

Why Political Equality I?

INTRINSIC EQUALITY

Many people will conclude that the advantages of democracy discussed in the last chapter may be enough—perhaps more than enough—to justify their belief that democratic government is superior to any alternatives that are realistically attainable. And yet, you just might wonder whether it is reasonable for you to assume, as a belief in democracy seems to presuppose, that citizens ought to be treated as political *equals* when they participate in governing. Why should the rights necessary to a democratic process of governing be extended equally to citizens?

The answer, though crucial to a belief in democracy, is very far from obvious.

IS EQUALITY SELF-EVIDENT?

In words that were to become famous throughout the world, in 1776 the authors of the American Declaration of Independence announced: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” If equality is self-evident then no further justification is needed. None can be found in the Declaration. Yet for most of us it is very far from self-evident that all men—and women—are created equal. If the assumption is not self-evidently true, can we reasonably justify adopting it? And if we cannot, how

can we defend a process for governing that seems to assume it to be true?

Critics have often dismissed assertions about equality like that in the Declaration of Independence as nothing more than empty rhetoric. If a claim like that is supposed to state a fact about human beings, they insist, it is self-evidently false.

To the charge of falsity, critics sometimes add hypocrisy. As an example they point out that the authors of the Declaration ignored the inconvenient fact that in the new states they were now declaring independent, a preponderant majority of persons were excluded from enjoying the inalienable rights with which they were supposedly endowed by no less than their Creator. Then and long thereafter women, slaves, free Negroes, and native peoples were deprived not only of political rights but of many other “inalienable rights” essential to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, property was also an “inalienable” right, and slaves were the property of their owners. Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration, himself owned slaves. In important respects women, too, were the property of their husbands. And a substantial number of free men—on some estimates about 40 percent—were denied the right to vote; in all the new American states the right to vote was restricted to property holders into the nineteenth century.

Neither then nor later was inequality at all peculiar to the United States. On the contrary. In the 1830s the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that in comparison with Europe one of the distinctive characteristics of the United States was the extraordinary degree of social equality among that country's citizens.

Although many inequalities have diminished since 1776, many remain. We need only look around us to see inequalities everywhere. Inequality, not equality, appears to be the natural condition of humankind.

Thomas Jefferson was too experienced in human affairs to be

✱ unaware of the self-evident fact that in many important respects human capacities, advantages, and opportunities are not distributed equally at birth, much less after nurture, circumstance, and luck have compounded initial differences. The fifty-five men who signed the Declaration of Independence—men of practical experience, lawyers, merchants, planters—were hardly naive in their understanding of human beings. If we grant that they were neither ignorant of reality nor simply hypocritical, what could they possibly have meant by the audacious assertion that all men are created equal?

Despite so much evidence to the contrary, the idea that human beings are fundamentally equal made a great deal of sense to Jefferson, as it had to others before him like the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.¹ Since Jefferson's time many more persons throughout the world have come to accept, in some form, the idea of human equality. To many, equality is simply a fact. Thus to Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 the increasing "equality of conditions" he observed in Europe as well as America was so striking that it was "a providential fact, and it possesses all the characteristics of a Divine decree: it is universal, it is durable, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress."²

INTRINSIC EQUALITY: A MORAL JUDGMENT

Equalities and inequalities can take an almost infinite variety of forms. Inequality in the ability to win a marathon race or a spelling bee is one thing. Inequality in opportunities to vote, speak, and participate in governing in other ways is quite another.

To understand why it is reasonable to commit ourselves to political equality among citizens of a democratic state, we need to recognize that sometimes when we talk about equality we do not mean to express a factual judgment. We do not intend to describe what we

believe is or will be true, as we do when we make statements about winners of marathon races or spelling bees. Instead we mean to express a moral judgment about human beings; we intend to say something about what we believe ought to be. One such moral judgment might be put this way: "We ought to regard the good of every human being as *intrinsically* equal to that of any other." Employing the words of the Declaration, as a moral judgment we insist that one person's life, liberty, and happiness is not intrinsically superior or inferior to the life, liberty, and happiness of any other. Consequently, we say, we ought to treat all persons as if they possess equal claims to life, liberty, happiness, and other fundamental goods and interests. Let me call this moral judgment the principle of intrinsic equality. ✱

The principle does not take us very far, and in order to apply it to the government of a state, it helps to add a supplementary principle that it seems to imply: "In arriving at decisions, the government must give equal consideration to the good and interests of every person bound by those decisions." But why should we apply the principle of intrinsic equality to the government of a state and obligate it to give equal consideration to the interests of all? Unlike the authors of the Declaration, the claim that the truth of intrinsic equality is self-evident strikes me, and no doubt many others, as highly implausible. Yet intrinsic equality embodies so fundamental a view about the worth of human beings that it lies close to the limits of further rational justification. As with factual judgments, so, too, with moral judgments: if you pursue any assertion far enough down toward its foundations you finally reach limits beyond which reasonable argument takes you no further. In Martin Luther's memorable words of 1521: "It is neither safe nor prudent to do aught against conscience. Here I stand—I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

Although the principle of intrinsic equality lies close to these

ultimate limits, we have not quite reached them. For several reasons, intrinsic equality is, I believe, a reasonable principle on which to base the government of a state.

WHY WE SHOULD ADOPT THE PRINCIPLE

Ethical and religious grounds. First, for a great many people throughout the world it is consistent with their most fundamental ethical beliefs and principles. That we are all equally God's children is a tenet of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Buddhism incorporates a somewhat similar view. (Among the world's major religions, Hinduism may be an exception.) Most moral reasoning, most systems of ethics, explicitly or implicitly assume some such principle.

The weakness of an alternative principle. Second, whatever might be the case with other associations, for governing a state many of us find every general alternative to intrinsic equality implausible and unconvincing. Suppose Citizen Jones were to propose the following alternative as a principle for governing the state: "In making decisions the government must always treat my good and my interests as superior to those of everyone else." Implicitly rejecting the principle of intrinsic equality, Jones asserts what might be called a principle of intrinsic superiority—or at least Jones's intrinsic superiority. The claim to intrinsic superiority could be made more inclusive, of course, and it usually is: "The good and interests of my group [Jones's family, class, caste, race, or whatever] are superior to those of all others."

It will come as no shock to acknowledge at this point that we human beings have more than a trace of egoism: in varying degrees we tend to be more concerned with our own interests than those of others. Consequently, many of us might be strongly tempted make just such a claim for ourselves and those to whom we are most

attached. But unless we ourselves can count confidently on controlling the government of the state, why should we accept the intrinsic superiority of certain others as a fundamental political principle?

To be sure, a person or a group with enough power could enforce a claim to their intrinsic superiority over your objections—literally over your dead body. Throughout human history many individuals and groups have used—or rather, abused—their power in just that way. But because naked force has its limits, those who have laid a claim to being the embodiment of an intrinsic superiority to others have invariably cloaked their otherwise transparently feeble claim with myth, mystery, religion, tradition, ideology, and pomp and circumstance.

Yet if you were not a member of the privileged group and could safely reject their claim to intrinsic superiority, would you freely and knowingly consent to such a preposterous principle? I strongly doubt it.

Prudence. The two preceding reasons for adopting a principle of intrinsic equality as a basis for governing a state suggest a third: prudence. Because the government of a state not only confers great benefits but also can inflict great harm, prudence dictates a cautious concern for the manner in which its unusual capacities will be employed. A governing process that definitely and permanently privileged your own good and interests over those of others might be appealing if you were confident that you or your group would always prevail. But for many people that outcome is so unlikely, or at least so uncertain, that it is safer to insist that your interests will be given equal consideration with those of others.

Acceptability. A principle you find prudent to adopt, many others will also. Thus a process that guarantees equal consideration for all, you may reasonably conclude, is more likely to secure the assent of all the others whose cooperation you need to achieve your ends.