

Meekness: Pursuing Excellence in the Service of Others

Advance Reading

From C. S. Lewis, "On Equality," in *Present Concerns* (Fount, 1986)

I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason. A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people like Rousseau, who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in the government. The danger of defending democracy on those grounds is that they're not true. And whenever their weakness is exposed, the people who prefer tyranny make capital out of the exposure. I find that they're not true without looking further than myself. I don't deserve a share in governing a hen-roost, much less a nation. Nor do most people – all the people who believe advertisements, and think in catchwords and spread rumours. The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters.

This introduces a view of equality rather different from that in which we have been trained. I do not think that equality is one of those things (like wisdom or happiness) which are good simply in themselves and for their own sakes. I think it is in the same class as medicine, which is good because we are ill, or clothes which are good because we are no longer innocent. I don't think the old authority in kings, priests, husbands, or fathers, and the old obedience in subjects, laymen, wives, and sons, was in itself a degrading or evil thing at all. I think it was intrinsically as good and beautiful as the nakedness of Adam and Eve. It was rightly taken away because men became bad and abused it. To attempt to restore it now would be the same error as that of the Nudists. Legal and economic equality are absolutely necessary remedies for the Fall, and protection against cruelty.

But medicine is not good. There is no spiritual sustenance in flat equality. It is a dim recognition of this fact which makes much of our political propaganda sound so thin. We are trying to be enraptured by something which is merely the negative condition of the good life. And that is why the imagination of people is so easily captured by appeals to the craving for inequality, whether in a romantic form of films about loyal courtiers or in the brutal form of Nazi ideology. The tempter always works on some *real* weakness in our own system of values: offers food to some need which we have starved.

When equality is treated not as a medicine or a safety-gadget but as an ideal we begin to breed that stunted and envious sort of mind which hates all superiority. That mind is the special disease of democracy, as cruelty and servility are the special diseases of privileged societies. It will kill us all if it grows unchecked. The man who cannot conceive a joyful and loyal obedience on the one hand, nor an unembarrassed and noble acceptance of that obedience on the other, the man who has never even wanted to kneel or to bow, is a prosaic barbarian. But it would be wicked folly to restore these old inequalities on the legal or external plane. Their proper place is elsewhere.

We must wear clothes since the Fall. Yes, but inside, under what Milton called "these troublesome disguises," we want the naked body, that is, the *real* body, to be alive. We want it, on proper occasions, to appear: in the marriage-chamber, in the public privacy of a men's bathing-place, and (of course) when any medical or other emergency demands. In the same way, under the necessary outer covering of legal equality, the whole hierarchical dance and harmony of our deep and joyously accepted spiritual inequalities should be alive. It is there, of course, in our life as Christians: there, as laymen, we can obey – all the more because the priest has no authority

over us on the political level. It is there in our relation to parents and teachers – all the more because it is now a willed and wholly spiritual reverence....

We Britons should rejoice that we have contrived to reach much legal democracy (we still need more of the economic) without losing our ceremonial Monarchy. For there, right in the midst of our lives, is that which satisfies the craving for inequality, and acts as a permanent reminder that medicine is not food. Hence a man's reaction to Monarchy is a kind of test. Monarchy can easily be "debunked": but watch the faces, mark well the accents, of the debunkers. These are the men whose tap-root in Eden has been cut: whom no rumour of the polyphony, the dance, can reach – men to whom pebbles laid in a row are more beautiful than an arch. Yet even if they desire mere equality they cannot reach it. Where men are forbidden to honour a king they honour millionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead: even famous prostitutes and gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served; deny it food and it will gobble poison.

And that is why this whole question is of practical importance. Every intrusion of the spirit that says "I'm as good as you" into our personal and spiritual life is to be resisted just as jealously as every intrusion of bureaucracy or privilege into our politics. Hierarchy within can alone preserve egalitarianism without. Romantic attacks on democracy will come again. We shall never be save unless we already understand in our hearts all that the anti-democrats can say, and have provided for it better than they. Human nature will not permanently endure flat equality if it is extended from its proper political field into the more real, more concrete fields within. Let us wear equality; but let us undress at night.

From C. S. Lewis, "The Necessity of Chivalry," in *Present Concerns* (Fount, 1986)

"Thou wert the meekest man," says Sir Ector to the dead Launcelot. "Thou wert the meekest man that ever ate in hall among ladies; and thou wert the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest."

The important thing about this ideal is, of course, the double demand it makes on human nature. The knight is a man of blood and iron, a man familiar with the sight of smashed faces and the ragged stumps of lopped-off limbs; he is also a demure, almost a maidenlike, guest in hall, a gentle, modest, unobtrusive man. He is not a compromise or happy mean between ferocity and meekness; he is fierce to the *n*th and meek to the *n*th. When Launcelot heard himself pronounced the best knight in the world, "he wept as he had been a child that had been beaten"....

Let us be quite clear that the ideal is a paradox. Most of us, having grown up among the ruins of the chivalrous tradition, were taught in our youth that a bully is always a coward. Our first week at school refuted this lie, along with its corollary that a truly brave man is always gentle. It is a pernicious lie because it misses the real novelty and originality of the medieval demand upon human nature. Worse still, it represents as a natural fact something which is really a human ideal, nowhere fully attained, and nowhere attained at all without arduous discipline....

The medieval ideal brought together two things which have no natural tendency to gravitate towards one another. It brought them together for that very reason. It taught humility and forbearance to the great warrior because everyone knew by experience how much he usually needed that lesson. It demanded valour of the urbane and modest man because everyone knew that he was as likely to be a milksop.

In so doing the Middle Ages fixed on the one hope of the world. It may or may not be possible to produce by the thousand men who combine the two sides of Launcelot's character. But if it is not possible, then all talk of any lasting happiness or dignity in human society is pure moonshine....