

WHAT PHILOSOPHY FOR CULTIVATING MERIT? RELATIONS OF RECOGNITION AND ORIGINAL TRUST ABOUT THE WORLD


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Abstract What is cultivated in merit? Talent or commitment, genius or the application of methods of study, work, social self-promotion? These questions reveal that the crux of the problem is to move from the consideration of a merit recognised mostly a posteriori, on the basis of expected or otherwise recognisable results, to a different consideration, according to which merit basically consists in a life purpose and thus in a project that brings inner well-being and social tranquillity, without limiting personal initiative and on the contrary allowing everyone to enjoy someone's particular talents. In recent times, both new ethical-social theories on the «recognition relation» have emerged that have sought to overcome the antinomy between conflict and human progress, and new relational theories in the psychological and psychoanalytic spheres (important references are A. Honneth, E. Levinas and P. Ricoeur; for *Infant Research* D.W. Winnicott, L. Sander, D. Stern, J. Benjamin). A second interesting philosophical path for reconstructing the basis of a theory of merit that does not depend on pre-established social models is that of the original *doxa*, of «original trust in the world», in what is perceived and in its reliability. Husserl speaks of this in a number of texts, not numerous but significant. The theme is developed by Merleau-Ponty with his «perceptual faith or trust» that would constitute the true original condition and thus the authentically «natural» condition.

Keywords: Cultivating Merit, Meritocracy, Phenomenology of Education, Recognition Theory, Trust

Preface. The discussion on merit has long occupied the public debate in all democracies. In the United States, the topic is part of the discussion on human capital and social excellence and is central to philosophical reflection on equality and justice: three important references are J. Rawls, M. Nussbaum and M.J. Sandel. In Europe the picture is more complicated because in the Old Continent the weight of national histories and religious disputes is greater and the intervention of

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the public hand is stronger. In Europe, the public school model counts a lot and specific national factors are involved. In France, for example, merit is an issue that closely concerns the State, which selects the ruling class through an established system of highly meritocratic public schools.

There are great ambiguities surrounding merit and meritocracy. Meritocratic theories sometimes conceal the return of neo-liberal and reactionary economic ideologies, while their rejection justifies the re-proposition of egalitarian equal opportunity theories that do not take into account the end of illusions about infinite economic growth. In Italy, the new conservative government decided, for example, to change the name of the Ministry of Education to «Ministry of Education and Merit», without anyone really understanding what merit was being taken as a model. The merit of studying? That of teaching well? That of excelling in some subject or in periodic and final assessments? This provoked irony and concern among families and teachers' unions. The question of merit always tends to slide to the level of recrimination against laxity and in favour of a model of school or work relations based on the authority of the system and models of behaviour inspired by a vision centred on personal effort and commitment. Success certainly requires effort, but personal effort is only one of the conditions for success. Commitment is not enough: successes are often due to luck and many failures occur despite commitment. Reducing merit to effort is a serious mistake. While effort is within everyone's reach, merit in order to develop requires starting conditions, e.g. a talent, a mandate, a drive ..., without which it would not be possible to evaluate it. However, for a whole series of other conditions, some fortuitous, merit is often rewarded to many who have no talent.

The most recent theories on intelligence and human relations show that any «individualist» idea of merit does not correspond to biophysical and social complexity. There are cases of merit that belong to team games or group dynamics. A great footballer, or a good manager, on their own can do nothing, whereas if they are assisted by a team they can express the best of themselves and to the benefit of the group. If we insist on rewarding individuals on the basis of expected results, on a predetermined scale of success, we will not be able to integrate those random, non-predetermined elements that alter our social model of reference and drive us to build new ones. There is no taxonomy of merit, and if there were, it would be as uncertain as all other taxonomies, psychological, aesthetic, moral, political. Instead, more attention should be paid to how to «cultivate» merit in order to make it grow in an orderly manner and in a quantity beneficial to the greatest number of individuals.

I. What is cultivated in merit? Talent or commitment, genius or the application of methods of study, work, social self-promotion? These questions reveal that the crux of the problem is to move from the consideration of a merit recognised mostly a posteriori, on the basis of expected or otherwise recognisable results, to a different consideration, according to which merit basically consists in a life purpose and thus in a project that brings inner well-being and social tranquillity, without

limiting personal initiative and on the contrary allowing everyone to enjoy someone's particular talents. Whoever cultivates needs a seed because cultivation – like any human activity – needs something alive that has its own line of development. We are now able to operate in deep genetics but we are not yet able, fortunately, to cultivate nothing or to create from nothing. Every biological and social process needs an origin.

Merits can be distinguished into «outcome» merits, achieved by the individual or the group, or 'gift' merits bestowed on the basis of someone else's will. Outcome and gift are two distinct models, because the gift cannot be identified with a material reward. Both contribute to each person's endowment, but they are not interchangeable. The gift presupposes a different «recognition» from that used for a reward that is not based on productivity and efficiency criteria. There is often no correspondence between merit and reward. Many merits are not identified, let alone recognised. Every social «recognition» depends on the context and the «jury», i.e. those who are called upon to judge. This partly explains why meritocracy dislikes, so to speak, states of war or situations of great conflict, in which many social hierarchies collapse in the face of emergency. And while gifts can be untethered from a logic of efficiency and also from the awareness of the recipient – think of childhood, for example – certified merits are not necessarily secure. Since they depend on more or less rational evaluation criteria, they are sensitive to changes in social systems, the market and public opinion.

The threats to our societies are so great that the entire economic theory on human capital, born in the 1960s, is in trouble. The progressive destruction of workplaces at the hands of technology and artificial intelligence is accompanied by the sclerosis of public apparatuses and the ineffectiveness of active training and employment policies that devour enormous amounts of financial resources with results that do not live up to expectations. Not only economic and financial inequalities between individuals have increased, but also those between areas of a country and between social classes. The re-emergence of the debate on merit in situations of global crisis almost seems to herald the restoration of an ideology of austerity in which individual merit would return to shine as the only chance to emerge and be saved. Meritocracy would claim to make up for the social and civil disintermediation of human relations that is a consequence of economic crises. Moreover, it does not take into account the circularity between man and the environment because in most cases it only examines the retributive aspect of merit without understanding that the well-being of people does not coincide with the well-being of the consumer who through competition is always looking for a reduction in price. To avoid the risks of revolution, contemporary elites have willingly embraced the consumerist drift of societies proposed by new forms of capitalism. The availability of time and space available to an individual embarking on a path of merit has been reduced through the collective neurosis of consumption, which is a way of attributing to objects those purposes and values that instead belong to the community. The claim to include the future of all in the present of a few is typical of an elitist vision of society in which the most deserving must receive the maximum of

satisfaction and rewards so that nothing is left to chance. Holding the reins in science, technology, and the political arts is an ambition in itself positive, but it does not translate into social expropriation only if it is the result of a democratic investiture that prevents the hoarding and «black» market of knowledge. Otherwise, the mass of the last is destined to represent, with its toil and «vulgarity», the «graveyard» of reality and the excuse for some to separate themselves from it.

II. In the meantime, it is useful to start with only apparently simple questions: 1. What is talent 2. How talents are distributed among people 3. How everyone can develop their talents; 4. How to reward the results of one's talents. It is not easy to state what talent is: it was a currency and has become a genetic factor. It was an autonomous capacity of the individual but also the sign of a divine blessing. The metamorphoses of talent are tortuous. A modern scientific tradition has imposed the idea that talents are inscribed in DNA, that they are gifts of nature, and that the task of the educated society is to detect them early and preserve them. According to Adrian Wooldridge (2021), meritocracy and the spirit of competition are decisive for building freer and more prosperous societies. For decades, people insisted on intelligence tests and objective assessment tests, but realised that they are neither reliable nor useful tools. There are children with high cognitive potential who refuse to compete and who give up, or freeze, at the chance to excel. Many gifted children have troubled adolescence and fail to find a satisfactory place in society. The theorisation of the early search for talent has certainly reawakened interest in childhood and shown that helping those who start out disadvantaged requires intervention as early as kindergarten. But the hypothesis of a mass screening of childhood intelligence has proven to be unrealistic and also undemocratic. It would be appropriate to educate everyone on the basis of their own potential, but while some are obvious (physicality, the ability to memorise, musical competence, linguistic ability...) others, sometimes the most sought-after, are not «natural» but constructed, second-rate.

Given the impossibility of categorising people according to IQ, we focused on the equal opportunities' theory, which however does not answer many other questions. Compulsory schooling has become the winning formula for the democratisation of society and for bringing everyone beyond a minimum level of knowledge. At the same time, the idea of opportunities suggests that one should not, in the name of abstract egalitarianism, give up on really getting to know children and stimulating them to discover their talents. However, there is an open sea between discovery and development: no life experience is linear and the growth of each individual is subject to unforeseen events and qualifying encounters. Continuous paths of recovery can be attempted, but we now know that no recovery can ever be a valid alternative to a person's natural development. On the other hand, beyond a certain age and after attending a congruent number of school years, it is no longer possible to adopt an egalitarian logic. In tertiary education, it would not be fair to waste resources on those who do not want to apply themselves or who prove incapable of progressing, but unfortunately resistance to selection is now very strong even there. It is proof that

where one claims to practise equality by right, one ends up fossilising inequality. The strongest separate themselves from the masses and seek refuge in the factories of excellence.

A decisive point is the reward to be given to those who have succeeded in developing talents, whether natural or acquired. This would appear to be peaceful and that is how meritocrats see it. Actually, many believe that rewarding the strong is nothing more than arrogance and a sign of a bad conscience. US philosopher Michael Sandel's anti-meritocratic critique in his 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good* is raising much discussion. According to the author, the idea of treating talent as an investment is the most obvious manifestation of the arrogance of the strong dictated by the will to humiliate the weak. In fact, Sandel's criticism has a weakness in that it disregards the desire of humans to «play the game» of who is better, and does not take sufficient account, except in a negative way, of human ambition and aspirations to compete, which belong to the nature of the *Sapiens* species. Living in a flat world and restrained by the concern not to be violent or to be too unkind is as unhappy a prospect for mankind as the opposite view that would apply talent selection from birth.

Meritocratic theories fail to cohabit with a serious theory of equality: while the former want to see results right away and are not content to simply act as a stimulus to energise the whole of society, the latter, equality, is a hypothetical ideal construct, founded certainly on rational data extrapolated from scientific observation (the unity of the human race), but never tested on the historical plane. The gap between the factual plane of power and the ideal construct of a general theory of man makes the issue highly controversial. Ultimately, most of those who reflect on the matter come to the conclusion that the only thing that is certain is that it goes hand in hand with the certification of inequalities. In order to prevent this from leading to paralysis, it is then necessary to work on the perceptual level one has of the former and the latter. This would be an exercise in social pedagogy that should lead to avoiding negative contrasts. This way of proceeding seems to recall the Aristotelian theory of virtues, moderation and balance between extremes. In reality this is, in my opinion, a poor approach to a fundamental issue, which is that of the recognition of a natural right to life that subjects all theories of social organisation to an examination of legitimacy with respect to the need for recognition that underpins personal identity. The prize is first and foremost life itself. Additional rewards are needed to enable mankind to care for it and, above all, to improve it where and when life is under attack, presents malformations, creates tensions, clashes with difficulties imposed by men. Life is a process that, like all phenomena, does not escape human evaluation but sustains itself in the desire for self, in a «self-love» that, as the ancients taught – echoed by Rousseau in the fourth book of the *Emile* – is positive, as opposed to the «self-respect» that depends on the opinion of others or what one believes to be theirs. The rewards of achievement belong to the logic of self-love, which makes those who lack a healthy desire to live or who feel insecure because of their inferiority very fragile.

III. Is a different perspective on merit possible? Certainly: I tried to outline it in a small book, *La democrazia del merito*, (2016). One of the conditions is that the discourse is not extrapolated from the more general ethical-political context in which it traditionally moves, on the relationship between equality and justice in liberal societies. However, the fact that terms such as «justice», «equality», «social conflict», «human solidarity» appear worn out to the point of boredom among scholars themselves, fuels public and private disenchantment. What is lacking, moreover, is a systematic study that reveals and explains the uncertainties of the idea of «merit», which is an inheritance from the Latin language and culture, which roughly summarised with it phenomena and positions that in other cultures had and would have found much finer specific explanations. In Greek culture, for example, a distinction was made between *kleos* and *axios*, between someone else's recognition of something heroic and the price or exchange value of something. Christian theological culture developed a heated discussion on the relationship between human merit and divine grace that occupied the public space in the very centuries that were decisive in the construction of modernity, to the point of prompting the ecclesiastical authorities themselves to impose a «truce» on a thorny issue that was pushing theology far away from modern rationality.

An interesting perspective remains that of an educational model for which the measurement of a «standard» merit gives way to a pedagogical proposal on the development of talents that is able to identify those that are socially most useful without preventing others from being born. Seen from the side of the educator, merit is very different from those who see it from the side of the pupil. Yet it is precisely the educational sphere that has long ago abandoned the path of merit, both because of a false egalitarian ideology that has dominated the scholastic discourse in some past decades, and also because of the disappearance of those leaderships that we might call intermediate, between the father figure and the figure of the political leader, who, with the passage from elitist schooling to mass literacy, have played a very important educational function. This is the case of the figure of the teacher and the professor who accompanied and then even replaced the figure of the parish priest. Called upon to perform roles as teachers, hundreds of thousands of men, and later especially women, have built a «road of merit» in compulsory schooling that could channel all students. In this way, the modern ideology of the elites has paid its debt to mass democracy while continuing to occupy those areas where the added value of knowledge and power was and is greatest, in elitist schools, private universities and in general all those «factories of excellence» from which the meritocratic verbiage emanates.

However, there is still a lack of a philosophical theory capable of laying the foundations of merit deeper than those traditionally taken into account by evaluation processes applied in schools and society. In order to get away from logics marked by functional economic ideologies, it is certainly important to start again from a fine factual analysis, based on pedagogical observation and case studies, of the relationship between master and student, between adult and child, between strength and weakness, which underlies our dual way of reading reality. However, case analysis and

pedagogical observation are not sufficient to correct meritocratic logics by preserving the value of merit as an anthropological premise that resists social segregation. The distinction between meritocracy and merit is the phoenix of egalitarian theories that have never been able to ground it solidly. Without the meritocratic perspective, the evaluation of merit would take on no political significance and become a universal sharing element, like the air we breathe. What is needed, therefore, is a philosophical reflection on the possibility of going beyond the dichotomy between principles and reality, between existence and possibility, which is typical of the Western cultural matrix. A binary and conflicting representation between merit and demerit, between poor normality and emerging dignity is consistent with a Manichaean view of reality and the logic of conflict. Without bothering Augustine and his polemic against the Manichean heresy or without going into the depths of the Neo-Platonic philosophies, it is useful to recognise that the philosophy of education is perhaps the only special philosophy that does not contemplate conflict as an archetype and, indeed, postulates a principle of necessity in every life experience. The philosophy of education is forced to continually combine the principle of reality with the principle of possibility in order to have margins on which to operate through the construction of a renewed humanity. Having as its object individuals in their «preventive» indeterminacy, i.e. assuming positively the postulate of human life, the philosophy of education uncovers their limits and magnitudes and impacts with the limits of the *genos* but also of the *kratos* that emerge from living together. The core of educating cannot therefore be reduced to a hierarchical and asymmetrical relationship between those who know and those who do not know, between those who teach and those who learn. The radical anamorphism of educating is generated by the broader anamorphism of human experience, which is never predictive, and which and continuously impacts the death of individuals. The phenomenology of educating is therefore not that of classifying, but of internalising, that is to say, of reappropriating experience with the help of social and cultural representations. The phenomenology of educating is therefore not that of classifying, but of internalising, i.e. reappropriating experience with the help of social and cultural representations. It needs an analytic of recognition that refers back to philosophies that recognise man for his need for relationships and that reject fideisms. In recent times, both new ethical-social theories on the «recognition relation» have emerged that have sought to overcome the antinomy between conflict and human progress, and new relational theories in the psychological and psychoanalytic spheres (important references are A. Honneth and P. Ricoeur; for *Infant Research* D.W. Winnicott, L. Sander, D. Stern, J. Benjamin) that have also had interesting parallels in the theological sphere in the work of H.U. von Balthasar and H. Verweyen)¹.

¹ I refer to a useful systematic work by F. Ceragioli, «*Il cielo aperto.*» *Analitica del riconoscimento e struttura della fede nell'intreccio tra desiderio e dono*, Effatà editrice, Cantalupa (Torino) 2012.

Recognition is the “place” of all revelation, whether secular or religious, and it is the place where the essence of human happiness is most powerfully revealed: to be recognised in freedom, even without merit, just by sharing. This is what has happened for thousands of years, but which modern societies have partly contradicted, attempting to place certainty on the same level as truth, the given before the real lived. Modern societies have found their coat of arms in the image of the tree of knowledge and have prospered when they have linked the fate of communities to their ability to transform collective ignorance – dogmatics – into new relationships based on criticism and the progress of science. Thanks to the physics of bodies and the sociology of liberal democratic individualism, they shattered the community into the masses but recreated social pyramids by concentrating much greater power and prestige in small groups than they could have had from the sheer number of their members. At this point, every ancient theory, secular or religious, of the correspondence between the talents to be cultivated and one’s social status, on which previous meritocracies were based, collapsed and the way was opened for the theory of elites and the social dialectic that the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity (which I will mention below) has made it possible to overcome thanks to the decisive function that the relationship would have in the construction of identity. Ricoeur (2005:250) writes that «Being-recognized, should it occur, would for everyone be to receive the full assurance of his or her identity, thanks to the recognition by others of each person’s range of capacities».

A second interesting philosophical path for reconstructing the basis of a theory of merit that does not depend on pre-established social models – certainly not the only one – is that of the original doxa, of «original trust in the world», in what is perceived and in its reliability. Husserl speaks of this in a number of texts, not numerous but significant². Husserl basically states that phenomenological reduction, the stripping away of all pre-understanding, does not destroy what is natural in the experience of the world and, above all, does not deny the desire to live. Every theoretical or practical activity is founded on this presupposition, on the universal ground of the belief of the world. The being of the world is that self-evident truth that not only can never be doubted, but on the contrary is the premise of all doubt, probability or certainty. The activity of knowing, of judging, always arrives after this original trust, inevitably comes late, to verify this or that element of the world, in the case that it has become doubtful, or to subject this or that

² E. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, L. Landgrebe (Hrsg.), Academia, Prag, 1939, §7 [Welt als universaler Glaubensboden für jede Erfahrung einzelner Gegenstände vorgegeben], p. 23-26, engl. transl. *Experience and Judgment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1973, p. 28-31; Id., *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, Hua, Bd. III/1, Karl Schumann (Hrsg.), Nijhoff, Den Haag 1976, § 104 [Die doxischen Modalitäten als Modifikationen], pp. 240-242, engl. transl. *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, Book 1, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis - Cambridge 2014, p. 207-208; Id., *Umsturz der koperkanischen Lehre in der gewöhnlichen weltanschaulichen Interpretation* (1934), Manuskript D17, published under the title *Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Raumlichkeit der Natur*, in M. Farber (ed.), *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1940.

particular entity or aspect to a «critical examination» or «a more thorough study» (Husserl, 1973: p.31). The theme is developed by Merleau-Ponty with his «perceptual faith or trust» that would constitute the true original condition and thus the authentically «natural» condition. The French philosopher opens his 1945 book on the *Phenomenology of Perception* by stating that phenomenology «Although it is a transcendental philosophy that suspends the affirmations of the natural attitude in order to understand them, it is also a philosophy for which the world is always “already there” prior to reflection – like an inalienable presence – and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world in order to finally raise it to a philosophical status» (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: p.1). Again, at the end of his life, in his posthumously published notes, Merleau-Ponty warns us not to give in to the temptation to replace «perceptual faith» with «reflection»: one must take «into account the total situation, which involves reference from the one to the other. What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a universe of adequate thought; it is a reflection which turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light» Merleau-Ponty, 1964: p.56). Unlike Husserl, the French phenomenologist even goes so far as to doubt that this original faith in the world can be put in brackets, made the object of reduction, of epochè: « the reflection is not to presume upon what it finds and condemn itself to putting into the things what it will then pretend to find in them», but « it must suspend the faith in the world only so as to see it, only so as to read in it the route it has followed in becoming a world for us [...]» (ibidem, p. 60; engl. transl., p. 38). The reflection of another important philosopher, Simone Weil, who worked to the extreme on the idea that origins are roots in something deeper – the human genre - and not geometric points, should also be linked to this idea of trust. The origin is the immersion in birth and unhappiness from which only through the asceticism of an education can we distance ourselves (Weil, 1949).

The phenomenological perspective is well suited to a philosophy of educating whose task is «esthetics» (Tognon, 2014), to elaborate a pedagogical interpretation of experience that has its foundation not in what ought to be, in some extraneous thing to which to submit, but in the common feeling of life with which to reconcile oneself daily, even while accepting its limitations and sorrows. In this fundamental human dimension, there is no merit, but necessity. This feeling is nourished through the various stages of perception and only later is it reflected in the various moral elaborations of human coexistence, which, however, cannot replace it, nor can they be defined as its products. Educating works, therefore, so that the gap between what one takes as a model and what one is is not closed. From this open «wound» on the unknown that is living comes the energy that transforms everyday experience into a work of mending. In this perspective, talents are stitches in the living flesh of humanity, but none of them can separate man from human, individual from species, mind from consciousness, power from fear, fear from expectation.

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