



Political Meritocracy for Responsibility

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Abstract

The political theory of political meritocracy generally focuses on the political elites' moral and epistemic ability to make a public decision that is conducive to the people's long-term interests. Understanding political legitimacy chiefly in terms of the government's good performance, therefore, advocates of political meritocracy stipulate a general causal relation between the political leaders' superior virtue and good public outcomes. This paper explores an alternative account of political meritocracy—so-called responsibility meritocracy—which rejects such a simple casual connection that underscores performance meritocracy. Unlike performance meritocracy, responsibility meritocracy takes an ex post approach to political meritocracy by understanding merit mainly from the standpoint of the way in which political leaders take responsibility not only for the consequences of their own public decisions but, more importantly, for social, economic, and political situations that have occurred largely out of their political control such as natural disasters and structural injustice.

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Political meritocracy is commonly understood as a rule by the best and the brightest. It focuses on the political elite's moral and epistemic ability to make public decisions that are conducive to the people's long-term interests. Understanding political legitimacy chiefly in terms of the government's good performance, advocates of political meritocracy assume a general causal relation between the political leaders' superior virtue and knowledge and long-term public goods such as economic growth and environmental protection. Therefore, virtually all recent proposals of political meritocracy revolve around the question of how to select virtuous and knowledgeable individuals and have them make law and public policy without being tainted by the dangerous will of ordinary people. Let us call this dominant account of political meritocracy *performance meritocracy*.

Interestingly, however, performance meritocracy has very little to say about how to assess the merits of the political elites (and high-level public officials) *after selection* and how to hold them accountable to the people, who are subject to laws and policies they make. In fact, nothing could be more unreasonable than to assume that once selected, the so-called virtuous and knowledgeable political leaders would never become corrupt or that their virtue would insulate them perfectly from the temptation to pursue private interests at the expense of the public good. It is equally problematic to assume that political leaders and public officials unconstrained by popular will would always make the right (i.e., objectively good) decisions, not only due to their superior virtue and knowledge but also because they are not held accountable, through any effective institutional mechanisms, to the people whom many performance meritocrats found to be irrational and myopically self-interested. The essentially prospective nature of performance meritocracy leaves the old question of "who guards the guardians" obscure.¹

In this essay, I explore two alternative accounts of political meritocracy—*purpose meritocracy* and *responsibility meritocracy*, respectively—with a special focus on the latter, which I understand as a

¹ This problem is most salient with Jiang Qing's vision of Confucian constitutionalism where the principle of the separation of powers is explicitly rejected (See Jiang 2013).

specific version of the former. What defines responsibility meritocracy is its rejection of the simple causality between the political leaders' putatively superior moral and epistemic qualities and good political results. In contrast to performance meritocracy and purpose meritocracy (which, as will be discussed later, subscribes to the principle of causality of a different kind), responsibility meritocracy takes an *ex post* approach to political meritocracy by understanding merit mainly from the perspective of ordinary people who call on political leaders and (high-level) public officials to take responsibility not only for the consequences of the public decisions they made but also for natural disasters and structural injustice, for which it is difficult to hold public decision-makers personally responsible. I argue that though any reasonable concept of political responsibility cannot afford to dismiss the importance of selecting good political leaders and their so-called good performances, not only is "good performance" contingent upon the public purposes that are formed through the process of the people's collective will-formation, guiding the overall direction of the given political community, but it can also never be separated from the way in which political leaders and public officials respond to disasters and structural injustices. Our exploration of responsible meritocracy will show that the conventional understanding of political meritocracy as an alternative to representative democracy is deeply misguided and that it is only when it is nested within a democratic political system that responsible meritocracy can best be realized.

I. Performance Must Be Guided by Purpose

Many proponents of performance meritocracy present it as an alternative to liberal democracy predicated on the "one-person, one-vote" principle (hereafter OPOV).² They argue that democratic representation operating on OPOV is critically limited in making the government meritocratic because there are no guarantees that virtuous and knowledgeable individuals can be selected through

² Most notably Bai (2020), Bell (2015), and Chan (2014).

popular and competitive elections. As Daniel Bell puts it, for performance meritocrats, “the politically relevant question is whether democratic elections lead to good consequences” (2015, 18). From the viewpoint of performance meritocrats, not only is democratic representation incapable of selecting the best and the brightest because of its structural reliance on the popularity of the candidates,³ but it also has a strong tendency to undermine the well-being of the people by allowing them, who radically lack the commitment to and capability of promoting the public good, to govern themselves, even if their collective self-government is exercised vicariously through the representation mechanism.⁴ Even in the case in which virtuous and knowledgeable individuals happen to be popular and thus are elected by the people, they cannot exercise their sound moral and political judgment for the public good under the system of democratic representation, because they must *represent* the people’s expressed desires and preferences faithfully during the public decision-making processes (See generally Bai 2020).

Not surprisingly, the belief that law and public policy must be made by individuals of superior virtue and knowledge has led performance meritocrats to design a bicameral (or tricameral) legislature in which the meritocratic upper house composed of nondemocratically selected members can constrain the democratic lower house whose members are elected by popular vote. According to Tongdong Bai, the rationale behind introducing a bicameral legislature, the meritocratic upper house in particular, is to “limit the influence of an uninformed and unreasonable popular will on policies” (2020, 72). As such, performance meritocrats do not roundly reject democratic elections. But, as Bai puts it, “the explicit aim of having [a democratic lower house] is not to give decision-making power to the people . . . but to let the popular will be expressed” (72) in a similar way in which people could only indicate their dis/content with the government without being able to participate in it in the classical Confucian ideal of rule for the people. Recently,

³ But see Dovi (2006) for a counterargument.

⁴ But see Urbinati (2006) for an illumination discussion on the normative appeal of representative democracy vis-à-vis the Rousseauist ideal of participatory democracy.

Bell has abandoned his famous and highly influential bicameral legislative proposal,⁵ but he did so not due to its normative disvalue, but mainly because of its impracticability in the given Chinese political context. He still states that “I need to argue for political proposals and institutions composed of leaders not chosen by means of free and fair elections (one person, one vote) with the power to debate and decide on a wide range of issues affecting the political community in ways that can override the decisions of democratically elected leaders” (Bell 2015, 20).

At the core of performance meritocracy is the assumption that virtue and knowledge are directly instrumental to long-term public goods such as economic development and environmental protection.⁶ Though performance meritocrats do not articulate this quasi-causal relation between virtue and good political consequences in reference to Confucianism, it is one of the key beliefs that was generally held by traditional Confucians. Youngsun Back (2016) captures the general causal power of virtue to bring about non-moral goods including good political outcomes in terms of “moral economy.” What is critically missing in the performance meritocrats’ faith in Confucian moral economy is the role of Heaven as the metaphysical force to ensure the general causal connection between virtue and the government’s good performance. Of the classical Confucians, it was Mencius who reformulated Confucius’s seminal idea of moral economy on the firm

⁵ On Bell’s idea of Confucian bicameralism, see Bell (2006, ch. 6).

⁶ During the review process, an anonymous reviewer raised a question about the generally consequentialist conceptualization of virtue among performance meritocrats, given the prevailing understanding of virtue ethics as a third theory between deontology and utilitarianism. True, virtue ethics is mainly concerned with developing character traits that enable one to flourish as a human being. However, it should be noted that the sort of virtue at stake in the political theory of political meritocracy is not so much moral virtue, concerned with human excellence and human flourishing, but political virtue that is additionally concerned with the protection and promotion of the well-being of the people. In Confucian virtue ethics, moral virtue and political virtue are not conceptually differentiated, hence “monistic.” Of note is that no traditional and contemporary Confucian political philosophers dismiss the consequentialist dimension of the ruler’s virtue, solely focusing on its intrinsic value. Though the nature of the connection between moral virtue and political virtue is an important question, especially for moral theorists, it is not the primary concern of this paper.

metaphysical ground by holding that virtue is acquired by developing the moral sprouts within human nature, whose goodness was decreed by Heaven (See *Mencius* 2A.6 and 7A.1), and that the virtue thus cultivated can (and tends to) result in good consequences as intended by Heaven. Without positing Heaven as the pivot of the moral universe, the general causal connection between virtue (and knowledge) and consequences that are *objectively* good can hardly be obtained, because there are so many contingent factors that interfere in the otherwise smooth operation of moral economy in the political world. As far as Confucian moral and political philosophy is concerned, it is unreasonable to believe that political outcomes can be totally subject to human control.

To be sure, performance meritocracy does not have to be understood in this way if the philosophical connection between classical Confucianism and the contemporary Confucian argument for political meritocracy is put aside. Performance meritocracy may be decoupled from its traditional metaphysical moorings and then reformulated as a set of simple assumptions: that the government's good performance can be generally expected from good policymaking and that good policymaking depends on the public decision-makers' good judgment, which stems from their superior virtue and knowledge. Arguably, these are the guiding assumptions of Confucian political meritocrats who present the meritocratic upper house as the institution of virtue and knowledge, where good judgments are (believed to be) made by the nondemocratically selected political elite. Here arise some important questions, though: How do political leaders form good judgment? What counts as good judgment, and, by implication, the common good, in the political community populated by tens and millions of distinct individuals who subscribe to different values, faiths, and ideas? For instance, do the people in contemporary East Asia uniformly believe that economic growth is the single most important criterion by which to measure the government's performance? (Cf. Bell 2015, 3–4).

Surprisingly, though, the idea of performance meritocracy is predicated on a tacit yet implausible assumption that there exists an objective standard for the common good that all members of a political community can (and ought to) agree on—"objective" in the sense

that there is no moral controversy in identifying and measuring the merits of political leaders and public officials, solely based on which they are supposed to be identified and selected. What we find here is the Confucian (performance) meritocrats' strong adherence to the traditional Confucian paradigm of virtue politics—that there can be a political agent (or a group of political agents) who can identify and promote the common good, the good that is objectively good for all members of a political community. Mencius famously called such agents “Heaven’s delegated officers” (*tianli* 天吏) (*Mencius* 2B.8), and in his moral and political system they were the “sages”—special individuals who have cultivated their innate moral potential to the fullest, thus having fully realized their Heaven-bestowed nature and acquired moral connoisseurship (Van Norden 2007, 128–33).

However, under the societal circumstances of pluralism, which increasingly characterize East Asian societies, it is extremely difficult for the members of a political community to agree on the common good as well as on the normative standards of merit prior to taking part in the process of collective will-formation in both formal and informal public arenas.⁷ Some people may believe that economic growth should be the most important criterion to assess government performance and thus the merits of public officials must be based on the ability to achieve this goal most effectively. Yet, others may contest that far more important than economic growth is the protection of the citizenry’s civil and political rights, that of minorities in particular. For the second group, economic growth achieved in violation of basic rights cannot (and should not) be regarded as good performance by the government, and the judgment of what counts as such a violation must

⁷ An anonymous reviewer challenged me here by saying that “in situations where it is impossible to determine what constitutes the common good, virtue ethics that do not explain virtue consequentially may actually shine.” I disagree, because at stake here is not so much what sort of ethics can help us determine the common good, but how the common good can be identified in the first place under the societal condition of pluralism. As a moral theory, virtue ethics is mainly concerned with individual persons, their moral excellence and flourishing. In the present context, my focus is how a multitude of the people who subscribe to different conceptions of moral excellence and flourishing can ever arrive at the common good. This is a quintessentially political question, which I do not think can be reduced to the question of individual ethics.

belong to the people themselves. Under the fact of pluralism where moral disagreement is ineluctable, neither a particular individual nor a particular group can claim the exclusive right to define, interpret, or enforce the (so-called) common good by appealing to Heaven, as suggested by Jiang Qing, or on the basis of one's superior virtue and knowledge. Contrary to Confucian meritocrats, virtue and knowledge cannot be the standards for merit before undergoing public deliberation on what the common good consists of and how to achieve it in the given context. Only after the common good is identified through the discursive process involving the people's active political participation, can one reasonably say what sorts of virtue and knowledge are instrumental to its attainment and promotion. The common good cannot be what some select individuals say it is.

These two facts—that the standards of merit are dependent on the conception of the common good as defined in a political community, and that the common good cannot be identified by a handful of individuals with special qualities—lead us to an alternative account of political meritocracy, namely purpose meritocracy. What is central to purpose meritocracy is the two following underlying assumptions: first, that the common good consists of common purposes, and, second, that under the fact of pluralism, common purposes must be the purposes that people have set for themselves as the shared guidelines for organizing their public life and coordinating their complex social, economic, and political interactions while maintaining their moral, religious, and political differences and disagreements. In purpose meritocracy, the selection of public-spirited, responsive, and competent political leaders is still enormously important, but it is regarded as an integral part of organizing and coordinating their shared collective life in light of public purposes. Accordingly, the criteria of merit are derived from the public purposes that have been formed politically by the members of a political community co-participating in the process of collective will-formation.⁸

⁸ Thus understood, purpose meritocracy is highly consistent with Henry Richardson's republican vision for democratic autonomy. See Richardson (2002).

From the standpoint of purpose meritocracy, performance meritocracy is misconceived for two reasons. First, performance meritocracy fails to do justice to the entire political community in conceptualizing political meritocracy. By concentrating on the moral and epistemic qualities of select political leaders, performance meritocracy precludes ordinary people from its rightful membership and regards them as mere passive beneficiaries of the good service supposedly provided by political leaders/public officials who are unaccountable to them by any meaningful institutional mechanisms. The political community it gives rise to is a community of the political elites, entitled with all the rights to design its institutional structures, determine the common good (or public purposes), make law, and produce policies that they deem to be good for all, certainly including themselves. Second, performance meritocracy falls short of being a robust political theory of political meritocracy because it understands merit pre-politically, as something that is independent of public purposes that are formed by all members of a political community. By assuming the existence of an objective standard for merit that all can recognize and agree, performance meritocracy is hard to justify under the circumstances of moral disagreement. Inasmuch as the gist of “the political” under the fact of pluralism lies in how to resolve, albeit provisionally, moral disagreement and the political conflict that ensues in a way that is acceptable, if not agreeable, to all members of the political community,⁹ performance meritocracy is far from political. In fact, it has much in common with an undemocratic version of political epistocracy, and, in this regard, it is not coincidental that some Confucian (performance) meritocrats are attracted to the core argument by Western epistocrats such as Janson Brennan who are skeptical of the moral value of the participatory and discursive process of conflict resolution.¹⁰

I believe that purpose meritocracy presents itself as a more plausible account of political meritocracy than performance meritocracy under the circumstances of modern politics marked by

⁹ Here I am inspired by Barber (1984), Gutmann and Thompson (1996), and Waldron (199

¹⁰ See Brennan (2016). Among Confucian democrats, Bell and Bai frequently cite Brennan to make their cases against representative democracy. For a useful distinction between democratic and undemocratic epistocracy, see Landemore (2013).

value pluralism and moral disagreement. First, it is inclusive in that the moral and political visions of all members of a political community are given equal weight, if not equal influence, in the process of the formation of the common will, which determines the direction and the content of public purposes. Second, it is participatory in the sense that, in principle, all members of a political community are supposed to take part in the process in which their public purposes are formed and articulated. Third, it is meritocratic, not in the sense of selecting individuals of superior knowledge and virtue that is good independently of the common will, but in the sense of realizing the common will more effectively by authorizing those who are strongly committed to making public decisions on behalf of the people in light of public purposes. Fourth and lastly, purpose meritocracy provides us with a clear criterion for what can count as “good” performance. It may take economic growth as one important measure for government performance, but it does not take economic growth in itself as an absolute good. In purpose meritocracy, economic growth is one of many valuable goods, and it (and economic inequalities necessarily following it) must always be balanced with other goods and values that are integral to public purposes. In purpose meritocracy, meritorious political leaders are those who are capable of striking a good balance between the various goods that are cherished in a political society in a particular given social, economic, and political situation.

In my view, compared to performance meritocracy, the greatest normative appeal of purpose meritocracy lies in its capability to enable the people, who are subject to laws and public policies made by political leaders and public officials, to assess their merits after selection (or election). This *ex post* ability to critically evaluate the merits of the high-level public decision-makers makes purpose meritocracy remarkably well suited to hold political leaders accountable to the people. In a purpose meritocracy, it is the people themselves (or their representatives selected by a due process) who articulate the public purposes in terms of law and public policy and are thus best placed to evaluate whether political leaders/public officials have fulfilled their public services in light of public purposes. As the judgment of what counts as merit is dependent on the public purposes of an entire

political community, political decision-makers cannot appeal to a pre-political, highly subjective, criterion of merit and persist in their right to rule. When they have failed to live up to the public standards of merit, they should be removed or deselected. Though purpose meritocracy is not inherently connected with democracy, there is no denying that constitutional democracy offers an ideal political system that can best actualize purpose meritocracy.¹¹

II. Public Purpose and Meritocracy

The dominant account of performance meritocracy, which prevails among Confucian meritocrats, is casually affiliated with the version of political meritocracy (like “the China model”) that is starkly opposed to representative democracy. In contrast, purpose meritocracy can be best actualized when it is housed within constitutional democracy. Insofar as performance meritocracy can be accommodated within a purpose meritocracy, however, neither their normative distinctions nor the political forms in which they are manifested should be understood as fixed or unalterable. In fact—perhaps surprisingly for some, given that they have been presented as two rival accounts of political meritocracy thus far—performance meritocracy and purpose meritocracy have something fundamental in common. And this commonality reveals the critical limitation of purpose meritocracy, thus calling for a novel account of political meritocracy that can address that limitation without going completely beyond the structure of purpose meritocracy.

Like performance meritocracy, purpose meritocracy is goal-oriented. In a purpose meritocracy, the merits of political leaders and public officials are assessed based on their “performance,” although the moral and political contents of performance are subject to public purposes—that is, whether public decision-makers have achieved the goal as stipulated by a higher public end. Like performance meritocracy, in which merits are supposed to track good performance, purpose meritocracy is predicated on the assumption that merits are supposed

¹¹ I sketched a rough vision of purpose meritocracy in Kim (2014, ch. 7).

to track the good performance of political leaders/public officials. The only difference between the two accounts of political meritocracy, though important, is that while in performance meritocracy merits are considered purely as individual qualities possessing inherent moral worth (and power), in purpose meritocracy merits are understood as publicly stipulated, that is, as values that are instrumental to achieving public purposes. Both understand merits as having a causal power to bring about good consequences: for (most) performance meritocrats, economic growth and political order, and for purpose meritocrats, higher moral and political ends that are served by public purposes.

The assumption of a general causal relationship between merit and good political outcomes is central to both performance and purpose meritocracies. We want to select meritorious political leaders and public officials, because their meritocratic leadership is likely to bring about good outcomes. If this rough causal connection does not hold, there is no reason to prefer political meritocracy to various forms of political system that are procedurally legitimate such as a pure majoritarian democracy.¹² We can call this rough casual connection implied in purpose meritocracy a modern (and democratic) vision of moral economy. Compared to the traditional Confucian ideal of moral economy, underpinned on monistic virtue ethics or the Neo-Confucian metaphysics of *li* 理 (“principle”) and *qi* 氣 (“vital force”), the version of moral economy that buttresses purpose meritocracy is more reasonable, in the sense that the contents of merit and good consequences are aligned through the complex institutional mechanisms that facilitate the people’s active political participation and strengthen their effective power to control the government within the normative perimeter of public purposes, which is established by the people themselves. Unless the people collectively set unattainable and morally depraved goals as their shared public purposes, which is highly unlikely, a rough causal connection between merits (or good political leadership) and good consequences can be reasonably stipulated.

12 For a forceful defense of a pure form of procedural democracy based on a majoritarian principle, see Christiano (1996).

But is this all we can say about political meritocracy? Is political meritocracy all about selecting meritorious political leaders/public officials and holding them accountable in light of the common political ends publicly set by the people? At first glance, there seems to be no problem with purpose meritocracy: people select competent and public-spirited individuals as our leaders and hold them accountable for the consequences of their public decisions. The underlying assumption here is that the expected good consequences are reasonably within the decision makers' control, and, as noted, in purpose meritocracy political leaders and (high-level) public officials are supposed to be selected solely based on their merits that are thought to best lead to the expected good outcomes. Thus understood, the moral theory that undergirds purpose meritocracy is a theory of causal responsibility, which conventionally holds that one should be held responsible for the consequences of the course of an action that he or she has freely chosen.

Of course, there is an unconventional element to the idea of causal responsibility that underlies purpose meritocracy, and it is important from a political standpoint. Purpose meritocracy does not subscribe to a simple version of causal responsibility, which emphasizes a direct causal connection between an agent's purposeful choice and the public outcomes resulting from it. The simple version of causal responsibility is the defining characteristic of performance meritocracy where the moral and intellectual qualities of political leaders/public officials are believed to be directly instrumental to producing good outcomes understood in very specific terms. In purpose meritocracy, "good outcomes" are whatever outcomes the people deem as congruent with public purposes. Now, it is worth noting that even if public purposes are derived from the common will, which has been formed through political debate, deliberation, and/or voting, and are therefore regarded as the people's shared purposes, they cannot be reduced to certain items that can be objectively measured such as GDP. Since public purposes are nothing other than the shared ends of the people co-participating in the same political community, they are naturally subject to continued public debate and contestation. Just like the constitution that is unavoidably subject to public debate and

contestation, despite its supreme role of forming and maintaining the people's common public identity (See Jacobsohn 2010), public purposes are always exposed to different interpretations of the members of a political community, especially when they are public-spirited.

The fact that public purposes are open to different interpretations implies that there is room for political leaders to “brand” the outcomes of their public decision as good by appealing to a particular line of interpretation on public purposes. This is not to say that in purpose meritocracy public decision-makers are disingenuous, manipulative, or self-serving. The point is that different interpretations of public purposes are inevitable in a pluralist society, not only among the people who hold different values, beliefs, and ideas, but also among political leaders/public officials, because their (strong) commitment to public purposes does not eradicate an essentially moral disagreement on how to interpret public purposes. In this case, it is ultimately up to the people—notwithstanding their internal diversity and disagreement on how to interpret public purposes and, by implication, how to assess the performance of the public decision-makers—whether or not to endorse the particular interpretation of public purposes offered by political leaders/public officials and thus to accept the outcomes of their public choices and actions as conducive to the common good.¹³

In purpose meritocracy, therefore, what makes political decision-makers really meritorious is not simply their ability to promote public purposes as such; rather, it is their capability to persuade the people with their vision of public purposes and justify their public choices and their outcomes in light of that vision.¹⁴ This is still a kind of causal responsibility, in the sense that public decision-makers are assessed based on what they have accomplished. Though, in purpose meritocracy, the questions of how public purposes should be interpreted when making law and public policy and what counts as

¹³ My account of purpose meritocracy is starkly opposed to what Adrian Vermeule calls “common good constitutionalism,” which posits the existence of the common good in terms of the moral ends that are objectively good and rationally identified by public authorities. See Vermeule (2022).

¹⁴ This is how “political peoplehood” is forged in a pluralist (democratic) society. See Smith (2015).

the common good in a specific decision-making situation continue to remain controversial even after the collective will-formation, giving rise to competing interpretations of public purposes (and the common good), political leaders/public officials are generally expected to make public decisions that are conducive to public purposes.¹⁵ They are found to be meritorious only if they have brought about good outcomes in light of public purposes, however contentious they may be. The crux of the merit of political leaders/public officials consists in how they keep public contestations over the interpretation of public purposes under a reasonable scope that the whole society can afford to sustain by means of their political ability of persuasion.¹⁶

III. When the Logic of Causality Does Not Hold

Here arises a question, however. If political meritocracy operates, in principle, on the principle of causal responsibility, and thus political leaders are supposed to be held accountable for the outcomes of their deliberate public choices, how does political meritocracy thus understood come to terms with a disaster that causes many injuries and casualties, but, by definition, occurs accidentally, and thus without involving high-level political agents' deliberate public choices and actions? Since (most) disasters are (believed to be) outside of human control, do they have nothing to do with the meritocratic dimension of government and the merit of political leaders/public officials? Then, how can we come to grips with instances, quite common after a disaster, where people find fault with political leaders/public officials who actively disown political responsibility by calling the disaster a mere accident or attributing it to the unpredictable force of nature?

In this regard, a recent public debate that took place in Korea, following “the Itaewon Disaster,” is worth special attention. The debate, which is still ongoing, revolved around the following questions:

¹⁵ Liberal societies are no exceptions. See Galston (1991).

¹⁶ The political ability of persuasion must include a willingness to make a compromise with one's political contenders guided by a different vision of public purposes. For an importance of compromise, see Gutmann and Thompson (2012).

whether public officials, including and especially the president, should bear responsibility for the mass casualty accident in which nearly one hundred sixty people, mostly young adults, were killed in a crowd crush during Halloween festivities in the Itaewon neighborhood of downtown Seoul, and if so, what sort of responsibility they should bear. This debate sheds new light on how we should understand the merit of public decision-makers and the moral nature of political meritocracy in general.

On the night of October 29, 2022, Koreans were shocked by the breaking news of more than a hundred of young adults dying after being compressed by a massive pile of people stuck in a small alley of Itaewon, a neighborhood best known for parties and festivities. While the death toll was still being counted days following the disaster, the Korean public went in a great uproar when none of the public officials concerned by virtue of their administrative (and political) duties—the President, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Administration and Safety, the Chief of Police, and the Mayor of the Yongsan-gu District, among others—appeared to take responsibility for the deadly disaster in the event, which had been taking place annually in the same neighborhood for years without much trouble. Though high-level public officials made ritualistic apologies both to the victim’s families and to the general Korean public, none of them explicitly acknowledged the failure of their administrative and political duties and called the disaster an “accident,” unavoidably caused by the gathering of a large crowd in a place too small.¹⁷ Most notably, the Minister of Administration and Safety strongly rejected any attribution of responsibility to him, and contended that the “accident” would still have happened, even if he had dispatched a good number of police officers and public servicemen to the venue (YTN News 2022).

While most public officials who many Koreans believed were responsible for the Itaewon Disaster were actively denying any legal and political liability, the South Korean President convened a special Cabinet meeting on November 7, more than a week after the incident, to reexamine the state-level safety system. However, in his lengthy

¹⁷ See, most notably, the Korean president’s public speech on October 30, 2022 (Yoon 2022).

opening monologue, the president mainly accused the police of having failed to conduct their duty properly (Kim 2022) and thus practically exonerated all other officials and the governmental bureaus from responsibility. All the more surprising, the president neither discharged the Chief of Police from his duty nor made him subject to public investigation, despite his poignant criticism of him. For oppositional parties as well as for many civic organizations, what the president did was anything but actively taking responsibility, which, in their view, should have been made public through his decision to remove all the high-level public officials concerned from the public posts and to order a thorough public investigation on the incident with full participation from the victims' bereft family members.¹⁸ Instead, the president raised a question about the long-held (and in his view "outdated") public practice that ascribes responsibility to political leaders and high-level public officials in the event of disasters without specifying one's personal liability.¹⁹

My concern here is not to fault the President of South Korea and the officials he appointed for their lack of a sense of responsibility. What is important in this context is how we can take a cue from the Korean president's (and other officials') reasoning and use it to formulate an alternative conception of political meritocracy—i.e., responsibility meritocracy. Let us start our philosophical inquiry with one guiding question: Can we call a government that actively avoids responsibility in cases like the Itaewon Disaster "meritocratic," even if, let us suppose, its economic performance is good enough and it has served public purposes reasonably well by promoting the core values of the political community? If our conventional conception of political meritocracy requires that political leaders and high-level public officials take

¹⁸ See, for instance, the public statement issued by the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (2022), one of the most influential civic groups in South Korea. The PSPD's public statement came after one hundred eighteen members of the Koran National Assembly, all from the oppositional parties, proposed an assembly probe into the governmental bureaus regarding the Itaewon incident on November 11, 2022.

¹⁹ Reportedly, the President made the following remark in the meeting held on November 7, 2022: "Strictly speaking, responsibility should be placed squarely on the person in charge. In the modern society, it is [unreasonable] to hold any random person responsible [for the incident like this]" (Kim 2022).

responsibility for disasters like the Itaewon Disaster in a way that is acceptable to the people's moral sensibility, how can we make sense of the reasoning behind this popular conception of responsibility? Does it have anything to do with an idea of political meritocracy? But, first, let us revisit the Korean president's (and his officials') reasoning behind his rejection of popular conception of political responsibility.

Apparently, what seems to have driven the president's moral reasoning is the logic of causal responsibility of the kind that is commonly employed in criminal jurisprudence. The president, a former attorney general, seems to hold that just as one should be found legally liable for the crimes that he deliberately committed through his action or its omission, so political leaders/public officials should be held responsible, beyond a ritualistic apology, only for the bad state of affairs that was directly caused by their failure to carry out public duties or by any critical negligence in undertaking them. In his view, the popular conception of responsibility is not only confusing from a rational standpoint, but it also falls far short of addressing the problem at hand effectively because it does not help us to clearly identify the liable parties. Since one cannot be held responsible for the state of affairs that was not caused by his actions (or negligent omission), it would only undermine the effective operation of the government if the people were to demand that political leaders/public officials take responsibility for the state of affairs caused by a disaster by, for example, resigning from their positions and subjecting themselves to public scrutiny. Such a demand may help express the public's moral frustration, but it has little legal and political substance, because there is no rational way to hold public officials responsible for problems that happened without their clear visible involvement as public decision-makers.

Thus understood, it is hardly surprising that the president's rationalist reasoning convinced him to find fault with the Chief of Police alone who, in his judgment, had done a poor job during the crowd crush by not dispatching an adequate number of police officers to Itaewon and thus failed to conduct proper crowd control. Still, for the president, the nature of the fault committed by the Chief of Police was nothing more than negligence in fulfilling an assigned administrative

duty, and it was not of the kind requiring moral and political responsibility from him as well as from one who had appointed him, the president himself. As the president saw the situation as well as the task of the government, what was needed was to cope effectively with the aftermath of the “accident” and to find a way to prevent the same disaster from happening again. In his understanding, a government must be forward-looking, and not be held back by an unfortunate event that happened anyhow. What makes a government meritocratic is its ability to move forward by handling the tragic situation well (whatever that means) and guiding the society to quickly return to normality.

IV. Responsibility Meritocracy

Is the Korean people’s conventional understanding of political responsibility indeed archaic, having no bearing in contemporary Korea as a moral standard for the merit of political leaders and public officials, especially in a tragic situation like the Itaewon Disaster? Since this popular conception of political responsibility normatively demands that political leaders and public officials be held responsible for the state of affairs that was not directly caused by them, thereby violating the principle of causality, on which both performance meritocracy and purpose meritocracy rest, does this imply that it has no bearing on the normative theory of political meritocracy and its political practicality? I argue that political responsibility must be understood as one of the central components of merit, based on which political leaders and public officials have the authority to run the government.²⁰ Following Mencius, I understand the gist of political responsibility as consisting in the public decision-maker’s moral determination to proactively take responsibility for the well-being of the people, even when it was critically damaged by forces beyond human control such as natural disaster or structural injustices, in the creation of which they may have not been involved.

²⁰ The locus classicus of this argument in Western political theory is found in Weber (2004).

In his famous conversation with King Hui of Liang, Mencius criticizes the king when he ascribed the destitution of his people to a bad harvest caused by a natural disaster. In Mencius's view, the king's avoidance of responsibility is not qualitatively different from what a murderer does by claiming it was not him but the weapon that killed the victim. Of course, Mencius's seemingly harsh criticism of King Hui can be made fully intelligible against the backdrop of the king's critical misrule, which Mencius portrays as follows: "[T]he king's dogs and pigs eat food intended for human beings and [yet] he does not know enough to prohibit this. On the roads there are people dying of starvation, and he does not know enough to distribute food" (*Mencius* 1A.3). Nevertheless, it is quite likely that King Hui was displeased by Mencius's chastisement and the reasoning behind it, which dismisses the principle of causality. He would have found Mencius's reasoning not only non-rational but also unfair, because Mencius held him solely and entirely responsible for the bad state of affairs that was caused mainly by a natural disaster and further criticized his rulership and government based on a non-causal conception of responsibility.²¹

Though there is a notable difference between King Hui and the current Korean president in terms of the modes of governance, they seem to be unified in believing that political responsibility is premised on the principle of causality and that political leaders should be free from taking responsibility for bad conditions generated by social and/or natural disasters. King Hui's government, which is inspired by the way of the ancient hegemons (*ba* 霸),²² aspires to become a performance meritocracy understood as a political system that aims to enhance the material well-being of the people by making the state strong and wealthy.²³ According to Xunzi, the hegemonic government does not rest on amoral rulership; rather, it stresses the critical importance of the ruler's moral ability to be trustworthy (*xin* 信) as the single greatest moral qualification to cause good political outcomes

²¹ For a detailed analysis on Mencius's non-causal conception of political responsibility, see Kim (2018).

²² On King Hu's interest in the way of the ancient hegemons, see *Mencius* (1A.5).

²³ Xunzi understands the hegemonic government as a mode of political meritocracy. See *Xunzi* (11.1c).

to happen (See Kim 2020, ch. 5). Yet, premised on the assumption of the causal connection between the merits of political leaders and good consequences, performance meritocracy is inherently limited in recognizing, let alone upholding, the non-causal conception of political responsibility and making it the key moral qualification of political leaders and high-level public officials under the circumstances of disaster. Performance meritocracy has nearly nothing to say about the circumstances of disaster.

Given the democratic pedigree of President Yoon Suk Yeol's government, its meritocratic dimension may be better captured in reference to purpose meritocracy, inasmuch as the current Korean government makes law and public policy within the normative boundary of the Korean Constitution, the crystallization of the public purposes of the Korean people. However, as noted earlier, purpose meritocracy, too, has little to say about the non-causal conception of political responsibility as the moral qualification of political leaders and public officials, especially under the circumstances of disaster, because it, too, is undergirded by the principle of causality. In a sense, albeit arguably, it is precisely because of the Korean president's and his cabinet members' strong subscription to the basic assumptions of purpose (and performance) meritocracy that they found it difficult to embrace the non-causal conception of political responsibility held by the Korean public.²⁴ It is also because of the forward-looking character of the version of political responsibility that is currently guiding Korean political leaders and public officials that the non-causal conception of political responsibility, focused on the remedy of the bad situation caused by social and natural disasters, does not seem to resonate strongly with Korea's high-level public officials including the president.

Responsibility meritocracy is distinguished from the two existing accounts of political meritocracy for the following three reasons. First, it takes the perspective of the ordinary people seriously, who are subject to the law and the public policy made by the political elites.

²⁴ Of course, it is another story to call President Yoon's government purpose-meritocratic, meeting the core conditions of purpose meritocracy. It is a question that requires a critical revisit by the time President Yoon's tenure is over.

While both performance meritocracy and purpose meritocracy are centrally concerned with selecting political leaders and the specific criteria of the merits that authorize their right to rule, responsibility meritocracy concentrates on the public decision-makers' moral and political commitment to the protection of the well-being of the people, including and especially the worst-off of the political community, under the circumstances of disaster, on top of their other moral qualifications to rule. Though it does not downplay the foundational importance of the political leaders'/public officials' ability to bring about good outcomes as conceived in light of public purposes, responsibility meritocracy pays extra attention to how to remedy a tragic situation created by social and political disasters in a way that can best protect and promote the well-being of the people most severely affected by them. Accordingly, responsibility meritocracy requires that political leaders and public officials pay heed to the voices of the people (the victims and their families as well as the general public), involve the victims and their legal and social agents in the remedial process, and hold responsible the public officials concerned by having them go through a rigorous public investigation, which must involve the victims or their agents.

Second, responsibility meritocracy actively contests the line between misfortune and injustice. When a disastrous event is called an accident (literally, an event that happened accidentally), it is often presupposed that there was little room for human agency, which could have prevented it from happening or alleviated its magnitude. One may say that the victims were simply unfortunate, because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and all the political leaders and public officials can do is to make a ritualistic apology for failing to prevent the accident (because they had little to do with the accident itself), and to promise to do their best to make sure that the same problem will not happen again in the future. Inspired by Mencius, however, responsibility meritocracy urges political leaders and high-level public officials to proactively find room for their political agency not only under normal circumstances where the general causal connection between political agency and good public outcomes is reasonably expected, but even in situations that appear to have been

generated by forces beyond human control. Rather than regarding the victims as merely unfortunate, responsibility meritocracy holds that public officials (elected or appointed) ought to see them as the victims of injustice perpetrated by their policy failures. Here I see remarkable resonance between Mencius and Judith Shklar, who says that “we must recognize that the line of separation between injustice and misfortune is a political choice, not a simple rule that can be taken as a given” (Shklar 1990, 5).

Let us return to the Itaewon Disaster. Where political leaders and public officials are reluctant to see their responsibility by appealing to a purely causal conception of political responsibility, responsibility meritocracy would require them to turn the logic of causality upside down. That is, even if they did not directly and deliberately cause the disastrous situation in question, they should not understand their political responsibility in a manner in which judges adjudicate criminal cases in which the principle of causality is the key. Instead, they should regard the casualties and injuries of (mostly) young Korean adults as resulting from, in significant part, the failure of their governance, and this active ownership of responsibility should further lead them to turn to compensatory justice. By turning what could have been deemed as a mere accident or a disaster into a problem of justice, responsible meritocracy renders the surviving victims and the family members of those who have perished the rightful claimants of justice, rather than helpless beneficiaries seeking the state’s paternalist support, that is, as rights-bearing individuals who can call upon the state not only to compensate for their losses and injuries, but also to call for a public investigation of the case at hand, and if any public officials are found liable, demand their legal punishment. Irrespective of the legal liability of public officials, responsible meritocracy enables the victims and their families to require a reshuffling of the cabinet, especially the ministers and other high-level public officials, whose tasks are directly concerned with the protection of the people’s constitutional right to life.

One may still find responsibility meritocracy’s normative demands unreasonably high. Is it really fair to turn matters of misfortune into a question of justice and hold political leaders/public officials respon-

sible? Should this be how we evaluate the merit of high-level public decision-makers and understand the meritocratic nature of the government? Here it is worth drawing attention to how traditional Confucian societies in China and especially in Korea (during the Joseon dynasty [1392–1910]) responded to natural disasters.

There is no denying that natural disasters are forces beyond human control, and, technically speaking, it is unreasonable and un-scientific to hold the ruler (and his officials) responsible for the suffering of the people caused by natural disasters. Interestingly, however, virtually all Confucian monarchs of Joseon took responsibility for the suffering of the people whenever their well-being was critically hampered by natural disasters, long and severe droughts during farming seasons in particular. Specifically, Confucian monarchs faulted the so-called inhumane government that they had conducted (by simply taking for granted that it had been inhumane), examined whether their decisions had been in accordance with the principles of benevolence and righteousness in handling criminal cases, among other things, and, more fundamentally, repented their violations of the Mandate of Heaven, the moral foundation for their ruling legitimacy, as now evidenced by the disaster from which the people, for the protection of whose well-being he received the right to rule, are suffering (See Yi 1996 and Kim 2024).

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to thoroughly investigate the philosophical underpinning of the Joseon Confucian monarchs' seemingly illogical behaviors in the face of the people's suffering caused by the forces beyond their political control. What is important in the present context is to note that Korea's traditional Confucian culture was such that the ruler's rational appeal to the principle of causality was out of the question and it did not resonate with the people's moral sensibilities. One may find traditional Confucian political culture to be outdated, and hence irrelevant to contemporary Korean society (and other East Asian societies of the Confucian heritage more generally), but it should not be forgotten that it is not because the people of Joseon, including the monarchs, were enchanted blindly by a God-like Heaven that creates disasters to punish evil rulers that they upheld to the non-causal conception of political responsibility. It is precisely

because of their moral determination, inspired by ancient Confucian masters like Mencius, to reformulate what would otherwise be called “natural” disasters in terms of a matter of injustice, which requires an active moral and political rectification of the problems that have been standing in the way of making the society just and benevolent. Admittedly, many disasters, the improper responses to which by the ruling elites often give rise to moral outrage and resentment among the people, are far less natural than droughts and floods, and they are often in part human disasters, in that their deadly influences on the people tend to be exacerbated by many factors involving human agency, especially under the modern administrative state characterized by complex overlapping jurisdictions across governmental bureaus and institutions. What is central to responsibility meritocracy is the ruling elites’ moral determination to expand the scope of their political responsibility, and it is this sort of responsibility that provides the people with one of the key normative standards by which to assess the merits of political leaders and public officials.

The third and final reason that responsibility meritocracy is distinguished from other forms of political meritocracy is closely related to the second reason just discussed. While both performance and purpose meritocracies have little motivation to reject the stark separation between misfortune and injustice and expand the scope of political responsibility, responsibility meritocracy aims to investigate whether what appears to be natural disasters or mere accidents could in fact be the symptoms of structural injustice deeply embedded in our society. Iris Young strongly urges us “to ask about the responsibility that persons bear not only for the consequences of their actions on their own circumstances, but on the circumstances of those unjustly disadvantaged by social structures” (Young 2011, 28). According to Young, structural injustice exists “when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them” (52).

What distinguishes structural injustice from non-structural forms of injustice is the difficulty in clearly pinpointing its perpetrators. Unlike various forms of injustice committed by the state or the ruling elites against specific individuals and minorities, structural injustice creates its victims while making its agents invisible or widely dispersed. In drawing our attention to structural injustice and an alternative account of responsibility, which is forward-looking in the sense of encouraging all members of a political community to collectively find a way to address it, however, Young pays little attention to political responsibility specific to public decision-makers. Even if I agree that the best way to rectify structural injustices is by exercising a common citizenship, I find Young's lack of attention to the political responsibility of those who hold high public positions with special authorities and articulated duties rather surprising.

In taking high government posts that are accompanied by an enormous decision-making power, public officials are by no means ordinary citizens, who ought to shoulder political responsibility for social injustices as a member of the political community, and hence not in the sense that they enjoy privileges and special rights. Their decision-making authority is naturally followed by a public demand for a higher sense of responsibility for the well-being of the people, the basic interests of the worst-off in particular. Therefore, while it is certainly right for Young to say that it is everyone's responsibility to try to address structural injustices, it does not entail the requirement that an individual citizen be held liable, legally and politically, when he or she has failed to actively participate in the collective rectification of structural injustices. In contrast, the collective project of rectifying structural injustice calls on high-level public officials to discharge a leadership, with all institutional means and legal measures, and failing that, they ought to be held liable for their inaction or inadequate actions, again legally and politically. I strongly agree with Dennis Thompson, when he submits that "[w]e normally distinguish degrees of responsibility that citizens and officials bear for policies of the government or the groups with which they are associated" (Thompson 1980, 907). Public officials are more responsible than ordinary citizens not only for policies of the government, as purpose meritocracy holds,

but also for the failure to address the society's structural injustices.

Moreover, it should be reminded that structural injustice works in significant part through the structural faults of the bureaucratic system that "block the efforts of all but the heroic bureaucrat or politician to accomplish morally respectable ends" (908), the most important of which is the rectification of the society-wide structure injustice. As Thompson rightly claims, however, the structural faults of the political system cannot be used as an excuse to shield public officials from political responsibility, even if they did not directly or actively contribute to creating such faults. It is because even if the official did the best job possible in the face of the constraints imposed by the defective structure that is not of his or her own creation, it can be reasonably expected that he or she could have criticized, and furthermore changed, structural defects (915). People can assess a public official's responsibility in light of the effort he or she made to criticize and change the structural defects of the political system, which often corroborate with and exacerbate the society-wide structural injustice.

Responsibility meritocracy pays close attention to a high-level public official's effort to redress structural injustice, and it is precisely the lack of this attention that does not figure prominently as a problem both in performance meritocracy, chiefly focused on the government's economic performance, and, albeit arguably, in purpose meritocracy, which highlights the public officials' capability to achieve social, political, and economic outcomes stipulated by public purposes. All in all, responsibility meritocracy refuses to relegate injustice to misfortune while actively expanding the scope of political agency, and, accordingly, political responsibility. It is not hard to understand why politicians and public officials are reluctant to embrace responsibility meritocracy as a normative model for political meritocracy. But there would be little controversy that this is a form of political meritocracy that can best protect and promote the well-being of the people. Certainly, responsibility meritocracy approaches political meritocracy from the perspective of ordinary men and women who are not just subject to laws and public policies made by the political elites. More importantly, it takes seriously the perspectives of the individuals and

groups who are far more vulnerable to structural injustice and various sorts of disasters, natural or man-made, than others in the society.²⁵

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have challenged the most dominant understanding of political meritocracy in the contemporary political discourse (i.e., performance meritocracy), which is singularly focused on nonelected high-level public officials' moral and epistemic ability to make decisions that can be conducive to long-term public interests, and presented purpose meritocracy and responsibility as two alternative accounts.

Unlike performance meritocracy, in which the merits of the public officials are understood as a power to causally bring about good outcomes that are objectively good, independent of the public purposes that bind all members of a political community, purpose meritocracy approaches the standards of merit as dependent on such purposes formed through the political process in which all participated or have the right to participate. Strictly speaking, responsibility meritocracy is not categorically distinguished from purpose meritocracy, and rather, it can be understood as a special form of purpose meritocracy, which pays extra attention to the non-causal conception of responsibility under the circumstances of disaster and structural injustice. Unlike purpose meritocracy, which is predicated on the endogenous relationship

²⁵ In this regard, I fully agree with an anonymous reviewer who suggested that a non-causal conception of responsibility could both criticize Confucian meritocracy theories and justify a non-meritocratic alternative to them, which, for instance, pays close attention to a strong civil society. In fact, I explored a political meritocracy that is fully compatible with a strong and pluralist civil society in my earlier work. See Kim (2014). That being said, the primary aim of the present study is to explore an alternative conception of political meritocracy and the (ex post) criteria of merits. Though I think responsibility meritocracy is not only compatible with but also can be housed within constitutional democracy, of which a strong civil society is an indispensable part, this constitutes an independent research question. But see Kim (2023), in which I present Confucian constitutional democracy, predicated on a viable civil society, as the most plausible mode of political arrangement in East Asian societies of the Confucian heritage. My idea of responsibility meritocracy is highly compatible with Confucian constitutional democracy.

between the merits of public officials and the good outcomes stipulated by public purposes, responsibility meritocracy goes beyond the causal conception of political responsibility, however important it is in holding political leaders and public officials accountable to the people, by calling on them to expand the scope of responsibility to such an extent that defies a stark separation between misfortune and injustice, which is often exploited by public officials in their attempt to insulate themselves from responsibility.

It is commonly believed, especially among some of Confucian political philosophers, that political meritocracy is an alternative to representative democracy. This paper has shown that such a dichotomous understanding of political meritocracy and representative democracy is mistaken. To be sure, a simple causal account of performance meritocracy may be regarded as at odds with an account of representative democracy that accentuates the critical normative value of procedural legitimacy. However, there is no reason to regard purpose meritocracy and responsibility meritocracy as incompatible with representative democracy. In fact, and as noted, the key underlying assumptions of purpose meritocracy make it more suitable within the political system of democratic representation. Inasmuch as responsibility meritocracy is a special, and more morally demanding, version of purpose meritocracy, there seems to be no inherent obstacle for it to take a specific political form within the structure of representative democracy. The point is that political meritocracy, with its varying forms, should be understood as the character of a particular—democratic or nondemocratic—political system rather than as a political system as such that is distinguished, both conceptually and politically, from representative democracy.

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