

Footnote: Earning One's Living

Most think their hard work earns them their living. But human effort cannot produce the needs of life. All we can usefully do is protect, gather, form and distribute what Nature provides. Inexcusably, most human effort is uselessly dissipated in a competition to determine who shall have how much of what. [PDF]

Definition

The proper meaning of the word **earn** is widely misunderstood. It simply means:

- "to obtain money in return for labour or services"
- "to gain interest or profit on capital"
- "to do something which causes you to obtain money" (eg betting or gambling)

These definitions attribute no moral virtue to the earner as a result of his act of earning. They are not acts deserving of commendation. They are mechanistic acts of exchange. They have no moral significance. However, when a rich person says to a poor person "I can afford my foreign holiday because I have earned it." he is using the word **earn** in the sense of, "to gain deservedly". He is saying that he *deserves* his holiday because of his virtuous effort, while the poor person does not, because he has not made the effort. The rich person is implying by default that the poor person deserves to be poor.

The meaning most attach to the word **earn** is therefore "deserved reward for virtuous effort". It asserts that if one is prepared to exert the virtuous effort then one will find oneself in receipt of the deserved reward. Virtuous effort is the cause: the deserved reward is the automatic effect. As a result, most people think that being unemployed is largely one's own fault. They assert that if one wishes to earn (more) money, then all one has to do is work (harder). The levels of State [welfare](#) now provided reflect this contempt which society in general currently has for the low-paid and unemployed.

In other words, the general belief is that the socio-economic system under which we live is a meritocracy. It bestows upon each of us our reward of wealth and power in proportion to our individual merit.

Obsession with Merit

Merit is defined as the quality of being particularly good or worthy, especially so as to deserve praise or reward. A meritocracy is a society governed by a group of people who are selected to hold power on the basis of their individual merit. These people are invariably drawn from a restricted subset of the society comprising members of a ruling or influential class of educated or skilled people. The pertinent questions are:

- By whom are those who govern selected?
- And how do they assess a selectee's merit?

The society under which I live prides itself as having, in the closing decades of the 20th Century, transformed itself into a meritocracy. The reason for its pride is that it thinks meritocracy to be the ultimate form of society as regards *fairness* to the individual. Its government is democratically elected. Every voter has his say in selecting his political representative according to his view of that representative's merit.

But the voter's thoughts are not his own. They are formed and shaped by a powerful [spin machine](#) built and operated by a rich self-seeking elite. Voters vote not as they reason but as they are persuaded. The electorate is a [quantum fluid](#) of political sheep. They vote according to the will of the influential elite. Thus it is this [elite minority](#) by whom [those who govern](#) are selected and put into power.

How do they assess a selectee's merit? On his ability to sell their ideology. On his charisma to carry the public mind at election hustings and through TV sound bites. On his sympathy for their personal and corporate interests. On his ability to preach reform and revolution while irrepressibly maintaining their *status quo*. On his trustworthiness to create and maintain a national government in their corporate image. Only such will they sponsor with the resources necessary to rise for election. His knowledge and ability to govern with equity the complex dynamical system we call society is hardly an issue.

The pool from which those with the kind of merit necessary for selection thus becomes a self-perpetuating clique which cannot be broken. Its meritocratic ethos filters down to permeate every corner of business and society. Hence the unassailable position of merit as a fundamental value in public opinion.

Philosophical Challenge

Most people I meet hold merit to be a moral value. If one works hard and does one's best then one should be rewarded in corresponding proportion with the necessities and luxuries of life. But for society to be able to reward a meritorious person, in right measure, society must first measure his merit. Consequently, society quantifies the merit of those who govern it, politically and economically, at every level of command from office supervisor to prime minister. Notwithstanding, this is a purely subjective quantification. One's measured degree of merit, therefore, is not the effort and virtue one *actually* puts into one's work. It is instead the degree of effort and virtue which society - as represented by one's superiors - *perceives* one to put into one's work. And it is this which determines the measure of the reward one will actually receive.

What a meritocratic society perceives is what its ruling or influential class of educated or skilled people perceive. But nobody can see anything other than from the [point of view](#) of his own unique position within the social order. He perceives everything in terms of a frame of reference constructed by his own circumstances. He has a cloistered view which cannot possibly embrace the full spectrum of circumstances within which the rest of society lives and works. Nobody can therefore make a valid assessment of individual merit for anybody outside his immediate peer group. Even within his own peer group he cannot know the inward trials and tribulations of his fellows.

The only basis upon which the merit of one person can be judged by another is the resulting *visible* benefit that person's effort provides for others. They must be judged by results. Resulting benefit is the only tangible measure. But this is not a valid measure of merit. It takes no account of the abilities of the person doing the work, the handicap under which he was working, or where he started from to reach his visible level of achievement.

This declares a handicapped person less deserving than an able bodied one, for no better reason than that the handicapped person cannot achieve as much in terms of visible results. Of course society makes allowance and compensates for disabilities which are blindingly obvious. A person with no legs would not be considered less meritorious for not finishing a city marathon at the same time as an able bodied athlete. However, this is not because his handicap exists, but because it is obvious.

This fact is devastatingly evinced by the prevailing public attitude to one who has a mental illness instead of a physical illness. People pass instant judgement on what they immediately see. "I can't see

why he can't work. He looks perfectly all right to me!" How often have I heard this from shallow people who do not have the slightest clue about the inward difficulties against which the subject of their criticism is battling. Hurtful retorts from a shallow minded public can be tolerated. They simply reflect the poor spiritual state of society.

What is wholly and ultimately inexcusable is the difference in *official* attitude to one who has a [mental illness](#) instead of a physical illness. This is evinced by the nigh impossibility for a person with a mental illness to obtain a welfare benefit called Disability Living Allowance because of the complete inappropriateness and irrelevance to mental illness of the questions on the benefit [application form](#). Society will only allow for disability when judging your merit if your disability is physical and immediately and undeniably obvious.

Notwithstanding, hidden and non-obvious disabilities can be just as severe - and often more so - than physical ones. I once knew a top systems analyst who worked for a large multinational. She was crippled by polio as a child. She was confined to a wheel chair. Nevertheless, although it was no doubt trying at times, she travelled the world attending high level meetings. People would fall over themselves at airports and company buildings to assist her in every way. Her disability was simple and obvious. She was regarded as extremely meritorious.

However, things are not the same for people with mental disabilities - especially when their disabilities render them unable to hold down a job or manage a home. Even more so when they appear physically whole and fit. They cannot venture on air trips. They would become confused about where they were going or paranoid about the intentions of those around them. But society attributes neither them, nor those who must care for them, with excuse. Both are malingerers - unworthy burdens on society who *deserve* nothing, but who are afforded a reluctant pittance to avert the national embarrassment of foreign tourists seeing them littering the streets.

From the pinnacle of human ability to the depth of human disability, is a vast continuum of aptitude. Many say that this spectrum of ability is an illusion, being no more than an artificial measure of the *relative* value the prevailing society of the time places on what are individual aptitude profiles of equal *absolute* value. Whatever the case, only the individual knows his abilities and the degree of determination with which he applies them. No outsider is capable of judging his inner intentions. Only the arrogant would presume to judge the merit of others.

If one be born *less able* than another, is he thereby *less deserving*? Does this give society the right to deny him full measure of the necessities and luxuries of life? I do not see why. Both the fit and the halt have the same bodily and intellectual needs. I see no reason why both cannot equally enjoy the same luxuries. How much an individual can produce, depends far more on things other than his ability and determination. Merit cannot be a valid basis for reward. A meritocracy is not a fair and equitable society.

Personal Observation

Nevertheless, the belief of most is that one's reward is automatically some positive function of the amount of effort one puts in to one's job. In other words, you are rewarded according to your works. My experience, however, strongly, and indeed painfully, indicates that this is a classical fallacy. It is simply not what happens in a capitalist free-market economy. The reward one receives for one's labour is determined solely by the forces of supply and demand - warped by fad, fashion and other vagaries of human irrationality. In reality there is little if any correlation between the quality, quantity and complexity of one's labour and the amount of money one receives for it.

During the 15 years from 1975 to 1991, my business gave me a [reasonable income](#). My work took me often to Belgium and Germany, once to France and once to New England. I couldn't help but notice that my colleagues in these other countries enjoyed much higher living standards than I did.

A Belgian engineer I knew bought a new mid range Mercedes every two years and lived in what to me was a luxury home in the Antwerp suburbs. But more than this, he and his family could go out for meals, have expensive hobbies, recreational activities and holidays in far-off parts of the world. He was not unusual. The life-styles of the Americans were beyond the bounds of reality.

I thought I worked hard. But did these foreign counterparts enjoy so much greater reward for their work because they worked harder? Or were there other reasons for their superior wealth? By taking thought, I found three reasons which were wholly unrelated to human effort.

1) Environment

It is observed that different places do not have the same abundance of the resources necessary to produce the needs of life.

It is harder to produce food and clothing in a barren desert than in a fertile land. It is harder to build a house on a plain than in a forest. It is harder to stay warm in the grip of a northern winter than in the cool of a tropical rain.

It is easier to learn of nature's wonders under an open sky than in a city ghetto. It is more satisfying to work in one's own field than in another's factory. Human fellowship is more forthcoming in the bustle of a tribal village than in the cold bland impersonality of a suburban housing estate.

2) Technology

Natural resources are the only means through which human work can be converted into human needs. However, by concentrating human skills through specialisation and amplifying their effect through technology, a modern economy enables the individual to obtain his needs in return for far less effort. A British factory worker gets a far greater reward for his effort than does a tribal farmer hoeing his shrivelled crop in a war-torn African outland.

This disparity in the amount of effort required to gain one's basic needs is also present within a single national economy. In my prosperous past, the efforts I put in to writing computer software gained far more for me than the longer and more boring hours put in by a lathe operator gained for him. Nevertheless, we were both able to acquire our families' needs. The difference was simply a matter of market supply and demand, and the difference in the perceived value of the kinds of work we each did.

3) The Market

I live in a country in which resources are reasonably abundant. Its technology greatly amplifies the effect of human effort. But that technology has caused me to specialise. I may get a high reward for my efforts while there is a demand for my specialist skill. But as soon as there is not, I get no reward at all.

In pure resource terms, it costs more to produce food in a barren land than in a fertile land. And it costs more to provide adequate clothing and shelter in a cold climate than in a warm climate. However, in a global free-market economy, this is not true of its *price*. The price of the biological fuel required to provide my 8,640,000 joules per day is far higher in Sainsbury's than it is in a Bangladeshi street market or a State food store of the former Soviet Union. This means that a person

with equivalent skills in one of these other countries can make his skills available to the global market at a much lower price than I can make mine available. And the Internet can deliver his skills to any point of demand just as easily as it can deliver mine. The market will therefore buy his and not mine.

The abundance of terrestrial resources plus the amplification of technology at first gives me (an inhabitant of the First World) the advantage. But the global free market then shorts out that advantage and leaves me unemployed. In this circumstance, no amount of effort on my part will result in any economic return. I have to be sustained from then on by State welfare.

Market Perception

There is the further complication of market perception. Demand is driven by people who do not have direct expertise in what they are buying. The frame of reference they use to assess what they are buying is therefore seriously over simplistic and hence fallacious. Their judgement is also heavily influenced by fashion and hearsay.

The result is that they are unable to see wood for trees. They bleat pitifully that they simply cannot find the right skills when people fully equipped with the very skills they need are dumped into permanent unemployment.

In 1989 I obtained a copy of the IMS Report on IT Skills. My skills profile is exactly that of the kind of person the report said was in greatest demand and for which there would be greatest projected [shortage](#). History has confirmed that its predictions were correct. Yet I have now (2001) been unemployed for 10 years!

Conclusion

The 7 basic [human needs](#) are universal in type, quantity and quality. However, the means of providing them are not. For reasons outside the control of the individual, it is far easier for some to acquire them than it is for others.

The amount of effort one puts into one's work may, in some cases and in some small way, affect the size and quality of one's reward. But generally, wealth is not a matter of how hard you work or even what you work at. It is mainly a matter of:

- how the society within which you live values the type of work you do, and on
- how much the economy within which you work yields in return for your efforts

Work is necessary to acquiring your needs. But work alone is not sufficient. One can never *earn* one's living by virtuous effort, but most must work in order to get it. How much they get is essentially unrelated to the effort they put in.

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