

WPE WebPsychEmpiricist

Excerpts from Chapter 9 ("Justice and Meritocracy") of: *How to Defend Humane Ideals*

October 18, 2006

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Abstract

This paper presents two sets of extracts from the author's book *How to Defend Humane Ideals*. The first set fundamentally challenges a great deal of "politically correct" thinking on bias in testing and social policy. One of the main organising constructs is "ethnicity as an information bearing characteristic". It is argued that it is naïve to think that individualistic assessment can meaningfully replace the use of the information bearing capacity of group differences in public policy. The second set of extracts clearly demonstrate that those who imagine that a single-factor meritocracy can be combined with gross differences in material standard of living are simply not thinking clearly. Resolution of the dilemma posed by the tension between meritocracy and egalitarianism behoves psychologists to find ways of identifying, developing, and rewarding multiple talents on the one hand and ways of understanding and intervening in the sociocybernetic forces which prevent people enacting their values (both individually and collectively) on the other.

Introduction by John Raven

By entitling an article in *The American Psychologist* “*Searching for justice: The discovery of IQ gains over time*”, Flynn (1999) makes it clear that his research into the, at the time, almost entirely unsuspected effects of environment on IQ was driven by ethical considerations. In fact, defending human rights and humane ideals had, by this time, been a major theme in Flynn’s life. But what he does not say in his article is that, at the very time it was published, he was engaged in working up a major book entitled *How to Defend Humane Ideals*. Why should a scientist allow his work to be driven by humane ideals instead of by questions derived from previous research?

How to Defend Humane Ideals is, in reality, a tour de force drawing together what philosophers from Plato onwards have had to say on the topic, explaining why it is important to defend humane ideals against their anti-humane opponents, and setting out how to do it.

But, given Flynn’s commitment to humane ideals, and especially in the context of much contemporary group think, it is striking to find in the book a trenchant critique of much widely accepted and “politically correct” “thinking” on such topics as bias, prejudice, stereotyping, and the concept of meritocracy which informs many discussions of “fairness” in testing.

I asked Flynn to make a selection from his book (and update it) that would illustrate his arguments relating to bias and meritocracy. What follows is, in fact, of particular importance to us here because, although Flynn does not say so (but which does not mean that he would not have done so if he had been asked), behind his observations on these topics lies a network of questions which it is clearly the moral responsibility of psychologists to address.

These are taken up in another paper on WPE (Raven, 2002). Here our aim is simply to illustrate the importance of psychologists tackling such topics.

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Excerpt 1:

Race as an information-bearing trait that disadvantages blacks - with some more recent data appended.

The humane-egalitarian ideal of social justice presented herein rests on sympathy for people in general, operationalized by leveling differences that are the effects of fortune. It includes affirmative action as a compensation for the luck of group membership, the welfare state as a compensation for the luck of genes, and redistribution of wealth as a compensation for the luck of personal circumstance. First, I will defend affirmative action for blacks living in contemporary America; then I will defend the ideal of equalizing environments, toward which the welfare state and redistribution of wealth are steps, against Herrnstein and Murray. These critics happen to be American, but the substance of their case, the meritocracy thesis, has been put forward by opponents of equality throughout the European world ever since the dawn of the industrial revolution.

Blacks as a Disadvantaged Group

Social science collects evidence on group differences. Sometimes it shows that putative differences between black and white Americans are illusions based on ignorance or bias. That can advantage blacks. Sometimes it shows that differences are real and must be accepted by all rational agents. As we shall see, if those agents are truly rational, they will then make certain choices to the disadvantage of blacks. Social science can do nothing about this except conceal the truth, and that it must not do. However, its practitioners must not close their eyes to the consequences of their science. They often say, "It makes no difference if we show that blacks on average are genetically inferior for intelligence, are less prudent and self-disciplined than whites, tend to be more criminal. Only a biased person will discriminate against people according to their group membership rather than judging them by their individual traits." I will show that this last assertion is false.

Social science also attempts to measure how much bias exists. Herrnstein and Murray (1994, 506) believe that while undeniably some bigotry still exists, the vast majority of Americans are fair-minded and free of racial prejudice. Rather than challenging that conclusion,

I will treat it as a window of opportunity. If we can show that even in the absence of bias, individual blacks are gravely disadvantaged simply because of their group membership, that might be the strongest possible case for affirmative action. Therefore, the organizing concept of this analysis will not be racial bias but the cost of information.

Levin (1991) points out that race can be an information-bearing trait. He cites a variety of sources as showing that one black male in four is incarcerated at some time for the commission of a felony, while the rate for white males is only about 3 per cent, and that a black male is ten times more likely than his white counterpart to be a criminal (Berger, 1987; Hindelang, 1978; Rushton, 1988; V.S. News and World Report, 1988; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). He endorses the practice of the New Jersey police of stopping young black males in expensive new cars for random drug searches. After all, police resources are stretched, and their efficiency in controlling the drug traffic is maximized by information that enhances the probability of finding illegal drugs. The dividends of targeting blacks extend to other areas of crime prevention. As police officer Mark Furhman of O. J. Simpson fame put it, if a black man is driving a Porsche and wearing a suit that costs less than \$100, you stop him on the assumption that the car may be stolen. Anyone who listens to a police radio will discover that blacks who walk through a white neighborhood are labeled suspicious, while whites in a black neighborhood go without remark.

It is rational for police to use race as a low-cost information bearer to enhance their efficiency. Is it rational for blacks to resent this and take steps to make the information more expensive? A few examples may help. Irish Americans have a rate of alcoholism well above that of most ethnic groups. When resources are stretched, as always, and the highway patrol is conducting random checks for drunken drivers, they would do well to stop only Irish male drivers, particularly where Irish are heavily concentrated. The problem is that they cannot be identified by appearance, and stopping all drivers to verify whether or not they were Irish would be self-defeating. Irish could be forced, and everyone else forbidden, to drive green cars, but that law might be evaded. The rational solution would be shamrocks indelibly tattooed on the foreheads of all Irish males, perhaps luminescent at night. There would be a cost in this, but it could be shifted to the Irish themselves. Levin also notes that people associate insider trading with Jewish-Americans. This association may not be based on evidence, and the resources of the Securities and Exchange Commission may not be stretched. But if those conditions hold, the utility of Stars of David becomes obvious.

Every black knows that Irish and Jewish Americans would raise the cost of collecting this sort of information to a prohibitive level by political action of the most impassioned sort. Their own efforts have had mainly a cosmetic effect: police omit race from the formula of criminal profiles but continue to use it in practice. Therefore, added to whatever humiliation blacks feel at random searches, there is a sense of overwhelming political impotence. Since blacks cannot use politics to raise the cost, it is rational to pursue other means both individually and collectively?

On the individual level, those stopped for random searches will tend toward noncooperation, verbal abuse, attempts at escape with attendant low-level violence. The police, being rational agents, are likely to anticipate this and resort to preventive measures, that is, they are more likely to handle and search black suspects roughly, even to perpetrate the occasional beating, hoping to intimidate and achieve control. The black community can collectively increase costs to the police by making it clear that if black suspects are abused, there is an ever-present chance of riot. You now have a significant level of random violence between police and black males, but there need be no animosity or real bias on either side. Black males may not dislike police simply because they are police nor police blacks simply because they are black. Both sides may recognize that the other's behavior is simply a rational response to objective group differences. Stove (1995, 95) adds a point that takes us from theory back to reality, namely, that even rational behavior, just so long as it inflicts injury, can engender strong negative feelings between groups. It can indeed.

If negative racial profiles of blacks are rational, we would expect them to be used by blacks as well as whites and to be used extensively. Both white and black landlords are more reluctant to rent to young black males - after all, 25 percent of them are convicted felons and who is to know which. Both white and black banks are more likely to lend money to entrepreneurs outside the ghetto - those within are seen as greater risks. Both white and black car dealers ask and get higher prices from blacks than whites - they see them as worse informed and less confident about bargaining. When shown photographs of blacks distinguished only by lighter or darker skin color, both whites and blacks identified blackness with poverty, aggressiveness, lack of intelligence, lack of education, and unattractiveness. Blacker males were also seen as criminal and ostentatious (Ayers & Siegelman, 1995; Maddox & Gray, 2002).

Two pieces of data are particularly shattering. Since 1941, uniformed police have shot 23 black policemen working undercover in New York City alone; no white policeman working

undercover has ever been shot by a colleague. When Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003) sent 5,000 résumés randomly assigned to either white or black sounding names (Emily and Greg or Lakisha and Jamal) to 1,250 employers who had placed help-wanted ads, the white names received 50 percent more call-backs. Average white applicants got many more call-backs than highly skilled black applicants, indeed, black applicants were treated as if their qualifications did not matter: high quality résumés got no more calls than average résumés. Human resources managers consulted beforehand were stunned. They believed that the results would reflect employers hungry for qualified minority applicants and aggressively seeking diversity.

Note that the application of these profiles does much to explain the reluctance of white males to marry black women. After all, their children would be socially classified as black. Why would a white man want to saddle his children with that when he has so much choice? For a white male to want her as a spouse, a black woman must have an appeal well beyond that of an Hispanic or Asian woman.

Excerpt II:

On meritocracy.

Humane-egalitarian ideals may include a coherent concept of justice, but can they accommodate what human genetics and social dynamics tell us about certain group differences? Herrnstein and Murray claim that they cannot and use the meritocracy thesis as the vehicle for their argument. I will rebut the meritocracy thesis and use that rebuttal to extract a bonus: a deeper insight into the dynamics of humane-egalitarian ideals. Herrnstein and Murray (1994, 105, 109, & 510) state the meritocracy thesis in four propositions: (1) if differences in mental abilities are inherited, and (2) if success requires those abilities, and (3) if earnings and prestige depend on success, (4) then social standing (which reflects earnings and prestige) will be based to some extent on inherited differences between people. They imagine a United States that has magically made good on "the contemporary ideal of equality." First, every child has equal environmental quality insofar as environment affects intelligence. Second, each person can go as far as talent and hard work can take him or her with neither social background, nor ethnicity, nor lack of money barring the way.

Herrnstein and Murray (1994, 91, 105-115, & 509-520) believe that America has realized the humane-egalitarian ideal in practice to a significant degree. The irony is that, insofar as it is realized, America approaches a kind of caste society egalitarians would loathe. If environmental

inequality is diminished, intelligence differences between individuals increasingly reflect genetic differences. If privilege is diminished, intelligence or IQ becomes an enhanced factor in social mobility, so that upper-class occupations become filled by the bright and lower-class occupations by the not bright. Genes for intelligence become more and more segregated by class. There is an elite class with good genes for IQ whose children tend to replicate their parents' high status because of luck in life's lottery, that is, because they inherit their parents' good genes. There is a large underclass with bad genes for IQ whose children suffer from cognitive disadvantage at birth and find it difficult to escape low status.

The meritocracy thesis strikes at the very heart of the human-egalitarian ideal. That ideal is revealed to be counter-productive in practice. The abolition of inequality and privilege produces a class-equals-caste society with high status the inheritance of a few, dependency and low status the inheritance of many. How little this vision will appeal will vary from person to person, but it is safe to say that countless idealistic men and women did not lay down their lives for this.

Herrnstein and Murray select 1960 as the year by which America saw potent meritocratic mechanisms in place. This generates a prediction that can be tested against evidence. Recall what a trend toward meritocracy means. The more meritocracy, the more good genes for IQ go to high status occupations, the more bad genes go to low status occupations. The genes are passed on from parent to child, so the more meritocracy, the more of an IQ gap between upper- and lower-class children. If Herrnstein and Murray are correct, the gap between upper- and lower-class children should show a visible jump when we compare representative samples of children tested recently with those tested in the premeritocratic era. The comparability of the most recent data rests on an assumption: that women show no less merit in attaining professional status than men. Social scientists who find life too dull or devoid of controversy are invited to step forward.

The best evidence comes from white American samples, and I have analyzed these to show that they falsify the posited trend toward meritocracy. The correlation between child's IQ and parental occupational status has been surprisingly stable from 1948 to the present. The pattern is a mean IQ of 105 for upper-class children, 100 for middle-class children, 95 for lower-class children. The most parsimonious conclusion is this: nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing has happened.

However, the best that evidence can do is show that meritocratic trends do not exist at a particular time and place. This leaves the central contention of the meritocracy thesis untouched. That contention is that if the humane-egalitarian quest of abolishing inequality and privilege is successful, it will result in class stratification of genes for talent of which IQ is a marker. If such stratification has not occurred, the quest has simply been unsuccessful. Moreover, Herrnstein and Murray claim that a meritocratic future is inevitable. This means that the humane-egalitarian ideal has been given a reprieve both temporary and humiliating. It is a poor ideal that must pray for eternal failure in order to avoid unwelcome consequences. Therefore, we must go beyond evidence to analysis.

Meritocracy is psychologically incoherent: (1) the abolition of materialist-elitist values is a prerequisite for the abolition of inequality and privilege; (2) the persistence of materialist-elitist values is a prerequisite for class stratification based on wealth and status; and (3) therefore, a class-stratified meritocracy is impossible.

The major barrier to abolition of inequality and privilege is our obsession with money and status. Job creation, public health and education, and the welfare state have to be financed by progressive taxation, death duties, luxury taxes. Even limited objectives are costly. One example would be the cost of giving America's depressed urban communities better housing - something which is desirable not only for its own sake but also so that these communities can attract middle-class residents who bring with them their mores and job networks (Dickens, 1999). Which is to say that all of the steps needed to equalize environments involve massive transfers of wealth from some to others. They founder on the rocks of the love of money in one's own pocket, the lust for status superior to one's fellows, the desire to confer advantage for these things on one's family. The fact that universities now do a better job of matching credentials to academic performance does not abolish the enormous inequities of the larger society. Some parents are simply better placed to advantage their children. They provide educationally efficient homes that point children toward superior credentials (Flynn, 1991, 126-139), alter their children's appearance to make them more presentable, give them models of people in work, and pay off crippling debts. Best of all, their contacts and networks become their children's contacts and networks.

Even within the working class, youths can be divided into those who have functional and dysfunctional networks. Wial (1988) describes Boston youth fortunate enough to have fathers

and uncles who tell them what skills they need (often learned informally on weekends), what behavior patterns are expected on the job, the importance of avoiding a criminal record, and provide information about job availability. The absolutely crucial role information plays is shown by the fact that about half of all jobs are found through connections (O'Regan, 1993, 329, Table 1). Wial's young men viewed door knocking and answering newspaper ads as equally fruitless. They took it as axiomatic that decent jobs depend on two things only: connections and luck. Youths in families and neighborhoods without viable networks miss out on everything important, no good preparation, no good information, no interview with an employer arranged by a friend working for that employer (Dickens, 1999). Connections and luck are factors whose reach extends right to the top of the job hierarchy (Granovetter, 1974). In 1990 the National Center for Career Strategies stated that over 80 percent of executives find their jobs through networking and that about 86 percent of executive job openings do not appear in the classified advertisements (Ezorsky, 1991, 14-16).

An America in which everyone wants to win the glittering prizes of wealth and status will not pay onerous taxes (or show heroic virtue when tempted to seek special advantage) just so the competition can enjoy a level playing field. However, let us imagine that the value change needed to achieve equal opportunity has occurred: let us imagine what would happen were people to lose their obsession with money and status. The class hierarchy that ranks by income and an agreed pecking order of occupations would be diluted beyond recognition. People must care about that hierarchy for it to be socially significant or even for it to exist. Imagine a society in which the appreciation of beauty, the pursuit of truth, craft skills, being fit, companionship, personal traits like good humor and generosity, and so forth really counted for more than having above average income and possessions. Some people would be better than others at all of these things, but there would be at least a score of noncomparable hierarchies, and being better would not necessarily carry financial rewards. Even today there are executives who care less about promotion than running a good 10 k. The decline of elitist values, less joy in the sheer fact that you are better at something than others are, is also relevant. Superior performance would persist, but less status, less passion, less of a sense of being a better human being would attend superior performance.

In sum: either meritocracy posits a population who are materialist and elitist but who make financial sacrifices and sacrifice the prospects of their children just so others have a better

chance to compete, or meritocracy posits today's class system as eternal, even though people have undergone a sea change that has eroded their love of money and status. The present class system cannot become just without a value shift, and a value shift would alter the present class system. Moral realists who believe the last sentence would be improved by calling that value shift a more accurate perception of moral facts are welcome to do so. After all, people have become less "morally depraved".

Meritocracy is also sociologically incoherent: (1) allocating rewards irrespective of merit is a prerequisite for meritocracy, otherwise environment cannot be equalized; (2) allocating rewards according to merit is a prerequisite for meritocracy, otherwise people cannot be stratified by wealth and status (3) therefore, a class-stratified meritocracy is impossible.

This reveals an ambiguity at the heart of the meritocracy thesis, namely failure to specify the quality of the equalized environments assumed. For most of us, giving everyone equal opportunity would mean everyone with access to quality health care and education; everyone reared in nondemonized homes and communities, that is, by parents in decent housing and with decent jobs; everyone protected against handicaps like having to support a indigent parent or parents. If these things are enjoyed by 95 to 99 percent the population, they can hardly be reserved to those of outstanding merit.

Yet equalization of environments is to coexist with a large immiserated underclass, and that class must compete with an elite that has an environment so potent that they constitute a menace to democracy (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994,509-526). The ideal that truly self-destructs in practice is the meritocratic ideal. Those who think it inevitable should give it a plausible social dynamic. They can begin by telling us how equality is to be achieved when a large underclass is already knocking at the door, or, conversely, how an underclass is to emerge if we keep topping up their environmental quality to maintain the level needed for equal opportunity. It is significant that Herrnstein and Murray imagine environments being equalized by magic. Magic's next task is to reconcile equality with a large underclass. Its final task should be to square the circle.

Our sociological analysis reinforces our psychological analysis. The higher we push the quality of environment all enjoy, the less attractive the prizes left for the winners. Many people of talent may want more than the not-unattractive norm, but how many will care about shaking the last dollar out of the money tree? Social scientists can go on publishing hierarchies that rank the whole population by occupational status, but these will fall short of ranking people by merit,

much less genes for talent. An overenthusiastic sports master can force everyone to participate in the annual school run, but he or she cannot force them to train or try. The published results will not stratify people for genes for running ability. A decent life for all does not foster a social Darwinist psychology or raise competition to fever pitch.

Now we have a better understanding of the dynamics of humane egalitarian ideals. Rather than self-destructing in practice, they possess a self-correcting mechanism that avoids meritocratic excess. The truth is that we cannot push equality much beyond our ability to humanize. Every significant step toward equality must be accompanied by the evolution of values unfriendly to "success" as defined by the present class structure. Every significant step toward equality means a step toward a people less materialistic and elitist, more variegated in their interests and behavior, altogether more humane. Whatever dark spirits lurk in the depths of equality, meritocracy is not among them.

A final disclaimer: this analysis makes no prediction about how far we can go toward humanizing people away from materialistic and elitist values: it does not even say how far we should go. The caution does not come from recognizing that people disadvantage blacks because of rational self-interest. The fact that bankers, landlords, employers, and proprietors want to survive market competition is quite compatible with putting your woodworking hobby ahead of plotting to be president of General Motors. The caution comes from an inability to predict history. What the analysis does attempt is to describe the interaction between humane values and egalitarian ideals, to show that radical progress beyond the status quo for one assumes radical progress for the other. It attempts to show that when our critics write a scenario that assumes radical equality of opportunity conjoined with the present class system and its psychology, they simply are not thinking clearly.

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