

ESSAY XXVII

Hierarchy, Status, and the Claims of Merit

Competence, Contribution, and the Justification of Rank

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ABSTRACT

Appeals to merit often combine judgments that should remain separate: who is competent, who contributed, who should decide, who should receive a reward, and whose interests count. This essay examines the transitions among these judgments rather than treating hierarchy as either self-justifying or uniformly objectionable. It argues that merit claims are incomplete until they identify a recipient, an allocation, a relevant basis, and a context of assessment. Competence can support task-specific authority without establishing a comprehensive ranking of persons; contribution can support claims to recognition without independently determining a complete distributive scheme. Engaging Aristotle's account of proportional justice, Rawls's distinction between legitimate expectations and moral desert, and Anderson's relational approach to equality, the essay develops a non-conversion argument: a reason that justifies one inequality does not automatically justify associated inequalities in reward, voice, or standing. Hypothetical cases of unequal preparation and joint production test the account. Objections concerning incentives, excellence, inherited advantage, and administrative feasibility show both the importance and the limits of merit in a defensible architecture of human order.

Keywords: merit; hierarchy; desert; competence; contribution; status; equality; authority

Conceptual analysis and critical reconstruction. Cases introduced as illustrations are hypothetical, not empirical findings.

1. What exactly has been earned?

A workshop must appoint someone to coordinate a technically demanding project. One candidate has the most relevant experience; another has contributed more unpaid work to maintaining the workshop; a third has borne the greatest hardship in acquiring the necessary skills. The candidates present three different claims under the same word: merit. Experience concerns likely performance, contribution concerns a relationship to a shared achievement, and hardship concerns effort or sacrifice. None can be assessed until the group states what the appointment is intended to do.

Selecting the experienced candidate may be justified by the work's technical requirements. That selection would not establish that the other candidates deserve less recognition, that their needs matter less, or that the selected person should control every subsequent institutional decision. The case illustrates a recurrent transition. A limited judgment about suitability becomes a general claim about rank, and rank is then used to justify advantages whose relation to the original reason has not been examined.

Merit claims therefore require an object. To say that someone deserves something is more informative than saying merely that they are deserving. A prize, a task, a payment, a hearing, and protection from injury are different allocations. The basis relevant to one may be irrelevant to another. Even where several allocations can be justified by the same achievement, the connection must be argued rather than carried by the prestige of the word merit.

This essay develops a non-conversion argument. Establishing a defensible distinction in one domain does not establish every inequality associated with it. The argument neither assumes that all hierarchies are unjust nor supplies an overall ranking of political or economic arrangements. Its purpose is to separate the reasons offered for rank so that their implications and limitations can be examined. It extends the collection's account of earned jurisdiction from rational claims to the distribution of social positions (Silentii 2026a, Essay II).

2. Hierarchy is not a single relation

An organizational hierarchy distributes decision-making roles. A hierarchy of expertise distinguishes levels of relevant knowledge or skill. A hierarchy of esteem reflects differential admiration. An economic hierarchy concerns resources or rewards. A status hierarchy concerns the standing through which persons are received, heard, and treated. These structures can reinforce one another, but their connection is not conceptually necessary. A technically knowledgeable person need not be the owner, and an owner need not be the most knowledgeable participant.

The distinction also reveals different questions of justification. Expertise is assessed partly through performance and reliable knowledge. An office requires an account of authorization and competence. Rewards may be defended through contribution, promise, incentive, need, or some combination. Esteem concerns the significance attributed to conduct or achievement. Standing concerns whether a person's claims enter the relationship as claims that must be considered. A single measure cannot settle all five questions without first defending the reductions involved.

Aristotle's discussion of distributive justice connects proportional allocation to a relevant basis of worth while recognizing disagreement over what that basis is (Aristotle n.d., *Nicomachean Ethics* V.3). Its relevance here is structural. Proportionality cannot operate until the dimension of proportion has been specified. Equal amounts to unequal contributors, or unequal amounts to equal contributors, are not assessable in the abstract when the object and rationale of distribution remain unknown.

A merit claim can consequently be expressed as a relation among four elements: this person should receive this allocation, in virtue of this basis, within this practice. The schema does not establish that the claim is true. It makes the claim sufficiently determinate to dispute. Someone may challenge whether the person possesses the relevant qualification, whether the qualification is relevant to the allocation, whether the practice's purpose is justified, or whether competing claims outweigh it. Each objection addresses a different part of the argument.

3. Competence and the limits of task authority

Competence supplies a strong reason for assigning some decisions. Where successful coordination requires knowledge and judgment, refusing all distinctions of competence can expose participants to avoidable failure. An account of equal standing need not require that every person have the same role, perform the same task, or possess an interchangeable opinion about technical questions. Denying relevant differences would not respect agency; it would conceal the conditions under which the common activity occurs.

Nevertheless, competence does not determine its own jurisdiction. An excellent designer can advise on a design without thereby acquiring the authority to decide which costs others must bear. A coordinator can issue relevant instructions without possessing a general claim to deference outside the project. The additional power must be connected to the activity's requirements and the arrangement through which participants cooperate. Otherwise competence becomes a transferable credential for governing matters it does not establish.

A useful test is counterfactual. Would the same power be assigned to any suitably qualified person in that role, or is it being claimed as an unlimited personal distinction? Does the authority end when the task or relevant competence ends? Can another participant challenge a decision on grounds that fall outside the expert's special knowledge? These questions do not produce an automatic verdict. They reveal whether the hierarchy is organized around a function or whether the function has become a rationale for permanent status.

The distinction also constrains criticism. A subordinate's right to be heard does not make every technical objection correct. A specialist's responsibility to explain does not require that all knowledge be reducible to what a novice can immediately verify. The appropriate response may involve another qualified assessment rather than a vote on the truth of the claim. Equal standing and unequal knowledge can coexist if the institution identifies which kind of authority is being exercised and how its limits are maintained.

4. Contribution and the problem of a shared product

Contribution appears to provide a straightforward basis for reward: give people what they produced. The difficulty is that production can depend on several jointly necessary activities. In a hypothetical four-person workshop, design, fabrication, coordination, and maintenance are all required for a completed object. Remove any one activity and the object is not delivered. Each participant could then claim that without their work the entire product would be absent. That counterfactual does not establish that each should receive the whole return.

The problem is not that contributions are unreal. It is that necessity does not uniquely determine shares. Different counterfactual baselines produce different attributions. One can ask what would happen without a role, without this particular person, with an available substitute, or with a different organization of the work. These are not the same comparison. A defensible allocation must explain why one baseline should govern rather than presenting the result as a quantity discovered independently of institutional choices.

Market compensation, negotiated payment, and moral desert must likewise remain distinct. A price can reflect scarcity, bargaining conditions, legal arrangements, and demand without being a complete measurement of moral worth. This observation does not show that the transaction is unjust. It shows that the justification of the payment cannot be inferred from its existence alone. Conversely, an agreed payment can generate a claim even where the recipient's effort was modest, because promises and legitimate reliance have a normative significance not reducible to exertion.

Rawls explicitly distinguishes expectations arising within just arrangements from distribution according to moral desert (Rawls 1999, sec. 48). The distinction used here does not depend on accepting his complete account of justice. It identifies a question that any view must address: are the relevant claims generated by the practice, or are they supposed to justify the practice independently? Invoking rules to explain who is entitled under them does not yet establish that those rules are defensible.

Shared production also extends beyond the visible team. Equipment, previous instruction, and earlier work can be necessary conditions of present achievement. It would be a mistake to conclude that no individual authorship remains, just as it would be a mistake to pretend that all enabling conditions were privately created. The collection's conditioned-authorship model permits real agency without ultimate self-origination (Silentii 2026a, Essay VII). Applied here, it supports recognition of individual contribution while resisting the claim that social dependence has somehow disappeared at the moment rewards are allocated.

5. Effort, unequal preparation, and the limits of correction

Effort offers an alternative to contribution. Someone who works harder may seem more deserving even when their output is lower. Yet effort itself requires interpretation. Time expended, difficulty overcome, conscientious attention, and sacrifice are different measures. A person may spend longer because of an avoidable mistake; another may work efficiently after years of preparation. The amount of visible strain does not by itself establish a complete claim to reward.

Consider two hypothetical apprentices who reach the same level of competence. One had extensive earlier access to instruction; the other had to learn under severe constraints. Their present ability may be equal while their effort and opportunity differ. If the immediate question is who can perform a task, present competence may be decisive. If the question concerns recognition of perseverance, the history matters differently. If the question concerns how future training opportunities should be allocated, both the history and the purpose of allocation enter again.

It would therefore be a mistake to use one corrective across every domain. Selecting solely by hardship for a task that requires demonstrated competence can defeat the task's purpose. Ignoring unequal preparation when evaluating a supposedly equal competition can conceal the conditions that produced its result. These observations do not establish a specific admissions, employment, or distributional

policy. They show why a criterion requires an account of the allocation it is intended to justify.

One objection is that attending to background conditions creates an infinite regress. Every achievement has antecedents, so no person could ever be credited with anything. That conclusion follows only if desert requires responsibility for every condition of action. A more limited account can recognize choices and effort within circumstances while refusing to infer ultimate moral entitlement from them. The difficulty is then calibration, not the disappearance of agency. What was undertaken, under which alternatives, with what contribution, and for what kind of recognition?

The opposite objection is that any such calibration remains arbitrary. Different assessors can disagree about the weight of effort, outcome, and opportunity. That disagreement is genuine. It does not make the distinctions useless; it shows that merit cannot eliminate the need for normative judgment. The honest merit claim states the chosen basis and its reasons. The misleading one presents a contested combination as though a natural scale had already ranked complete persons.

6. Status, standing, and the person who does not excel

A distinction between achievement and standing becomes most important when a person lacks the traits rewarded by a particular practice. Someone may not be an excellent designer, performer, organizer, or competitor. That absence can matter for a role. It does not, without additional premises, establish that the person's suffering, testimony, or basic interests deserve less consideration. A judgment about excellence and a judgment about the status of a claimant concern different relations.

Anderson's relational account of equality emphasizes opposition to oppressive social relations rather than treating equality only as the redistribution of goods according to individual fortune (Anderson 1999). The relevant point is that a distribution can carry a relationship of standing. Being permitted to receive assistance only after displaying inferiority differs from being recognized as a participant with claims. This is an attributed theoretical orientation, not an em-

pirical description or an endorsement of a particular contemporary program.

The argument about standing need not deny moral evaluation. A person can act dishonestly or cruelly and properly be criticized for that conduct. Equal standing does not mean equal virtue, equal competence, or equal suitability for every activity. It means that a failure in one of those respects does not automatically remove the person from the space of reasons. Accountability itself presupposes a subject who can be addressed, rather than merely an inferior object whose interests may be ignored.

This also limits the inverse conversion from achievement to exemption. Exceptional contribution can warrant gratitude or reward without canceling obligations unrelated to it. A celebrated expert can remain responsible for deception; an indispensable participant can still owe truthful explanation. If success were allowed to purchase immunity from common standards, the justification of hierarchy would change. The system would no longer merely assign tasks according to competence; it would distribute permission to escape accountability according to rank.

7. Incentives, indispensability, and the strongest objection

The strongest practical objection is that some unequal rewards or authority may be necessary to secure beneficial performance. An individual might decline a demanding task without additional compensation or discretion. This can supply a genuine instrumental argument. But an incentive argument is not identical with a desert argument. The proposition that a payment is necessary to obtain an outcome differs from the proposition that the recipient possesses a prior moral claim to that amount.

Keeping those arguments distinct improves rather than weakens their assessment. An incentive claim depends on evidence about behavior, alternatives, and effects. A desert claim depends on the relevant basis of deservingness and the relation between that basis and the allocation. Either may support a decision under specified conditions. Neither can borrow the apparent certainty of the other. Describing a useful payment as earned in a comprehensive moral sense

conceals the difference between producing an effect and honoring a prior entitlement.

Indispensability creates another ambiguity. Someone may be difficult to replace because they developed rare competence, because the organization failed to train others, or because information has been deliberately withheld. These different histories can generate similar immediate bargaining power. The fact of indispensability alone cannot distinguish them. An organization may need to act under present constraints while separately assessing how those constraints arose and what duties follow from their maintenance.

A related objection warns that limiting rank conversions undermines ambition. If excellence cannot confer broader social distinction, why pursue it? The answer is not that ambition should be eliminated. Achievement can still matter through the activity itself, recognition, rewards, and justified influence. The limitation concerns the claim that achievement in one domain authorizes unrelated control. A defense of excellence must explain why its value requires that conversion, rather than assuming the connection.

Finally, some hierarchy can be chosen for its expressive character. Participants may value traditions of rank, apprenticeship, or ceremonial distinction. The framework does not treat every asymmetry as a hidden injury. It asks what the distinction permits, whether participation and interpretation remain meaningful, and what happens when the ranked person raises an objection. A voluntarily adopted form can be significant without becoming immune from scrutiny when its consequences exceed what was undertaken.

8. Testing the merit claim without pretending to measure the whole person

The proposed approach is a discipline of specification. Begin with the allocation rather than the claimant's prestige. Identify its purpose, the basis offered, and the evidence that the person satisfies it. Distinguish prospective suitability from retrospective recognition. Examine competing claims, including commitments already made. Then ask whether associated powers or rewards require separate reasons. These questions are not a numerical scoring system. They identify the structure an argument must possess before a conclusion can be evaluated.

The approach has clear limits. It does not provide an independent theory of every relevant good. It cannot calculate the exact weight of all contributions or remove the need for institutional judgment. It does not establish that all inequalities can be justified, or that none can. Its central contribution is narrower: it prevents merit from functioning as an unrestricted conversion mechanism among competence, compensation, authority, and standing.

That limitation nevertheless changes difficult cases. A person can be selected for a role without being judged more valuable as a person. A contribution can warrant acknowledgment without determining the entire distribution. An incentive can be considered without being disguised as moral desert. A background disadvantage can be recognized without pretending it establishes competence for every task. These distinctions permit disagreement to concern the actual grounds of a decision rather than a total judgment about who deserves to be above whom.

9. Conclusion: rank within a domain

Hierarchy becomes intelligible only when the relation being ordered is specified. Expertise, office, reward, esteem, and standing are not one scale. Merit becomes assessable only when the allocation and its basis are identified. Without these distinctions, a local achievement can become a general title to advantage, while the absence of achievement can become a general reason to disregard a person.

The non-conversion argument preserves the possibility of relevant differentiation. It does not ask a workshop to ignore competence or a practice to abandon excellence. It asks what precisely has been justified, what remains unproved, and which additional powers are being attached to the conclusion. A hierarchy that serves a task and a hierarchy that distributes comprehensive human standing require different arguments.

Human order can therefore recognize differences without treating every difference as a rank and every rank as a jurisdiction over others. The important question is not whether anyone is better at anything. It is what that fact authorizes, what it does not authorize, and why the person who falls below a particular standard still remains someone to whom reasons are owed.

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