

# Examining the Human Costs of a Narrow Meritocracy

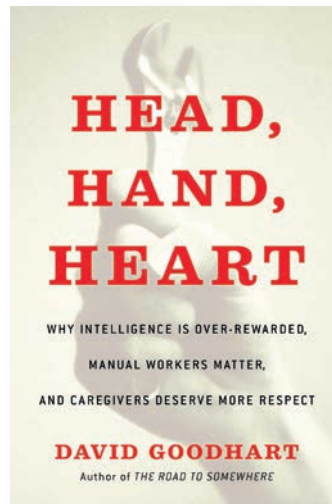
*Economic critique displays energy but not much evidence*

**Head, Hand, Heart: Why Intelligence Is Over-Rewarded, Manual Workers Matter, and Caregivers Deserve More Respect**

by David Goodhart

Free Press, 2020, \$27; 368 pages.

As reviewed by Michael McPherson



IT IS UNUSUAL for an author to open the concluding section of his book by repudiating the framework that organizes the book as a whole. Yet here is David Goodhart: “The title of this book is misleading. It implies that Head, Hand, and Heart, or thought, craft, and feeling, are distinct domains. They are not, of course, and too rigid a division between the three is one of the pathologies of the cognitive era.” Notwithstanding this late-arriving caution, Goodhart does use these three categories to organize his narrative. Goodhart’s main aims are to explain how the broad category of “head” workers, aka the “cognitive class”—roughly, those people who have at least a bachelor’s degree—have risen in status and income over the last half century or so at the expense of “heart” and especially “hand” workers and to examine the disturbing consequences of this shift. Goodhart, the founder and former editor of *Prospect* magazine, is British, and it shows in the institutional detail, anecdotes, and data he most often uses, though he aims to cover both his home country and the United States.

If the head workers are the college-educated, who are the hand and heart workers? In the mid-twentieth century, hand workers—mostly men—were skilled craftsmen, factory “hands,” and manual laborers, people who had limited formal education but held reliable, often unionized jobs with respectable incomes and social status. But as educational

attainment has become a more decisive marker of workers’ earnings and status, and as technology and globalization have undermined factory work, hand workers today include all those who occupy jobs available to people without bachelor’s degrees, whether or not their work involves skilled hands or strong backs. That means that many hand workers now spend their days running cash registers, entering data, or preparing fast food. This broad category includes all such people except those whose occupations involve providing care for others.

Those caregivers are the “heart” workers—mostly women—who include nurses, counselors, schoolteachers, day-care workers and others, as well as people who work at home caring for members of their own families.

The problem with Goodhart’s three groupings is that many occupations today cannot be neatly categorized into one domain or another. They demand a variety of skills and competencies that involve thought, craft, and social-emotional skills.

(The author says little about how many people are doing which things, perhaps because that would require systematic data reporting, which he tells us in the first chapter he now largely eschews in favor of storytelling.) This overlap of categories is especially awkward with regard to nurses and teachers, who at least in the United States and increasingly in the United Kingdom have bachelor’s degrees, and whose jobs entail substantial cognitive demands. Why aren’t they “head” workers? Perhaps it’s because they are mostly women, but, more basically, why do we have to choose?

Goodhart sees the main source of working-class resentment as the rising status, incomes, and political influence of the cognitive class, a group whose social position derives from their success in graduating from well-regarded universities. Increasingly, he argues, the most important, most respected, and best-rewarded jobs go to people who get the most extensive education at the most selective schools. The extent to which this is true varies significantly across occupations. It is most evident in the “learned professions” of medicine and law but far less so in, for example, corporate leadership, where just over half of the CEOs of the largest 100 companies in the United States have no education beyond a bachelor’s degree.

The practice of slotting people into top jobs based on their educational achievement is a defining characteristic of a “meritocracy,” a term coined by the British sociologist Michael Young in a dystopian satire published in 1958. Some analysts see meritocracy as a worthy organizing principle for a society, while



David Goodhart

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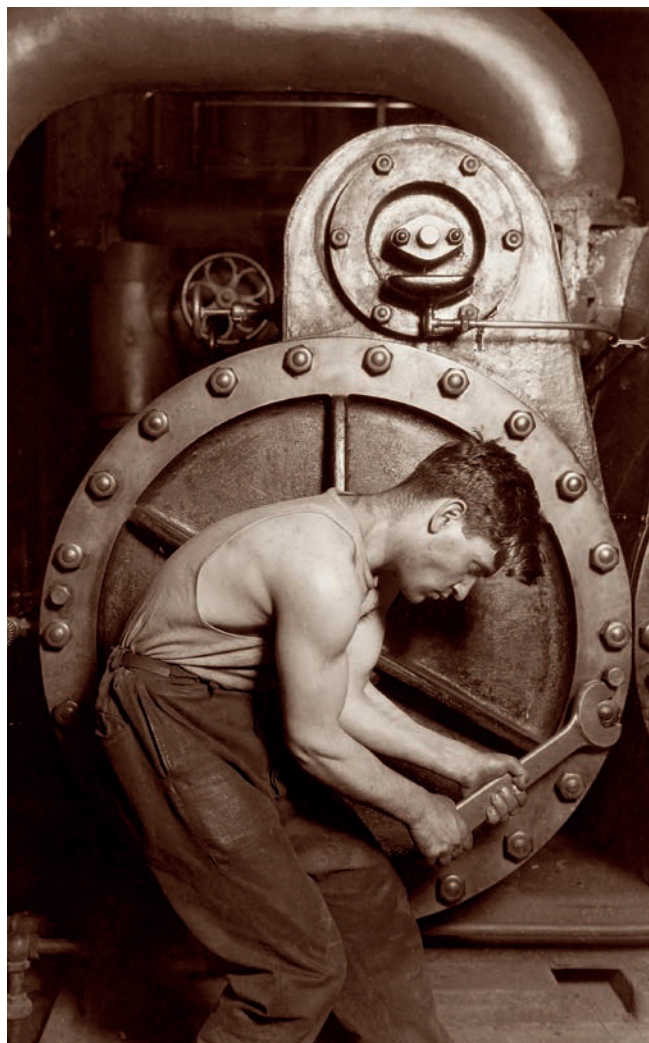
Critics of meritocracy don't deny that employers, in hiring for a particular job, should in general select the candidate judged most likely to perform the best. This is hiring according to merit, where "merit" is defined in relation to the specific characteristics required to do a job.

Trouble arises, the critics assert, when a single overriding conception of "merit," largely divorced from actual job requirements, comes to dominate a society's judgments about people's capabilities and productive value. That across-the-board index of merit, at least in contemporary societies, tends to be some notion of brainpower or "cognitive merit," as measured by an individual's educational achievement. Increasingly, then, the most important positions in both the United States and the United Kingdom accrue to the most highly-educated people, and not only in professions such as law, medicine, or engineering that require specific advanced training.

Goodhart is particularly exercised about the steadily rising education levels of elected politicians. He worries that, in government roles, the cognitive elite may too readily confuse their own interests and worldview with the common good, leaving the laboring classes without effective representation. Further, he notes that many members of this elite have trouble communicating in the plain language politics requires (a handicap two of Goodhart's favorite populists, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, both graduates of elite universities, seem to have overcome.)

Goodhart joins other critics in decrying the human costs of meritocracy. Accepting the legitimacy of a one-dimensional index of "merit" linked to

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economic and social status encourages those who fare poorly on that index to blame themselves, to see themselves as losers in a "fair" contest. As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (whom

Goodhart relies on for some of his analysis), puts it, "a significant portion . . . of the white working class [believe] that they do not deserve the opportunities that have been denied to them." That is, they think they haven't "tried hard enough," or that they simply lack the intelligence or ability to make significant contributions to their society. At a time when less-well-educated individuals see their job prospects and earnings dropping, their dignity is threatened and their resentments grow. Goodhart suggests that maybe it was bet-

ter in some ways when the class structure was clearer and status was more visibly linked to the accidents of birth. "In the relatively immobile class society of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, if you failed to rise from the working class into more genteel society, it was no reflection on your own aptitudes; it was just the way things were," he writes. This is an easier story to tell about England than the United States, where the culture has always supported the notion that everyone—that is, every white man—is the author of his own destiny.

One might argue that a meritocratic society, despite its human costs, is at least good for the economy. Goodhart is having none of this. He acknowledges that there are many important jobs that demand extensive education. But he doubts that today's heavy emphasis on educational credentials in staffing good jobs is genuinely productive. In his view, the education offered at elite institutions is often narrowly academic and far more concerned with mastering arcane subjects than acquiring practical know-how. He asserts that, at least outside technical subjects, undergraduate edu-

cation is mainly a matter of sorting and signaling, with little meaningful learning going on. He agrees with Bryan Caplan's 2018 contention in *The Case Against Education* that little is taught or learned

## book reviews

in most of higher education (see “The Main Purpose of Education,” *books*, Winter 2018).

Goodhart brings a lot of energy to his economic critique, but not much evidence. In attempting to show what goes on inside universities, he relies mainly on personal observations and affords no opportunity for university leaders to respond to the assertion that they don’t teach anything useful. At least in the United States, universities purport to educate people in problem solving, critical thinking, civic judgment, and effective communication, all important forms of know-how. Derek Bok, in his 2020 book *Higher Expectations*, thoughtfully assesses the role that colleges should play in teaching such skills (see “The Purposes of Higher Education,” *books*, Winter 2021). There is plenty of reason to criticize university education and hiring practices that place undue value on undergraduate and advanced degrees, but Goodhart’s treatment verges on caricature.

The author’s argument about the cognitive class constitutes the core of the book and takes up about two-thirds of its pages. In those pages he also wanders into extensive discussions of matters such as IQ and heritability, which don’t add much to the main narrative. Hand and heart each get a chapter addressing assorted topics such as the decline of the skilled trades, deaths of despair, implications of an aging population for nursing care, and the sharing of housework between men and women. Regrettably, Goodhart passes up the opportunity to discuss the distinctive struggles of African Americans in the United States and of ethnic-minority populations in the United Kingdom.

In sum, Goodhart paints a picture of a society in which a monolithic cognitive elite of university graduates have managed to gather for themselves most of the well-paying and socially respected jobs, while the fading of the industrial economy has robbed the working class of secure incomes and social status.

In his concluding section, Goodhart turns from his diagnosis of the failings of contemporary society to admittedly scattered remarks on cure. He describes early on in the book his personal transition

from a “leftish” journalistic perspective to one more aligned with that of “decent” populists. In the conclusion, he allows his inner leftist to come forward. Here he finally comes to grips with the reality that jobs can’t be classified as requiring only one of the trio of thinking, feeling, or manual skills. Most jobs require, and most people possess, some mixture of these capacities, all of which can be developed through attention and effort, whether in school or elsewhere. Moreover, cognitive capacity cannot be reduced to some one-dimensional index of general intelligence

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such as IQ, as much of his earlier discussion seems to imply; instead, we should recognize and even celebrate “cognitive diversity,” a concept that seems closely aligned with Howard Gardner’s highly influential theory of “multiple intelligences” introduced almost 40 years ago.

Recognizing that human endeavors and capacities are diverse in multiple ways is valuable for at least two reasons, one descriptive and one normative. Descriptively, it frees us from trying to force the complexities of work life into these three Procrustean beds, as in Goodhart’s struggle over whether nursing is a head job or a heart job when obviously it is both. Similarly, the recognition that human ability is complex leads us to see how some highly educated politicians, such as Franklin Roosevelt or Bill Clinton, succeed—by combining considerable analytical powers with a keen emotional intelligence that helps them connect with people. Normatively, the recognition that personal achievement hinges on a diverse range of talents and skills undercuts

the notion of a single all-purpose index of merit that shapes people’s social standing.

In this concluding section, Goodhart also warms to the notion that governments should help to restore the sense of community that he believes our current economic structure is ripping away. He wants government to invest substantial public funds to support the caregiving professions, both to improve the lives of those who need care and to bolster the earnings and respect accorded to caregivers. He would, for example, expand the tax allowances Britain already affords to caregivers, support families’ investments in their children through child allowances, and subsidize various forms of counseling.

Goodhart recognizes that high levels of material inequality, and especially the travail of growing up in conditions of deprivation, tend to reinforce a misconception of education as purely a means to economic success. This opportunity gap also stacks the deck in favor of the more affluent in the competition for access to the best and best-rewarded education. Goodhart is broadly sympathetic with government investment to combat such inequality. “A gradual rearrangement of current trade-offs to produce a more even distribution of status—while avoiding false egalitarian extremes—is the most desirable direction of travel for rich countries.” He says little about what kind of “rearrangement” he has in mind, and I don’t know what he means by “false egalitarian extremes,” but he does seem eager to reassure readers that he is not some kind of “democratic socialist.”

I do wonder how this book would have unfolded if the author had begun with a frank recognition that the “too rigid” segregation of people and work into head, hand, and heart is misleading and so from the outset had told the story with the richer perspective he embraces near the end. I’m not sure that his main conclusions would be any different, but my hunch is that, told that way, his story might have proved more persuasive.

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