

THE IDEAL OF EQUALITY

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The opening passage from Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" depicts the culmination of an ideal—the ideal of equality.

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of the agents of the United States Handicapper General.¹

Such an ideal could not be realized, however, for with everyone handicapped to perform at a minimal level, no one would be present who possessed sufficient competence to impose proper handicaps.

Of course, one might hypothesize that competent persons would be present who had internalized the value of minimal competence so thoroughly that they could operate behind the scenes to ensure that needed maintenance functions were carried out without disrupting the facade of equality. But leaving aside the question of why competent persons would fanatically devote themselves to such an idea, I will simply assert that the ideal is practically unattainable. Further, while one can imagine a super-automated, self-repairing complex of machines built and set in motion to sustain functional morons, would one want to call this state of affairs a human condition? And anyway, such a solution would entail an eradication of diversity, a price no egalitarian would be willing to pay.

How can such an absurd ideal—the ideal of equality, the ideal that in some indefinable mystical sense humans are equal—be maintained? Isn't this metaphysical notion as absurd as the contention that three is equal to one? In what sense is it meaningful to assert that all persons are equal? Such an assertion only becomes meaningful if we ignore the existence of important differences.

No one in his right mind operates on the assumption that there are no differences between people. When someone says to me, "Smith is strong" or "Smith is smart," the range of expectations which I have with respect to Smith is altered. In general, the degree of my uncertainty with respect to Smith is narrowed. Such an expression as "Smith is strong" or "Smith is smart" carries information both in the sense that an information scientist uses the term and in the ordinary sense. The amount of information is, of course, a function of the credibility of the source, but we cannot deny that such statements generally convey some information.

One might contend that all such differences as stronger than, quicker than, and smarter than are nonessential characteristics. But then we can legitimately ask what is the essential characteristic in terms of which all men are equal?

It might be said that all persons think, hope, and have expectations and are thus capable of experiencing that emotional state we call happiness. It might be further stated that everyone has an inalienable right to happiness. But leaving aside all "ought" and "is" considerations, one might still be puzzled by the apparent necessity of equal access to goods and services as a precondition for happiness. And this is the conclusion that egalitarians must draw, or the assertion that "all men have an equal right to happiness" expresses merely an empty sentiment.

The best support for reaching such a dubious conclusion from such a dubious premise is what I shall call the argument from envy. The mere sight of someone else enjoying something we do not possess makes at least some persons unhappy. Thus, the happiness of all is not possible in the face of inequality.

But if we must cater to envy, then there is at least as much reason to respect the essential existence of avarice. A rough paraphrase of Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy" follows: Every social system requires a degree of organization, and organization implies differential access to information. Persons with privileged access to information in any organization are in a position to manipulate the perceptions of others and thus to exercise some control over their behavior. All other things being equal, those persons who desire control will be those who acquire control. Thus, all social systems are fated to be ruled and, furthermore, ruled by those who want to rule. Privilege always follows power, if for no other reason than that privilege augments power. Thus, organization implies privilege.²

From the above, we may conclude that universal happiness is incompatible with the existence of organization.

This consideration might lead one to talk about "equality of opportunity," but Pettigrew and other educators have argued so persuasively that equality of opportunity is only possible when equality of condition obtains that it would appear that the phrase, "equality of opportunity," is another empty locution.³ In what way could it make sense to say that a one-legged man has an "equal opportunity" to win a footrace with a normal, fully functioning person? To give meaning to such an expression, I am afraid we should have to consult the Handicapper General.

But if the egalitarian position is even one-half as absurd as it appears to be, how can it be maintained? How can we blindly assert that we must accept as true an assertion which is patently false? To understand some of the egalitarian position, it might be fruitful to consider another sociological notion which gains prominence with Pareto. According to

Pareto, unequal access to goods and services, i.e., "privilege" requires legitimation if rule is to be maintained by means short of naked force. Rule by naked force is inefficient, thus rulers turn to legitimating rationalizations.⁴ Following Marx, we might call these legitimating rationalizations "myths." Why are we inclined to call them "myths"? It is because they are "rationalizations" in the Freudian sense—they are spurious reasons given after the fact.

The rulers in contemporary societies are often deficient in those qualities whereby they legitimate their right to rule and their access to privilege. For instance, Americans are supposed to believe that under this election process, intelligent men of high moral stature are selected for office. To label this belief a belief in a myth might receive some support today.

The issue can be stated generally—men come to power in any social system either by virtue of their ability to manipulate appearances or by force, or by both. Since force can never be legitimated, any legitimated rule is a rule by those who can manipulate appearances. But the ability to manipulate appearances is itself unacceptable as a legitimation of power and privilege. Thus, all regimes not based upon naked force are necessarily corrupt—they are legitimated but never legitimate.

The essential irony of democracy is that a would-be ruler rises to power at least in part on the basis of his ability to create the appearance that his elevation will promote equality. The candidate can, in the unlikely event he is so inclined, attempt to promote equality. But equality is incompatible with organization, and organization is the basis of power. Thus, one who "promotes equality" undermines his own power and, to the extent that he succeeds, increases the probability that he will fall from power.

Thus, we might perceive, in the yearnings of egalitarians, a pathos similar to that which Kierkegaard perceived in Christianity—the pathos (and absurdity) of a god on a cross. We are confronted with the spectacle of a great leader destroying himself in the pursuit of an absurd ideal—an ideal which by virtue of his demonstrated dramaturgical skills we can infer he has the intelligence to perceive as absurd. Is masochism a character trait we can associate with egalitarianism?

NOTES

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Harrison Bergeron," *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: 1968), p. 7.

² Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York: 1965). For a brief discussion of Michels' ideas, see Neil J. Smelser, ed., *Sociology: An Introduction* (New York: 1967), p. 493-94.

³Thomas F. Pettigrew, *Racially Separate or Together* (New York: 1971). See also, "Another Look at the 'Evidence on Busing,'" *NCRIEEO Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 5, May 1973 (ERIC document no. EDO85436).

⁴Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, trans. by A. Bongiorno and Arthur Livingstone, ed. by Livingstone (New York: 1935), Vol. III.

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