



The Idea of Merit: Delineation and Challenges

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Abstract

The idea of merit is at the core of intense contemporary debate related to social justice in general and meritocracy in particular. In this paper, I aim to differentiate the notion of merit from two other notions with which it is often mistakenly identified, namely the concepts of talent and achievement. Here, I define “merit” as the value of an action that 1) is imputable to a subject’s free conduct, 2) implies some sort of effort, and 3) is oriented towards a good. Merit so understood is a valuable phenomenon considered from various perspectives, and therefore the subject who has it deserves to be properly recognized. But, more importantly, this merit is valuable in a sense that is different from the value attached to talent and achievement. We should therefore try to recognize the three of them according to their specificity. I conclude by signaling some problems and limitations associated with the idea of merit that, on the one hand, contribute to the aforementioned confusion and, on the other hand, show that the principle of merit must not be absolutized to the detriment of other forms of value (including talent and achievement).

Keywords Merit · Talent · Achievement · Effort · Recognition · Meritocracy

1 Introduction

In the last few years, debate surrounding meritocracy as a regulative principle of social order (and particularly of the market) has intensified. On the one hand, this system may seem appealing to many people because it apparently offers a fair way of configuring social mobility and social distribution. In contrast with the class privileges of the past, the modern principle of individual merit supposedly allows us

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to recognize each subject according to her specific, autonomous contribution to the common good. Thus, from this perspective, our social status ultimately depends on ourselves. On the other hand, however, many voices claim that there are numerous (biological and social) factors that impact the results of our actions, making it so that, time and again, those who get more do not actually have more merit, but rather just have it easier (Girardot, 2011; Littler, 2018; Markovits, 2019; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2009; Sandel, 2020). According to these authors, anything the subject achieves is always the result of numerous circumstances that escape her control, including the education she received at home and at school, a given society's positive evaluation of certain activities and her belonging to it, the economic resources at her disposal, etc.

I wish to argue that this kind of critique is ultimately neither opposed to the idea of merit *per se*, nor to its recognition as something valuable. Quite the contrary, I reckon that the arguments of these critical authors are often compatible with the idea that a given subject's actions (including work) may be more meritorious than another person's actions. Moreover, these critical approaches are to a great extent compatible with the idea that a given subject should be granted more recognition (at least some form of it) than another if his actions are more meritorious than those of his counterpart(s).¹ Instead, what these authors criticize is, on the one hand, the way in which merit is socially understood and evaluated in our society: they consider that merit is often conceived of and measured according to criteria that are heteronomous to the subject herself, which turns the principle of merit into a pretty unfair rule. On the other hand, some of them also question whether merit (even if it was rightly understood and evaluated) should be the sole or principal criterion for granting recognition (in the form of esteem, social status, jobs...).

Thus, a key aspect of the debate revolves around the social understanding of the word 'merit,' which is often employed with different meanings, not all of them mutually compatible. More concretely, some of these meanings actually correspond to the notions of 'talent' and/or 'achievement.' This paper advocates for a more restrictive notion of 'merit;' it distinguishes 'merit' from 'talent' and 'achievement' since these three notions correspond to different basis for desert-claims. In this regard, I do not intend to vindicate merit as an absolute principle over the other two, but rather to argue that they should not be confounded. Each one corresponds to a different value that can and should be recognized, but said recognition must be adapted to each one's specific features. Both confounding these realities and limiting the subject's recognition to just one of them (or even all three, leaving aside other relevant human dimensions) may cause pathologies that would make fairer development of the social sphere more difficult. In the same line, I also argue that the idea of merit, even when

¹ A notable exception to this is Rawls (1971, p. 312), who considers merit itself (understood in terms of effort, as I do here) as a result of several factors that are foreign to the subject herself. Thus, for him the recognition of people according to their merit implies unjustified inequality, such that merit cannot be taken as a just principle in the process of regulating social distribution and mobility. An interesting reply to Rawls' approach may be found in Milne (1986), who speaks in favor of the possibility of developing an egalitarian version of the principle of desert (understood precisely in terms of effort). Another relevant critique to Rawls is also to be found in Sher (1979, 2003). In contrast, Bradford seems to agree with Rawls that the amount of effort we can invest is not something that is entirely in our hands; according to her, "it just seems to be true that some people can try harder than others" (2015a, p. 52). Despite its importance, this controversy cannot be dealt with in depth here, as to do so would require much more space than is available.

it is restrictively defined and delineated, does not lack its share of problems if applied as the sole or primary criterion for social regulation.

This paper first examines the definition of merit as a recognition-worthy value. I propose to restrict this notion of merit to the value of any free, good-oriented action in which the subject invests certain effort. Then, I offer a review of the notions of talent and achievement, highlighting their differences and interrelations with the restrictive idea of merit. Finally, I outline some problems and limitations related to the idea of merit, which, in turn, contribute to the current, widespread confusion between merit, on the one hand, and talent and achievement, on the other.

2 ‘Merit’ as a Value Worthy of Recognition

The notion of ‘merit’ differs from what is usually conceptualized as ‘desert.’ Indeed, ‘desert’ is usually viewed as a much broader concept than ‘merit’² (Daniels, 1978; Galston, 1980; Mulligan, 2018, pp. 65–71; Sher, 1987). For instance, people may deserve something in virtue of what they have involuntarily experienced (e.g. innocent victims deserve compassion, empathy, and sometimes even reparation (Feldman, 1996, 1997, pp. 182–184, 203; Sher, 1987, p. 4)). This is a legitimate ‘desert’, but the victims’ desert-claim is certainly not based on their merit, as they were passive in their victimization. ‘Desert’ is thus a genre from which ‘merit’ is a species; in other words, ‘merit’ is one basis (among others (see Feldman, 1997, pp. 202–204; Galston, 1980, p. 171ff; Mulligan, 2018, p. 68; Sher, 1987)) that may substantiate legitimate desert-claims.

This difference between ‘desert’ and ‘merit’ still applies to the restricted definition of ‘merit’ for which I advocate. Said definition includes three essential elements, namely that the meritorious instance (1) is attributable to the subject’s free conduct, (2) implies some degree of effort or personal sacrifice (physical, mental or other) on her part, and (3) is oriented towards a certain good.

1) Merit can only exist if what we consider to be meritorious can be traced back to the subject’s initiative. In other words, if it is an expression of her free activity. Indeed, the main reason why the principle of merit is usually considered as opposed to privilege (either natural or social) is because the former refers to something that is attributable solely to the subject, rather than to some external instance. A person possesses merit to the extent that she has earned it through her own activity, it has not been given to her. By contrast, the presence of an external influence detracts from the subject’s merit, hence the opposition between merit and luck. For instance, there is no merit in winning the lottery, as this is a matter of pure luck. Similarly, neither that which merely happens to us nor that which is handed to us by others qualify as merit, since we cannot be said to be the ultimate source thereof. As in the case of achievements (see Bradford, 2018, p. 1), the weaker the perceived link between the subject’s conscious will and the activity in question, the lesser the merit. Unlike other bases for desert-claims, merit is closely linked to agency, as only agents can be regarded as

² A notable exception in this regard is Pojman, who affirms that “merit is a broader concept, the genus of which desert is the species” (Pojman, 1999, p. 86).

possessing merit (in this sense, merit is a basis for ‘personal desert’ (Feinberg, 1970, p. 55)).

Admittedly, since we always act in a given context, a complete lack of external influence is impossible (see Williams, 1981). Therefore, the connection between merit and free action does not imply a complete absence of restriction or coercion. In fact, some meritorious actions may take place under circumstances that the subject would have preferred to avoid, such as when someone recovers from a serious injury thanks to intense rehabilitation. In this case, the action is meritorious even though nobody would choose to be injured in the first place. Since we are autonomous, responsible subjects, our actions are expressions of ourselves, even if they take place in circumstances in which we have not freely chosen to partake. We can speak of ‘merit’ when we are the ultimate source of the action and there were other possible actions, which we chose to discard in favor of the meritorious one. The possibility of not carrying out the action is essential here since, in the case of meritorious actions, the subject is seen as having a particular incentive to refrain or quit. More concretely, said incentive against meritorious action takes the form of difficulties that the subject must overcome through his effort.

2) The performance of a free action alone is not enough to attribute merit to the subject, since not every free action is meritorious. The autonomous activity must also imply overcoming some sort of difficulty. Thus, the same action may be more or less meritorious depending on who performs it. For instance, reading a sentence out loud is more difficult for a five-years-old child who is still learning to read and struggles with syllables and sounds, than for an educated adult with no impairments. Despite the action being the same, and even if the adult makes less mistakes, the child has more merit, as he faces greater difficulty. In fact, no one would deem the adult’s action as meritorious, since once the difficulty is removed, the merit disappears.

‘Difficulty’ here is defined in terms of how costly it is for the agent to perform the activity; in turn, such cost is measured in terms of effort. Indeed, a given activity is more or less difficult (and is thus more or less meritorious if performed) depending on the level of effort it requires from the agent. Instead, if the obstacles that the action initially entailed disappear due to luck, through other people’s actions or thanks to resources whose investment does not imply an effort on the part of the subject, then the activity itself becomes less difficult for the subject. Consequently, her merit will be lower (see Knight, 1923, pp. 598–600). The focal meaning of ‘effort’ is here the mental and physical energy required to perform an activity. That notwithstanding, the investment of other resources, such as time and/or money, may also be regarded as effortful, at least in two senses. On the one hand, they may (in)directly involve the investment of physical or mental energy (e.g. paying for my son’s education is a meritorious action to the extent that earning money through my employment demands a substantial amount of physical and mental energy from me). On the other hand, investing a certain amount of time and/or money may be *sufficiently* costly in itself for the subject. Thus, the notion of ‘effort’ may be expanded here to include other kinds of *significant* costs for the subject, beyond mental and physical energy. Hence an effortful action is a burdensome one, where said ‘burden’ is primarily, yet not necessarily, the investment of physical and mental energy.

Effort is the measurement unit that allows to weight the degree of difficulty of a certain action, and thus the merit of the agent who performs it. So the greater or lesser merit that is attributable to a particular action is proportional to the effort that the individual is supposed to have invested to (try to) carry it out. The harder and more demanding an action is, the more meritorious it appears to us. For instance, we regard a student as having merit when he strives to learn, not when he gets a good grade based on mere natural talent. As a result of this, ‘merit’ does not apply to a machine’s activity, no matter how excellent it is. Even though machines may sometimes incite in us an admiration-like feeling due to their performance, they cannot be considered to have ‘merit.’ For instance, no one denies that nowadays computer programs ‘play’ chess immeasurably better than any human being; however, the way the best human players play is often considered very meritorious, whereas the same does not apply to how a software plays. For said human players, playing chess at a high level implies much more effort (in the form of training, focus, etc.) than what is required of a machine.

3) Finally, besides being free and effortful, an action must imply some good to be considered meritorious. Indeed, ‘merit’ as an object of social recognition has a strong positive connotation, as it implies ‘praiseworthiness.’ In turn, an action cannot be worthy of praise if it is oriented towards an evil or harmful endeavor (Sher, 1987, pp. 65–68) (e.g. a criminal action is not meritorious, even if the criminal freely put a substantial amount of effort to assure success and avoid arrest). There must be some ‘fittingness’ (Feinberg, 1970, p. 82; Mulligan, 2018, p. 65; Pojman, 1999, p. 93ff) between the basis of a desert-claim and what is deserved. A meritorious action is esteem-worthy; we thus must identify it in its reference to an endeavor that is considered good. This is clearly not the place to discuss the ontological status of said good, including whether it is universal and objective (and in what sense), if we can get to know it (and how), how is it realized, etc. Leaving aside these metaphysical-normative reflections, and focusing just on the sociological-descriptive aspect of the issue, we can argue that cultural contexts play a key role in this regard. Indeed, they necessarily influence the kinds of reasons considered valid for justifying that something is seen as a good or not.

In the same line, Sen (2000) remarks that the content related to the idea of merit will depend on our idea of a good society. However, his argument is set in the context of an instrumental conception of merit. Instead, I suggest that the connection between the ideas of merit and good goes beyond said instrumental conception. On the one hand, as Sen argues (Ibid, p. 8), we may value a meritorious action for its own sake, regardless of its result (even though he considers this position as marginal in current debates about merit and meritocracy, particularly in the economic sphere). On the other hand, it is not just that merit is considered valuable in itself, or that a meritorious action’s particular end is good; instead, any particular action, including a meritorious one, is always embedded in a broader practical context in which its goodness can be evaluated, including its merit. A meritorious action does not necessarily have to be oriented towards the fulfillment of some moral duty (e.g. an athlete running a race without any moral obligation of doing so); but the broader course of action in which it is embedded must be deemed as good (e.g. training and competing in the Olympic Games is socially considered as something good). In this sense, as

Dewey argues (2009, chap. 3), effort is not always desirable for its own sake, even when we pursue a praiseworthy end, but is instead only so in the context of certain courses of action.

To sum up, I propose to conceive merit as the value of a free, effortful, good-oriented action³. Indeed, all three elements are necessary conditions for merit to be present. If the action is effortful and good-oriented but not free, we could not impute any of its features to the agent, including its merit. If the action is free and good-oriented, yet not effortful, we would deem the action as too easy to be performed. We would then consider that the agent did not make any costly investment that should be praised. Finally, if the action is free and effortful but oriented towards evil, it cannot be worthy of praise. This definition does not explicitly mention the external result of the action nor the natural talent with which the subject initiates her action. It places the value of the subject's merit within the subjective dimension of her action, since only the latter falls under the agent's control (to the extent that it does). Many of the problems that critics describe in the current meritocratic system have their origin in an idea of merit that goes beyond this definition, that is, an approach that puts merit beyond the individual's subjective, autonomous sphere. For instance, in a context such as the market, it often seems like the definition of merit that I defend here is put aside in favor of another that is actually closer to the idea of the subject's talents and achievements. It is of the utmost importance, then, to differentiate these three notions (merit, talent and achievement), pointing out the injustices that may derive from confusing the first one with the others. With this distinction, I do not aim to deny the value of talent or achievement, but rather to prevent its misidentification with the value of merit. If a meritocratic system mistakenly equates these three notions, then said system will lose its potential as a legitimate ethical organization.

3 Talent and Achievement as (Non-Merit) Values

The definition of 'talent' is far from being uncontroversial (see Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Meyers et al., 2013; Robb, 2021; Turner & Kalman, 2014, chap. 3). My usage of the term here is concerned with the subject's capacity to perform some activity at an above-average level, thanks to a particular piece of knowledge, ability, personality trait, etc. (see Ericsson & Smith, 1991, p. 2). In this sense, and at first sight, 'talent' seems opposed to the definition of merit that I have delineated above. While merit is proportional to the effort the subject must put into the action, talent is

³ The notion of 'merit' primarily applies to actions. Nevertheless, we may derivatively apply it both to persons and to outcomes, such as when we say that someone has merit or that there is a lot of merit in what she achieved. This derivative use of 'merit' is made possible by the implicit reference involved in each case to a meritorious action that the agent performed or that resulted in the acclaimed outcome. With the word "meritorious", however, this reference is sometimes lost. Indeed, this adjective (understood as "deserving honour, praise or esteem") is often used with reference to other forms of 'desert' rather than to 'merit,' despite the obvious philological connection. For instance, when we define a subject as "a meritorious athlete," we may mean that she is outstanding and/or praiseworthy, but being outstanding and/or praiseworthy is not the same as having merit. So when we talk of the most meritorious subject in a group, we are not necessarily referring to the one whose action has the biggest merit. It depends on what we consider to be the reason why that person deserves praise: her talent, her achievements, her effort....

inversely proportional to it: the greater the agent's talent involved in the activity, the easier it is for her to carry it out (see Robb, 2021, pp. 8090–8091).

Yet, it is necessary to differentiate here between two types of 'talent' depending on its ultimate origin. The first type, the 'natural talent,' refers to a subject's innate ability to perform a given activity without any training. Talent thus understood is in direct opposition to the idea of merit since the individual is not actively involved in the acquisition of talent, and it therefore lacks the value of autonomous, effortful conduct. Moreover, given a particular outcome, and deducting the effect of luck and other external factors, the subject's amount of merit is considered inversely proportional to her natural ability for performing the activity. For instance, someone who, by way of genetics, has a pronounced capacity for athletics and gets a good mark in a race will be regarded as less meritorious than another subject who gets the same mark despite possessing an inferior genetic capacity.

Thus, natural talent and merit are two different, somehow opposite, phenomena. In fact, as Sandel argues, problems arise when natural talent is considered as equivalent to merit. Indeed, if natural talent is considered as equivalent to merit, then we lose sight of its condition of (non-self-conferred) gift; in turn, this may lead to unjustified *hubris* among talented people and feelings of humiliation among the untalented (Sandel, 2007, 2020; in the same line, see Young, 1958). In short, the ethical value of merit as the core of the principle of justice is based on the autonomous, effortful nature of the action in question; therefore, natural talent does not qualify as merit, and must not be recognized as such.

The second type of talent refers to the 'acquired or developed talent.' The distinction with merit, and even with achievement, is less clear with this type since here the ability to perform a given activity is often the result, at least partially, of the subject's effort to acquire a related skill (see in this regard von Kriegstein, 2019, p. 47ff). For instance, a surgeon who performs cardiac surgery requires certain biological and social factors that contribute to his capacity to perform his task. These include having steady hands, the opportunity to attend medical school, etc. However, it is undeniable that the surgeon must also deploy a great deal of effort into developing his natural talent; he must seize the opportunity handed to him by his socio-historical context. Thus, here we find a mixture of natural talent and luck (in the form of a favorable socioeconomic situation, or historical context, to name a few) and individual merit (see in this regard Howe et al., 1998; Meyers et al., 2013, p. 313). Moreover, since the subject has to invest a fair amount of time, money, energy, etc., his talent may also be considered as an achievement. Namely, acquired talent is the successful outcome of a relatively lengthy, onerous process that the subject undertakes.

In turn, the idea of achievement is directly linked to the idea of outcome and, thus, (indirectly) to a certain idea of success. Indeed, achieving a valuable outcome implies that the action has been (at least partially) successful. In this sense, the idea of achievement differs from that of merit: whereas the latter refers to the free, effortful way in which the action itself is carried out, the former refers to its successful outcome (either its external product or the performance of the action itself). At this point, it is crucial to know which definition of 'success' is being applied, that is, what

is regarded as a valuable outcome⁴. Think for instance of a person who visits several stores looking for the perfect present for his romantic partner. To use Weber's terminology, in this situation, there is a mixture of two ideal-types, namely 'goal-oriented rational action' and 'value-oriented rational action' (Weber, 1978, pp. 24–26). Indeed, regardless of whether the present is actually found or not (goal), generously spending one's personal time on its search is a demonstration of unselfish love (value). Thus, the action may be considered successful (at least partially) even if the subject does not find any gift or his partner does not like it. To put it differently, it can be argued that such an action is successful, at least to the extent that it realizes a value.

Ignoring the distinction between merit and achievement and taking both notions as synonyms may lead to serious problems. Indeed, if we equate them, when evaluating an action, we may mistakenly take the presence of one of these two elements as proof of the presence of the other. That is, an achievement will appear to us as meritorious by definition, and vice versa. This is particularly troublesome in the first case, namely if we consider that an achievement is sufficient proof of the existence of merit. In fact, a considerable amount of critiques directed at our contemporary, (allegedly) meritocratic system focus on this point (see among others Elmgren, 2015; Khan & Jerolmack, 2013, p. 13ff; Littler, 2018; McNamee & Miller Jr., 2009, chap. 2; Sandel, 2020, pp. 13–14, 24–25, 59; Young, 1958). Many critics argue that merit is often and mainly evaluated according to the outcomes of action (i.e., related achievements or failures). Again, the issue here is that said results are influenced by numerous factors that are outside of the individual's merit and control, from luck to family and social contexts, to available economic resources, to education, etc. (see among others Fischer et al., 1996; Frank, 2016; Sauder, 2020). Thus, a legitimate meritocratic system should not judge merit on the basis of accomplishments. Otherwise, we would succumb to the fallacy of taking a part for the whole, that is, we would see one of the elements that influences the outcome (merit) as the only one present.

To sum up, the argument developed in this section heretofore (the distinction between talent, merit and achievement) consists in the fact that, even though these three elements all have value, the nature of their precise value differs in each case. Namely, talent refers to a capacity, merit to a way of acting, and achievement to an outcome. This distinction is not trivial because, depending on the value at hand, the corresponding criterion for recognizing it vary. I now turn to briefly comment on their differences.

⁴It should be noted that the notion of achievement analysed here (to distinguish it from merit) corresponds to a common-sense approach that equates achievement with successful outcome. But there are other interpretations of this notion. According to Bradford's influential account (see Bradford, 2013, 2015a, 2018), a successful outcome only qualifies as achievement if it involves some effort. Moreover, she claims that 'effort matters for the value of achievements' (Bradford, 2013, p. 208; for another version of this idea, see von Kriegstein, 2017). This makes Bradford's conception of achievement more akin to my notion of merit than the common-sense conception of achievement. At the same time, however, it is important to note that Bradford's notion of achievement is not equivalent to my notion of merit. For instance, Bradford admits the possibility of an 'evil achievement', that is, 'an achievement that has a product that is of negative value' (2015a, p. 162). Similarly, for Bradford an achievement implies a process culminating in a product (2018, p. 1), whereas my notion of merit does not require the existence of such a product.

4 Different Criteria for Recognizing Talent, Merit, and Achievement

In the case of ‘merit’, the criterion for valuation is individual and the measure is absolute (i.e., non-comparative). That is, on the one hand, there is no objective, universally applicable standard. On the contrary, the same action may be more or less meritorious depending on who performs it. On the other hand, the merit associated with one person’s actions is not dependent on the merit of other people’s actions; instead, it is measured independently, according only to each’s particular circumstances.

As for talent, the criterion is different in this case. Indeed, as already mentioned, ‘talent’ is employed in ordinary speech to designate a special ability that someone possesses, and thus carries with it three relevant differences when compared with merit. To start, as a capacity to do something, talent is not so much valuable *per se*, but rather because of what it allows you to do, that is, based on its (potential) connection with achievement (see Bradford 2015b, pp. 104–105). For instance, if a given skill ceases to be relevant for facilitating performance of the corresponding activity (due to technological change or to offshoring, for instance), then its status as a socially valuable talent would suffer (see Sennett, 2006, chap. 2). Thus, talent in itself always has a utility value since it is only valuable as long as it facilitates the successful performance of a particular activity.

Besides, talent is considered as such only in comparative terms, that is, someone is talented only if she has a greater ease or ability than the average. As a result, and contrary to what we have seen regarding merit, here the criterion for valuation is neither individual nor absolute. On the one hand, there is an ‘objective’ standard that is valid for everyone, namely, people’s average level of ability for performing the corresponding activity. Thus, for instance, sight is rarely considered to be a talent since most people naturally possess this capacity; only a particularly outstanding level of visual sharpness is considered a talent. In this sense, talent is measured according to people’s average level of skill. On the other hand, not only is this standard (the average) *not* individual, it is also *not* absolute, but rather is comparative and can increase or decrease. If the average level of skill increases (for instance, as an effect of a pressing, competitive environment) the necessary requisites for such a capacity to be considered a valuable talent also rise. This is currently the case, for example, for Western citizens and their ever increasing average education and training levels, which produces ‘credential inflation’ (Collins, 2013, p. 51ff): this process makes any given level of qualification less and less valuable since the ability level required to qualify as a valuable (acquired) talent is becoming progressively higher (see Clavero, 2021).

As a result of the above, the third difference between talent and merit consists in the former depending on factors that are not under the subject’s control, who, in turn, only has a limited impact on the process. He lives at the mercy of the gifts nature gives him, the ones it gives to others, the activities that are considered valuable in a given society, etc. (Sandel, 2020, pp. 122–123). The fact that individual freedom has little to no role here is particularly significant in the case of natural talent, whose acquisition is not at all a product of the will. That notwithstanding, as already mentioned, acquired talents consist of skills that may be simultaneously regarded as achievements accomplished thanks to more or less meritorious conduct and through

a more or less demanding learning process. So, in this case, an important distinction is in order: when seen as capacities, acquired talent and its recognition fall under the criterion explained above (i.e., such talent is not valuable *per se*, but rather is evaluated in comparative terms, etc.); when considered an achievement or a meritorious acquisition, said criterion correspond to each of these two phenomena.

This brings us to the criterion for recognizing achievements, which is the last element of the merit-talent-achievement trio that remains unexamined. This last phenomenon is perhaps the hardest to establish since, as mentioned, it depends on our idea of success. As a result, circumstances substantially change the relevant valuation criterion, which may be individual and absolute, or rather ‘objective’ and comparative. For instance, to come back to the academic sphere, the same grade on a test may be considered a success or not (and thus an achievement or not) depending on numerous factors, including whether the subject finds the course content particularly complex, whether he intends to apply for a scholarship or not, whether most students passed or failed, etc.

The related definition of success also influences the greater or lesser control that the individual has on the outcome. If the mere act of studying is considered to be a success in itself, then the subject will be more in control. Instead, if ‘success’ is identified with obtaining a particular mark, then more external factors would have an impact (the complexity of the test, the student’s mental clarity on the day of the exam, etc.). The question, therefore, pertains to the definition of success that is currently hegemonic in meritocratic discourse. Said definition is often linked to ‘triumph’ in competitive environments (such as obtaining profits in the market); as a consequence, the difficulty that these achievements entail is evaluated in comparative terms. In turn, this usually fosters many external handicaps, which are not under the subject’s control, but still decisively impact an action’s outcome and its consideration as a success/achievement. Given these external influences, success is ultimately a heteronomous standard for evaluating the subject’s action. Nevertheless, it is clear that the socially hegemonic definition of success is not homogeneous; nor is it the only one since different persons or groups may hold a variety of definitions thereof (see for instance Dyke & Murphy, 2006).

As seen in this section’s discussion, it is necessary to distinguish between talent, merit and achievement since they constitute different phenomena whose recognition responds to different criteria. Confounding them or equating them may lead to problems and injustices. Similarly, taking merit (understood in terms of free, effortful, good-oriented action) as the sole foundation of a meritocratic system is also problematic. I now turn to briefly examine the factors that make the principle of merit so problematic and that contribute to confounding ‘merit’ with ‘talent’ and/or ‘achievement.’

5 Problems and Limitations Associated with the Idea of Merit

Up to this point, I have explored the meaning of ‘merit’ and I have distinguished it from ‘talent’ and ‘achievement,’ explaining that each one responds to a different valuation criteria. In addition, it is also necessary to analyze the problems associated with the idea of merit itself, and why it is often mixed up with the other two notions

(that is, why meritocratic discourse often confuses merit for what is actually talent or achievement). It should be noted that, as already explained, ‘acquired talent’ is indeed the result of a mix between the three, which is obviously an important factor in this regard. But, beyond this, and also leaving aside the influence of class interests (Littler, 2018, chap. 4; Sandel, 2020, pp. 13–14), to my mind, there are at least four more factors that render the principle of merit problematic, and/or favor the tendency to consider talent and achievement as merit.

1) First, one of the main problems involves a frequent misunderstanding or, more precisely, a misguided use of the term ‘merit.’ Said notion is not always used with the same meaning in public discourse, especially when debate revolves around meritocracy; even among the specialized literature, ‘merit’ is usually understood in a different and/or broader sense than the one I defend here, as the former tends to include what I consider to be talents or achievements (Galston, 1980, p. 176ff; Mulligan, 2018, p. 70; Pojman, 1999; Sher, 1987, p. 107ff; von Platz, 2022). For instance, when we argue that someone is the ideal candidate for receiving a distinction, filling a position, etc., we usually mention his ‘merits,’ although we are actually referring to his talents and achievements. That is, talents and achievements function here as valid reasons that speak in favor of someone as deserving a particular recognition. In this context, talents constitute valid reasons to the extent that they allow for the achievement of results that the community considers valuable; for their part, achievements constitute valid reasons because the subject has already proved he can achieve said results (see Schmidt am Busch, 2010, p. 263ff). Merit is not a part of these equations, at least not in the sense I defined the term (as an autonomous, effortful, good-oriented action). Here, merit rather seems to consist in ‘a valuable contribution to society or the capacity to accomplish it, which makes the subject worthy of recognition.’ The only link between these two definitions of merit is indirect since a contribution that is hard to accomplish is usually considered to imply some effort. In my opinion, contemporary discourse on meritocracy tends to indiscriminately confound these definitions of merit.

Said confusion can be traced back to a false equivalence between ‘merit’ and ‘desert.’ In the context of this paper, these notions are *not* interchangeable. Indeed, merit (in the sense explained above) implies that the subject has earned recognition based on the effort or personal sacrifice she freely put into a good-oriented action. In contrast, ‘desert’ is a much wider notion referring to any form of recognition that the subject may justly demand, regardless of the reason that justifies said demand (that is, regardless of whether or not the subject earned it through her conduct and how she did it) (see Feinberg, 1970; Feldman, 1997; Olsaretti, 2003; Sher, 1979, 1987). For instance, every person deserves some recognition by the mere fact of being a person, but ‘being a person’ does not qualify as merit in my scheme. Merit is a particular instance of desert since it is a value that must be recognized; but not every desert necessarily constitutes a merit as there are other forms of value that the subject possesses (for instance, talent and achievement) that make her recognition-worthy. This distinction is not trivial because the definition of ‘desert’ is even more complex and controversial than the definition of ‘merit,’ and confounding them is problematic (in this regard, see McCrudden, 1998).

2) Second, accurately measuring merit (understood as the value of free, effortful, good-oriented action) is extremely difficult. The part of the action that is most clearly perceived from the outside is its result, whereas the effort it entails can only be deducted comparatively or through clues. Accurately measuring said effort requires knowledge of the person and process that is only possible (and, even then, only to a certain extent) in particular social spheres, such as the family. By contrast, the same cannot be applied to other social spheres. With no close personal contact, there is a lack of data that prevents us from accurately evaluating whether there is merit or not, and to what extent. Thus, many interactions in civil society lack any chance of justly measuring how much of an action can be traced back to the subject's autonomous effort, and how much of it is the result of luck, biological or social circumstances, etc. (see McNamee & Miller Jr., 2009, p. 43ff). Given this problem, in this kind of interaction, outcome/achievement is often taken as the reference point for measuring merit. This is an inadequate strategy, though, since 'merit' and 'achievement' follow different criteria, as already explained.

For instance, the realm of education contains standardized methods of evaluation that allegedly serve as an objective standard for measuring the recognition that each person justly deserves based on her merits. The problem here is that merit does not respond to objective, comparative standards, but rather to individual, absolute ones (see above). Thus, said standardized methods of evaluation might measure achievement (depending on the reigning definition of 'success'), but not merit. In fact, the history of their creation and development shows how, as a cultural product, these methods are often far from being an objective criterion for measuring students' merit (Carson, 2007; Lemann, 1999; Walton et al., 2013). They are, rather, means for reproducing cultural and economic capital, and, therefore, for class division (Bourdieu, 1974; Carnevale et al., 2020). For instance, a subject's (or her family's) socio-economic resources allow her to better prepare for university entrance exams, job interviews, athletic scholarships, etc. Thus, obtaining a given result on standardized testing is not an accurate portrait of merit.

3) A third factor has to do with what is considered to be the priority objective in each interaction. Agents' main aims may differ depending on the social sphere in question. In some contexts, the value of action itself (and more concretely, the effort put in it) may take priority over its point of departure or its outcome (see e.g. Noh et al., 2019). For example, in the context of educating children, some parents may value effort over ability and results. In contrast, in other spheres (such as the market), interaction may be oriented by outcome or capacity rather than by action itself. Think for instance of someone who wants to get his home's leaky roof fixed. Typically, he will seek to employ the person who can do the best job (either in absolute terms or in the price-quality ratio), not the one with the most merit. Admittedly, there are some exceptions to this 'rule,' but most related choices will follow it. Ultimately, these interactions are guided by a utilitarian perspective. As a consequence, achievement is regarded as more important than merit (Hayek, 1960, p. 98). Similarly, talent may also be considered more important than effort when the former allows us to obtain the desired outcomes in a more efficient way than the latter does.

This problem has led to some debate among scholars, regarding the following two issues. On the one hand, whether 'merit,' and even 'desert' in general, should be

considered as primary or secondary categories, upon which other principles, such as need or utility, may or not take preference in some contexts (see Pojman, 1999, p. 85ff). On the other hand, whether the distribution of jobs and material goods is the appropriate way to reward merit, given that (1) there are other kind of rewards that can be distributed and that might better correspond to merit-based desert-claims (see Feinberg, 1970, pp. 61–78; Hurka, 2003, p. 57ff; Mulligan, 2018; Sher, 2003; Swift & Marshall, 1997), and that (2) the relative scarcity of jobs and resources may force us to consider merit as a basis of comparative rather than non-comparative desert⁵.

4) Finally, effort is not in itself the ultimate principle of our conduct. Not even the strongest advocates of the value of free, effortful, good-oriented action think that it is good to limitlessly increase the difficulty of tasks. Think again of the parents who praise a child who makes more effort over the one that is more successful. Even they, despite deeply valuing that their child overcomes obstacles through effort, will recognize a reasonable limit to that exigence (Dewey, 2009, chap. 3). Thus, for instance, they will bring their children to school, buy them appropriate school materials, provide them with a quiet place to study at home, etc. All of these advantages certainly threaten to diminish the merit of their children's learning activity, as they reduce the difficulty and, therefore, the amount of effort that is needed to overcome it. The fact that parents still decide to give these advantages to their children shows that achievement is also valuable. Indeed, it is important to be able to achieve (at least) some degree of success through our actions (James, 2005; Keller, 2004; Sennett, 1998, chap. 7).

In this regard, absolutizing merit and seeing it as the only relevant criterion would lead to social problems and paradoxes. For instance, instead of complete equality, those who have more resources at their disposal or are more naturally talented, could be disadvantaged in certain situations. This paradox would especially arise in contexts in which merit is measured according to achievement (see above) and the scale for measuring said achievement has a maximum. This is the case of the aforementioned academic evaluations. For their merit to be considered equal, those with more external advantages for obtaining good grades (due to superior natural talent, more economic resources, etc.) would have to obtain significantly higher marks than the disadvantaged. But when the evaluation system has a maximum (10 points, 100 points, etc.), advantaged students need the disadvantaged ones to obtain not-too-outstanding results because otherwise it would be impossible for the former to obtain significantly higher marks than the latter. This problem is one of the keys for understanding some of the arguments deployed by those who consider so-called 'affirmative action' to actually be a form of 'reverse discrimination' (in this regard, see for instance Fraser & Kick, 2000, pp. 19–24): they argue that, paradoxically, fewer obstacles may at the same time land a person in a socially unfavorable position that leads to a differentiated consideration of his marks. Here the aforementioned difficulty of accurately measuring merit comes into play again.

⁵ Some authors even consider that non-comparative desert is always insufficient or implausible as a sole criterion for justice, and must be complemented with some form of comparative desert (Hurka, 2003; Kagan, 2003, 2012; McLeod, 2003).

To sum up, several factors contribute to the principle of merit being problematic and the very notion of merit being mixed with the ideas of talent and achievement in public discourse. Among these factors, we find the difficulty of accurately measuring said merit, the priority given to achievement and/or talent in certain social spheres, and frequent confusion between ‘merit’ and ‘desert.’ The fact that merit is not an absolute, ultimate principle also has an impact in this regard. In this sense, my aim here has not been to deny the social value of talent and achievement. Rather, I have strived to highlight the importance of distinguishing them from merit, and of appropriately recognizing each.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have aimed to contribute to a clarification of the idea of merit, which despite its growing relevance in public debate is still under-analyzed, particularly in the terms in which I defined it here. More concretely, my argument started from a conception of merit as the value of a subject’s free, effortful, good-oriented action. On the basis of this definition of merit, I have tried to show the sense in which it must be distinguished from talent and achievement, two notions with which merit is often mixed up and confounded, giving rise to several problems. Indeed, even though all three refer to valuable phenomena (so that the subject may legitimately expect and demand certain recognition for each), these phenomena are different: talent refers to capacity (natural or acquired), whereas merit alludes to a way of acting, and achievement to an outcome. Consequently, the recognition of each responds to different criteria. It would be a mistake to confound them; as they respond to different criteria, they cannot be understood as one uniform basis for desert-claims. Instead, they constitute different bases for desert-claims, and said dissimilarities must be acknowledged and respected. Similarly, it is erroneous to absolutize one of these three phenomena, while discarding the other two.

In line with this last remark, it is important to add that the idea of merit does not lack problems and limitations, such as the difficulty of measuring it accurately or the confusion that frequently arises between ‘merit’ and ‘desert’ in public debate. These and other factors speak in favor of an adequate delimitation of the principle of merit. They also contribute to wrongly identifying as merit what actually falls under the categories of talent and achievement. The fact that we sometimes encounter a mixture of the three in reality, where it is hard to evaluate each component’s weight (as in the case of acquired talents), also plays a significant role in this confusion.

The complexity of this issue is thus enormous. Deep reflection is still required in order to clarify many of its most controversial aspects. With this paper, I have helped lay the foundations upon which said reflection can flourish. It must necessarily unfold based on an adequate understanding and delineation of the ideas of merit, talent and achievement. Debate related to these concepts and to the fairest way of recognizing each of them involves the values that are meant to govern our society. Ultimately, said debate entails shared reflection upon the kind of society we want to live in.

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