

A Liberty Founded on Proportional Equality: *An examination of Cicero's De re publica*

This paper attempts to unearth Cicero's conception of liberty as articulated in his philosophical dialogue *De re publica*. Despite Cicero's Enlightenment reception as the founder of the republican tradition, so centrally concerned with liberty, a focused examination of his conception of liberty remains largely absent from scholarship on his political philosophy. Understanding liberty simply through the lens of the republican tradition alone fails to address the crucial question of what level of egalitarianism liberty demands. Through close textual analysis, this inquiry demonstrates that Cicero's conception of liberty is grounded in proportional equality.

This paper's inquiry arises from Cicero's use of proportional equality as the justification for a mixed constitution as his favored regime type: "For there is no reason for a change when every citizen is firmly established in his own station, and there underlies it no perverted form into which it can plunge and sink" (Cic, Rep. 1.69). The stability of the mixed constitution, the typical source of its praise, Cicero attributed to proportional equality. By assigning each citizen a role in accordance with ability, the mixed constitution secures the stability of the commonwealth. It is for this reason that Cicero sees the mixed constitution the superior form of government, incapable, unlike other forms, of degenerating into corruption. This stability, as Cicero diagnoses, rests on proportional equality. The superiority of the mixed regime, then, lies in its safeguarding of proportional equality, which Cicero sees as essential to justice and political order. Given the centrality of this concept, and its being often overlooked in scholarship, a fuller understanding of the particular inequalities Cicero deems essential is crucial for grasping the deeper reasoning in his political philosophy.

With the place of proportional equality so central to Cicero's political philosophy, this paper emphasizes the need to distinguish Cicero's understanding of proportional equality from that of his predecessors, namely Plato. Here, a critical difference emerges: Cicero did not see the inclusion of wealth as a basis for proportional allotment of proportionality as a regrettable concession but rather one integral to his conception of justice. This positioning of wealth, along with merit, as a determinant of the extent of one's share of political authority cannot be dismissed as a mere prejudice of an aristocratic sympathizer but rather is consistent with his larger republican philosophy.

This paper finds that Cicero's preference for proportional equality is not a defense of aristocratic privilege at the expense of the masses, but rather as the means of securing true liberty—a liberty grounded in justice—for the entire commonwealth. Exploring Cicero's reception in the republican tradition thus prompts a reexamination of his conception of liberty and equality, which in turn, reveal key, yet often overlooked, insights into his shrewd political thought.

Works Cited

Cicero. "De Re Publica." Translated by Clinton W. Keyes. Harvard University Press, 1928.

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