

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: What is Meritocracy? (0:15 – 25:47)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Professor James Hankins of Harvard University, distinguished scholar of the Italian Renaissance and political thought thereof. Very fine teacher, many friends of mine have studied with you here at Harvard and you've taught classes with Harvey Mansfield –

HANKINS: Right.

KRISTOL: – who's been a guest on these conversations occasionally – on what? Republican thought in the Renaissance, is that right?

HANKINS: Just republicanism from antiquity to the present.

KRISTOL: Oh, well, good topic. We'll have to discuss that sometime; and then you can educate me and others on all kinds of thinkers I've never read in the 15th, 16th century.

But I thought for today we would discuss a topic you have written about some, recently, and is very much in the news, which is, meritocracy.

I was flying up here – and we are talking in early May of 2019 – and I flew up last night to do this Conversation, among other things. And I opened up a magazine and there was a piece right there on "Meritocracy Blues." And I thought, we're having a very topical conversation. And you've written interestingly about it. So, meritocracy. What about it? What is it? Let's just begin with that.

HANKINS: All right. Well, the word, as everyone knows I think now, was invented by George Young, in his novel about the meritocracy of 1958. The father of Toby Young, by the way.

KRISTOL: Michael Young, I think.

HANKINS: No, no, Michael Young is the father of Toby.

KRISTOL: Yeah, you said George Young.

HANKINS: I'm sorry, I got my Youngs mixed up, excuse me.

KRISTOL: So, Michael Young is the father of Toby Young, who writes today.

HANKINS: Who writes for *The Spectator* today, yes. He's very proud of that, that his father invented the term, 'meritocracy.' But the classicists, of course all complained that because "merit" is a Latin word and "-cracy" is a Greek work, and so it's an inappropriate expression.

But the correct Greek expression would have been "aristocracy". But there were obvious reasons why you could not use the term aristocracy to describe what Young was talking about, which is the idea that those with merit should rule. Those who – merit, read variously, understood as usually academic merit of some kind – should be the rulers of society, or should be the magistrates, or the people who have power in society.

KRISTOL: But Young was, if I'm not mistaken, some kind of socialist.

HANKINS: That's right, unlike his son.

KRISTOL: And was a critic of merit. I mean, it was a critique of meritocracy, his book, as I vaguely remember from –

HANKINS: Yes, it was a dystopia, in which the meritorious ruled, and that was bad. But he was a Labor politician, and one of his critiques is that meritocracy essentially culls all the best people out of the laboring classes, deprives the laboring classes of their natural leaders, the most intelligent people. And then they are co-opted by the elites. They lose their contact with the laboring classes, and they become arrogant ruling-class people.

KRISTOL: Self-serving.

HANKINS: Self-serving, right. They lose their contact with the laboring classes and no longer defend their interests.

KRISTOL: It's so interesting. I think everyone talks these days about meritocracy and the case for it and against it, and we'll get to that. But the fact that it's such a modern term surprises me. I mean it feels like it –

HANKINS: Yes, people latched onto that term. Because the thing existed in our world, in the Western world, since the French Revolution really, where you had to have a way of replacing the hereditary aristocracy with some other aristocracy.

Jefferson talked about the "natural aristocracy;" the French created their *Grandes Écoles*, which was supposed to train the meritocratic generations that would replace the hereditary aristocracy. And the British had their civil service system which was modeled on Chinese meritocracy in fact. It was just trying to replace the old boy system with something that was based on a hierarchy that was defensible in some way. And the way they defended the hierarchy is to say these are the most meritorious people, people who have knowledge. And in the Chinese version it was also not just knowledge, but also wisdom and moral merit as well as intellectual merit.

But modern meritocracy is what usually is called technical meritocracy. It's people who know policy, they know social science, they have some kind of scientific knowledge. And they're smarter than everybody else, and that's why they deserve to rule.

KRISTOL: Right, a career open to the talents and all. It was the alternative to kind of the Old Regime and an unjust class system, right?

HANKINS: Yes. And, you know, we had a meritocracy in this country. President Lowell of Harvard was a great promoter of this. And that's where we got the SAT tests in the 1930s and '40s, that came out of a

desire to correct a system which promoted privilege over merit. And all the Presidents of Harvard, actually, since Lowell and Pusey in particular were great advocates of bringing merit into the equation and taking out this kind of privileged, Anglo, WASP-y class that was actually running things.

KRISTOL: And so, I guess, why the reaction against meritocracy, and is it fair and just? Has it just become a mask for a kind of new class of self-seeking, self-serving people? What do you make of all that?

HANKINS: Well, I think the current criticism of meritocracy comes from both the Left and the Right. And the criticism is basically that it doesn't work; that we're not getting the most meritorious people. The people on the Left, like Lani Guinier wrote a book a few years ago, she's at the Law School here, called *The Tyranny of Meritocracy*.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: And her view was that the people who are actually making it into Harvard, which is a gatekeeper of meritocracy and other Ivy League schools, those people were unfairly advantaged. They were privileged, in the modern sense of privilege, which is somewhat different from the French Revolution's sense, the early modern sense. So, there's something wrong with the system which evaluated people and let them into the universities they were in. They didn't take enough interest in the kind of people that the prospective students were, and too much in scores. That they overestimate scores.

And there is a Right critique of meritocracy as well, which also talks about – well, it objects to the racialism of meritocracy as it's practiced. Saying that affirmative action has distorted the results of meritocracy. The idea that we're getting the best people is compromised by an approach which disadvantages Asians, for example. There's the big controversy about Asian admissions at Harvard. And the conservatives or some people on the right are behind that. And there's also a well-known fact that poor whites, whites who are not elite whites, are disadvantaged by university admissions. They might have the same qualifications, the same numbers, but they don't get in in the same proportion. And conservatives tend to identify with those people. And so that's one set of conservative objections.

The other set is about the kind of progressive promotion of meritocracy as an alternative to democracy. That if you go back to the early Progressive movement in the early 20th century, Progressives were, had a certain distaste for party politics, for electoral democracy, electoral parties. Because it was messy, and sometimes they lost. And it didn't turn out the way they thought it should turn out. And there was a promotion of an idea of an elite who were scientifically trained, who knew about policy, and who could put an end to all the messiness of democracy. So it's a form of Holism. I don't know if you've read Nancy Rosenblum's book, *On The Side of the Angels*, it's a very interesting book.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: Which it is highly relevant to meritocracy as well. But she presents this as a holistic progressive meritocracy, the holistic political attitude to parties that don't like parties. Parties may not get the right results; they're too – electoral politics is too open to emotion and we really need intellect.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: We need people of intellect to control the system and make sure that the people get what they need rather than what they want.

KRISTOL: It seems to be there are critiques – correct me if I'm wrong, but there are critiques of meritocracy that criticize it for not being *really* meritocratic. In other words there's preferences for either legacy students or minorities or whatever and or other distortions of meritocracy; or it's too narrow a view of merit even.

Then there's really a more fundamental critique I guess, which is more the, I don't know, the Old Right, the agrarian right, and it's that we don't like that kind of society. That it's –

HANKINS: It's anti-political fundamentally, yes.

KRISTOL: It's a bourgeoisie, it's a kind of – yeah.

HANKINS: People don't defend their interests in a democratic system; they're being told what to do by people who know better.

KRISTOL: And it disrupts also old patterns and ways. And there's a kind of reactionary, you might say, critique of – it's not beautiful, you know, meritocracy; it's kind of vulgar and competitive and progressive and not, you know.

HANKINS: Yeah, the competition though is to get into the elite. And after that, the competition stops. Meritocracy is a party-to-end-parties, right? It's a “we want to control the discourse;” “we want to make sure it's this.” It's sort of Hobbesian, “we don't want people to talk unscientific stuff. We want people to be told what to think as well as what to do. And if we control the educational system, we'll be able to make sure that people think correctly about political problems and don't come up with these crazy ideas from the past.”

And progressive meritocracy is very forward looking, right? So, traditional ways of thinking are dangerous, and they might lead to bad results in elections. You might have people paying attention to their religion, clinging to their guns -

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: – and religion, and not be rational.

KRISTOL: So does meritocracy have to be this kind of rationalistic, progressive version of it? Or is there sort of a broader view of meritocracy that one could – ?

HANKINS: Well, I guess I'm sounding very negative about meritocracy.

KRISTOL: Yeah –

HANKINS: I actually like meritocracy.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so, tell us. So what kind, how?

HANKINS: I think that the critique of meritocracy is very exaggerated. I teach at Harvard, I'm surrounded by very smart people who have worked very hard and in my view they deserved what they've gotten. In many cases they're much smarter than I am. But I think that meritocracy is a good thing, that we should have smart people rule us.

But I would distinguish maybe between social meritocracy and political meritocracy. Because there's an old tradition in the West of wanting to be ruled by smart and moral people, by people who really are better, more virtuous we would say in this discourse, than the average person.

And there is in [Aristotle](#) – and [Plato](#) is very clear on this, right? Plato in *The Republic* and also in *The Laws*, they want the magistrates to be people who have an illuminated view of the good.

And Aristotle, even though Aristotle is much more friendly to partisanship and to parties, when you look carefully at who Aristotle wants for magistrates, they are people who are the good – “the great and the good,” right, the British would say. People who have, who are particularly moral, people who are particularly have a philosophical understanding of society. That's who he wants to rule.

And the Romans also had a meritocratic system. There are meritocratic educational systems and there are meritocratic institutions, right? The Romans had meritocratic institutions. You could not be in the Senate unless you had been a magistrate or one of your relatives had been a magistrate. If you behaved badly in the Senate, they had an office called the censor who came along and chucked you out if you were corrupt – in principle, mind you. In practice, what the censor normally did was to throw you out if you didn't have the correct money qualification for the Senate. But there were some times when the Senators kind of reached in and said this person is very corrupt.

And the modern analogy of that is impeachment, of course. Impeachment is a procedure designed to remove immoral people from government. So there are institutions, I think in our original Federalist, our original Constitution, there was a meritocratic institution in the Senate because the Senate was supposed to represent the wise men of the States.

KRISTOL: And the Electoral College, I'd say, even more, in its original understanding. I mean Hamilton explicitly defends it as "we don't want, you know, the public, it's going to be tricky for them to judge really who would be better as president."

HANKINS: Right.

KRISTOL: There'll just be all these demagogic appeals, or just popular appeals. But these individuals will get together and really know sort of these people who are competing.

HANKINS: And the Senate is supposed to be, take larger views. They're there for six years.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: They're able to restrain the impetuosity of the House of Representatives. So there are meritocratic institutions very deep into our history, going back to the Greeks and Romans.

And there are also the idea of a meritocratic education, that people should be educated for office. And there's basically two forms of meritocratic education in our tradition, which is the philosophical form which you find in Plato and Aristotle, that we study philosophy. And that is what is going to give us the illuminated perspective and the moral founding, the moral basis for making good political judgments.

And that's [The Ethics](#) of Aristotle, the relationship of *The Ethics* and [The Politics](#) of Aristotle. And they're one project, right – is that *The Ethics* is supposed to give you moral judgement – *phronesis*. That you're able to find the virtuous mean in your ethical life. You have a kind of *nous* about what the correct course is and you can balance prudence against goodness.

We all want to be good, but maybe not right now, not right in this way, there are other ways we can arrive. So that you're supposed to have this very advanced *phronesis* before you go into politics. And then you study the politics which tells you about how to adjust the interests of different parts of the population in a way that's going to steer the state towards virtue.

KRISTOL: I guess we modern liberals put a little more emphasis on consent of the governed and so forth, but still with an eye towards getting reasonable people into government. That's very explicit in *The Federalist Papers*, and as you say in the Progressives, and throughout the kind of liberal tradition really. Locke was concerned about this, and so forth.

HANKINS: I think that it's really, the liberal tradition has liberal virtues after all. And they have to be cultivated. I think one reason why we have the terrible partisanship we have today is some of those liberal virtues have not been cultivated. People don't have the moral excellences necessary to run a democratic system, a party system. Those are disappearing.

Which brings me actually to the other way that, a form of meritocratic education. One form is the philosophic form; the other form, which is shared between the Chinese and ourselves, is the idea of

humanistic education: education in eloquence, in poetry, moral philosophy, and history. Which will give people the sort of prudence they need to govern. And also a moral training, virtue, in order to govern.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I want to come to the Chinese example which you've written about, though this wasn't your original area of scholarly expertise –

HANKINS: No. [Laughs].

KRISTOL: But very interestingly. So what – it sounds so reasonable when you say it all this way – why the objection or the reaction to it, do you think? I mean –

HANKINS: Against meritocracy?

KRISTOL: Yeah.

HANKINS: Well, I think meritocracy is deeply at odds with democratic and egalitarian values. That we don't have any current project in our politics of justifying hierarchy *other* than meritocracy.

And we're an egalitarian society. We believe we're – most people are I think 'dignitarian egalitarians' in some way – to use that mouthful. But it means people who think that we deserve to be equal because of our personhood as human beings, and we all should be involved in the choice of our rulers. And to say that some people – to try to say that some people deserve more to rule than other people is an uphill battle in that ideological environment.

KRISTOL: So having knocked out all the artificial barriers or elevations you might say, we now knock down the less artificial, or what we would have said once, were the less artificial, more appropriate for a liberal democracy kind of – people rising based on their talents presumably, though we get resentful of that too I suppose.

HANKINS: Well, we've become Calvinists about merit. This is something one of my colleagues, Eric Nelson, has been writing about – he has a book coming out on this quite soon. That meritocracy requires you to be Pelagian: you think you can earn merit. His book is about a theological background of modern politics. But we're all Rawlsians today, and Rawlsian is a disguised Calvinist. He thinks that there is no merit; we don't deserve anything that we have, all that is given to us by the system. So that to make a claim of merit is un-egalitarian and it's undemocratic in his understanding of what democracy is.

KRISTOL: And so democracy cuts against meritocracy, even though it both produces meritocracy and maybe requires meritocracy.

HANKINS: Yes, I think 'cuts against it' is a good way of putting it. Just because – I don't think that they're actually incompatible.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: Aristotle didn't think the party system was incompatible with merit in magistrates. But I think one problem is we can see of meritocracy as a social elite. These are the people who are going to get the rewards. And so why are they going to get the rewards? Well, because they've done well on tests. And why have they done well on tests? Because their parents are wealthy and can send them to take Kaplan courses in how to do better on tests –

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: Or they've had good teachers. And that's not egalitarian. To have people, certain people, have advantages on the tests, certain people will continue to have their rewards. That means the elite will be closed. It will be harder for people who are poor, who are disadvantaged, to get into the elite. Our elite

is something that rewards people with power and status. And that's just wrong, we shouldn't have that system. The system should be open.

So the countervailing policy would be to try to make education more egalitarian. And to give out – give out vouchers to poor people so they can buy good education.

But that's, I think, a way of understanding meritocracy that is different from political meritocracy which I think everyone has an interest in. Political meritocracy is a public good. Everyone deserves or – deserves is the wrong word – but everyone would prefer to be ruled by smart people, but also by meritorious people. People who have 'goodness' in the traditional sense, in the sense that they're committed to a life of service, they're committed to serving the people, they're committed to the common good. So they have a kind of moral vision of their role in society.

Russ Douthat wrote about this a couple months ago, basically saying that moral meritocracy is something that is a possession of the old elite, but not the new elite. So he's renovating this idea that the WASP elite of yesteryear was actually better at being an elite because they had a sense of *noblesse oblige*, they knew that they didn't deserve what they had. And that made them paradoxically more willing to say, "we have to give back; we have to – we have had this position, so we have an obligation to take care of other people who don't have this position."

Whereas the modern meritocracy, the meritocracy that got where it is by scoring high on the SAT, those people say, "I deserve what I have; and other people didn't deserve that, so it's right that I have more money and more power than they do."

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think sophisticated defenders of, like the British regime of the 19th century, whatever you would call that, always were very favorably impressed that it was open to the talents. That it was a kind of meritocracy. You could come from poverty and make a lot of money, or ascend close to the heights of power.

But also that it preserved that old aristocracy which in a way tempered the narrowness of the new meritocracy. It had a certain kind of *noblesse oblige*, and you were the 10th Earl of something, and you maybe weren't actually very brilliant at all. But because you were the 10th Earl, you supported various public efforts in the arts or in other areas or whatever.

HANKINS: There was some, I think it was one of the British Prime Ministers who said that the thing he liked about the House of Lords was, 'there's no damn nonsense about merit.'

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good. Well I guess having the House of Commons and the House of Lords is in a way, of course, of – you know, it exemplifies those two different –

HANKINS: Yeah. But it's true that the British educational system was designed to preserve the elite, *but* there was always space for the poor boy.

KRISTOL: Yes.

HANKINS: Right. The British public schools, which are private schools we know, their public schools, there were always scholarship boys, who may not have been treated equally, but they had access to the education. They became part of the elite that way.

KRISTOL: And I think another defense of a kind of meritocracy against the narrow charge that it's one political elite that ends up watching out for itself and is somewhat narrow in its understanding of what even it means to be an elite – was that in a kind of a pluralistic sense there are lots of elites. And that you have a business elite that rewards different virtues than the political elite; there's a social elite. And this is really true in America. They didn't coincide.

HANKINS: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Or in Britain for that matter, and in fact there were tensions among them. And maybe that was healthy because you had sort of a pluralism of elites that prevented the kind of – And one has the sense, – the critics say this, argue this – that now the elites have all kind of jelled into one social, educational elite that is harder to enter somehow, you know.

HANKINS: Yeah, no. I think that's true. But it's also the case that elites should have a collective interest in being open to persons who are non-elite.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: Because that's how you refresh yourself. And elites – the people who want to keep elites closed are parents, basically. They want to make sure their children are in the elite, and they want to make sure they have a particular education so that they can become part of the elite.

But education is also a public good, and everyone should want their neighbors to be educated and humane people, and don't like cruelty, and they understand what good government is, and they understand the Constitution. So, any elite will at some point realize that it can't close itself off. And if it doesn't, it dies.

II: Meritocracy in China (25:47 – 1:03:29)

KRISTOL: So, tell me how you got from this set of issues and interests, which I think are interesting, and someone like you who knows so much about Western history and the Renaissance and British history and American history – would of course think a lot about these questions of a meritocracy and merit and elites.

Why China, how did that happen? And I'm just curious personally even how you got interested in it. And certainly in the couple of articles you've written recently, you've spent some time really, discussing the Chinese understanding of meritocracy, if that's the right term even, and then interests and what we can learn from them.

HANKINS: Yes. Well, my colleagues are asking the same question.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right. [Laughter]

HANKINS: Because we thought we had you in the Italian Renaissance; so what are you doing running over to China?

KRISTOL: That's the good thing about tenure, right? [Laughter].

HANKINS: Exactly. Well, I've been writing this big book called *Virtue Politics*, about – the subtitle is *Soulcraft and Statecraft in the Italian Renaissance*. And I was trying to understand why this political tradition is so different from the Medieval and the Early Modern tradition of Constitutionalism and Absolute Monarchy – and it is quite different.

And eventually, because one of the key issues is, that the humanists came to believe, from reading Greek philosophy, that soulcraft is prior to statecraft, right? That you have to be a certain sort of person before you can exercise power well. And the ancient motto was, he who cannot rule himself cannot rule others. So, I was not finding many resources in modern Western political theory to help me understand this sort of what I call virtue politics, which I prefer to meritocracy.

KRISTOL: So, it's called virtue politics, or I guess – which comes out of the humanist tradition – is that a fair way of saying it?

HANKINS: Yes, that's right.

KRISTOL: And in the 16th century or so, I mean – it ends. I mean it sort of doesn't – it yields, I guess, in the 17th century, is that basically right? Or the 18th century – to a more liberal, constitutionalist, interest checking interest, et cetera, politics?

HANKINS: The way I put it in the book is that modern constitutionalism is worried about badly behaving rulers.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: And the virtue politics people are trying to – they're trying to check people who exercise power badly. And the virtue politics people are trying to get bad people to exercise power well. So, they're surrounded by it.

It was a terrible time when virtue politics got started in the mid-14th century when Christendom was falling apart; the Papacy is incredibly corrupt; the Holy Roman Emperor, as the two universal authorities of the Middle Ages, is completely powerless. Italy at the time is being trampled over by mercenary armies holding people to ransom. Most of the Italian, north Italian city states are controlled by tyrants.

So the humanists are trying to say, where does – how can we get the virtue of the Romans back? Because they all were convinced that the Roman Empire was great because of virtue. So that's when they turned to education. So they link legitimacy with merit and that's very similar to what the Chinese do. But they link – so, you cannot be – it's a necessary condition of ruling legitimately to have virtue of some kind or other.

KRISTOL: Right. And if you would just put a couple of names on these thinkers for our audience to –

HANKINS: Well, I think the ones they're most likely to recognize are, Petrarch who is the great poet of the 14th century, but also the founder of humanism, which people are less aware of; and Erasmus would be in this category as well.

And there are many Italian humanists who are less familiar. Some of them are actually, were more popular at the time than people like [Machiavelli](#). But I'm sure you've never heard of Francesco Patrizi of Siena. But he's the best-selling humanist –

KRISTOL: That's a safe bet, right? [Laughter]

HANKINS: Yeah, no, I'm sorry. I don't mean to question your learning.

KRISTOL: Quite okay. I have no – [Laughter].

HANKINS: But he out-sold Machiavelli in the 16th century. He was tremendously influential.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. And so there was this really rich tradition and strong tradition, which fades. Is that fair? Or does it keep –

HANKINS: Well, it fades into essentially the ideal of the gentleman, the gentleman who has a certain education, which prepares him to rule.

KRISTOL: And that stays strong for –

HANKINS: That goes into the 20th century I think.

KRISTOL: But I suppose the Machiavellian – am I right about this – sort of, assault on mere humanism, and then the students of Machiavelli later kind of –

HANKINS: Yes, well, Machiavelli isn't –

KRISTOL: –become dominant in modern political philosophy, right?

HANKINS: Yes, he is an enemy of virtue politics.

KRISTOL: Yes.

HANKINS: And it's partly his own experience, because he lives in an Italy that's been conquered by the French, and later by the Spanish, that just roll right through all of these polities that have virtuous, humanistically-educated rulers, who run for the hills the moment the French army shows up with cannon. And so Machiavelli is much more interested in power and how to keep it. And he thinks the virtue politics of the preceding generations is a fantasy.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. Because I'd say, having, when I studied political philosophy a little bit, it was sort of "Christianity," and that has its own aspirations. And then Machiavelli is a critic of that of course, because, you know, it's not – can't deal with politics as it should be, but politics as it is, humanity as it is, and human beings as they are.

But I suppose the humanist also – and I always wondered about this – the humanist alternative which isn't particularly, or needn't be particularly, religious I suppose, though it has –

HANKINS: It's trying not to be religious. It's trying to be compatible with religion without being religious.

KRISTOL: Right. And it seems to be a sort of in-between effort you might say, from the Middle Ages or from "Machiavellian modernity."

HANKINS: Well they're trying to come up with a civil philosophy, which is what Thomas More calls it, a civil wisdom, a civil prudence. Which is based on the study of antiquity, of ancient philosophy, ancient history, people who are not Christians. Precisely because people have so little faith that Christianity is going to produce good people, since the clergy are famously corrupt in this period. It's one reason why we have Luther.

So they want to come up with an alternative. And this is an idea that continues actually into the 17th century. Lipsius and Grotius want to have a civil wisdom. Train people in a form of wisdom of the humanities which will prepare them to rule, precisely because of religious warfare. That we can't agree about religion, but surely we should be able to have some kind of common moral standards, common ideas of the good which we can build upon to build societies. And the crazies can go fight about transubstantiation if they want, but we need a kind of core of common values. Which we can do, we can create, by studying antiquity.

KRISTOL: And so that has – you're, I take it, attracted to this strain of thought? You think it would be healthy.

HANKINS: Well I'm critical of –

KRISTOL: It would healthy if we were able to –

HANKINS: I think if we had a civil wisdom that we could agree upon. In a way it's a kind of continuation of communitarian thought of the '90s. But the communitarians didn't pay enough attention to education and to the production of modern moral standards. They just think we could identify them in the seminars and people could then sort of pass a law.

KRISTOL: The humanists understand how difficult it is to produce, genuinely –

HANKINS: Yes. Well one other note, one other sort of contrast that I think is important for understanding virtue politics is the contrast with legalism. Because the – in the Medieval period and again in the Early Modern period, the typical attitude for a social problem is: pass another law.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: Create another magistracy and more enforcement, more surveillance. That's the way to solve social problems. It's like Philip Howard territory.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: To just pass more laws, more police, and that will solve the problem. We need to coerce people into legal behavior.

And the humanists are deeply skeptical of this, as were their ancient models. One of the mottoes that they like to quote from Tacitus is, "Corruptissima respublica innumerae leges", which means that the most corrupt republics have the most laws. Right? That when a republic gets very corrupt, it starts passing more and more laws because that's a sign of weakness. And that the virtuous republic needs fewer laws. The extreme position, the virtuous republic doesn't need any constitutional laws at all which you find in Isocrates and some ancient authors, but most people recognize that as silliness.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: But there's a general – there's a feeling that you have to – that the institutions have to be inhabited by people who have moral standards and who have some kind of educated prudence. They need education. They need to know about history. They need to know some moral philosophy in order to function in these institutions and make those institutions function well. And that's what they thought needed to happen in the 15th and 16th centuries.

KRISTOL: And how did – so this study of this very interesting tradition in Italy and Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries – how did that get you to China, then?

HANKINS: Well, I started having Chinese graduate students that were coming over. There's a great number of people who are around Harvard now who are paid for by the Chinese government, who come as visiting scholars. So I had a couple of visiting scholars. And I met with them once a week to discuss their writing. These are professors.

So, a couple of them kept saying to me, well this is Confucianism. I said, I don't think it's Confucianism; I've read Confucius, this is not Confucianism. They said, well, you should read Daniel Bell; you should read Bai Tongdong; you should read Joseph Chan. They'll tell you what Confucianism means.

KRISTOL: This was not Daniel Bell the –

HANKINS: No, no, the other Daniel –

KRISTOL: – the co-editor– of the Harvard Sociologist?

HANKINS: – this Bell who is currently the Dean of the School of Public Administration at Shandong University. He's probably the best-known of the Chinese political Confucians. And so I started studying and reading these people, and then they led me back –

I have taught for a long time a course on comparative moral self-cultivation between the ancient Greek philosophers, the Buddhist thinkers, and Confucian thinkers. And so, I was focused on ethics. And I started reading their political writings as well: Mencius and Xunxi.

And I realized that, yes, there's a huge amount of common ground between these philosophers. They look back to antiquity for models of ideal political behavior. They believe that the elite has to be nurtured in the traditions of the past. They need to read Confucian literature, Confucius himself. And they have to learn how to compose. They have to be able to communicate well. And they have to – that merit is a necessary condition for governance. That the Mandarin class, which was created by an examination system in approximately the 7th or 8th century A.D., was a way of filtering people out.

But the difference in the filter between the examination system and the modern SAT is, the filter was, in the Chinese examination system, they tested you for knowledge of the Confucian classics and to be able to write well. So that had a certain commonality with what the humanists were teaching.

So I got very excited by this. And I organized this year a couple of conferences on political meritocracy in comparative historical perspective which was sponsored by the Harvard Global Institute. And we had a conference in November here at Harvard, and we had a conference in the Harvard Shanghai Center in March. And we brought together Confucian scholars, and Western students of political thought, and Western historians to talk about how societies historically have tried to 'elevate the worthy' – in the Confucian expression – tried to create people, a ruling class that is wise and virtuous.

KRISTOL: And these Confucian thinkers you were mentioning, not the people at the conference but the ones that you were earlier talking about, they are back centuries ago. I mean this is a long-standing, old –

HANKINS: This is antiquity, Chinese antiquity, yes.

KRISTOL: Chinese antiquity. Looking back even further back to Confucius. But it seems that what you say in – I think I've read in a couple of your articles – is this is somehow more of a living tradition in a funny way in China. Or not in a funny way, but in China, than it is for us? Or that it's not –

HANKINS: Oh, I think so –

KRISTOL: You didn't just rediscover something that everyone's ignored for the last few centuries?

HANKINS: No, no. This is well-known to Chinese scholars. It's bright and new to me, but to people who study China, they understand about this. The big difference between the modern West and the modern Chinese, the Chinese are rediscovering their classical traditions.

KRISTOL: Yes.

HANKINS: And we are getting rid of ours.

KRISTOL: Yeah, for them it wasn't just a historical matter, but somehow it's a possible guide for – is that the question?

HANKINS: Well, this is my other angle into the Chinese meritocracy because they're having a renaissance. They had a long period when – well, Confucian meritocracy, well let's say the Confucian elites ran China for 1,800 years. From the time of the Roman Empire down to 1905 when the Ching Dynasty falls. So it's always a monarchy; it always has a Mandarin class, a class of educated magistrates. It's a very long, deeply rooted tradition.

And the Republic tried to get rid of it, and then the Communists tried to get rid of it. At one point the Communists actually attacked the Shrine of Confucius in Qufu in Shandong Province, tried to destroy it. Because they associate Confucianism with the feudal past, the bad old days when China was dominated by these elites. Which over time became more and more hereditary, or it was harder to break into the Confucian elite. It's one reason why elites have to stay open.

So the Republic didn't like them. My former colleague Henrietta Harrison wrote a beautiful book about [the man who dreamed of the past](#), about the last Confucian who was thrown out of his job, and sitting off in a village somewhere trying to come to terms with the fact that his culture had been completely shattered by the revolution.

KRISTOL: And when is this?

HANKINS: This is right after the 1910 – the Republic is –

KRISTOL: So this is a Confucian in the early 20th century.

HANKINS: Yes. The Republicans didn't like the Confucians any more than the Communists did.

KRISTOL: And I suppose the critique of the Republicans might have been not unlike our – I mean Machiavelli and the early Liberals, in that well this is a nice thing to talk about, but in practice it's a bunch of weak warlords who get overrun by more powerful Western countries and so forth. Is it sort of – ?

HANKINS: Well I think the objection was more that they weren't scientific and modern, because the Republic identified with the West.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: The big shakeup in Chinese history was the Opium Wars where the Chinese who think of themselves as the center of the world and the greatest country on Earth, they were beaten by these Western barbarians.

KRISTOL: So it's not that unlike – I mean, this is not that unlike Italy – all these Italian cities just being overrun by –

HANKINS: Right. They were shaken by defeat. Defeat is a great source of political innovation.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: And so, the generations in the Republic disliked – well they thought that the old traditions had failed, and had unsuccessfully defended China. So China needed to modernize, it needed to get science, it needed to get democracy, it needed to get modern political systems.

And then the Communists came along and took that even further and got rid of, or tried to get rid of, Confucianism entirely. It went underground. There's an underground Confucian tradition during the Communist period, some very brave people. But then of course 1989 happened. We're coming up on the 30th anniversary of Tiananmen Square, which is June 4th.

KRISTOL: Yes. Next month.

HANKINS: I'm flying to China that day. So I will miss – I won't get there in time to see how many people are wearing black. That's what you do in Chinese universities if you still sympathize with the victims of Tiananmen Square.

KRISTOL: And it's permitted to do that?

HANKINS: Well, it's hard to stop. And in places like Beijing – or Peking University, there are enough people who sympathize. I'll be very interested to see, I would have been very interested to see how many people are dressing in black in Chinese universities.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that would be interesting.

HANKINS: Because there's a lot of crackdown on that kind of belief these days. But when I was there, say, five years ago, I happened to be there on June 4th five years ago, at Peking University, and I would say a third of the student body was dressed in black to show their sympathy with the victims of Tiananmen Square.

KRISTOL: And my impression is that Tiananmen was more animated by a kind of western liberal, let's say thought, than by Confucian.

HANKINS: Yes.

KRISTOL: I mean it just – or was that already coming up, the Confucian underground, was kind of – or was that after?

HANKINS: It was pretty interesting. Well, the Confucian underground I think is a reaction to the belief that many people had at the time, that liberal democracy was the end of history, which is Fukuyama's famous article and later his book.

KRISTOL: So that's after '89, right.

HANKINS: That the communist elites were very shaken by Tiananmen Square, and they saw communist regimes falling around the globe. They didn't want to be one of them. So there are basically a Party embrace of Confucianism, and a non-Party embrace of Confucianism.

There are people like Jiang Qing who is someone who had been marginalized by the Communist Party because he was thought to be unsound for various reasons, who said that we need to replace Marxism, a failed Western ideology – not Chinese enough – with something that's really Chinese. And he invents a whole new constitutional system which is built, according to him, or is inspired by Confucian political thought of antiquity.

And then the Communist Party itself starts to think that we can use a little Confucianism ourselves. At that time the party elites were getting a little long in the tooth. They're what we call a conquest elite – they're the people who ran the Long March, and their children, and now their grandchildren, who have a ascriptive position within the Communist Party elite because of their ancestry. So it's becoming like hereditary aristocracy.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: And the Communist Party, to its credit, felt that this is not an adequate basis for legitimacy, and we should start to bring an element of good old fashioned Confucian merit into our system.

The modern Communist Party elite, they are very, very intelligent people. They're the top 1 percent of 1 percent of the people in the exam system. They're very sharp technically. They are very interested in Western social science. There was a great interest in Western social science in the 1990s because they wanted to understand at a more sophisticated level how societies are ordered and how political parties or political powers can remain in power.

And one thing they did is they embraced Confucianism. Hu Jintao did this in a big way and it became part of the educational system. People now study Confucius in school. It's a great turnabout from the Cultural Revolution when they were trying to destroy Confucianism.

And it's because the Party began to think of Confucianism as a civil wisdom, as something that was compatible with communism. If it's carefully shaped, it could be compatible with communism; but it would prepare people to be good citizens of a communist state or of a socialist state I would think, to use a better term.

So they were doing with Confucianism the same project that Lipsius is doing with humanism in the early 17th century, trying to create a kind of, a tier of political wisdom that is not ideological, but that is – not ideological in the modern sense, but that is something that's shareable among everybody in principle.

KRISTOL: And how authentic is this, and how much is it state elites finding a nice, traditional gloss for their basically maintenance of power, suppression of dissent, letting their kids become rich, you know, and so forth?

HANKINS: I think that they're sincere. I think that there's a large number of people who are sincere. This is not just 'this is saving our skins.' Maybe there's an element of that, but there's an element of that in all human ideals, right, that we have interests that mix with ideals. So I think that there's some serious embrace of these ideals.

And I met a 75th generation of Confucius, a descendent of Confucius, when I was in Ching Hao [phonetic] in March.

KRISTOL: Wow.

HANKINS: I was very impressed by this. He's a very humble, decent person who's very interested in Western political thought, who is an expert in Western political thought, but also an expert in Confucianism. A very sincere Confucian, obviously, as you would have to be, as a descendent of Confucius who has the right to be buried in the Qufu Cemetery, which shows that he really is a descendent of Confucius.

But he lectures to the Communist Party elite, and he is not himself a member of the Party or I don't know if he's a member of the Party or not. I could be wrong about that.

But anyway his goal is to kind of preach to them Confucianism, with the idea that they can be morally improved, that China will be morally better off if they have a Confucian formation of some kind, and this is being spread in the schools in China.

But as you say, there's disagreements about whether this is an appropriate way to use Confucianism. Because there's an old tradition of Confucianism which still exists, especially in places like Hong Kong or Taiwan, where Confucianism is a wisdom. It's a wisdom tradition in which you learn by sitting at the feet of a master, you try to live a Confucian life. It borders on a religion. Some interpreters of Confucianism would say that Confucianism is a religion. The Communist Party does not like that definition of Confucianism; it's going to conflict with Marxism.

Interestingly to me, the strategies that the Communist Party uses to incorporate Confucianism into their public philosophy is the same one that Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit Missionary, the very famous Jesuit Missionary to China in the 17th century. He also was a Confucian himself and thought that Confucianism could be adapted to Christianity. That you could distinguish between what Aquinas would call the natural and the supernatural end of man, right? The natural end of man is to be happy in this life; the supernatural end is to be saved and happy in the afterlife. So, Confucianism could be a public moral philosophy for this life, and that Christianity could come in at the level of the supernatural end of man and convert people so they would be compatible. And the Communist Party is doing a very similar sort of move, trying to make Confucianism into a civil philosophy.

KRISTOL: And is there also this sort of anti-communist version of Confucianism so to speak, or a dissident version, that it sort of would change the regime –

HANKINS: Yes.

KRISTOL: – as opposed to – ?

HANKINS: Yes, well, this is, there are some people I think who want Confucianism to be a Trojan Horse. And they want – they're looking for the next generation. The Chinese do not, despite the – and maybe perhaps because of the Great Revolution of 1949 and the Cultural Revolution, are not revolutionary people.

They've also gotten very wealthy, thanks in part to the guidance of the Communist Party since 1978. And the Communist Party has acquired a kind of performance legitimacy as we say, from the vast expansion of the Chinese economy. People don't want to rock the boat. People want peaceful transitions.

So one idea of peaceful transition is that Marxism, which very few people believe in in China anymore, can be kind of escorted out of the room in a quiet way, and then Confucianism can take its place. Or, we can come up with some synthesis of communism and Confucianism that will be a more civil philosophy in the moral sense, that it will be a philosophy that is more humane and more rooted in Chinese tradition and treats people better than maybe in some of the manifestations of Marxism in the past. So there's that sort of reaction.

Then there are people who are pluralists – genuine pluralists. Like Joseph Chan is probably the greatest example of that. Wrote a book called *Confucian Perfectionism*, a very interesting book, in I think it's 2012 now. He's now at Princeton this term. Joseph Chan argues that we should not regard meritocracy – getting back to meritocracy –

KRISTOL: Yes, that's good.

HANKINS: – as a regime type. That's the way that Daniel Bell presents meritocracy, it's a regime; it's aspirationally what the communist regime could become if properly guided by Confucian philosophers. But that China has – he wrote a book – Daniel Bell wrote a very famous book called *The China Model* which caused a lot of disturbance among political philosophers because it was an argument against liberal democracy, or against “one man, one vote” form of democracy, and against popular sovereignty. And arguing that meritocracy – you could have a meritocratic regime which, by the way, is a mixed regime and it can have elements of democracy but democracy is not the only element in this regime.

So Joseph Chan, who is a professor at the University of Hong Kong, he's a native Hong Kong-er, and someone who is very sympathetic to Confucianism. I think he is a Confucian personally, but also believes that Confucianism is compatible with pluralist regimes, with many regime types. This is something actually talk about in my book, that Renaissance virtue politics is compatible with different regime types. So I have a particular sense of kinship with the way that Joseph Chan thinks about meritocracy.

So meritocracy is meritorious governance. A meritocratic regime may not be meritocratic, because a meritocratic regime may be poor at getting actually worthy people into office. There may be technical reasons, or there might be ‘closed elite’ type of problems that prevent people from elevating the worthy. So, a meritocratic regime might be not meritorious.

KRISTOL: Right.

HANKINS: And at the same token, you could have a liberal democracy that was meritorious, if you could find a way to elevate the worthy, to make sure the magistrates, the political leadership, were people who were good people, or wise people or well-educated people. And that is the view that I'm more sympathetic to personally, but it's also in the mix in the Chinese context as well, in addition to these other approaches.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting, because I'd say the more conventional, or at least my personal vague sense of China is so much more that they're just the kind of state capitalism run rampant, it's all about wealth. Of course they're capable, they seem to have been good so far at managing this situation. Brutal occasionally in dealing with various dissidents and minorities obviously.

HANKINS: Right.

KRISTOL: But you're saying the Confucian element is a little – is there, too.

HANKINS: Well I think people now are idealizing Confucianism, and it's a way – it's a solution to everything that's wrong with our system. And there are different ways that it's the solution to things that are wrong with our system. And of course you can't openly say what's wrong with our system.

KRISTOL: This is in China, you're saying.

HANKINS: This is China, you can't really say that. It's hard to do or it's a very courageous thing to do. Courageous in the yes, prime minister's sense of being politically dumb.

KRISTOL: Right, right.

HANKINS: But there are people who are trying to reorganize a traditional Confucian education. In fact, I'm going to a conference that's sponsored by these people in Guang Xiao [phonetic] in June.

The people who want to drop out of the Chinese state system, which emphasizes the exams, everything is oriented towards the one great exam which decides your future fate. There are a lot of parents, especially wealthy parents, who don't want to put their children through that.

And they have listened to the siren voices of Confucian educators who say, you should drop out of the state system, especially if you have a lot of money and you can live, you don't have to run the gauntlet of the state exams. And you have a real education, an education in humanity and Confucian ethical ideals.

And so they've created these various Confucian academies. There are hundreds of them now across China. The great grandfather is the Wen Li [phonetic] Academy, which I'm going to visit in a few weeks. Where people, I'm sorry to say their idea of Confucian education is memorizing large swathes of the five classics and the four books. I'm not so sure I'm in favor of that, but it's presented as an alternative to state education, which is very much oriented to creating good citizens in a communist state.

KRISTOL: It's interesting. So it's very much up in the air which way the Confucian revival goes I suppose in terms of strengthening or weakening the state, or –

HANKINS: Yes. That's why I'm so interested in this. Because China is not my favorite – I would never go to live there. I mean, I have many Chinese friends that I'm very fond of and I like going to China. But the reason I like going to China is it's just fascinating. We don't know what's going to happen next.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

HANKINS: And there are people who think that the Party is clamping down and it's becoming absolute – an absolute power and a tyrannical power. And the people who think that, the fact that the Party is doing this shows their weakness. That it's *corruptissima res publica innumerae leges*. It's more surveillance, more police, because they're weak. Before it was that the communist system is corrupt; and that there could be a big change coming.

That's why I find that the Chinese situation right now so interesting. Not only because it reflects the Western situation, because the West also has this worry about who is in charge and are they really meritorious; but also because it reflects my own studies in the Italian Renaissance.

KRISTOL: Yes, it's so interesting. And just to conclude then, going back to the West or the current West, do you feel somewhat hopeful that there'll be a kind of broadening of people's horizons here, too, or in the universities and beyond, in terms of virtue politics or humanistic politics? Or is the combination of egalitarianism and capitalism maybe just kind of – doesn't leave much room for that? What is your sense?

HANKINS: Well I think that's much harder. I think the Chinese have a better chance of doing it than we do in some ways. Especially at the university level.

Where I see the shoots of renewal is in secondary education. There's a lot of character education going around. There are many people in religious schools, but also non-religious schools. There even is an element, which my nephew who is in education told me about, he's in public education, told me about that there is a move for character education within public education. And they're creating resources. And there is an interest in studying the classics of Western thought, the classics of Western history, for that reason. So there is some possible renewal going on.

I don't think in the university. Universities are not very good at moral renewal because they're technocratic institutions when it comes down to it. You're getting a degree in order to serve a function in the state, or in the economy, or in some way. And they have to prepare you for your future career. There's a kind of ineradicable careerism in university education. Which can be enlightened by humanistic education, and has been, going back to the 15th century. But that's ultimately not what a university education has been about.

That sounds very cynical or perhaps pessimistic, but I think that there are certainly people in the university who think that humanist education is good for your soul, it's good for your – improve your character, and can have positive influence on our public life. And I think with the real renewal it's going to come from secondary education.

KRISTOL: Or, just outside the universities perhaps, since not all education is university education.

HANKINS: Possibly. Yes, that's very important actually.

KRISTOL: Which is a good thing, I think.

HANKINS: Yes.

KRISTOL: Not to denigrate universities or even find –

HANKINS: No, but I noticed this today, in modern universities there are a lot of institutes now clustering around the edge of a university, like the Morningside Institute. I was just down in Columbia lecturing to the Morningside Institute, which is an institution which is trying to support humanistic education at Columbia, and to give humanistic resources to people who may feel that their education isn't sufficient. Columbia and Chicago are the last places you actually need these.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it seems like they are the better ones.

HANKINS: Yeah, they're still doing humanistic education at those places. But there are people there who feel that they haven't had all the humanistic education that they want. So they go to these classes and seminars.

There are people who have recently graduated, who are kind of in the penumbra of Columbia. And that institution is there to give them some kind of support in their aspirations to acquire humane knowledge.

And there's a similar outfit called the Lumen Christi Institute at Chicago; we have one here, the Abigail Adams. They're trying to supplement the careerism of university education by giving some people a more spiritual or moral orientation.

KRISTOL: So maybe a healthier meritocracy than –

HANKINS: Yes.

KRISTOL: – than the careerist meritocracies we seem to have now. But also a healthier reaction to meritocracy than just trying to throw it out the door.

HANKINS: Yes.

KRISTOL: Thank you for this conversation and thank you for this *qualified* defense of meritocracy. And more interesting to me perhaps, the explanation of the different aspect of meritocracy, and particularly not just the Italian – not only the Italian Renaissance, but also the Chinese example which is so interesting. And interesting that you have gotten so interested in it.

HANKINS: Right. Well, thank you for the invitation to come talk. It's been very interesting.

KRISTOL: Well, good. I think our viewers will find it interesting. Professor James Hankins, thank you so much.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]