

Equality in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of equality has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the history of mankind. Man appeals to it in a host of contexts- moral, political, legal, economic, religious, educational and social. It is one of the most controversial of all concepts and understandably so, for attitudes and policies justified by reference to this concept or principle play a formative role in making our communities and societies, what they are, directly influencing our lives every day, given this role, clarity and understanding of this concept is vitally important, and yet confusion and misunderstanding of it abounds not only among layman, but among philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, theologians, economists, biologists, government leaders and so on. There is reason for this confusion, for the concept of equality is complex indeed and seems to embrace a family or cluster of ideas, each of which requires special analysis and examination. Furthermore, in the history of man, this concept has undergone considerable change and development. In this paper it is my little effort to explore how this concept has evolved till now.

Keywords: Equality, Justice, Democracy, freedom, inequality, egalitarianism

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The demand for equality can be traced back to antiquity. The stoics are supposed to be propounders of the concept of equality in the western world. “They first taught the principle”, writes, Lord Lindsay, “unknown to Plato and Aristotle, of the natural equality of man”.¹ They deduced this concept of equality from the concept of ‘natural law’ and tried to make it the basis of equality. Stoicism laid emphasis upon the idea of self-realization as the goal to be achieved by every individual. According to stoics men are the sons of God and, therefore, they are brothers to one another. Since every man is endorsed with reason so every man is equal. Sabine observes, “Stoicism is thus tended to conceive of a world-wide system of law. It diminished the importance of social distinctions between individuals and tended also to promote harmony between states.”² The stoic philosophy established, in very clear terms the notion of the equality of men. They were the first to coin the phrase ‘citizen of the world’ and today the ideas of universal brotherhood of men and world government, are the legacy of stoics. Their concept of law of nature later on became the basis of Roman jurisprudence.

A distinction was made by Roman thinkers between these two concepts – the concept of the law of nature which postulated absolute equality and the law of nations which recognises slavery. Actually by nature all men are born free and equal, but slavery is permitted according to the laws of nation. Christianity further added to the Stoic doctrine the primacy of the individual rights as a separate and distinct subject of Equality. It was on this basis that the principle of human equality was expressed in terms of natural law. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for Ye’ are all one in Jesus Christ”.³ Its social teaching, thus, was inclined heavily towards equalitarianism. So far as the Indian culture and civilization is concerned, the Vedas and Samritis speak highly of equality and brotherhood. “Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam” (the entire world is a family) was the motto of civilization. St. Paul observed, “The unity of reality has two facets: one is that God and man are one. The second is oneness of mankind. All men are brothers under Brahman. The unity of man and God has as its correlate the oneness of man and man”.⁴

Sophists, on the other hand were divided into two schools. Some argued that nature is good and civilization bad. They believed that “by nature all men are equal, becoming unequal only by class made institutions and the law is an invention of the strong to chain and rule the weak.”⁵ Others who claimed that nature is beyond good and evil were of the view that by nature all men are unequal, that morality is an invention of the weak to limit and deter the strong.⁶ Socrates afterwards, attached the democratic theory of equality among men. He was against the rule of sovereign

assembly. His great disciple Plato perpetuated his master's thinking in Republic, "No two Persons", he declared "are born exact alike, but each differs from each in endowments, one being suited for one occupation and other for another. Every citizen must do his duty in his appointed place and to do the things for which his nature is best adapted."⁷ His classification of the entire population into three classes viz. guardians, assistant guardians and farmers, is determined by this very concept of human nature. It was in this context that equality was defined in terms of Justice, "of giving each man his due, so that equal man received equal rewards. That all men were not equal and certainly not equal in all respects was a platitude confirmed daily by the most casual observation."⁸ Popper criticised Plato by saying, "For the principle that every class should attend to its own business means briefly and bluntly, that the state is just if the ruler rules, if worker works and if the slave slaves. It will be seen that Plato's concept of justice is fundamentally different from our ordinary view of justice. Plato calls class privilege 'just', while we usually mean by justice rather the absence of such privilege. We mean by justice some kind of equality in the treatment of individuals, while Plato considers justice not as a relationship between individuals but as a property of the whole state, based upon a relationship between its classes."⁹

Later on Aristotle's 'distributive justice' came to be known as that principle of distribution by which goods, services, honour and offices are distributed among the citizens of the state. Different men make different contributions and hence they put forward their different claims for share in the distribution of offices and honours. Therefore, according to Aristotle, a democratic state will suggest that offices, honours and other rewards should be distributed in equal shares to the citizens of the state. It is thus established that distributive justice in democracy insists on absolute equality. Moreover, this distributive justice creates a certain system of rights which established a sort of proportionate equality in the state. It is, therefore, the business of corrective justice to see to it that proportionate equality so established, may not be disturbed. Proportionate equality, recognizes and preserves the distinction between the worthy and non-worthy. It counters equality of the unequal and ensures that man's rights, duties and rewards should correspond to his merit and social contribution.

However, this equality of treatment was not open to the men of all walks of life in society, but confined to the citizens. In this category artisans and slaves were not included. He excludes these two categories on the ground that "virtue is impossible for men whose time is consumed in menial labour."¹⁰ He therefore asserts that the denial of equality to the masses will be disastrous to the state as it will lead to revolution. Besides, he also defends slavery on the ground that it is quite in accord with the laws of nature as well as principle of justice. Aristotle maintains : "For that

some should rule and other be ruled is a thing, not only necessary, but expedient, from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection others for rule.”¹¹ He has contended his view point that “Nature is universally ruled by the contrast of the superior and inferior: man is superior to animals, the male to the female, the soul to the body, reason to passion. In all these divisions, it is just that superior rule over the inferior and such a rule is to the advantage of the both.”¹²

Evidently this observation presents a contradictory thinking of Aristotle. While at one place he claims equality as the bulwark of democracy and justice on the other he supports slavery on the pretext of nature. He regards inequality inherent in slavery as a natural and culturally justifiable phenomenon. His concept of equality, therefore, appears a limited concept as it is applied primarily to a small fraction of the society and has no universal application in the modern world.

According to St. Augustine “man was created, in God’s image to be master of irrational creator, beasts not to follow men.”¹³ He, thus considers all men, to be equal. Therefore slavery cannot be justified on the basis of the nature of men. On the other hand, it can be justified as a result of human sin. Augustine holds it both punishment and remedy for sin. St. Thomas Aquinas on the other hand makes Aristotle his guide, when he accepts equality as the very basis of justice and adopts the doctrine of distributive justice. He defines justice, as the fixed and perpetual will to give everyone his own rights. According to him, “Equality of justice has its place in retribution, since equal rewards or punishments are due to equal merit or demerit. But this does not apply to things as at first instituted. For just an architect without injustice, places stones of the same kind in different parts of building not on account of any antecedent differences in stones but with a view of securing that perfection of the entire building which could not be obtained except by different position of the stones, even so God from the beginning to secure perfection in the universe has set therein creatures of various and unequal natures according to His wisdom and without injustice since no diversity of merit is presupposed.”¹⁴

Among the exponents of the contract theory of the state Hobbes admits, that in the state of nature man is both free and equal. In his *Leviathan* he observes, “Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claims to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he.”¹⁵ He further says, “For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger

with himself. And as to the faculties of mind, I' find yet a greater equality among men, than that of strength. For prudence is but experience which equal time, equally bestows on all men, in those things they equally themselves unto."¹⁶

Hobbes required equal legal rights and equal justice for all, regardless of wealth or traditional rank. It is therefore noticed that Hobbes laid emphasis' on equality both in his stipulations about legal rights of the individual in the sovereign state whose desirability he was trying to demonstrate and in his theoretical model of society where all relations are in effect market relations. Actually he needed the postulate of equality in a still more fundamental way. Without it he could not have hoped to deduce right and obligation from the supposed facts of men's nature.

Afterwards, Locke, a great political thinker of his time, further supported the idea of individual equality as the embodiment of certain natural rights as a common plea of political speculation. He admits that men are more or less equal. He writes: "All men are naturally in a state of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and ranks promiscuously born to all the same advantage of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection."¹⁷

About the original state of nature he opines that it was a state also of equality wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another. Besides by saying that in a state of nature men are free and equal he does not merely means that there was time in the past when men were in fact free and equal, he actually means to assert that they ought to be free and equal.

Jean Jacques Rousseau takes the state of nature as a state of perfect equality, perfect freedom and perfect innocence. Man's emergence according to him from the state of nature is due to fatal chance. The development in the art of agriculture required the aid of one another. This led to the creation of rich and poor. Besides property also showed its pernicious effect. It ultimately led to inequality. Not only this, but through the device of the social contract, perfect equality is ensured as each individual makes a complete alienation of himself and all his rights to the community. In 'Social Contract' he says, "I shall end this chapter and this book by remarking on a fact on which the whole social system should rest, that is, that instead of destroying natural inequality, the fundamental compact substitutes, few such physical inequalities as nature may set up between men, an equality that is moral and legitimate and that men who may be unequal in strength or intelligence become everyone equal by convention and legal right."¹⁸

Rousseau in his 'Discourse on Inequality' has distinguished between two types of inequalities. "I conceived that there are two kinds of inequalities among the human species, one which I call natural or physical because it is established by nature and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength and the qualities of mind or of soul and another which may be called moral or political inequality because it depends on a kind of convention and is established or at least authorised by the consent of men. This latter consists of the different privileges, which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others such as that being more rich, more honoured, more powerful or even in a position to exact obedience."¹⁹ It is therefore established that the problem of inequality arises with the formation of society.

Harold J. Laski believes equality, as a necessary guarantee of liberty. To him equality implies a certain levelling process. "It means", Laski says, "That no man shall be so placed in society that he can overreach his neighbour to the extent which constitutes a denial of latter's citizenship."²⁰ He has insisted that to proclaim a man is born equal is not to proclaim that they are born identical. Since he is a champion of democracy he admits that where there is rule of limited numbers, inequality is bound to exist. He, therefore, advocates the abolition of all special privileges based on birth, property, religion or colour. Abolition of such privileges involves the enjoyment of equal rights by all and also equality before law. He also considers adequate and equal opportunities to all for the full development of their personalities as a factor of equality. However, equal opportunity to him does not mean identical treatment for individual who differ in capacity and need. According to him equality is an insistence that there is no differences inherent in nature between the claims of men to happiness. It is, therefore, an argument that society shall not construct barriers against those claims which weigh more heavily upon some than upon others.

Karl Marx is regarded by many as the champion of equality for the weaker section of the society living in any part of the world. To him equality means the abolition of classes and equal social status for all men. His yardstick for measuring equality is labour. His view of equality was expounded in the critique of Gotha programme (1875). "The right of the producers is proportional to amount of labour they contribute, the equality consists in the fact that everything is measured by an equal measure, i.e. labour. This equal right is an unequal right for unequal work."²¹ Therefore, equality does not mean that all should be put on the same level. He interprets equality as the opportunity for each to occupy the position which corresponds to his ability. Besides, under Marxist philosophy equality does not signify egalitarianism with regard to personal needs.

One individual will always be different from another. In illustration, the following selection from a speech by Joseph Stalin, at one time leader of Soviet Union, can be offered as a telling instance, “By equality Marxism means not equality in personal requirements and personal life but abolition of class i.e., (a) the equal emancipation of all toilers from exploitation after capitalists have been overthrown and expropriated, (b) the equal abolition for all the private property in the means of production after they have been transformed into the property of the whole of society, (c) the equal duty of all to work according to their ability and equal right of all toilers to receive according to the amount of work they have done (Socialist Society), (d) the equal duty of all to work according to their ability and equal right of all toilers to receive according to their requirements (Communist society). And Marxism starts out with the assumption that people’s tastes and requirements are not and cannot be equal in quality or in quantity, either in the period of socialism, or in the period of Communism.”²²

Lenin tried to follow this principle of Marx. Consequently a common factor in Marxism, Leninism in respect appears that equality entails abolition of the private ownership of the means of production, the end of all human exploitation, the elimination of class and eradication of all political and cultural discrimination against the proletariat. Besides, the socialization of all means of production must precede the universal obligation to work and equality of pay regardless of age and sex and nationality. The wages must be geared to the quality and quantity of the work performed. It is a fact that natural variety cannot be parted with but it should not be taken as a justification for inequality. On the contrary variety promotes equality though in a social and not in individual sense. Therefore only the abolition of classes can achieve social equality and help to promote the all-round development of human personality.

It is an undeniable fact that all the changes in the social and political structure of a society are the results of the thoughts of eminent thinkers. Similarly, the ideals and views concerning equality; of all the political thinkers have influenced to a great extent the social and economic movement in many parts of the world. With the movement of time equality, which was confined merely to social and political thinking became a matter of legal consideration. In this period, to a great extent the emphasis is laid upon economic sphere of state activity and the people become increasingly aware of the fact that the real liberty is not possible where grave inequalities in economic sphere exist. As a result men have diverted their minds from political struggle to economic rights which ultimately has given way to socialism. Therefore economic equality has become a leading doctrine in political thinking because men

have begun to argue that so long as there existed economic inequality there could not be true liberty.

It should be noted that the general concept of freedom is inseparably tied up with the concept of equality. Freedom is a condition of equality and vice-versa. Equality without freedom is slavery and freedom without equality is licence and anarchy. Greek political scientist Aristotle had also emphasised that liberty was not attainable until the passion for equality had been satisfied. Consequently it prevents the emergence of equilibrium and social harmony in the state in case the passion for equality remains unsatisfied. Therefore, it is established that freedom and equality far from being antithetical are complementary.

On the whole, it is established that the history of the concept of equality in modern world is intermittent and sometimes violent dissatisfaction with the existing principle of equality. For the ideal of equal status men will undergo much sacrifice and will set great events in motion. It is because, inequality dies hard. Seldom do the privileged surrender their advantages, without a struggle. It is no accident, therefore, that some of the most revolutionary movements in the history have been sparked by a desire to achieve equality. They succeeded in large measure because the passion for equality was one of their driving force. Therefore, any discussion over equality is likely to be an unending one, raising new questions, new ideas and even new problems.

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