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TA Online
Foundations
Term Paper 4
May 19, 2009
Word Count: 1,987

The Gilded Trap: The Dangers of Equality

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .”

(The Declaration of Independence)

Equality is a strange thing. It is a catchword, tossed around to advance the cause of every conceivable organization under the sun. It is a powerful word, for it calls forth such remembrances as the Civil Rights movement, women’s suffrage, and many other events in American history that all pay homage to the noble idea of equality for all people – rich or poor, black or white, male or female. Yet it is also an ambiguous word, for though “equality for all” is encouraged in America, the advocates of complete equality might be hard pressed to explain exactly what they mean by this “equality for all,” even while they are moving heaven and earth to achieve it. Although the members of a democratic society tend to regard equality as the highest attainable good, equality pursued above freedom or excellence is dangerous, because people can restrict excellence and liberty when they apply equality to areas where it should not and cannot exist.

People are not equal in all things, and they never can be. “Equality” is applied to many different things and has many different meanings; however, the word itself is simply a synonym for “the same.” Obviously, all people are not the same in all things, as Abraham Lincoln explains. While discussing the meaning of the Declaration of Independence in relation to slavery, Lincoln claims that people are not all “equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity” (120). It is a simple fact that people are different in many things, in both the mental and physical realms; it is impossible to attain absolute equality in all things. When the blanket term “equality” is used, it is important to understand what it is being used for, since people are not inherently the same in all things.

John Locke and the Declaration of Independence define equality as being equal in the possession of inherent rights. In his book, *Second Treatise of Government*, while defining the state men are in before they enter a society, John Locke explains that this state is one 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 rank . . . should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection” (8). Each person has an equal

and inherent right to govern himself; no man has a natural right to control other men. From this inborn right of self-government and freedom, the Declaration of Independence derives its statement that men are equal. Abraham Lincoln elucidates the meaning of the equality mentioned in the Declaration, explaining, "I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects* They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal in 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' " (120, emphasis original). Men are only equal in their rights to live, to be free, and to do whatever they can to procure their own happiness. America's government is formed on the premise propounded by Locke and the Declaration that all men equally possess inherent rights.

However, Alexis de Tocqueville observes that people in America are also equal in the social, intellectual, and political realms. Tocqueville explains in his book, *Democracy in America*, that certain property laws in America created social equality, which occurs when there are no social classes based on one's parentage or inherited wealth, though there are still classes based on one's success in the financial world (47-50). Tocqueville also claims that men in America are educated in the same manner, so they have intellectual equality (50-51). Finally, Tocqueville applies equality to the people's political sovereignty, remarking, "each individual forms an equal portion of the sovereign and participates equally in the government of the state" (61). People are politically equal when all men have a share in the government, though not all men have an equal influence on the direction of the government. Tocqueville refers to equality as the social, intellectual, and political equality that he saw in America.

People create social, intellectual, and political equality to further the Declaration's proclamation of inherent equality and to benefit society. As the Declaration maintains, people have rights that cannot be given or taken away; these are natural and inherent rights, as Locke affirms (8). However, the existence of oppressive governments proves that these rights can be ignored. For this reason, people encourage social, political, and intellectual equality in society. Even though this equality is not inherent in mankind, it may help to further man's intrinsic equality (Tocqueville 234-235). Tocqueville says that if people want to "procure the most well-being for each of the individuals who compose [the nation] and to have each avoid the most misery," they should create equality (235). Men can institute the political, intellectual, and social equality Tocqueville speaks of in a society to create benefits and comforts for the citizens of the democracy. These benefits include the opportunity to be involved in the government, the opportunity for everyone to be educated, and the opportunity for the recognition of each man as a

precious human being, despite his race, parentage, or financial status. When people in a nation pursue the equality Tocqueville describes as a way of furthering mankind's inherent equality, they can produce many good results.

However, democratic peoples love this social, intellectual, and political equality so much that they can extend it to areas where equality should not be applied. When Tocqueville was in America, he saw the effects of equality on the people and the government (3). His observations prompted him to say of democratic peoples, "what they love with an eternal love is equality . . . nothing can satisfy them without equality, and they would sooner consent to perish than to lose it" (Tocqueville 52). Men in democratic nations adore political, intellectual, and social equality to an extreme extent. This is dangerous, because people may apply this equality to all things. While explaining why political equality will eventually be achieved in democratic nations, Tocqueville asserts, "One cannot conceive of men eternally unequal among themselves on one point alone, equal on all others; they will therefore arrive in a given time at being equal on all" (52). People can easily extend equality to other areas and equalize people in all things. This is unwise, since, as was already established, natural equality does not exist in all things. Because democratic peoples love social, intellectual, and political equality, they may apply it to areas where it does not belong.

Social equality can be misapplied when people force equality to extend to abilities, which overrides excellence. Tocqueville states, "one also encounters a depraved taste for equality in the human heart that brings the weak to want to draw the strong to their level" (52). Men can love equality in society so much that they would prevent those who are great from succeeding. C. S. Lewis describes this penchant in *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis's main character, Screwtape, tells a story about a dictator who goes into a grain field and cuts off the tops of any stalks that are higher than the rest, thus demonstrating that one must make all men the same to keep them under control (Lewis 165). Screwtape then says, "But now 'democracy' can do the same work . . . No one need now go through the field with a cane. The little stalks will now of themselves bite the tops off the big ones. The big ones are beginning to bite off their own in their desire to Be Like Stalks" (Lewis 165). The passion for equality can so pervade society that men would hamper the abilities of both others and themselves in order to be equal. Screwtape later advocates a diabolical method of promoting democracy and equality in schools. He explains that "differences between the pupils . . . must be disguised," and he says of the ignorant and idle children, "there must be no faintest hint that they are inferior to the children who are at work" (Lewis 166-167). Excellence can be prevented in education when people ignore the differences in intellect or motivation between different children and force all the

children to remain on the same level, in order to keep the less bright ones from feeling unequal. People can crush natural abilities and differences when they ignore individual differences and force everyone to be the same for the sake of total equality.

Also, pursuing intellectual and political equality can easily endanger intellectual freedom. Freedom of thought is one of the main things endangered when people institute equality in all areas of life. While discussing how a majority of the citizens in a democracy can oppress a minority and dictate the thoughts of all the people, Tocqueville states, "I see very clearly two tendencies in equality: one brings the mind of each man toward new thoughts, and the other would willingly induce it to give up thinking" (409-410). As Tocqueville further elaborates, in a democratic nation, such as America, where the people are all equal under the law and politically equal, the people would soon come to be ruled by the will of the majority (410). The standards of the society would dictate the thoughts and values of the people, and they would cease thinking for themselves. When equality is applied to all realms, the values, ideas, and beliefs of the greatest number of people will hold sway.

This intellectual equality could lead to despotism and the suppression of political freedom. As Tocqueville explains, political equality is not inexorably linked with liberty, since people could all be equal under the rule of one dictator who regards all of his servants as equal (479). It is unlikely that Americans would blindly accept the ascension of a despot. However, when equality of intellect and the views of the majority reign, it would be easy for a single man to gain the approval of the majority. From this point, this man could use his power to turn the nation into a despotic nation, where all the people were still socially and politically equal. Tocqueville recognizes this danger and expressly links equality to despotism, explaining, "the vices to which despotism gives birth are precisely those that equality favors" (485). As Tocqueville explains, social, intellectual, and political equality favor despotism, because when people are equal and self-dependent, they tend to be selfish (482-485). A despot uses this selfishness to prevent people from banding together to oppose the evils of a despotic government. When democratic peoples are intellectually, politically, and socially equal, the conditions are ripe for a form of despotism to sneak up on the people and ensnare their liberties before they even know it.

Because forcing people to be the same in all things in the name of equality can restrict liberty and excellence, the passion for equality above freedom and excellence is dangerous, though democracies like America often view all forms of equality as the best possible benefit for society. Absolute equality is impossible to attain, since men are not equal in all things. Men are equal in the possession of the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness. As Tocqueville observed in America, people can also institute equality in the social, political, and intellectual realms in order to further mankind's inherent equality and to benefit society. However, this can be very dangerous, because men love this equality and may begin to institute it in all realms of life. In this case, social equality will hamper excellence by hindering people from excelling in their abilities. Political and intellectual equality, when applied to areas where they do not belong, can restrict both intellectual and political freedom. One must take care, lest the gilded trap of absolute equality encloses all in the common mire, destroying excellence and annihilating liberty.

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