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Naive Meritocracy and the Meanings of Myth

Abstract: *Hackers and other geeks have long described their spaces as meritocratic. Geek feminists challenge this belief as a myth. In short, so-called meritocracies reproduce extant members and favor incidental attributes; they are biased, susceptible to privilege, and unconcerned with inequitable outcomes. I agree that meritocratic claims are often unfounded and elide equitable opportunities and outcomes; such claims deserve scrutiny. Yet, meritocracy is experienced as real by some, and it is a worthwhile ideal. Given that the word myth has multiple meanings (unfounded versus ideal), I offer the term naive meritocracy in its place. I also suggest there are two types of naiveté about meritocracy: ignorant naiveté, which is unaware of these critiques, and subjective naiveté, by which personal experiences trumps all else. The notion of naive meritocracy permits us to be critical of meritocratic claims without sacrificing the ideal of meritocracy as equal opportunity.*

In January 2014, the CEO of GitHub, a company beloved by many geeks and entrepreneurs, tweeted that the company "was getting a new rug." The company's reception area mimics the Oval Office, and its carpet had the GitHub logo encircled with the motto "United Meritocracy of GitHub." Much like the design and slogans chosen by U.S. Presidents, this was meant to be representative of the company: that it was a fair environment wherein everything was judged solely on technical merit. But the idea of a tech meritocracy had recently become tainted: feminists argued that the notion was a cover for continuing inequities. In response to these critiques, GitHub CEO and co-founder Chris Wanstrath (2014) wrote that "We thought 'meritocracy' was a neat way to think of open source but now see the problems with it. Words matter. We're getting a new rug." Subsequently, Github replaced the carpet with a new one bearing the slogan: "In collaboration we trust" (Orsini, 2014).

GitHub is a service that enables people to collaboratively develop software in the open, permitting anyone to participate and allowing the best contributions (and contributors) to rise to the top. Eric Raymond (1997), who helped coin the term "open source," wrote that this open approach succeeds because given enough "eyeballs," "almost every problem will be characterized quickly" and a fix will be "obvious to someone."

What problems, then, could people have with the idea of meritocracy? Critics claim that meritocracy is a myth. A few months prior to Github's announcement, feminist media

scholar Alice Marwick (2013) published an article in *Wired* entitled "Silicon Valley isn't a Meritocracy. And it's Dangerous to Hero-worship Entrepreneurs." Marwick did not address GitHub directly, but she characterized meritocracy as a myth given the imbalance and bias in the tech sector—which is especially visible among executives, twenty percent of whom are women and less than three percent of whom are Hispanic or African American ("Diversity in high tech," 2015). For its critics, meritocracy is a myth in the sense that it is widely believed but unfounded; to proclaim a "meritocracy" is to fail to recognize biases and to rationalize inequities as a matter of ability, preference, and choice.

The origins of this belief in meritocracy can be traced from Silicon Valley, through open source developers, back to the original culture of computer hackers—those who enjoy exploring and building systems. Raymond, who also considers himself "hacker culture's resident ethnographer," wrote that "hackers consider themselves something of an elite (a meritocracy based on ability), though one to which new members are gladly welcome" (Raymond, 1991b, 2013). Not all hackers are malicious, but this meritocratic distinction is present even among "dark hat" hackers, those who exploit system weaknesses for their own gain: the "elite" dark hats find and develop exploits and "script kiddies" can only deploy them when bundled up into an easy to use script or program.

Champions of meritocracy, such as Eric Raymond and fellow hacker Meredith Patterson, do so because they've experienced geekdom as welcoming and meritocratic in contrast to experiences in the mainstream. Raymond (2016a) and Patterson (2013) have both written about this with respect to cerebral palsy and autism. Also, when they've confronted challenges, their eventual victories over adversity strengthened their conviction in meritocracy—they managed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This prompts a defensiveness toward critique and a fear that the ideals of "performance, intelligence, dedication, and technical excellence" are under attack from "racial and sexual identity politics," as Raymond (2016a) wrote.

Discussions about the myth of meritocracy are difficult for a couple of reasons. This critique challenges peoples' sense of achievement and, consequently, tends to be inflammatory. Also, the term *meritocracy* itself was coined decades ago as a satirical critique of self-serving claims about equality of opportunity, as I will discuss more fully. And claiming something is mythic can connote an aspirational ideal or an unfounded and self-serving belief. After providing some background on geeks, I explore three

claims of meritocracy by technologists Michael Arrington, Meredith Patterson, and Phil Libin; these demonstrate the naiveté, subjectivity, and privilege that underlie meritocratic claims. I argue that meritocracy should not be understood as an established fact *or* unfounded myth; it is an ideal of unbiased fairness toward which claims are often naively made. Given that these claims elide inequities, similar to claims of *openness* and *freedom* (Reagle, 2013), they should be scrutinized, but the ideal need not be wholly dismissed. Meritocracy is mythic, but in the sense that it embodies the ideals of a community.

Geeks and geek feminism

I speak of *hackers*, *nerds*, and *fans* as types of *geeks*: "To be geek is to be engaged, to be enthralled in a topic, and then to act on that engagement" (McArthur, 2009, p. 62). One can "geek out" about most any topic, though the term is most strongly associated with technical and online interests. Fans, for example, are geeks who are enthusiastic about fiction and music. Hackers enjoy exploring and building technical systems. And nerds love learning.

Following my sources, I use these terms almost interchangeably, though they have distinct histories and meanings (Coleman, 2014; Dunbar-Hester, 2014; Sugarbaker, 1998). For instance, *hacker* was first defined in MIT's Tech Model Railroad Club dictionary five decades ago as someone who employed an "ill-advised" but playful technique (Samson, 1959). The word also appeared in the "Jargon File," a collection of computer-related lingo started in 1975 and which received its greatest popular attention under the editorship of Eric Raymond (1991a), who also published it as *The New Hacker's Dictionary.* As noted, Raymond is most well-known for helping found and popularize the open source movement—although this is being overshadowed by his reputation as a neo-pagan "gun-toting libertarian" and author of a controversial blog (Raymond, 1997, 2016b).

Geeks tend to be self-documenting, as seen in the "Jargon File," early Internet FAQs, and contemporary wikis (Reagle, 2014). The Geek Feminism (GF) wiki and blog were established in 2008 and 2009 and follow this tradition by documenting and applying feminist-related concepts to notable events. GF's founder, Alex Bayley (better known as "Skud"), wrote that "our main tactic is to document things." Skud is a long time "open stuff" contributor and her path to GF included a pair of widely read essays about being a geek woman; she was also one of the first geeks to "question the merits of meritocracy" (Skud, 1998, 2000, 2009, 2011, 2012). Today, the GF blog and wiki have

about a dozen active contributors and the wiki describes itself as being "about women in a range of geeky cultures/communities/activities" (Feminism, 2015b).

At the same time as Skud's early reflections, scholars began to challenge the geek stereotype by considering the identity and practices of girls as well as issues of masculinity and race (Bucholtz, 1999; Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 2002). Linguist Mary Bucholtz (2002) used the discussions of Skud's essays to define *geek feminism* as a commitment to both feminist concerns and geek enthusiasms. In turn, in 2008, Skud adopted this term herself when she established the GF wiki; the next year she started its blog as a "dedicated feminist space to talk about feminism and feminists in geekdom" (Feminism, 2009). Other notable projects followed, often with overlapping membership. The Ada Initiative ("About us," 2012) was "a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing participation of women in open technology and culture." The online and print publication Model View Culture seeks to "present compelling cultural and social critique, highlight the work and achievement of diverse communities in tech, and explore the use of technology for social justice" (Kane, 2015). I refer to those affiliated with these activities as "geek feminists," despite differences of opinion and personality. For example, *MVC* is especially damning of industry and its founder is known for her acerbic tweets. I reserve "GF" for the wiki and blog.

The myth of meritocracy

In 2010 Michael Arrington, founder of the *TechCrunch* news website, posted an essay entitled: "Too Few Women in Tech? Stop Blaming the Men." He was responding to criticisms of *Disrupt, TechCrunch's* annual entrepreneurial conference and competition. Arrington (2010) explained that "Success in Silicon Valley, most would agree, is more merit driven than almost any other place in the world. It doesn't matter how old you are, what sex you are, what politics you support or what color you are. If your idea rocks and you can execute, you can change the world and/or get really, stinking rich." Arrington was frustrated that despite *Disrupt's* best efforts, "We beg women to come and speak," they still ended up with a poor showing. He concluded that "the problem isn't that Silicon Valley is keeping women down, or not doing enough to encourage female entrepreneurs. The opposite is true. No, the problem is that not enough women want to become entrepreneurs." Others disagreed (Smith, 2010; Stone, 2010). Stanford gender researcher Caroline Simard responded that "saying high-tech is a meritocracy doesn't make it so" (Simard, 2010).

Simard's response is bolstered by arguments about the myth of meritocracy. The first is that meritocracies affirm and reproduce extant community members. In *Model View Culture* (*MVC*), software developer Noah Slater (2014) wrote that meritocracy is based on "what we, privately, think contributors ought to look like." One tech blogger referred to this as "mirrortocracy" (Bueno, 2014). For example, at *Disrupt* 2013, just two years after Arrington's missive, there were open displays of androcentrism and sexism. During the presentation for the app *Circle Shake*, a game of how fast you can shake your phone, a man appeared to masturbate on stage. Also, the app *Titstare*, "where you take photos of yourself staring at tits," was proposed for its supposed benefit to men's health (Morais, 2013). These cringe-worthy attempts at humor presume and perpetuate a particular audience. It's no wonder they have to beg women to attend.

A second argument is that pushiness rather than (or in addition to) skill is rewarded in geek meritocracies. An article on the Geek Feminism (2015a) wiki stated, "meritocracies tend to promote those who not only have the skills/experience, but are also outspoken enough to let everyone know about it." In her study of open source software, anthropologist Dawn Nafus (2012, p. 679) referred to this as "pushyocracy," which creates a double-bind for women who are meek-and-ignored or assertive-and-censured. Nafus' finding was contrary to the belief that software development is gender-blind because "patches don't have gender." (A patch is a submitted improvement to software.) Third, ironically, the notion of meritocracy can *further* bias. Management researcher Emilio Castilla (2008; 2010) has found a "paradox of meritocracy": making merit more salient to those evaluating others can strengthen (non-meritocratic) biases against women.

Fourth, meritocracy presumes a level playing field. Software developer Coraline Ada Ehmke (2014) wrote in *MVC* that "the majority of today's technologists enjoy elevated privilege in a meritocracy because they have the luxuries of time, money, education, and preferential treatment by the world at large." Peggy McIntosh (1988/1990) famously identified privilege as an unseen advantage in an essay that was influential for its (1) use of metaphor ("like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions"), (2) recognition that privileges of color, class, and gender are "intricately intertwined" (related to intersectionalism), and (3) identification of "the myth of meritocracy."

Research continues to reveal the ways that race, gender, and class influence purportedly meritocratic competitions. For example, there is an unseen advantage among young white men who can engage in risky "break-the-rules" behavior (e.g.,

skipping school, use of intoxicants, and gambling) without impairing their future. Additionally, risk-seeking white men use financial, social, and cultural capital to launch entrepreneurial ventures or recover from them when they fail (Black et al., 2015; Groth, 2015; Levine & Rubinstein, 2013). A Silicon Valley aphorism is to "fail fast and fail often," but only those with the capital to do so can do so, and they then attribute their eventual success to their own merit. Unlike Arrington's claim, class, age, gender, and color do affect the likelihood of success—not only in the competition, but in who shows up to compete, fail, and compete again.

Fifth, some critics of meritocracy challenge the focus on equal opportunity. Ehmke (2014) wrote that the utilitarianism of meritocracy is dehumanizing and asked, "even if the myth of equal access and opportunity were true, is it really enough to be measured by the quality of our code alone?" Coincidentally, Ehmke's question about meritocracy corresponds with the origins of the term itself (Littler, 2013). Meritocracy was coined by British sociologist Michael Young when he adapted his 1955 Ph.D. thesis into a dystopian novel set in 2034. Young intended to satirize the educational tracking of British students who were divided into three different types of schools based on early testing. Young and socialist writer Alan Fox independently argued that increasing access to *opportunity* by way of meritocratic education did not further the *outcome* of social equality. As Fox (1956) wrote, meritocracy is one of the "bigger and better 'sieves' ('equality of opportunity') to help the clever boys get to the top and then pile rewards on them when they get there." Nonetheless, meritocracy (despite unequal outcomes) is embraced by many. Equality of opportunity is compatible with influential geek philosophies, including individualistic anarchism, libertarianism, and objectivism [1] (Barbrook & Cameron, 2004; Coleman, 2014; Herring, 1994; Reagle, 2013; Turner, 2006). The valorization of meritocracy in the new millennium led Young (2001) to confess that "I have been sadly disappointed": "The book was a satire meant to be a warning."

In sum, many are ignorant of the significant problems associated with meritocratic claims. Even more people are unaware that "meritocracy" was coined to parody these very problems. Meritocracy is seen as a myth because claims for it are often unfounded. More importantly, it is also mythic in that it represents an ideal to reach for. So as to keep these meanings distinct, we should speak of *meritocratic claims* and the *meritocratic ideal*.

Ignorant and subjective naiveté

Those who make meritocratic claims do so on the basis of two types of naiveté, which sometimes overlap. First, they may be unaware of the critiques of meritocracy (*ignorant naiveté*). Second, they may be aware of the critiques, but their experiences convince them that meritocracy's practice is sound, even if imperfect (*subjective naiveté*).

Like many geeks, Meredith Patterson (2014) is fond of a "constructivist" mentality, as she calls it. In an essay about "when nerds collide," Patterson claimed that you can't argue with code: "Programming is an inherently constructivist discipline. A constructivist is like the archetypal Missourian: 'Show me!'" The primacy of the "show me" attitude was later echoed by Eric Raymond: "When hackers fail our own standards of meritocracy, as we sometimes do, it's up to us to fix it from within our own tradition: judge by the work alone, you are what you do, shut up and show us the code" (Raymond, 2015). Both of these claims are reprisals of the idea that software "patches don't have gender," which Nafus (2012) encountered in her study of women's relative scarcity in open source projects. Nafus rightly pointed out that assessing software is not inherently objective; establishing what counts as good code is culturally laden and characterized by "highly masculinized, aggressive online talking" (p. 679). Programmers are always arguing about the relative merits of software's performance, cost, elegance, and readability. In this regard, Patterson and Raymond's claims have elements of ignorant naiveté, as both hackers are likely unaware of Nafus's critique and seemingly forgot how argumentative hackers can be.

Patterson continued: "Some programmers can leave constructivism at the office, but hackers live and breathe it." Here, we transition into subjective naiveté: conflating proof, in a mathematical sense, with personal experience. One of the things that Patterson has evidence of, as lived experience, is that geekdom is under siege. According to Patterson (2014), her people, the weird (or "outsider") nerds, have ample reason to fear incursions from the mainstream because their "own lived experience yields proof after proof that they, and their outsider norms, will be first against the wall when the popular kids come." Geekdom had proven to be a sanctuary from the challenges of "growing up with autism"; it is a space where outsiders and weird nerds "fit in a little better without having to try so hard." When cool nerds and brogrammers arrive, weird nerd acceptance is threatened.

Patterson's concern for weird nerds contrasted with Zeynep Tufekci's (2014) concern that the "many women—and men—who don't fit into the 'bunch of weird nerds' culture

will leave the field." This group's experiences of alienation and exit are also undeniable "lived experience." The question then is should geekdom accommodate the "weird" or the "normal," or, is it big enough for both? For Patterson (2013), geekdom must be protected from both brogrammers (non-weird men who program for money) and geek feminists: "Why is the onus on the outsiders who built our own spaces to understand the insider-newcomers, and not the other way around, particularly when the insiders are the ones colonising us?" Patterson's defensiveness is, in part, a consequence of being dismissed as being in "denial" and "colluding in my own oppression." Although her experiences should not be so simply dismissed, her position naturally reflects her experience and subjectivity.

In addition to having been welcomed into these spaces, Patterson (2013) never heard "no girls allowed." Unlike her experiences as an autist in the mainstream, Patterson's experiences of gender bias in geekdom have been unusual, unnoticed, and easily surmounted. In one rare instance of acknowledged discrimination, Patterson only learned of it when "it was brought to my attention long after the fact." Unbeknownst to her, someone had dismissed her technical proposal because of her gender; she subsequently implemented it herself. When she later learned of the discrimination, "I literally doubled over laughing at how nonplussed he must have been to see it not only implemented, but implemented to 'rousing success.'" Patterson's geekiness rendered her immune to slights, and her code allowed her to triumph. Other women have told Patterson that her experiences of a welcoming geekdom are not typical. She conceded that this may be true, but that "maybe other women would have a better time of things if they tried walking around in my shoes for once" (Patterson, 2013). Patterson's story highlights the fact that as a "weird" nerd she's found geekdom welcoming and non-discriminatory. Additionally, in the instance in which she did encounter gender-based discrimination, it was something she was easily able to overcome—so much so that it was laughable.

Granted, one cannot easily reconcile the experience of those who found geekdom inclusive and those who found it alienating. In Patterson's interpretation, her lack of sensitivity to social slights and the success of her code is evidence of how to participate in a functioning geek meritocracy. Yet, others can be alienated in the same circumstance, regardless of their code's quality. And some women have been told "no girls allowed" and actively harassed. These experiences are not objective or constructivist. Context matters, even for assessing code—as seen when companies cheat

at benchmarks for phone and graphics hardware. It is possible to have good and bad experiences in a community and for people to interpret these experiences differently.

There is much to appreciate about geek culture. It is a haven from mainstream strictures, a community of like-minded enthusiasts, and, at its best, a space that welcomes novelty and difference. It is also a place where many feel they are judged for the merit of their intellect and creativity rather than social adroitness, dress, and popularity. But like any other culture, it has its biases. Indeed, the narrative of a misfit who finds a new home and triumphs is powerful, but it is subjectively naive to the fact that not everyone's circumstances are equal, even in the refuge of a subculture that is preferable to the mainstream.

Conclusion: The privilege of naiveté

I conclude with one more case, that of Phil Libin (2011), former CEO of Evernote (a note-taking app). In a 2011 talk at the Stanford entrepreneurial program, Libin professed that "we live in a geek meritocracy." He explained that, "Now is the best time in the history of the universe to start a company because we are living in a geek meritocracy today, or as close to a geek meritocracy as has ever happened." Advances in technology allowed him to focus on creating excellent products, rather than worrying about marketing, logistics, and "other crap," as he did in previous companies.

Unlike Michael Arrington's (2010) *subjective naiveté* in claiming that Silicon Valley and the *Disrupt* conference were merit-driven and that women fail to participate, Libin (2011) was not referencing gender when he opined that "we live in a geek meritocracy —or as close to a geek meritocracy as ever happened." Libin's *ignorant naiveté* was related to his excitement for creating great products in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Libin (2011) believed we live in a geek meritocracy because there has never been a better time to start a tech company: "Is there any point that you think you would rather change your life today for? Would you be back in 1992, would you go back to the '70s, would you go back to the 1500s? When was there ever a better time?" That is, we live in a geek meritocracy because the present is preferable to the past.

This question reveals a privilege in Libin's comparative historical thinking. Even if every geek (including feminists) agreed that the present is preferable to the past, this does not mean everything is perfect. Geek feminists imagine a world where things *are better*, and the presumption of meritocracy achieved (or even approached) is an impediment to that future.

Libin's claim is one more example of how the notion of meritocracy is used naively. Even if we abandon Young's meritocracy as "satire meant to be a warning" and value "equality of opportunity," opportunities are not as equal as we hope. In practice, purported meritocracies are biased toward affirming and reproducing attributes of extant members, and they then favor incidental attributes of those members, such as pushiness or idiosyncratic dress. Also, the very notion of meritocracy can create biases against non-majority members, and it presumes all members have equitable competitive circumstances.

Because the word *myth* has multiple meanings, and the first sense (unfounded) tends to extinguish the second (an ideal), we are better served by speaking of a meritocratic ideal and imperfect implementations. We should never claim to have a meritocracy, only to aspire to have meritocratic methods; to claim anything else is naive and inimical to progress toward the ideal.

Footnotes

1. With respect to objectivism, Ayn Rand (2014a, 2014b) was dismissive of the *term* meritocracy though she advocated for a similar notion, the "pyramid of ability."

Acknowledgments

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Footnotes (returns to text)

1. With respect to objectivism, Ayn Rand (2014a, 2014b) was dismissive of the *term* meritocracy though she advocated for a similar notion, the "pyramid of ability."

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