

## Editor's Page

# The Ant, the Grasshopper, and Meritocracy: Where has Aesop's Fable Gone Wrong?

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I belong to a generation and social group for whom simple values, such as believing in and supporting what is right, rewarding diligence and rejecting deviousness, were the milk that fed our childish souls. In Aesop's fable about the hard-working ant and the frivolous grasshopper, the rectitude of the former insect was clear beyond all question.

That simplistic outlook was fine for a small island community like the village where I grew up, forty and more years ago, when social, financial, ethical and political perceptions had a far smaller ambit and disputation as a way of life was encountered only in the writings of a few intellectuals. Nowadays, disputation, often devoid of any ideological aura but more aggressive than ever in daily practice, drives extreme behaviour, scoffs at values, and becomes increasingly indistinguishable from derision.

I think this is tragic. Tragic, because disputation, as a tool of philosophical inquiry, walks hand in hand with creativity. Derision, on the other hand, has a degrading and destructive character; it needs dress itself in no ideological garb, and it permits shady and murky interests to prevail.

Seeing medicine as a science and a demanding vocation, we could reasonably be optimistic that its meritocratic nature would enjoy as long a reign as its structure, its ethics and its mission deserved.

We were wrong. Medicine is being demeaned, not as a science, but as a system perpetuated today by a dubious body of persons, methods and practices. That is true here in Greece; I believe elsewhere, too.

When I look at the level of undergraduate studies

in some of our medical schools, at the universities beyond our borders to which many of our students have resorted (having failed the entrance exams to Greek medical school), at the results of examining those students for the recognition of their qualifications, at the quality of training in the specialities, I feel saddened and disillusioned.

It is apparent, at least in Greece and probably further afield, that medicine is living through a period of material decline. Meritocracy disappeared some time ago, while vested interests over the last thirty years have churned out thousands of physicians and have contributed to tearing down the standards of excellence that used to underwrite the worth of academic titles. Inevitably, the invasion of this horde (4.4 doctors per 1000 population compared to 3.1 for Europe as a whole) has led to unemployment and often to corruption.

Apart from the evident decline of the profession as a whole, it is particularly disquieting to see the appointment of heads of department within the national health system, or even sometimes of university professors, with barely a nod to meritocracy. Rather, the choices reflect political friendships, cliques and blocs, which are often players in a variety of power games. While the relative depreciation of undergraduate studies and degrees is alarming, the failure to appoint the most competent individuals to leadership positions within the system can have literally catastrophic medium and long-term consequences. Let us examine the most serious of these.

First there is the example that is being set for the

young, the hard-working, the studious. They are being sent a clear message that success will have little to do with their diligence, but instead will be a function of social and political factionalism. On top of this, the mediocre managers demonstrate day after day their inability to organise models for development, to adapt

to modern competitive requirements or to inspire their juniors.

In the land of Aesop, the lesson of his fable has been unlearned. Every grasshopper now teaches that, summer and winter alike, it is the vain and idle who will be rewarded.