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The Egalitarian constitution: modern identity in three moral values

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PART III: Moderating values: consensualism and personal autonomy

In the third part of this book I describe and explain the two chief values that moderate the equalitarian impulse. These serve to channel the energy of the alter-conscience, placing it in check: thus, an egalitarian mind is made out of a mere equalitarian impulse. The moderating values, then, completes the axiological set, making an egalitarian constitution into a conceivable model both of moral and of political governance, a proper regime. The inability to make decisions about the good based merely on equality will have led to the consideration of a solution with consent. Consent, likewise, is incapable of being a self-sufficient principle of moral and political life. That holds even when it is coupled with universal equality. Finally, personal autonomy, under a synthetic definition of ‘treating oneself as an end in oneself’, emerges as the linchpin value and virtue of modern persons, removing external ends, and making heteronomous obligations in principle impossible. The habitus of personal autonomy is the virtue without which none of the others can function sustainably; and with it, the other modern virtues flourish. Equality provides the universal status of persons, consent provides the ideal conduits of licit relations, but autonomy provides the content and limits of what equal persons can legitimately consent to, based on what they themselves manifest as their choices. It holds both the overweening excesses of equality and the open-endedness of consent in place in service of the person. A consonant mind might emerge from the interplay of these three values, but are the values and their attendant virtues enough to constitute and preserve an egalitarian constitution? That is the leading question of the last part of this book.