

# **Meritocracy and Political Authority Legitimacy**

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## Abstract

Meritocracy is a persistent value cherished by human beings throughout history. When it comes to political authority, meritocracy is also an important guideline people follow in order to achieve the best outcome of human resource and personnel arrangement for positions controlling authority and implementing policies. Even modern liberal societies embrace the value of meritocracy, despite the fact that liberal political account opposes negative effects of the overemphasis of meritocracy. This thesis explores the puzzle of the persistence of meritocracy from the perspective of meritocracy's role in legitimatizing political authority. The function of power-forming contributes to meritocracy's firm relationship with political authority, namely that the utilitarian feature makes meritocracy indispensable to political authority acquiring legitimacy, regardless of the type of political authority – ancient or modern authority, autocratic or liberal authority. However, in the framework of modern liberal political obligation, legitimacy of authority greatly depends on the realization of equality-based justice, so meritocracy's role in liberal societies is determined by its adapting to the comprehensive legitimacy – the combination between utilitarian function of authority and equality-based justice. In this regard, natural duty theory asks meritocracy to further discharge individuals' duties among each other by reaching a compromise between its utilitarianism and justice consideration. By setting principles for meritocracy from the perspective of egalitarianism, this thesis argues that it is possible to arrive at a compromise between the need of meritocracy and the appeal of social justice. Eventually a merit-based society featured with self-restraint of meritocracy can be achieved, contributing to both the performance-oriented and justice-focused legitimacy of political authority.

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## Introduction

Meritocracy is a persistent value cherished by different social and political regimes throughout the history of mankind,<sup>1</sup> which results from the close relationship between meritocracy and political authority legitimacy. The obvious logic underlying the interaction between meritocracy and political authority is that meritocracy benefits the building and maintaining of political authority by constructing an orderly social arrangement. This social arrangement can be characterized by locating individuals in corresponding positions matched to willingness, talents and efforts endowed to and exhibited by individuals. On the other hand, it is very common for human societies to hold the value that justice should be grounded on the notion of proportionality between investment and profit. This argument is supported by the plain intuition which holds that talented and hardworking individuals should be rewarded with more returns. However, as is well known, equality-centered philosophy of justice has surpassed the justice of equity in liberal societies. Equality-centered philosophy gives more attention to distribution of goods from the perspective of equal starting places and subsequent distribution outcome received by individuals, while justice of equity bases its foundation on the principle of proportionality and stresses individual responsibilities.

Even though the equality value is more widespread in recent decades, when justice value is applied to human resource and personnel arrangement in political authority, meritocracy remains one of the dominant principles in determining how political authority should be constituted in a liberal democracy. Inspired by the contradiction between the remaining vitality of meritocratic value and justice appeal of equality, this thesis sets out to theoretically analyze (1) the

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Pojman, "Merit: Why Do We Value It?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30, no.1 (1999): 84.

relationship between meritocracy and political authority, and to find the general way by which meritocracy provides political authority with legitimacy; (2) the role of meritocracy in legitimatizing liberal political authority and to give normative arguments related to how to set principles for meritocracy in the framework of liberal accounts.

The topic of meritocracy appears frequently in literature related to sociology, education and public administration, mainly covering studies analyzing the impacts of meritocratic system on social inequality,<sup>2</sup> the role of education in shaping a meritocracy-centered society<sup>3</sup> and meritocracy's role in bureaucracy and other professional systems.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some literature involves the relationship between meritocracy and political structure and process. A certain part of this kind of literature theoretically and empirically discusses about the interaction between meritocracy and political legitimacy in specific countries, such as China<sup>5</sup> and Singapore<sup>6</sup>. Generally, sociological and educational research focuses on the negative impact of meritocracy on society. For example, Michael Young, who first systematically analyzes meritocracy, criticizes acquiring power and privilege by merit<sup>7</sup> and he especially points out that reforms targeted on meritocracy in the political authority has failed. The consequence is that “the rich and

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Young, *The Rise of the Democracy, 1870 – 2033, An Essay on Education and Equality*, (Mitcham: Penguin Books, 1961); Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Bovens and Anchril Wille, *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Ye Liu, *Higher Education in Asia: Quality, Excellence and Governance*, (Singapore: Springer Science + Business Media, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Fred Dallmayr et al, “Beyond Liberal Democracy: A Debate on Democracy and Confucian Meritocracy,” *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 4 (2009): 523-560; Nicholas Charron et al, “Careers, Connections, and Corruption Risks: Investigating the Impact of Bureaucratic Meritocracy on Public Procurement Processes,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2017): 89-104.

<sup>5</sup> Juan Canteras and Javier Gil, “Modelling Meritocracy Democratic Transferences and Confucian Assumption in The China Model,” *Philosophy and Public Issues* 7, no. 1 (2017): 169-201; Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Wong and Xunming Huang, “Political Legitimacy in Singapore,” *Politics & Policy* 38, no. 3 (2010): 523-543; Kenneth Paul Tan, “The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-liberal Globalization and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 67-92; Sungmoon Kim, “Pragmatic Confucian Democracy: Rethinking the Value of Democracy in East Asia,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 1 (2016): 237-249.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Young, “Meritocracy revisited,” *Society* 31, no. 6 (1994): 87.

powerful are encouraged by the culture of meritocracy to believe they fully deserved all they have”.<sup>8</sup> Based on their privileged situation, those criticisms claim that “lucky sperm club confers no moral right to advantage”.<sup>9</sup>

In view of the obvious defect concerning injustice caused by the outcome of meritocracy – hierarchy, inequality and Social Darwinism, nonnormative research almost all views meritocracy as an outdated and immoral concept which should be abandoned or modified in real social life. Faced with challenges in public discourse and empirical studies, however, philosophical literature related to meritocracy attempts to defend meritocracy by normative analysis and arguments. Louis Pojman demonstrates that “rewarding being a form of universalizing gratitude is the closest thing to a nonutilitarian moral justification for meritocracy”.<sup>10</sup> Parallel to Pojman’s argument, this thesis will illustrate that for the purpose of legitimatizing political authority, there is no need to find nonutilitarian justification, instead, the utilitarian feature of meritocracy is sufficient enough to justify meritocracy’s role, provided that justice based on liberal considerations is embedded so as to realize the compromise between utilitarianism and justice of equality. David Miller argues that obstacles to achieve pure meritocracy can be overcome through education, legislation and institutional reform, and meritocracy should be valued because it corresponds to basic values we cherish in liberal and market-based society. In the process of analyzing, Miller manages to bridge the gap between desert aspect and merit aspect of meritocracy.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, this thesis will try to give more weight to merit aspect of meritocracy for the purpose of reaching a compromise between utilitarianism and justice of equality.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Young, “Meritocracy revisited,” 89.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Young, “Meritocracy revisited,” 89.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Pojman, “Merit: Why Do We Value It?” 100.

<sup>11</sup> David Miller, “Two Cheers for Meritocracy,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 4, no. 4 (1996): 284.

In order to comprehensively analyze the relationship between meritocracy and authority legitimacy, this thesis will utilize theories of political obligation to explore how meritocracy functions to legitimize different kinds of political authority. Political authority consists of two dimensions: one is power and the other is the right to rule. Literature concerning power's role in political legitimacy is limited, but power is in fact a constitutive element in terms of making meritocracy functional from the perspective of utilitarianism. In this view, the role of meritocracy in power forming is an integral part in the process of analyzing the mechanism in which meritocracy legitimizes political authority. Afterwards, an analysis will be conducted in frameworks of theoretical sources of political obligation/authority. Before we enter into the analysis of the relationship between meritocracy and modern political authority theories, meritocracy's role in ancient political obligation theories will first be analyzed. The persistence of meritocracy throughout the historical evolvement of political authority will display the essential nature of meritocracy – being utilitarian and functional in legitimizing political authority. Then the major analysis revolves around the relationship between meritocracy and modern political authority sources. A large volume of literature deals with legitimacy of political authority and a variety of theories have been proposed to explain why the political authority can impose coercion on its subjects and why individuals subject to the authority have an obligation to obey the sovereign. From those theories, this thesis selects consent theory, fair play theory and natural duty theory to analyze meritocracy's role, because on one hand, those three theories are most widespread and widely studied; on the other hand, the theoretical analysis based on these three authority theories lays foundation for the third chapter of the thesis – to set principles for meritocracy.



Analysis of the relationship between meritocracy and consent theory/fair play theory will demonstrate that perspectives from citizens actively transferring power to the authority is not sound enough to explain meritocracy's role in political authority legitimacy, whereas natural duty theory stresses the authority actively functioning as the must presence to discharge individuals' duties among each other, so natural duty theory is to be selected to construct the framework in which the compromise between utilitarian feature and justice of equality is achieved. This compromise then endows meritocracy with coherent internal logic in terms of its relationship with political authority legitimacy. Based on the compromise, principles for meritocracy can be laid down. These principles reflect the integrated perspective of political authority legitimacy – political authority should balance its utilitarian function of discharging citizens' duties and its social justice appeal of achieving equality among all its subjects.

Last but not least, before we enter into the main body, several points need to be clarified. First, the thesis argues that utilitarian feature of meritocracy needs to be tempered, but not for the purpose with a broad sense – to ensure outcomes produced by meritocracy are redistributed with justice in the larger social sphere. Rather, achieving social distributive justice is a separate broader topic which is not included in my focus. In the thesis, the understanding of 'utilitarian feature of meritocracy needs to be tempered' is constrained in the sphere of authority arrangement through a) limiting the influence of meritocracy in personnel arrangement for positions in authority; b) thus guaranteeing that on one hand, authority holders just utilize their positions to produce valuable outcomes needed by the public; c) on the other hand, the demonstration effect of meritocracy prevalence in the sphere of political authority does not exist in the broader social sphere, despite the fact that meritocracy still has strong presence in the social sphere, such as recruitment in the market, education enrolment and so on.

Second, related to arguments in the first clarification, the thesis is not meant to confirm that meritocracy in itself is an independent account of political obligation/legitimacy, rather, meritocracy is put forward as a relatively narrower value which is applied complementarily in the sphere of authority arrangement instead of being as the independent theory to provide justification/legitimacy source for authority. Because constructing an independent theory is a task which should answer how broader justice in the social sphere is achieved, which is not the purpose of this thesis – the thesis does not plan to put meritocracy in the discussion about the broader sense of distributive justice. In brief, the thesis just answers how meritocracy-based authority can be its best with the consideration of limiting side effects of utilitarianism. Therefore, an analysis of general theories of political obligation is intended to demonstrate how meritocracy functions in general sources of authority legitimacy – contrary to meritocracy's narrower role in authority arrangement, those general theories of political obligation have already offered us frameworks of political authority legitimacy in a broader sense, and they concern the holistic application of legitimacy, including the relationship between state and society, each individual's status in the political community and so on. In sum, the topic of the thesis is the relationship between meritocracy and political authority legitimacy, so justice consideration, especially equality-based justice, is simply the integral part of the analysis and should be not identified as the ultimate orientation of the purpose of the writing.

# Chapter One

## **1.1. Concept of Meritocracy in the Realm of Political Authority**

In the context of modern political philosophy and practice, state authority is considered “public” authority,<sup>12</sup> so only when the operation of political power can effectively reflect the democratic will, does the political power win an authoritative influence over the public who are governed. The democratic public attribute of modern political authority determines that every citizen who satisfies constitutional requirements – in most modern states, it is that all citizens who are adults and are not deprived of political rights – has the legal right to be placed in a political position. Thus, theoretically political positions are the only job offices for which no formal qualifications are required<sup>13</sup> and anybody can be elected/assigned/promoted to a political position regardless of her qualifications. However, even though political authority is constitutionally open to all citizens, meritocracy remains a primary feature of the arrangement of human resource in the structure and process of political authority building and maintaining in both democratic and non-democratic states. So how does this phenomenon become a default fact and what is the underlying normative logic of meritocracy? In order to answer the question, this thesis will focus on the relationship between meritocracy and political authority. In other words, this thesis will utilize multiple theories of political obligation/authority to clarify the role of meritocracy in conceptions and theories of political authority and to provide the justification and critique of political authority based on meritocracy’s relationship with political legitimacy.

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<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Young, *The Rise of the Democracy, 1870 – 2033, An Essay on Education and Equality*, 1.

In the first part, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the concept of meritocracy when it is utilized in the analysis of political authority. Meritocracy cherishes the value of merit. In political setting, meritocracy is an ideal form of human resource arrangement in which each individual's value is assessed by her merit, according to which a specific individual's chance to acquire a political position of advantage depends entirely on her merit. In such an authority arrangement system, political institutions are to ensure that the match between political positions and candidates is based on meritocracy. To be specific, advancing an individual in the meritocratic system to a higher position is not a random selection, neither it is to base the standard of human resource arrangement on information about an individuals' ascriptive attributes, such as physiological features, social status and interpersonal relationship, but rather it is individuals' talent which can be devoted to or effort which has been made in public affairs, or performance which has been displayed or outcome which has been generated for the public that matter. In this regard, meritocracy appears to make an incision across layers caused by unequal social starting places<sup>14</sup> – the latter of which is the concern of Rawls's original position theory – despite the hierarchy arising from merit principles and the existence of intersection and overlapping between merit-based hierarchy and inequality caused by other social and political factors.

The distinction between desert and merit specified by Pojman<sup>15</sup> is a useful reference for us to comprehensively understand what the constitutive elements of the value of meritocracy are. Desert aspect is more connected with intention or self-propelled effort, so individuals are judged by what they actively do with the natural talent attached to them. For example, if an individual has good intentions and she keeps working hard for the purpose of her self-actualization, this scenario can be regarded as corresponding to desert standard. As to merit aspect, it is the quality

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<sup>14</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Louis Pojman, "Merit: Why Do We Value It?" 83-102.

an individual possesses which in itself is a basic meritorious asset bringing rewards for the individual, such as one's intelligence and physical endowment. The more important is that the meaning of merit then can be extended to the contribution an individual makes, namely that if someone performs well and makes a positive contribution to broader public interests, this scenario corresponds to merit standard. In this regard, merit aspect is more result-oriented and it is performance, rather than intention, that matters.<sup>16</sup>

From the above clarification, we can see that there is divergence when it comes to the definitive criterion of meritocracy indicated by the distinction between the desert aspect and the merit aspect. Although the divergence is real in terms of denoting criterion of meritocracy, in analyzing the role of meritocracy in political authority, the paradigm of merit aspect obviously accounts more for giving specific connotation to the notion of meritocracy, because the public-serving attribute of political authority asks it to give more attention to the final outcome rather than the subjective intention reflected by authority implementation. To be clear, it is merit aspect rather than desert aspect which should be focused on in the sphere of political authority. Let us assume a situation in which desert paradigm other than merit paradigm is followed. In such a situation, a politician or a bureaucratic official would deserve rewards of being promoted to a higher position even if her good intentions or continuous efforts do not yield the desirable outcome. This scenario is in clear violation of our intuition and real-life experience, because personnel arrangement in politics is a typical domain in which the end justifies the means. And yet for all that, desert aspect should still be regarded as a necessary precondition for merit aspect, because only when one has desert attribute – conscientiousness or good intention – can we justify that she has the willingness to conduct merit-based action. Furthermore, regarding the

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<sup>16</sup> Louis Pojman, "Merit: Why Do We Value It?" 92.

justifying distinction between merit aspect and desert aspect and the reason for giving more weight to merit aspect when meritocracy is evaluated in the sphere of political authority, more analysis and reasoning will be given in the 3.2.2. section discussing how the justice consideration asks meritocracy to limit itself in the sphere of utilitarian functioning in order to realize meritocracy's mission of political authority legitimatizing while preserving equality-based justice.

### **1.2. Meritocracy: A Way of Forming Political Power**

The above section stipulates that in the sphere of political authority, meritocracy is more of a result-oriented value which is reflected by the merit aspect being given more weight as the assessment standard, despite the fact that the notion of desert is still a precondition of the realization of good performance and desirable outcome. On the basis of the above clarification of meritocracy, this section argues that the close relationship between meritocracy and political authority building and maintaining is reflected by the mechanism of meritocracy being a way of forming political power.

“Authority is about the entitlement to rule and mere power is not enough to supply entitlement.”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, power and the entitlement to rule – what makes power right – are the two dimensions of political authority. In the relationship between power and authority, power is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of authority. In this regard, the role of meritocracy in the sphere of political authority lies first in its constitutive attribute of being functional in forming power. Meritocracy being the source of political power is supported by the

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Hampton, *Political philosophy*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 4.

argument that merit-based systems tend to yield power-reinforcing outcome. Although this thesis does not support the argument that selection by merit inevitably facilitates the formation of an illegitimate hierarchical society, which will be clarified in the third chapter, the way that meritocracy contributes to the formation of a performance/outcome-oriented political process is indeed the road state-power building and maintaining must get through.

Formally, according to Talcott Parsons, power “integrates both factors and outputs of political effectiveness”.<sup>18</sup> First, in the sense of factors, power is the means of “acquiring control of the factors in effectiveness”.<sup>19</sup> Here we see that power in itself is a vehicle through which control of factors leading to effectiveness is realized. Regarding how meritocracy works, analogy between power and meritocracy is instructive. (1) Parallel to the goal of leading to effectiveness of power is meritocracy’s result-oriented principle. (2) Parallel to power in itself is a vehicle is that meritocracy in itself primarily is also a vehicle rather than the ends. When it comes to the bridge which connects meritocracy with power, it is that meritocracy is one of the factors that power commits itself to control. So the logic is that on one hand, the merit-principle is the means for achieving the goal of power, on the other hand, the merit-principle shares the same goal with power, namely effectiveness to achieve the desirable outcome. Second, in the sense of outputs, it is the capacity to assume leadership which embodies the output. Besides, power here is the precondition for organization effectively functioning, the latter of which guarantees the implementation of responsibility for collective effectiveness. In brief, leadership and organization, in the substantial sense, are all embodied in the operation of power. In turn, power is reflected by the implementation of collective effectiveness. Parallel to meritocracy being one

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<sup>18</sup> Talcott Parsons, “On the Concept of Political Power,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 3 (1963): 258.

<sup>19</sup> Talcott Parsons, “On the Concept of Political Power,” 234.

of the factors that power is to control, meritocracy plays the similar role in the operation of leadership and organization in that meritocracy is a set of system to generate standard-based leadership and organizational institution.

By definition, according to Talcott Parsons, “power is generalized capacity to secure binding obligations by units when the obligations are determined by their bearing on collective goals and if recalcitrance occurs there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions.”<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the capacity and goal-oriented attributes in the definition of power, meritocracy’s constitutive role in political power has been discussed in the previous paragraph. When it comes to the relationship between meritocracy and power’s attribute of enforcement, it is the systematic hierarchy embedded in human resource system directed by meritocracy that has relations to political power. What needs illustration is that the object of state enforcement is the public who are governed, but enforcement also applies to political authority holders, because on one hand politicians and civil servants are also those who are governed; on the other hand, enforcement is needed among authority holders so as to guarantee the organizational operation of political power. In this case, political power has double meanings. One is the general political power aimed at the public, and another is the narrower political power running within the power organ. The focus here is on the relationship between meritocracy and power’s attribute of enforcement within the power organ.

In order to clarify hierarchy resulted from meritocracy, the thesis refers to screening mechanism argument proposed by David Miller. Criticisms of the hierarchy related to meritocracy generally concentrate their firepower in individuals’ lives of bad luck that falls on them without the choice of their own, namely that bad merit is assigned to individuals who suffer bad luck, causing them

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<sup>20</sup> Talcott Parsons, “On the Concept of Political Power,” 237.



to have no chance to be rewarded with political position of advantage. However, this hierarchy criticized is not the same as the hierarchy which occurs as a result of screening mechanism required by the smooth organizational operation of meritocracy in the power organ. Although the primary concern of merit-based principle is to guarantee that individuals are evaluated on their merits, on the basis of which each individual has an equal chance to be placed in the position that she deserves, the screening mechanism argument holds that “positions cannot be ranked in terms of their importance or contribution to the organization as a whole, rather the actual scenario is that merit-based screening is essentially a screening for a division of rewards that reflects the balance of power between different groups within the organization.”<sup>21</sup>

The screening argument is based on the fact of division of social groups, but a revision has to be made so as to make the screening argument can be self-validating rather than being justified by social factors. In this regard, the division of rewards in screening mechanism is not the result of and the passive response to the balance of power of groups, instead, the division of rewards is simply the essential condition of the notion that social order is naturally built around merit-based principle. Order is the by-product of meritocracy, for in order to implement the principle of rewarding positions to individuals on the basis of merit, there must be a guideline specifying the reward schedule for positions.<sup>22</sup> Such a reward schedule obviously violates some moral appeals by status-equality-based distributive justice and will produce some kinds of hierarchical structure in which power relations are shaped primarily by the position rank division. Reward principles can only be effective when they conform to general knowledge and intuition about the matching between the value of reward and the value of specific corresponding position. Proportionality thus is the core mechanism underlying the merit-based principle. Since proportionality inevitably

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<sup>21</sup> David Miller, “Two Cheers for Meritocracy,” 290.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Daniels, “Merit and Meritocracy,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (1978): 208.

causes unequal distribution of positions according to resource being divided to individuals based on hierarchy-yielded valuations, the condition for the implementation of enforcement is generated. To summarize, the by-product of hierarchical order in a meritocratic system according to proportionality makes the enforcement of power possible.

### ***1.3. Meritocracy in Frameworks of Pre-modern Political Authority Legitimacy***

The analysis of the relationship between meritocracy and political power demonstrates that meritocracy plays a constitutive role in the formation of political power and political power can be enhanced by merit-based principles. Now the topic turns towards the relationship between meritocracy and the legitimacy of political authority, namely how meritocracy can increase or decrease the legitimate right to rule of political authority. The argument can be applied to if the public are legitimately subject to the political authority featured with meritocratic value and practice, it is not only because of the possible sanction caused by the enforcement of power, but also because that the authority based on meritocracy has the normative right to require the public to fulfill their obligations. In this regard, this thesis holds that meritocracy is the linkage among various political authority theories with the emphasis on enhancing the internal legitimacy of the authority organ. In order to clarify this argument, the analysis in this section is grounded on meritocracy's role in certain pre-modern broader theories of legitimate source of political authority – the divine authorization theory, natural hierarchy theory, ancient perfectionism perspective and consent theory.

According to divine authorization theory, political authority comes from an external source rather than from the intrinsic property of the authority-holder. Jean Hampton recognizes three

ways in which authority is derived from God. In the first form of divine authorization, the authority holder herself is the god in human form.<sup>23</sup> In this scenario, the most valuable merit equals to the god, and the application of merit-based principle in the secular context has no place in terms of prescribing how individuals can be positioned in their suitable places in the authority organ. The reason is that all positions running in the authority are the natural ramifications of the unparalleled authority of the almighty god. Consequently, meritocracy perceived as arrangement principle of authority has no place in the “ruler being god” paradigm. The second form of divine authorization depicts the scenario in which authority-holder claims that even she is not the god, but she is related to the god and subsequently divine authority to rule is shifted to her. Here, the value of meritocracy is applied to a certain extent because the authority-holder voluntarily bases her authority claim on the ground of merit relevant to the god. The third form of divine authorization argues that the authority-holder admits her humanity, but she is given the authority by the god to rule. Meritocracy in the third divine authorization functions similarly with its role in the second divine authorization form. The difference is that in the second scenario, merit is more embedded in the fact of the connectedness between the authority-holder and the god, while in the third scenario, merit is more than the fact of being given authority by the god. The authority-holder must indicate why and how she is rewarded with the right to rule by the god. In other words, it is possible for other substantial merits, such as inheritance, to give the authority-holder the chance of claiming her god’s authorization.

For natural hierarchy authorization theory, political authority comes from the intrinsic property rather than from the external source of the authority-holder. Natural hierarchy recognizes such a belief that some individuals’ natures fit them for power and leadership, whereas others are

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Hampton, *Political philosophy*, 7.

qualified with natures to be governed, which makes them submit to the superior ones.<sup>24</sup> Although there is huge controversy concerning whether there can be natural dominance based on the assumption of unequal natural qualities, the basic ground of such a theory is clear and consistent – if some individuals have the nature fitting them to give direction to other individuals, the latter of whom have the nature to be directed, then the former type of individuals naturally has the authority over the latter ones. Natural hierarchy is derived from the substantive inequality among the natural attributes attached to individuals, based on which natural superiority entitling some group of individuals to dominate over others is supposed as legitimate.<sup>25</sup> The idea of natural hierarchy authorization appears at first blush to share a common logical starting point with meritocracy, in that they both ascribe the acquisition of political authority to the superiority of certain attributes individuals possess. Besides, it is rationality that natural hierarchy authorization theory regards as the sign of being superior in the relationship between being naturally directed and being naturally giving direction to the inferior. Rationality is an important factor for one to be identified as possessing merit as well. However, there is significant divergence between natural hierarchy authorization and meritocracy. Regarding the role of rationality in meritocracy, rationality is just one of the numerous component factors of the modern standard of being meritorious, meaning that rationality itself does not equal to merit-based principle, while in natural hierarchy authorization theory, rationality is the standard by which natural hierarchy is distinguished from divine authorization – intrinsic superior rationality instead of external source of association with the god is the foundation for someone being endowed with dominance power. The distinction between standards of intrinsic attribute and external attribute also applies to the divergence between natural hierarchy authorization and meritocracy. As illustrated above, the

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Levin, “Natural Subordination, Aristotle on,” *Philosophy* 72, no. 280 (1997): 255.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Hampton, *Political philosophy*, 12.

desert aspect in meritocracy focuses on intention and effort devoted by individuals and this is more intrinsic attribute-oriented. Nevertheless, in the sphere of political authority, meritocracy is more related to the merit aspect, the latter of which gives more attention to performance and result, so what distinguishes meritocracy from natural hierarchy authorization is that meritocracy in the sphere of political authority is outcome-based and it does not care too much of how to achieve the outcome, such as outcome achieved by rationality.

According to ancient perfectionism perspective, political authority comes from the wisdom possessed by the authority-holder, but wisdom is not naturally endowed to the holder, rather it is justified by the outcome of the Good. From the perspective of ancient perfectionism, the authority-holder's legitimacy is the result of her superior knowledge of the Good. Besides, the authority-holder rules herself via reason according to her knowledge of the Good. Therefore, there are two dimensions related to ancient perfectionism of authority. One is that the authority-holder knows the Good and she applies the Good in her own life, namely that she is the embodiment of the Good. Another is that since the authority-holder possesses the quality of reasoning, she has the responsibility to devote herself to the community, hence her authority legitimacy is due to her knowing "which ought to be" instead of simply the fact that she is superior to or better than others by the rational ability.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in the substantial sense, meritocracy also takes the good/merit as the first principle, and simultaneously, merit should be reflected by the desirable outcome produced by the good for political community. However, the divergence between ancient perfectionism and meritocracy lies in that the former idea is a metaphysical theory which explains universal elements of reality by looking into the distance without flexible considerations concerning the fluidity of circumstances. In other words, ideas

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<sup>26</sup> Jean Hampton, *Political philosophy*, 24.

derived from perfectionism presupposes the realization of the objective Good, so perfectionism is the opposite of relativism.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, although the goal of meritocracy can also be recognized as perfectionism due to its endless pursuit of the better arrangement of authority based on merit-principle, the perfectionism attached to meritocracy is actually perfectionism without perfectibility: there is no such thing as an ultimate model as the Good from the view of meritocracy. Perfectionism means that there is always an ultimate model, in the sense of which, implementing merit-based principle is to arrive at the perfect end, though the fact is that the ultimate perfect can never be reached. Meritocracy, thus, can be claimed as a view of perfectionism accompanied by relativism. Both of perfectionism and relativism reflect the practical emphasis of meritocracy to enhance the incremental validity. Meritocracy is a result-oriented value of process, rather than a view of metaphysical orientation. If we judge legitimacy of political authority based on perfectionism perspective, obviously no authority which has existed in history is the Good due to the lack of the philosopher king. Nevertheless, meritocracy can be identified as a variant version of the model of philosopher king, which is applied in the real-world political practice so as to infinitely converge towards the perfect goal of the Good.

Ancient consent-based theory heralded modern political theories, the mainstream of which repudiate inequality-based theories that have existed in history. Ancient political authority theories discussed above all presuppose that there is substantial inequality among individuals. Inequality in terms of the association with the god, nature or rationality differentiates the authority-holder from those who are born with the destiny to be governed. Embedded in those inequality-based political authorities, the role of meritocracy mainly lies in its sharing the common emphasis on the good or merit. Besides, the mechanism of proportionality also applies

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Hampton, *Political philosophy*, 24.

to meritocracy's adaptation to ancient political authority theories, though the continuous spectrum of proportionality is distorted by ancient authorities and becomes an extreme binary version of oppositional relationship between the authority-holder and the public being governed. After political development stepped into the new stage of individual liberation, with the transition of source of legitimacy of political authority, the problem faced by meritocracy is how to overcome its appearance of overly emphasizing merit, subsequently acquiescing in merit-based inequality of status among individuals. The strategy for meritocracy is that the mechanism of proportionality is adjusted to its original appearance of being a political value featured with individuals being arranged in positions on the grounds of the combination of fittingness and adequate mobility. In meritocracy, the dimension of mobility functions so long as the structure of fittingness changes. In this regard, ancient consent-based theory can be regarded as the preliminary form of political authority theory which takes equality of individuals' nature and rationality into account. Therefore, meritocracy in consent-based theory, accordingly, to some extent, surpasses its collusion with inequality-based logic.

The argument of legitimate political authority resting on the consent of the governed is attributed to Aristotle by some scholars,<sup>28</sup> this is where ancient consent-based theory comes from. Aristotle bases the creation of political authority on human beings' needs and necessities instead of on the presupposed natural inequality among people. The role of meritocracy in such an assumption naturally becomes that it is to satisfy human beings' needs by providing principles for creating justifiable political authority. On the basis of human beings' needs to form political authority, mutual consent is the medium process by which the necessity to create an authority can be embodied. Alongside with mutual consent are various political values providing normative

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<sup>28</sup> Roderick T. Long, "Aristotle's Conception of Freedom," *The Review of Metaphysics* 49, no. 4 (1996): 776.

arguments for the building and maintaining of the legitimacy of political authority based on the basic recognition of the equality of human nature. Meritocracy is one of those political values, playing its role in modern political theories and legitimatizing political authority in a variety of ways. The analysis of the relationship between meritocracy and modern political authority theories – contract theory, fair play theory and natural duty theory and so on – is not the task in this section, but from what has been illustrated so far, we can draw a rough conclusion that forms of authority theories are all historical products. The circulation of one source of authority legitimacy being replaced by another source of authority legitimacy is the historical pattern, eventually resulting in political development. In this regard, however, meritocracy can be identified as the everlasting political value, which has been consistently assisted other sources of authority legitimacy in legitimating a constant flow of political authorities.



## Chapter Two

### ***2.1. Introduction of Frameworks of Modern Political Authority Legitimacy***

Although ancient consent-based theories base political authority on the consent of all those who have equal natural status according to the necessity resulted from their actual needs, the authority-holder to whom political authority is conferred does not necessarily hold the value of liberalism. On the contrary, regimes led by king and tyrant as well as governed by aristocracy and oligarchy, can all be forms of consent-based political authority, in which the default governing value is not liberalism, rather it is the almighty sovereign which constitutes as the primary concern for monarchy and tyranny, and it is elitist ruling which provides the theoretical foundation for authority held by aristocracy and oligarchy. On the face of the remaining complicated landscape of diversity of source of modern political authority legitimacy, theoretical division of the types of the nature of individuals' obligation to authority is useful. The binary accounts of types of obligation are voluntaristic and non-voluntaristic.<sup>29</sup> Voluntaristic theories assume that for an individual who is obliged to accept the legitimacy of political authority, she must perform actions indicating that she subjectively accepts the obligation to political authority. As a result, all of these acceptances of obligation are performed voluntarily. In a broad sense, ancient consent-based theories can be identified as voluntaristic, because consent to authority is theoretically individuals' voluntary actions. Furthermore, modern consent theories narrow down the voluntaristic account to more individualist-oriented, so modern consent-based perspective can also be categorized as voluntaristic accounts of obligations.

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<sup>29</sup> Rolf Sartorius, "Political Authority and Political Obligation," *Virginia Law Review* 61, no. 1 (1981): 3-17.

In contrast to voluntaristic account of political obligation, non-voluntaristic account argues that even though voluntary indications of being subject to political authority sometimes do not exist, non-voluntaristic obligation under political authority in some circumstances can make individuals' life easier and happier due to the realization of rule-governed cooperation among separate individuals. In this way, some kind of acceptance of obligation to political authority is grounded more on benefits individuals gain from their status of being governed by the authority-holder. In such a context, political obligation is still legitimate despite the lack of individuals' voluntary indications of obligation. This benefit-based non-voluntaristic scenario is summarized by the fair play theory of political obligation. Another scenario in which non-voluntaristic account works is communitarian condition. From the perspective of communitarianism, an individual "is always situated in a particular tradition, plays certain roles, and has commitments and relationships",<sup>30</sup> so her choice of being subject to political authority of her community cannot be regarded as voluntary, but rather it is a non-voluntaristic situation. In other words, for communitarian account, it is the social role in the community that determines individuals' obligation to the political authority. When describing the legitimacy of political authority from the perspective of obligation of individuals who are governed, the above two non-voluntaristic accounts directly base their foundation on individuals' attitudes towards and behaviors relevant to political authority.

However, for modern theories of political authority, especially for liberal political theories, the relationship between political authority and justice rather than other factors, such as benefits gained from obeying authority or communitarian reasons, is the major factor which determines the legitimacy of political theory. In this regard, the natural duty account of obligation reflects

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<sup>30</sup> Adeno Addis, "Individualism, Communitarianism, and the Rights of Ethnic Minorities," *Notre Dame Law Review* 67, no. 3 (1992): 641.

that individuals who are governed have the natural obligation to the political authority if such an authority is able to and even is needed to discharge individuals' moral duties to each other. In other words, in the scenario of natural duty obligation, the political authority is the embodiment of social justice and social justice is the major source of legitimacy for the political authority; therefore individuals' obligation to political authority mainly stems from the fact of justice becoming in essence de facto condition of the political authority.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the search for obligation mechanism/political authority legitimacy equals to the search for theoretical foundation of justice. Under this circumstance, analyzing the relationship between meritocracy and political authority is to analyze meritocracy in theoretical frameworks of political and social justice. On the other hand, for the purpose of assessing how meritocracy plays its role in political authority by focusing on the dimension of justice, we have to clarify the relationship between political authority and justice, namely how do authority legitimacy and justice interact with each other? Is justice the criterion of political authority or is there any other relationship between justice and political authority? In order to answer those questions, the theoretical case of meritocracy's role in political authority/justice is helpful to clarify the differences between justice and political authority.

Based on the frameworks of modern political authority legitimacy listed above, the remaining part of this thesis will analyze the role of meritocracy in modern sources of political authority with a focus on how meritocracy adapts itself to the popular liberal theories of political authority – authorities based on modern consent theory and the fair play theory. In addition, with regard to meritocracy in liberal accounts of authority, justice is one of the primary concerns held by

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<sup>31</sup> John Horton, "Political legitimacy, justice and consent," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2012): 134.

modern political theories, so justification and criticism of meritocracy will further be carried out in the framework of the relationship between justice and political authority legitimacy.

## **2.2. Meritocracy in Liberal Democracy and Meritocracy as A Political Value**

As previously mentioned, even in liberal democratic societies, meritocracy remains a primary feature in terms of human resource arrangement in the structure and process of political authority. Some scholars such as Daniel Bell argues that meritocracy nearly vanishes from the public discourse in liberal democratic states and the key reason for the end of the debate about meritocracy in political theory in recent decades lies in the universal consensus that political authority leaders should be selected by means of “one person one vote”.<sup>32</sup> The underlying meaning of Bell’s argument is that meritocracy and the “one person one vote” styled democracy are completely opposite from each other. However, the phenomenon of the lack of debate on meritocracy does not change the fact that political authority holders in liberal societies are elected/selected/promoted under the guidance of value of meritocracy, regardless of whether the authority holders act as political leaders who make political decisions or serve as civil servants who implement concrete policies.

First, in the case of political leader election, the electoral means of “one person one vote” in liberal democracy should not be regarded as the opposite of meritocracy because meritocracy commonly pervasively exists throughout the election candidates’ political growth process in which she accumulates political experience gained with the help of her talent and efforts, and more often her previous career achievements benefit her in terms of acquiring recognition from

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, 66.

the supportive voters: this reflects the performance and outcome emphasis of meritocracy. The faith in the idea of “one person one vote” does not mean that merit is excluded from public voters’ considerations of finding an appropriate political leader equipped with the best qualifications. On the contrary, evidence from empirical studies demonstrates that there is strong correlation between voters’ consideration of voting for a specific candidate and this candidate’s leadership quality identified as necessary to be successful in the future, despite the fact that people’s perception of the leadership quality changes all the time.<sup>33</sup> The term of leadership itself reveals that the leader should at least possess the merit of leadership. Although the election method of “one person one vote” sometimes may “fail to produce the desired good leader and qualities making for leadership success in one set of circumstances might militate against it in another”,<sup>34</sup> it cannot be denied that the value underlying election in liberal democracy is in line with meritocracy’s emphasis on individual’s merit.

In the case of public official selection, it is more obvious that the modern civil servant selection system in most liberal societies operates under the idea of meritocracy and such a system can be traced back to Weberian theory which sees merit recruitment and merit promotion as elements of an incentive structure in the ideal-type bureaucracy.<sup>35</sup> One situation needs to be clarified, that apart from bureaucratic employees hired on the basis of merit, largely outside the political decision process,<sup>36</sup> there are some advisory bodies with staff recruited by a specific elected leader, and those staff leave their offices as the leader leaves hers. In this scenario the staff

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<sup>33</sup> Rajnandini Pillai et al, “Personality, Transformational Leadership, Trust, and the 2000 U.S. Presidential Vote,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 14 (2003): 161-192.

<sup>34</sup> Robert C. Tucker, “Personality and Political Leadership,” *Political Science Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (1977): 383.

<sup>35</sup> Jørgen Grønnegård Christensen, “Political responsiveness in a merit bureaucracy,” in *Politicization of the Civil Service in Comparative Perspective The quest for control*, ed. B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre (London: Routledge, 2004), 16.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald N. Johnson and Gary D. Libecap, “The Problem of Bureaucracy,” in *The Federal Civil Service System and The Problem of Bureaucracy*, ed. Ronald N. Johnson and Gary D. Libecap (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

affiliated to the leader are not selected or elected to political authority positions by merit-based principles, but since those stuff do not hold political power institutionally and their number is very small, the existence of such stuff in a leader's office does not change the nature of meritocracy perceived as the arrangement value of political authority in liberal democracy. In sum, contrary to what has been argued by Daniel Bell, which implicitly regards the "one person one vote" styled democracy as the opposite of meritocracy, meritocracy is still a key factor contributing to liberal democracies' political leader election, civil servant selection and relevant political authority holder evaluation, assessment and management.

Since meritocracy is not the opposite of democracy, how should we situate meritocracy when we analyze it in the context of liberal democracy where the discourse and theory of social justice are framed by liberalism's reduction of democracy<sup>37</sup> (even non-liberalism basis of social justice are constructed through criticizing liberalism)? We can take the widely studied democracy as an example to draw inspiration of how to situate a term. In this regard, democracy – all its qualified members are legally and substantially given equal rights to take part in political activities – is recognized as lying at one end of a conceptual spectrum, the other end of which is autocracy – "a system of rule where people are totally excluded from the political process and have no control over it".<sup>38</sup> The existence of the spectrum and the opposite equivalent term – autocracy – used for situating democracy reminds us to find a conceptual spectrum and the opposite equivalent term for meritocracy so as to make it easy to situate meritocracy in liberal theory.

Michael Young in his book "The Rise of the Democracy, 1870 – 2033" puts meritocracy as the opposite of egalitarian system, and he argues that "the basic assumption of one man, one vote,

<sup>37</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Liberal/Democratic Divide. On Rawl's Political Liberalism," *Political Theory* 24, no. 1 (1996): 98.

<sup>38</sup> David Beetham, "Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratization," *Political Studies* XL, no. Special (1991): 40.

was egalitarian”.<sup>39</sup> But just as what has been proved wrong that democracy defined by the method of “one person one vote” is not the opposite of meritocracy, so egalitarianism cannot be regarded as the opposite of meritocracy. Furthermore, when meritocracy is employed in empirical analysis, the term of nepotism – “to give resources to persons to whom one has personal obligation to the family, friends and membership groups”<sup>40</sup> – always plays as the contrary to meritocracy. But if nepotism is the opposite of meritocracy, many other similar terms can also play the same role as delimiting the boundary of meritocracy, such as favouritism, factionalism and so on. The problem here is that nepotism is more of a descriptive term rather than a theoretical term, the latter of which should focus more on normative meaning rather than merely phenomenal experience. Thus, nepotism cannot be identified as the opposite of meritocracy when meritocracy is put in normative analysis scheme. What should we do if we still want to find a position for meritocracy?

The meaning of meritocracy in political setting has been identified as a specific individual’s chance to acquire a political position of advantage depending entirely on her merit, so the key conceptual element includes equity, meaning that “the ratio of people’s inputs to rewards should be equivalent to the ratio of relevant comparison others”.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the opposite of equity in meritocracy should be related to inequity. What is the term which parallels with inequity as well as can be applicable in the field of meritocracy related resource distribution (in political setting it is political authority positions that are to be distributed)? In this case, there is no term suitable to be the opposite equivalent for meritocracy, just like autocracy to democracy, and hence the

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Young, *The Rise of the Democracy, 1870 – 2033*, 134.

<sup>40</sup> Zhibin Zhang, “Crowding Out Meritocracy? – Cultural Constraints in Chinese Public Human Resource Management,” *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 74, no. 3 (2015): 275.

<sup>41</sup> Donna M. Garcia et al, “The Merit of Meritocracy,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 3 (2011): 433.

conceptual spectrum does not exist either. If we must find a word used in everyday life which shares similar meaning with inequity, unfairness is the synonym. Then unfairness is another expression of injustice, so an interesting point emerges. The key aspect of the meaning of meritocracy, equity, in itself equals justice. Even though this fact can tell us nothing of the analytical relationship between meritocracy and justice in the field of political authority, it can shed some light on the natural attribute of meritocracy as a term.

Meritocracy is always regarded as a value which seems to cover the whole ideological appeals of human being, just like the role democracy has always been played – democracy is a political end for people to pursue, causing all other political principles must first be adhered to the democratic spirit. But the analysis above demonstrates that meritocracy is not a fundamental political paradigm which involves all human social considerations and this thesis holds that meritocracy should be strictly identified as a political value which is merely of concern to human resource arrangement and personnel selection in the process of political authority building and maintaining. To be clear, this thesis does not uphold a moral judgment according to which a just society must be a meritocratic one, just like the prevalent tenet saying that a just society must be a democratic one. Rather, this thesis holds a prudent judgment from the perspective of instrumentalism, arguing that meritocracy should be regarded as a constitutive factor which contributes to the formation of a de facto well-functioning society featured with a self-restrained political authority. The spirit of meritocracy is more of pragmatism rather than a fixed ideological metaphysical pursuit, so the role of meritocracy is to provide political authority with principles related to personnel arrangement and those principles should comply with fundamental requirements advocated by social justice so as to keep the authority legitimate.



The natural attribute of meritocracy analyzed above can be reflected by the phenomenon that meritocracy is not only a value cherished by liberal democracies but also advocated by non-democratic states such as the authoritarian and hybrid regimes in East Asia – China<sup>42</sup> and Singapore.<sup>43</sup> The fact that meritocracy exists in distinct forms of regime from liberal democracy to Confucianism-based state is an indication that meritocracy in itself cannot be regarded as the value covering the whole ideological appeals of human beings featured with coherent internal normative logic. When it comes to comparison with liberalism, meritocracy emphasizes equity<sup>44</sup> but underestimates the justice of equality. Since liberal theories of justice go beyond equity – the key aspect of meritocracy – and generally involve dimensions of other attributes, especially equality, the analysis of meritocracy's relationship with political authority from the perspective of justice is to clarify how the justice of meritocracy is constructed based on its pursuit of equity and how the injustice of ignoring the principle of equality becomes meritocracy's Achilles heel. And further, principles which make meritocracy more perfect in terms of better adapting to social justice in liberal democracy by compromising equity with equality can be laid down.

### ***2.3. Meritocracy in the Framework of Consent-based Account of Political***

#### ***Obligation***

The 1.3. section shows us that meritocracy exists throughout the historical periods of the evolvement of political authority, while the following is to provide justification of meritocracy for its existence in the field of political authority in modern liberal democracy. Consent-based

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<sup>42</sup> Ruixue Jia et al, "Political selection in China: The complementary roles of connections and performance," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 13, no. 4 (2015): 631–668.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas J. Bellows, "Meritocracy and the Singapore Political System," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2009): 24-44.

<sup>44</sup> Donna M. Garcia et al, "The Merit of Meritocracy," 433.

account is the solution most commonly mentioned to solve the problem of how to construct relationship between the right for political authority to dominate and individuals', who are governed, obligation of being subject to political authority. In this regard, consent theory provides a model for reasoning for the legitimacy of political authority, which is widely accepted and also adjusted by other obligation theories, such as fair play theory. Even though fair play theory is a non-voluntaristic theory, it manages to overcome the dubious account of tacit consent by legitimating "the employment of minimal coercion as needed to secure compliance with this obligation".<sup>45</sup> From how fair play theory interacts with consent theory, we can argue that the basic logic of consent theory lays the foundation for other modern theories of political obligation/authority. The logic is that a state has political authority, then there must be someone who "has a correlative obligation, and at the same time, consent is a necessary condition of political obligation".<sup>46</sup> This statement is the reflection of modern humanism which emphasizes the value of human, placing the realization of individuals' rights before everything including political authority. Accordingly, the correlation between obligation and authority replaces the coercion of authority in the name of god, natural hierarchy and perfectionism of public goods.

Meanwhile, types of ancient consent-based authority, ranging from monarchy to tyranny, from aristocracy to oligarchy, do not conform to the standard of individuals being entitled with substantial self-determination, whereas the key premise for modern consent theory is that each individual independently holds natural authority over herself, so what distinguishes modern consent theory from other authority theories also lies in that it is based on the appeal to realization of individualist rights. In this regard, the standard prescribed by meritocracy is

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<sup>45</sup> Richard J. Arneson, "The Principle of Fairness and Free-Rider Problems," *Ethics* 92, no. 4 (1982): 622.

<sup>46</sup> Harry Beran, "In Defense of the Consent Theory of Political Obligation and Authority," *Ethics* 87, no. 3 (1977): 260.

consistent with the basic spirit of consent theory – the spirit of liberal theory of political authority – the primary concern for an individual is to take advantage of the authority she is born with over herself. In the account of meritocracy, an individual should be responsible for her acts on the basis of the belief that “men are alike in holding the notion of proportionality between investment and profit” that lies at the heart of distributive justice according to George Caspar Homans.<sup>47</sup> Regarding the substantial relationship between meritocracy and consent-based authority, we need to explore the attribute of consent theory being a necessary condition of political obligation<sup>48</sup> from the perspective of utilitarianism and therefore the role of meritocracy in consent-based theory.

Traditionally, voluntariness is identified as the key feature of consent-based authority. Since each individual is born with natural authority over herself and there is no absolute sovereignty in the state of nature, the presence of Leviathan will be justified if it emerges by consent – “people bind themselves by collective agreement”.<sup>49</sup> The transition of authority from individual-based legitimacy to collective-based legitimacy is achieved through the mechanism of voluntary transfer by individuals who act on the ground of their subjective wills. However, voluntariness is merely a characteristic of the assumed consent-based transfer and there is another motive that lies behind it. The motive – Hobbes regards the motive as eliminating threats while Locke regards the motive as enacting the natural law – is more qualified in terms of being playing as authority resource than voluntariness. The perspective focusing on motive takes the position from utilitarian considerations, so it is the utilitarian advantages of maintaining governments and laws which makes the state of nature assumption and consent-based authority appealing.

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<sup>47</sup> George Caspar Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, (RKP, 1961): 246 & 264, in “Equality and Desert,” written by Louis Pojman, *Philosophy* 72, no. 282 (1997): 559.

<sup>48</sup> Harry Beran, “In Defense of the Consent Theory of Political Obligation and Authority,” 262.

<sup>49</sup> David Schmidtz, “Justifying the State,” *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990): 91.

Furthermore, the utilitarian reaction tends to “dissolve the obligation altogether, so that individuals’ duty is always to do what produces the best results, quite apart from whether or not one has made any promises on the subject”.<sup>50</sup> Utilitarian calculus thus becomes the connecting ground between consent-based theory and meritocracy, the latter of which holds the belief in the evaluation of individuals’ acts by utilitarian considerations.

As Hanna Pitkin notes that legitimate authority is precisely that “which deserves obedience and consent”.<sup>51</sup> From this utilitarian consideration, the legitimacy derived from the origin of authority (voluntariness focused) is replaced by the legitimacy derived from the utility of the authority.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, drawn from common knowledge of the criteria evaluating government performance by “how well institutions and officials define and act on the polity’s best interests”,<sup>53</sup> we can also conclude that after the establishment of authority, the authority legitimacy will be further judged by how the authority satisfies individuals’, who are governed, expectation of the functional utility. In sum, as functioning in other types of authority, meritocracy can enhance the utility of authority by implementing utilitarian principles. By recognizing and rewarding merit, efficiency and welfare are promoted. In other words, if the authority originally constructed by consent has a commitment to rewarding those who perform well and who devote their talent and efforts to the functioning of society, then utility maximization will firstly occur in the operation process of the authority and then occurs in the output of the political authority legitimacy, namely that utility-oriented meritocracy benefits the authority by enhancing its political utility. Nevertheless, since consent-based authority involves the key factor of voluntariness, metaphysical demands attached

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<sup>50</sup> Hanna Pitkin, “Obligation and Consent—II,” *The American Political Science Review* 60, no. 1 (1966): 47.

<sup>51</sup> Hanna Pitkin, “Obligation and Consent—II,” 39.

<sup>52</sup> John Zvesper, “The Utility of Consent in John Locke’s Political Philosophy,” *Political Studies* 32 (1984): 57.

<sup>53</sup> M. Stephen Weatherford, “Measuring Political Legitimacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (1992): 150.

to universal moral pursuit should not be concealed by the perspective of utilitarian considerations. In this regard, in order to sustain the legitimacy of consent-based authority, the merit-based principles should give more place to liberal right-preserving oriented justice rather than ignoring the balance between advancing merit and promoting equality resulted from excessively intoxicated in outcome maximization. As to justice aspect of meritocracy, it will be discussed in the third chapter.

#### **2.4. Meritocracy in the Framework of Fair Play Account of Political Obligation**

According to the fair play theory of obligation, the legitimacy of political authority is derived from benefits that individuals who are governed enjoy. As regard the origin of benefits, they are produced from joint enterprise according to rules which restrict individual liberties. George Klosko claims that “those who have submitted to these restrictions when required have a right to a similar submission from those who have benefited by their submission”.<sup>54</sup> The principle of fair play as the source of political authority can be simplified to two dimensions. One is that if public goods provided by the political authority benefit individuals who are governed, then individuals should contribute to the maintaining of the political authority – in fair play theory, the political authority is the concrete embodiment of cooperation dedicated to producing public goods. Another dimension is that the submission of one individual incurs submission from others who also benefit from the cooperative scheme.<sup>55</sup> The connection between meritocracy and fair play lies in the clarification of the logic of how the two dimensions of fair play interact with each other and thus meritocracy’s role in this interaction. First, it is assumed by fair play theory that

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<sup>54</sup> H. L. A. Hart, “Are There Any Natural Rights?” *The Philosophical Review* 64, no. 2 (1955): 185.

<sup>55</sup> George Klosko, “The Principle of Fairness and Political Obligation,” *Ethics* 97, no. 2 (1987): 353.

cooperation among individuals can produce benefits which is needed for human beings to live in an orderly way, and these benefits are commonly referred to as public goods. Fair play theory ascribes the production of public goods to cooperation among individuals in a society instead of regarding an independent political entity who has superior entitlements of governing as the one who is responsible for the provision of public goods. In this regard, meritocracy seems to have no place in the model of fair play, because cooperation occurring in the public and merit-based human resource arrangement are two different spheres.

However, the second dimension of fair play theory will endow meritocracy with significance. Because of the attribute of non-excludability and the subsequent free-rider dilemma,<sup>56</sup> the assumption of public goods produced from the presumed cooperation among individuals cannot be guaranteed in actual practice. Besides, since the fact of the nonexcludable goods are furnished to all members including individuals who do not contribute their fare share to the costs generated in the process of public goods production is morally unjust, fair play theory changes the logic direction, by putting public goods production in excludable category, rather than the original non-excludable category, so as to ensure the realization of cooperation. Therefore, demanding individuals to accept the constraint in the form of cooperative obligation becomes the key aspect of the legitimacy source of political authority in fair play theory. The cooperation requirement derived from the principle of excludability helps meritocracy find its place in terms of sharing spirit with fair play theory.

The principle of those who benefit from the cooperative efforts of others having an obligation to cooperate is argued to be constructed on a more general principle, namely the just distribution of benefits and burdens, the latter of which promotes such a notion of fairness that “one should

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<sup>56</sup> Richard J. Arneson, “The Principle of Fairness and Free-Rider Problems,” 621.

have the consciousness that she cannot gain from the cooperative labors of others without doing her own fair share”.<sup>57</sup> This general principle of fairness is in line with the idea of equity held by meritocracy – the ratio of people’s inputs to rewards should be equivalent to the ratio of relevant comparison others.<sup>58</sup> For meritocracy advocates, the distributional justice is to arrive at the scenario in which each individual is proportionally rewarded with what she has contributed to the market or public affairs. Similarly, if we depict a blueprint for the ultimate realization of the fair play model, the problem of free-riding caused by the dilemma of collective action should be overcome by the approach in which responsibility and rewarding are balanced. The assurance approach proposed by Carlisle Ford Runge is an example. It emphasizes that individual decisions are conditioned on, rather than being separable from, the expected decisions of others, thus with such coordinated expectations,<sup>59</sup> voluntary coordination will be proportionally contributed by individuals in society and eventually contributing to the utility-maximizing of public goods. The similarity between meritocracy and fair play theory is that they both cherish all social members’ voluntary contribution to the overall public goods by devoting their efforts and talents, and it indicates the necessity for meritocracy’s function in fair play-based authority.

Nevertheless, fair play theory is not enough regarding providing legitimacy for political authority, because sometimes individuals in society merely passively receive public goods instead of positively accepting public goods, a situation which makes the rule-governed cooperation from the fairness consideration invalid – receiving rather than accepting such public goods are not actions generated from free will.<sup>60</sup> How can we situate meritocracy if the problem of the lack of

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<sup>57</sup> George Klosko, “Presumptive Benefit, Fairness, and Political Obligation,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16, no. 3 (1987): 242.

<sup>58</sup> Donna M. Garcia et al, “The Merit of Meritocracy,” 433.

<sup>59</sup> Carlisle Ford Runge, “Institutions and the Free Rider: The Assurance Problem in Collective Action,” *The Journal of Politics* 46, no. 1 (1984): 154-155.

<sup>60</sup> George Klosko, “Presumptive Benefit, Fairness, and Political Obligation,” 233-244.

soundness is considered when we take fair play as the legitimacy source of political authority? As a matter of fact, this situation is more favorable for meritocracy to justify itself related to meritocracy's function for political authority building and maintaining. Because besides the equity aspect, order arising from hierarchy caused by the mechanism of power generating is another feature for merit-based authority, and as what has been analyzed in the 1.2. section, being a way of forming power, the power-generating dimension of meritocracy will offset the lack of the moral right to dominate. Briefly, in the case of insufficient soundness of fair play legitimacy, meritocracy helps such a justice-flawed authority to gain domination by coercively imposing public goods beneficial for the whole political community through means of power enhancing. But certainly, justice insufficiency remains a problem, so the consolidation of meritocracy's role needs more justification by setting explicit principles for the operation of meritocracy in political authority building and maintaining. This will be elaborated when justice of meritocracy is framed in the natural duty theory section.



## Chapter Three

### ***3.1. Natural Duty Theory, Political Obligation and Authority Legitimacy***

In the rest part of the thesis, meritocracy will be embedded in the analysis of the relationship between political authority and liberal theory of political justice so as to answer the question of how to set principles for justice-based meritocracy. At the same time, the focus on meritocracy will also help us further understand the interaction between the demand for social justice and the necessity of political authority. When we try to set principles for meritocracy, the classic discourse is to emphasize that virtue should be rewarded and that a measure of proportionality between input of talent/efforts and the output of reward should be maintained. But when this principle is carried out in the sphere of political authority, a focus concentrating on the balance of political authority building and maintaining and broader social justice is also needed. Otherwise, as has been mentioned in sections analyzing meritocracy's role in consent-based authority and authority explained by fair play theory, besides utilitarian justifications, the function of meritocracy mainly relies on its power forming effect – hierarchy producing, order maintaining and coercion legitimatizing. It is obvious that meritocracy as the functional source serving those two authority legitimacy sources lacks sound justification from broader social justice considerations. Conversely, analyzing meritocracy from the perspectives of consent theory and fair play theory cannot provide a justice-based foundation for meritocracy to adapt itself to democracy – the most common political authority type which draws its legitimacy mainly from creating and maintaining justice valued by liberal ideology.

The problem faced by both consent theory and fair play theory is that they cannot overcome the dilemma in which the right of individuals who are governed to reject to be ruled by a legitimate

state is in conflict with the state's legitimacy to restrict citizens' seceding from being the member of the state. In the framework of consent-based account of political obligation, even though the concept of tacit consent is created to explain the reality that there is no government which is really built on a contract originated from the consent of all citizens who voluntarily transfer their authority on themselves to the government, the tacit consent still lacks validity with regard to explaining individuals' right to secede from the state. Because according to conditions – first, the potential consenters are aware of what is happening; second, there must be a guaranteed duration when objections are invited; third, the point at which the objections are not allowed must be made clear<sup>61</sup> – in which tacit consent works, only the freedom of expressing intention to secede from the status of being governed is ensured, but how the authority approves the seceding request is still an open question. Besides, it is also argued that when the justice of authority is considered, voluntariness and deliberateness in consent theory cannot guarantee that the authority is just enough for all of its members who are governed. The example given by John Simmons is that if the unjust institution employs violence but the violence does not constitute an infringement of my rights, then I can still freely consent to this unjust authority which arbitrarily suppresses its other citizens.<sup>62</sup> The fact of consent-based authority not to be necessarily just makes it possible for the functioning of meritocracy to be driven by coercion featured with power forming aspect rather than to be driven by justice supplying function of meritocracy.

In the framework of fair play account of political obligation, the dilemma between the legitimacy of a state's ruling authority and citizens' autonomy is reflected by the problem that in the cooperative scheme, individuals' acceptance of being subject to an authority is morally binding

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<sup>61</sup> A. John Simmons, "Tacit Consent and Political Obligation," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 5, no. 3 (1976): 279.

<sup>62</sup> A. John Simmons, "Tacit Consent and Political Obligation," 277.

only if she is free to reject the benefits,<sup>63</sup> but the freedom to reject to be governed does not exist. In such a situation lacking legitimacy supported by justice consideration, the role of meritocracy is the same, which mainly relies on its power forming aspect. Since obligatory account presupposes just institutions, a justice-based framework is thus needed. Natural duty theory hereby exhibits its value as the source of political authority which regards moral status of both individuals and the authority as the key factor for the legitimacy of political obligation and political authority.

The basic claim of natural duty theory is that individuals have a natural duty to obey political obligations if these obligations are derived from requirements of justice. There are three dimensions in natural theory. First, it is argued that natural duties apply to individuals regardless of individuals' voluntary willingness. Besides, natural duties have no relations to social and institution arrangements. Second, natural duties exist in virtue of moral contents, so they apply to all human beings instead of specific individual roles or institutions. The third dimension of natural duty theory connects individual-based natural duty with the legitimacy of authority. As John Rawls puts it: "a fundamental natural duty is the duty of justice. This duty requires us to support and to comply with just institutions that exist and apply to us."<sup>64</sup> The advantage of natural duty is that we don't have to look for grounds on which the justification of coercion of political authority is built and the only work for explaining why individuals who are governed should fulfill the natural duty in legitimate scheme of the authority is to demonstrate that the authority concerned is just. In this regard, the justification of meritocracy lies in its compatibility across the legitimacy sources of authority. In the case of liberal democracy, meritocracy's compatibility with sources of consent theory and fair play theory has been analyzed, so the next

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<sup>63</sup> Christopher Heath Wellman, "Toward a Liberal Theory of Political Obligation," *Ethics* 111, July (2001): 738.

<sup>64</sup> John Rawls, *A theory of justice*, 99.

step is to make meritocracy compatible with mainstream justice principles held by liberal democracy, so as to realize that the authority scheme featured with meritocracy is in conformity with natural duty's requirement of justice. But before we probe into the justice aspect of meritocracy, the compromise between authority building/maintaining and justice supporting should be clarified.

This thesis refers to Christopher Heath Wellman's proposal of explaining the relationship between sources of political obligation and John Rawls' distributive justice. In addition, since natural duty theory holds that institutions (the authority) are needed to discharge natural duties among individuals – to ensure that persons' rights are respected and that respecting their rights is necessary for treating them as moral equals<sup>65</sup> – justice based on utilitarianism should be given more weight in creating an authority with meritocratic justice. The spirit of utilitarianism is reflected by the fact that authority is referred to as the mediation means necessary to solve the coordination problem so as to achieve the goal by which equal rights of individuals are protected. Based on utilitarian consequentialism, Wellman's proposal is built on benefit theory – being part of fair play account of political obligation – which argues that states secure benefits for their citizens.<sup>66</sup> This argument is in keeping with the utilitarian spirit of meritocracy which emphasizes the ontological status of valuable outcome merit-based principles can yield. By focusing on benefits that authority delivers for its citizens, the justice of authority changes its emphasis on distributive justice, in which political authority lacks role and status, to a kind of authority centric justice: authority is needed to discharge natural duties among individuals. Afterwards, distinguishing between political obligation and political legitimacy is another way in which we can legitimize the authority-centric justice.

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<sup>65</sup> Allen Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy and Democracy," *Ethics* 112, July (2002): 704.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Heath Wellman, "Toward a Liberal Theory of Political Obligation," 741.

As indicated by Wellman, political legitimacy is more of the reasons that the authority holds in order to legitimize the coercive power, whereas political obligation is more concerned with citizens' moral duty to obey the ruling of the authority.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the perspective of political legitimacy can be identified as authority-biased, while the perspective of political obligation is more related to finding legitimacy from individual moral reasons grounded on citizens who are governed. The logic of the distinction between political legitimacy and political obligation also implies that due to the fact that authority-centric perspective tends to give more freedom to authority's discretionary power, justice originated from the perspective of political legitimacy will be more in favor of augmenting liberty of the authority, which in turn results in the decrease of liberty endowed to individuals who are governed. In brief, the extent to which political obligation involves is larger than that of political legitimacy – meeting with standards of political obligation is a sufficient condition for meeting with standards of political legitimacy, so in terms of investigating meritocracy's role by putting it in the framework of political obligation, a perspective from political obligation can provide sufficient grounds for understanding meritocracy's relationship between political legitimacy. Based on the above analysis, the authority-centric justice – the justice based on the narrower political legitimacy rather than the broader political obligation – is the first dimension of meritocratic legitimacy. And this meritocratic justice revolves around the realization of the utilitarian outcome, so the value of meritocracy lies in its function of making authority operational in an efficient way, which will be further elaborated through meritocratic principles in the last section.

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<sup>67</sup> Christopher Heath Wellman, "Toward a Liberal Theory of Political Obligation," 741.

### **3.2. Social Justice and Merit Aspect Outweighing Desert Aspect in Authority**

#### **3.2.1. Compromise between Social Justice and Utilitarian Feature**

In order to set justice-related principles for meritocracy, we should spell out to what extent the value of meritocracy can result in injustice in terms of it failing to discharge natural duties among individuals. Justice promoted by meritocracy is built on the strict adherence to the principle of equity. As has been analyzed in the previous sections, the notion of equity in the sphere of meritocracy strictly refers to distributing resources and allocating rights according to individuals' merit and when equity is applied in the sphere of political authority, it means that political authority should be proportionally distributed in accordance with different merits that candidates possess. The justice of merit-based equity is argued to consolidate social cohesion because according to Durkheim's idea, "social solidarity is only possible when the distribution of social functions reflects the distribution of natural talents such that social inequalities exactly express natural inequalities".<sup>68</sup> Such an argument by those who support the merit-based equity nakedly expresses their support of social inequality resulting from natural inequality. This is the theoretical defect of meritocracy as far as equality focused-justice is concerned, which has been criticized many times.

The main reason for equity causing inequality is that the term of equity is in connection with the notion of exchange, while general justice/ distributive justice focuses more on situational fairness of allocation.<sup>69</sup> When the term of equity is defined in the exchange framework, the principle is primarily employed by the distribution of economic resources and thus is influenced by the definition as "the equivalence of the outcome/input ratios of all parties involved in the

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<sup>68</sup> Peter Saunders, "Meritocracy and Popular Legitimacy," *The Political Quarterly* 77, issue. 1 (2006): 189.

<sup>69</sup> Karen S. Cook and Karen A. Hegtvedt, "Distributive Justice, Equity, and Equality," *Annual review of sociology* 9, (1983): 218.

exchange.”<sup>70</sup> In this regard, criticisms of meritocracy argues that meritocracy legitimizes unequal endowments naturally distributed to individuals by legitimizing privileges rewarded from different capacities and performance outcome. In addition, the social impact of meritocracy’s bias towards equity is argued to lead to the prevalence of Social Darwinism which is embodied by the legitimatization of hierarchy ideologies. Son Hing and some other authors describe three forms of consequence resulting from meritocracy-related hierarchy ideologies. They are the ossified belief in the current system which leads to the difficulty to change the unequal social status quo; prejudice appearing as those who are in the higher status have negative stereotypes of those who have lower status; and social dominance orientation which is the outcome of the ossified belief in the status quo and prejudice, causing the enhancing and widening of inequality and hierarchy.<sup>71</sup> What is obvious is that the negative effects demonstrated above are the consequences of utilitarianism philosophy rooted in the value of meritocracy, despite the fact that the utilitarian orientation contributes to meritocracy’s function to serve the legitimization of political authority.

The main concern of meritocracy when it comes to its relationship with political authority lies in that merit-based principles can serve to yield good performance of political actors and produce positive outcome anticipated, thus eventually maximizing the overall utility. This is regarded as the major contribution that meritocracy generates for human resource and personnel arrangement in political authority. But the problem of injustice also relates to and is the other side of the coin of the utilitarian feature. Although individual-based human right is the primary concern for liberal theories, the distributive justice among individuals is ignored in utilitarianism, in the same way it is ignored in meritocracy. In such a condition of lack of attention to interpersonal equality,

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<sup>70</sup> Karen S. Cook and Karen A. Hegtvedt, “Distributive Justice, Equity, and Equality,” 218.

<sup>71</sup> Donna M. Garcia et al, “The Merit of Meritocracy,” 434.

the just distribution of benefits coming from the fact of advancing to and occupying political authority position by merit is absent.

Since criticisms towards meritocracy center on the notion of natural lottery, which argues that people should not be rewarded for their good performance which is the outcome of natural talents, growing environment, personal networking and so on,<sup>72</sup> this thesis borrows principles from John Rawls' justice theory to reduce the negative influence of utilitarianism embedded in meritocracy. Rawls' original position is the assumption aimed at solving the problem resulting from natural lottery and reducing the role internal resources (such as talent) play as the currency of equality. The original position's solution is to create a veil of ignorance which excludes information related to individuals' social and personal advantages and disadvantages. In this regard, the widespread universal suffrage and civil servant recruitment system in many countries already conform to the principle of justice, because these types of constructing political authority barely set bars to discourage individuals from trying to exhibit their merit and all individuals, regardless of their natural endowments, are encouraged to take part in political activities. However, the problem of bad brute luck remains. Regarding the problem of brute luck associated with more extensive social factors, which means that political authority in itself cannot solve the problem, this thesis holds that the utilitarian orientation determines that meritocracy can only guarantee justice in the form of procedural justice and self-restraint mechanism. The self-restraint mechanism embraced by meritocracy is meant to restrain those who are advanced to positions in political authority by merit from abusing political power, the objective of which equals limiting the spillover effect of generating social injustice caused by the side effect of utilitarianism. Furthermore, Rawls' principle – "social and economic inequalities are to be

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<sup>72</sup> Louis Pojman, "Merit: Why Do We Value It?" 99.



arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all"<sup>73</sup> – can guarantee that individuals who are not advanced to anticipated positions in political authority due to the merit-based principle can expect that they get remedies from the outcome of good performance contributed by those who are controlling the political authority. Besides, the meritocratic principle based on Rawls' argument should also include that a proportion of political authority positions are assigned to those who have lower status because of their bad social starting place. One example of this principle can be reflected by special arrangement of electoral representative for minorities in society. So here is the perspective from distributive social justice to tackle the problem of natural inequalities, and the other side is utilitarian consideration. Setting principles for meritocracy is to balance the two basic guidelines. Only reaching a compromise between the goal of distributive social justice and utility maximization, will meritocracy work at its best to provide political authority with justice-based legitimacy.

### **3.2.2. Explanation for Merit Aspect Outweighing Desert Aspect**

The drawback of Rawls' justice is that it gives too little attention to individual responsibility, the latter of which is the focus that the deserve aspect of meritocracy emphasizes. However, based on the consideration of balancing social justice and utilitarian influence of meritocracy, this thesis argues, as has been mentioned in the concept definition section, that the theory of political obligation itself ought to be de-moralized through the way of giving more weight to the merit aspect of meritocracy and giving less weight to the desert aspect of meritocracy. This logic is based on the samaritanism reasoning for political legitimacy, which states that political

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<sup>73</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 53.

legitimacy is to solve the dilemma in which “one has a duty to help a stranger when the latter is sufficiently imperiled and one can rescue her at no unreasonable cost to oneself”<sup>74</sup>, and thus the authority should keep itself in a minimum presence which is enough to meet social citizens’ needs of having a coercion equipped authority. For the purpose of meeting the spirit of minimum presence and self-restraint of political authority, merit-based principles should pay attention to the ultimate outcome of political authority functioning rather than emphasizing too much the good intentions exhibited by those authority holders. Because on one hand, intentions are not as important as performance (the outcome merit of utilizing talents and devoting effort) from the perspective of keeping a necessary but minimum authority; on the other hand, political actors’ intentions are too complicated to be measured and evaluated in terms of ensuring that good intentions do not involve concerns for private ambitions and interests. As a consequence, it is merit aspect, rather than desert aspect, which should be given more weight so as to build justice-based meritocracy.

Merit aspect outweighs desert aspect also because that the emphasis on good intentions is self-moral justification, (whereas performance focused merit aspect of meritocracy bases its justification on evaluations from the outsiders), so desert aspect of meritocracy is not appropriate when it comes to meritocracy sustaining its role in justice enhancing as well as providing legitimacy source for political authority. Playing as a guidance for substantiating procedural justice, meritocracy should keep itself as neutral as possible instead of appearing too ambitious in legitimatizing certain kind of intentions and subsequently bestowing those who are in authority charismatic charms and powers. With the aim of achieving the goal of disenchantment of meritocracy, the orientation for justifying meritocracy should strictly turn its attention to the

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<sup>74</sup> Christopher Heath Wellman, “Toward a Liberal Theory of Political Obligation,” 744.

utilitarian feature regarding meritocracy contributing to increasing social utility.<sup>75</sup> Through this way, justice as individual's merit will restrict its sociological explanation in functional scope, thus avoiding the ideological prevalence of meritocracy which may cause the consequence of Social Darwinism. The latter dimension of restricting the ideological and cultural influence of meritocracy is the precondition of the justice-based functionalization of meritocracy in terms of it legitimatizing political authority by guaranteeing that the authority conforms to basic principles cherished by liberal values.

### ***3.3. Making Meritocracy Just and Political Authority Legitimacy***

#### **3.3.1. Egalitarianism and Equality-based Meritocracy**

The previous section achieved a compromise between utilitarian feature of meritocracy and social justice consideration. The analysis result is that utilitarianism accompanied with merit-principles should not be identified as the direct opposite of moral appeal for equality which may impede the realization of social justice, rather in the context of recognizing meritocracy's function in discharging individuals' natural duty, the solution should be aimed at making meritocracy conform to the principle in which on one hand legitimacy's utilitarian focus is retained, giving more weight to authority's role in benefiting its citizens by maximizing political utility; on the other hand, liberal considerations are pursued and integrated to utilitarian feature, so that conflicts between utilitarianism and social justice are kept at a minimum level. In the framework of equality-based legitimacy, meritocracy's relationship with political authority can achieve a balance with regard to its role in making political authority operate efficiently and trying its best to maintain the liberal pursuit of social justice.

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<sup>75</sup> Louis Pojman, "Merit: Why Do We Value It?" 100.

Equality-based legitimacy can draw upon egalitarianism, the latter of which centers on the value of equality. The starting point of egalitarianism is that all individuals in society are equal in terms of individual's moral status. In this regard, egalitarianism is the justice theory which helps meritocracy to overcome its utilitarian negative influence. However, there are many types of egalitarian value when egalitarianism is discussed from different kinds of perspective. The distinction between distributive egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism<sup>76</sup> is beneficial for us to identify how meritocracy can be positioned when it is applied in the framework of equality-based justice.

Distributive egalitarianism regards equality as a distributive value, so that goods are distributed equally to individuals without disparate treatment. The logic of distributive egalitarianism starts from the assumption that goods allocated to individuals by market or by government should be in accordance with the removal of welfare or resource inequality, so it is the end that matters. Justice is achieved by the realization of equal distribution of ends. However, when it comes to human resource and personnel arrangement in political authority, distributive egalitarianism cannot be fully achieved, because first, compared with the number of those who compete to be advanced to higher authority positions, the number of positions available in reality is too limited to be widely and thus equally distributed. Second, as has been pointed out, merit-based principle is needed in the sphere of political authority, in order to make authority function in an efficient way. Distributive egalitarianism remains to be given more attention if meritocracy is expected to be more just, so the lack of consideration of distributive equality results in the lack of equality-based justice in meritocratic arrangement. Furthermore, relational egalitarianism also provides a potential theoretical foundation for the equality appeal of meritocracy.

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<sup>76</sup> Christian Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 11, no. 2 (2011):123-148.

The emphasis of relational egalitarianism is on reaching egalitarian social relations. One of the differences between relational egalitarianism and distributive egalitarianism is that the former one values the equality of process and relations among individuals rather than ends individuals are distributed to. According to Elizabeth Anderson, “inequality is unjust when it disadvantages people: when it embodies or causes inequality of authority, status, or standing.”<sup>77</sup> This logic of relational egalitarianism demonstrates the essence of the lack of equality-based justice by meritocracy, because meritocracy almost excludes the concern of interpersonal relations, and equality among individuals based on relational ‘friendship’ plays a minor role compared with utilitarian consideration in meritocracy. This problem can be answered from the perspective of materialistic conception. Although the principle of proportionality – “rewarding based on merit” – to some extent reflects the value of equality of means, meritocracy in the sphere of authority involves little about the aspect of social relations, because political authority is a rigid hierarchical system and relations among its members are fixed due to the materialistic nature of authority system. The goal of meritocracy is to produce instrumental authority holders, so people are materialized in authority organ, such as bureaucratic system. Thus, the equality of means exhibited by meritocracy in authority has nothing to do with relational ties featured with humanistic care, the latter of which is the core requirement of relational egalitarianism. In brief, according to the two dimensions of egalitarianism illustrating the drawbacks of meritocracy, setting principles for meritocracy is necessary to reduce the negative effect caused by the lack of distributive equality and the consequence resulting from materialistic nature of rigid hierarchy accompanied by meritocracy.

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<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, “The Fundamental Disagreement between Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 40, issue sup.1 (2010): 2.

### 3.3.2. Principles for Meritocracy and Political Authority

To sum up, based on comprehensively integrating the justification of meritocracy grounded on consent theory, fair play theory, natural duty theory, utilitarian consideration and distributive justice concern, laying down principles for meritocracy should conform to the perspective of equality-based legitimacy<sup>78</sup>:

- (1) Meritocracy is the appropriate principle concerning human resource and personnel arrangement in political authority, because it reflects the equity demand of justice.
- (2) The hierarchy resulting from meritocracy is a necessity, because this hierarchy is necessary for power forming and the power aspect is an indispensable aspect of an effective political authority.
- (3) In order to ameliorate the side effect of utilitarian consequence in terms of producing inequality to the largest extent, merit-based political authority should be in compliance with the spirit of minimum presence and self-restraint.

After clarifying normative claims for the relationship between meritocracy and political authority, criticisms towards meritocracy's role in real life should be scrutinized so as to conceive some concrete principles for the better operation of meritocracy. In so doing, Michael Young's criticism towards meritocracy will be investigated, and challenges and modifications to his criticisms are put forward.

In the section analyzing meritocracy as a way of forming political power, it has been illustrated that hierarchy arising from merit principles constitutes the essential condition for the functioning of meritocracy. Besides, the mechanism by which hierarchy works lies in its screening function,

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<sup>78</sup> Matti Häyry, *Liberal utilitarianism and applied ethics* (London: Routledge, 1994): 96 – 104.

the latter of which holds that merit-based screening is essentially a measure to screen for a division of rewards that reflects the balance of power between individuals who compete for being recruited to/ promoted to/ elected to/ selected to advanced positions in political authority. Therefore, the core mechanism underlying meritocracy being necessary for the legitimacy of political authority should be to ensure the normal operation of competition, so that the utilitarian objectives of the presence of political authority can be achieved. Utilitarian objectives of political authority, based on the theory that the reason for the presence of political institutions is that only they can fulfill some social goals and discharge natural duties among citizens, generally include accountability and efficiency<sup>79</sup>, namely that political authority should be accountable to individuals who are governed and “accomplish society’s ends without wasting time and resources”<sup>80</sup>. As a result, setting principles for meritocracy is first built on the recognition of the legitimacy of competition and the corresponding performance-based modern political authority legitimization, and then to search for standards by which the spillover effect of emphasizing competition can be confined to a reasonable range. In the reasonable range, on one hand, the functioning of political authority benefits from competition resulting from meritocracy, on the other hand, justice-based legitimacy of political authority will be guaranteed. Furthermore, an often-raised concern of injustice caused by meritocracy is that merit-based evaluation employs unequal distributions assigned to everyone to determine differential distribution of primary goods, such as economic income, social status and self-respect based on social relations. This problem has been analyzed and the solution is to create a self-restraint mechanism for meritocracy. Through creating self-restraint mechanism, it is expected that authority holders who are placed in their power status by meritocracy can restrain themselves from abusing political

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<sup>79</sup> Tero Erkkila, “Governance and accountability-A shift in conceptualization,” *Public Administration Quarterly* 31, no. ½ (2007): 27.

<sup>80</sup> M. Stephen Weatherford, “Measuring Political Legitimacy,” 150.

authority, the latter of which equals restraining themselves from abusing the value of meritocracy, so that meritocracy is justified in the narrower sense by way of ensuring its morality.

For further demonstrating the principles this thesis holds, here Michael Young's principles for criticizing meritocracy are critically evaluated:

“(1) Meritocracy requires administrative overview and the careful redistribution of human ability. (2) For administrative purposes, human ability is a relatively fixed trait. (3) Competition is irrational and is to be avoided. (4) A perfected meritocracy is one where inequalities are precisely matched to abilities. It is a society where inequalities are justly unequal.”<sup>81</sup>

The response to criticisms by Young and relevant principles are as the follows:

(1) Administrative overview and evaluation of ability and performance of candidates who want to be advanced to positions in political authority does not equal to the abolishing of liberal system if we confine the spread of value of meritocracy to the scope of human resource and personnel arrangement for positions operational in political authority instead of popularizing meritocracy to the broader range of social activities. (2) Human ability should not be identified as fixed, because the competition mechanism underlying meritocracy implies that fluidity can be achieved as long as mobility is stressed in meritocratic system, and accordingly diversity of human ability is reflected by concrete measures to realize mobility in meritocratic system. That is in the just system of meritocracy, the principle of fluidity based on diversified performance (rather than based on fixed intelligence) is followed. (3) The argument “competition is irrational” itself is irrational and a large volume of public choice literature has proved that competition can be researched in the framework of rational choice. Since competition is needed so as to guarantee

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<sup>81</sup> Ansgar Allen, “Michael Young's The Rise of the Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 59, no. 4 (2011): 372.



the efficiency of the operation of political authority, the task for a justice-based meritocracy is to reduce the effects of Social Darwinism caused by severe competition. (4) In the framework of equality-based legitimacy, a perfected meritocracy strictly focuses its role on making authority functional in an efficient way, and at the same time liberal concerns have their place in reducing inequality caused by utilitarianism embedded in meritocracy.

In addition to principles put forward through responding to Young's criticisms, four concluding principles are proposed: (1) The operation of meritocracy ideally lies in the mechanism of competition. (2) There is a need to design an institution which inspects social mobility necessary for a justice-based meritocracy system. (3) Meritocratic system should be based on performance evaluation (instead of intelligence assessment), because (a) performance gives more weight to authority-holders' actual and effective efforts instead of inherent talent, (b) performance-focused system can guarantee the fulfillment of outcome-oriented principle of utilitarian meritocracy. (4) The implementation of meritocracy should be restricted in the field of political authority (instead of in the broader field of social activities). Therefore, the ultimate goal of meritocracy is to balance its role in powering political authority and morally justifying political authority – thus contributing to the overall legitimacy of political authority.

## Conclusion

Having conducted an analysis of the relationship between meritocracy and political authority legitimacy, five dimensions should be emphasized. First, meritocracy remains a vigorous value in terms of it being employed in the realm of human resource and personnel arrangement in political authority and meritocracy is cherished by a variety of political regimes, including liberal democracy. Second, the strong vitality of meritocracy as political value and its persistence in political life lies in meritocracy's role in providing legitimacy for political authority. Third, from ancient political authority to modern political authority, the primary role of meritocracy is to form political power; and since political power is the constitutive element of political authority, through the way of power forming, the relationship between meritocracy and authority legitimacy is firmly established. Fourth, even though meritocracy is indispensable in legitimatizing political authority – this is realized by meritocracy's utilitarian feature regarding its role in political authority – how to make meritocracy just in the framework of modern political obligation is the other side of the topic, because modern liberal account of legitimacy concentrates on the role of political authority in enhancing equality-focused justice. Fifth, natural duty theory of political obligation is suitable for legitimatizing meritocracy's role in the account of equality-justice. Natural duty theory emphasizes that political authority actively discharges individuals' moral duties, so meritocracy can draw lessons from this argument to fill the gap between its power forming function and its lack of attention to social justice. Next, the thesis addresses the question: how to make meritocracy more just by reaching the compromise between the function-oriented utilitarianism of meritocracy and reducing meritocracy's side effect on social justice.

The essence of justifying meritocracy is to guarantee that hierarchy caused by merit-based principles does not yield substantial inequality among individuals who are governed. In order to achieve this goal, the justification of the presence of meritocracy should be narrowly applied to the selection of authority ‘employee’. The term of ‘employee’ here indicates that politicians or civil servants who are advanced by merit-based principles only have the functional right to employ political power to bring political authority into operation efficiently. Apart from emphasizing this instrumental function, it should be institutionalized that authority ‘employees’ – politicians and civil servants – do not have privilege to seek other goals, for example, there should be no chance for authority ‘employees’ to put their concentration on pursuing their personal ambitions or for them to nurture public worship of their charisma in the political system.

Furthermore, another important point related to meritocracy’s self-restraint is about restricting the influence sphere of meritocracy to the political authority domain. This principle is derived from the potential implication of Social Darwinism caused by public obsession with the value of meritocracy. The effect of the hierarchical order should be minimized at the low level – the smooth functioning of the political authority is maintained, whereas the rank order accompanied with hierarchy does not give rise to the spillover effect. In other words, meritocracy can only exist in a full form if the sphere of influence of meritocracy is narrowed down to the indispensable level by which the spread of meritocracy is a must for the functional operation of authority. Otherwise, like in society reigned by official-standard political culture, the consequence of excessive emphasis on meritocracy will undermine the foundation of liberal philosophy and democratic civil culture. The scenario prospect based on meritocracy’s self-restraint can be described as follows: “Were we to evaluate people, not only according to their intelligence and their education, their occupation and their power, but according to their

kindliness and their courage, their imagination and sensitivity, their sympathy and generosity, there could be no classes.”<sup>82</sup> In this scenario, there is no clear distinction among individuals and among job types. Political authority is self-restrained, so political authority holders are just common social ‘employees’ who produce goods needed by the public. Moreover, authority legitimacy in such a situation will be more equality-oriented, and justice becomes the foundation of legitimacy.

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Young, “Meritocracy revisited,” 89.

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