

# ΙΣΟΝΟΜΙΑ

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Equality is one of the great issues of our age, but few people stop to wonder at its being an issue in politics at all. Yet it is surprising that a concept which has its natural habitat in the mathematical sciences should have taken root in our thinking about how we should be governed. We do not naturally think of society in terms of group theory, or rings or fields, and have long been aware of the difficulties in establishing any over-arching social or political order. But we unthinkingly assume that we can meaningfully ask, and reliably tell, whether people are, or ought to be, equal to one another even while admitting how difficult it would be to say whether they were more or less than one another.

Formal logic can help. Equality is an equivalence relation, that is to say one that is transitive, symmetric and reflexive. Equivalence classes pick out classes of people or things that are the *same*, or *similar*, in some respect or other. There are many such, and we need to specify in respect of what two things are or are not equivalent before we are saying, or asking, anything definite. I can be equivalent to you in respect of age, or height, or weight, and many equivalence classes—contemporaries, co-religionists, comrades—may be of great importance socially or politically. But equality is, in its original context, more than just an expression of sameness. It suggests also a possibility of being either *more than* or *less than*. I can be the same age as you, but if I were not, I should be either older than you, or younger. This is always the case in mathematics. The law of trichotomy holds, that if two things are not equal, then one is greater, in the relevant respect, than the other, and the difference can itself be measured. With human beings, however, there are rather few respects in which we can be properly measured. Age, height and weight apart, the ascription of most numerical measures is a dubious affair. At one time psychologists were confident that they could measure intelligence, and economists still purport to measure wealth, but the ascriptions they actually make do not seem to deserve the confidence called for. I can make witty remarks, you can crack problems in symbolic logic: you have several thousand pounds in the bank, but I have a free house and access to all sorts of useful services. In extreme cases it is clear that one is cleverer or richer than another, but but it would be a bold, or insensitive, man who would claim that there is a uniform scale of intelligence or wealth that could be applied uniformly in all cases.

These difficulties are obvious and have often been pointed out, but we nevertheless continue to talk in terms of political and social equality, and assume that there must be some order, of wealth, or social position, or legal treatment, which will make the corresponding applications of the word to economic, social, or legal affairs legitimate. Why is this so? The answer is to be discerned in the early stages of Greek political thought, when equality first entered the political vocabulary.

Harmodius and Aristogeiton made Athens equal-lawed when they killed the tyrant.<sup>1</sup> Isonomia is the dominant inspiration of Greek democratic thought. It appears in our written records towards the end of the sixth century, though, of course, it may have been on men's lips for many years before. It is taken over by Alcmaeon as a medical metaphor in the first half of the fifth century, and is used

<sup>1</sup> Athenaeus 15.695a-b.

by Herodotus to characterize the democratic constitution championed by Otanes in the Debate of the Persian Nobles.<sup>2</sup> To our ears, used to the idea of fancy franchises and complicated voting systems, it does not seem strange to assign to each person an equal vote—everyone to count as one, and no one as more than one. But though the Greeks associated isonomia with democracy, the rule of the many, the terms were not quite synonymous<sup>3</sup>—it is particularly noteworthy that Thucydides (3.62.3) speaks of ὀλιγαρχία ἰσόνομος—and legal equality was not to glossed in terms of voting rights. It was an equality of nomos that was felt to be in issue, and the question remains how nomos could be the sort of magnitude of which an equal quantity could be desired.

Liddell and Scott helps: νομός, ὄ, ( νέμω) properly *anything assigned apportioned, that which one has in use or possession*, is juxtaposed to νόμος, ὄ, ( νέμω a feeding-place for cattle, pasture. Several other words, νομή, νομάς, νομεύς, come likewise from νέμω, and preserve the pastoral sense: νέμω itself (from √NEM, cf. Latin *Numa*, *numerus*, Gothic *nim-an*, Anglo-Saxon *nim-an*) has a double sense: A. *to deal out, distribute, dispense*, often in Homer mostly of meat and drink, and B. of herdsmen *to pasture or graze* their flocks. We can understand how the two senses are related, and give rise to the further senses of νομός. If I am to pasture your flocks and not fall foul of you, I need to know which pastures are apportioned to me, and which to you.<sup>4</sup> It is the earliest occasion the ancestors of the Greeks would have had in which they needed to abide by arrangements for allocating a good. Such arrangements were unlikely often to be reached by explicit distributive decisions. Custom would indicate who pastured what when and where,<sup>5</sup> and would naturally apply not only to the guidance given by the herdsmen but to the accustomed movements of their flocks, so much so that Heraclitus (fr.114) needs to add ἀνθρώπειοι το νόμοι in order to indicate that he is talking of human habits. The usage continued post-pastorally, so that Hesiod (Op. 388) can tell, more arably, of the νόμος of the plains, the done thing in the matter of ploughing, sowing and harvesting.

Custom grows up naturally in established communities and needs little articulate thought. It is different when new communities are founded. A fresh start is bound to be an occasion for rethinking. When the East Locrian colony at Naupactus was founded in the first quarter of the Fifth Century, the foundation decree

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, III, 80-82.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Greek Democracy*, Oxford, 1969, pp.110ff.; I am greatly indebted to this work.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Genesis 13:6-12.

<sup>5</sup> See E. Benvista, *Noms d'agent et noms d'action en indo-européen*, Paris, 1948, p.79: who gives as a definition “partager légalment; faire une distribution réalière, conforme au rang des personnes ou aux convenances de la situation”. C'est un partage réglé par l'autorité du droit coutumier. De là, en des sens divergents, mais où persiste la signification première, d'une part n'omos 'attribution régulière, règle d'usage, coutume', puis 'loi'; de l'autre nom'os 'attribution territoriale fixée par la coutume (>pacage), ou par l'autorité (>province), etc. But E. Laroche, *Histoire de la racine nem- en grec ancien*, Paris, 1949, esp. ch.IV, claims that there is no pastoral sense in any Indo-European language apart from Greek, and doubts if the pastoral sense could have been derived from the distributive one.

refers to the *νόμος* governing the inheritance of property, and lays down the customary (*νόμος*) practices to be followed both in the new colony and the original community.<sup>6</sup> Although many practices can be transplanted without being explicitly formulated, provided all the settlers come from the same mother city, it is inevitably the case that no prescriptive rights exist to guide them about who is to plough which piece of land or pasture his flocks where. That is a question always arising when fresh land is acquired, and one inviting an answer in quantitative terms.

As the age of colonisation drew to a close, their founding became more sophisticated. Prospectuses were issued, through the *Delphic Oracle*, in something of the same spirit as companies are floated in modern times. It was less a matter of impulsive communal action, driven by factional defeat or economic necessity, and more one of individual investment weighing up the benefits of a new life overseas as against the assured advantages of staying at home. The transition from the family firm to the public company has made us develop the concept of a *share*, so as to able individuals to weigh returns against outlays and to decide how much to invest. Similar conceptual pressures must have operated as the option of joining in a new colonial enterprise opened up to individual Greeks. The relevant good to be shared out was not monetary profit, as with a joint-stock company, but land, possibly pasture but more likely the limited fertile plain on which corn and vines and olives could be grown. It would make sense to ask how the available land was going to be shared out before embarking on a hazardous enterprise with strangers, and in the absence of already established custom, an equal distribution would not only seem natural, but would be the only basis on which outsiders would be willing to join. In the Sicilian Debate Athenagoras finds it natural to link *μετὰ πολλῶν ἰσονομεῖσθαι* with *ἐν δημοκρατίᾳ ἰσομοιρεῖν*:<sup>7</sup> to be assigned an equal share of the land is to have an equal share in the *πόλις* generally.

The double sense developed from the *NEM* root made it easy to apply the concept not only to the distribution of land but to established customs and usages of a society generally. The conceptual ground for Cleisthenes' reforms was established in the pastoral practices of Indo-European herdsmen long before. But *ἰσονομία* did not go unchallenged. Already in the Fifth Century the sophists were pointing out that customs were only conventions which might be changed, not part of the fabric of the universe, and the *νόμῳ / φύσει* contrast was not to the advantage of *νόμῳ*. Plato was more formidable still. He thought deeply about geometry, and proposed the programme of axiomatization, which was later carried out by Eudoxus and Euclid. Euclid's parallel postulate is not the most felicitous basis for Euclidean geometry, and yields a highly unintuitive proof of Pythagoras' theorem, as generations of schoolboys have learned to their cost. It is far simpler to prove it by similar triangles (which, much later, Wallis and Saccheri showed to be equivalent to the parallel postulate), but to do that rigorously requires an account of real numbers, and although Eudoxus almost anticipated Dedekind, he did not quite, and incommensurable numbers were felt to be irrational, and a no-go area for the Academy. But Plato was aware of the importance of similar triangles, and drew philosophical conclusions from the fact that they were the same shape but not the same size. He distinguished "geometrical equality" (same shape) from "arithmetical equality" (same size), and reckoned the former to be of great cogency among gods

<sup>6</sup> Martin Ostwald, *Nomos and the Beginnings of Greek Democracy*, Oxford, 1969, pp.170-173.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides VI, 38:5, 39:1.

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and men, while the latter led to the great injustice of assigning equal shares to equals and unequals alike.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle took over the distinction, and elucidated justice in terms of “proportionate equality”, in which good things were distributed to people in proportion to their ἀξία, worth, merits. Egalitarianism thereupon faded out in the ancient world. Although δικαιοσύνη was said to be an ἰσοπῆς τις, the ἀξία it was proportional to was essentially unmeasurable, and all that was left was the principle of universalisability, that we should treat like cases alike. Yet in another sense we could say that Plato and Aristotle saved the concept of equality as a political concept, by interpreting it in a way that was viable, and enabling it to survive under an egalitarian name but as a valid canon of justice. Perhaps we should say that Plato scotched ἰσονομία rather than killed it.

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Buck, GD, No.59 A.1 and 14. Jeffery, LSAG 105-06 and 108

But note: there are some instances of ἴσον being used to mean ‘same’ in Homer. ἴσον θυμὸν ἔχειν, I.13.704, 17.720. to be of like mind ἴσον ἐμοί φρονέουσα II. 15.50; θεοῖσιν ἴσ’ἔθελε φρονέειν II. 5.441, cf. 21.315 etc. L&S Thucydides and the orators often couple τὰ ἴσα with τὰ ὅμοια. L&S

But Solon sought to provide ἰσομοιρία for both ἀγαθοὶ and κακοὶ (Diehl. 23,21).

<sup>8</sup> *Gorgias* 508a; *Republic* VIII 555-562; *Laws* VI, 757.