Introduction

Steven Frankel and John Ray

The idea for a volume of essays on "Equality and Excellence" arose out of a Tocqueville reading group at Xavier University that we held a number of years ago. Tocqueville saw that equality is the dominating passion of modern democracies. He thought that the Americans of his day had shown how equality could be combined with liberty to produce a stable democracy that would allow the talented to pursue their ambitions and perhaps even a version of aristocratic honor. He was not primarily interested in the Madisonian solution of institutional checks and balances in a diverse commercial republic but emphasized instead the doctrine of self-interest properly understood supported by religious beliefs, specifically those of Protestant Christianity. Yet as readers of the concluding chapters of volume two of *Democracy in America* know, Tocqueville was pessimistic that the excessive love of equality in democracies might ultimately be turned away from its tendency to undermine the liberty that excellence—whether as public or private virtue—needs to flourish. Equality would inevitably lead to a flattening and homogenization of democratic souls, typically obsessed with their own narrow interests. Individual men and women would be thwarted and overwhelmed by what Tocqueville called "soft despotism" to describe government as an irresistible parent guiding and limiting what can be done, said, and even thought. A dreary picture, to be sure, yet it is only one of many explorations on the tension between equality and excellence to emerge out of the history of political philosophy.

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Analysis of the meaning and implications of equality has taken on renewed urgency in American life. Today, demands for racial justice and gender and sexual equality pervade our politics, threatening either to expose as fraudulent our national commitment to "equality under law," or to undermine that commitment by replacing individual rights with the group rights of identity politics. The times in which we live seem to call for sustained reflection on equality in the history of political philosophy. The chapters of this book capture the diversity of formulations of the tension between equality and excellence (and of the meaning of these terms) as well as of proposals to reconcile the two.

How, we wonder, in the long tradition of political philosophy has this age-old tension been understood? Is this tension a permanent reflection of human nature itself? Or, rather, is it simply a product of historical or other circumstances? Alternatively, what are the sources and types of human excellence? How critical is civic or personal virtue to a good society? And, of course, we must not shrink from asking, What is a good society? In addressing the tension between equality and excellence, we return, necessarily, to the question of justice.

Ancient Greek writers are critical of democracy from the point of view of nobility and wisdom, yet they do not simply dismiss the claims of equality. Readers of this volume will find in Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon—the three writers we take to represent the best of ancient Greek political philosophy—both theoretical and practical grounds for respecting and promoting the claims of the many. Plato's *Symposium*, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*, each in its own way, acknowledge human aspirations as universal.

Stephanie Nelson argues that while Plato's *Republic* promotes an ideal of Philosopher Rulers and has some exceedingly harsh things to say about democracy and equality, the dialogue that is in many ways its companion piece, the *Symposium*, grounds the philosophic pursuit of the Forms in a universal motivation. Even more paradoxically, although the *Republic* focuses on *aretē*, or excellence, it is, overall, much less interested in competition than the *Symposium*, the theoretical view of which is much more universal, but which is competitive throughout. Finally, the *Symposium*'s closing picture of Alcibiades, torn apart by competing views of the good, reflects the "almost-philosopher" of the *Republic*, setting up a dialogic relation between the *Republic*'s ideal city and the actuality of Athens. As such, the dialogues, taken together, force us to reconsider the relation between excellence and equality, not because democracy necessarily promotes philos-

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ophy, but because a doubtful system of values, such as that of a democracy, might finally be the more desirable option.

Nathan Tarcov observes that in his novel *The Education of Cyrus* Xenophon invents a quasi-Spartan ancient Persia formally devoted to freedom and equality, but where the well-off peers receive an education required for political office that the vast majority of hard-working commoners cannot afford. Cyrus's education is divided between his father's Persia, where he undergoes a warrior's austere and severe education in justice (as obedience to law), moderation, and military skills, and his grandfather's despotic and luxurious Media where justice means the ruler has everything. When Cyrus is appointed to command a Persian army, he works a moral, military, social, and political transformation of Persia that enables him to create and rule his quasi-universal empire. First, he transforms the moral outlook of the peers so as no longer to practice virtue for its own sake but to do so for rewards; second, he arms the commoners like the peers undermining the old hierarchy; third, he makes rewards proportionate to desert as judged by Cyrus himself. Thus he establishes a quasi-meritocracy where all have an equal opportunity under his despotic rule over an enormous multinational empire. Readers of *The Education of Cyrus* are left to wonder whether equality suits despotism as well as freedom.

We offer two views of Aristotle on the question of the relation between excellence and equality, one on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and one on the *Politics*. According to Ann Charney Colmo, munificence (*megaloprepeia*—splendid and fitting expenditure, especially for the city), although often overlooked in Aristotle's discussion of the moral virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, discloses a surprising admixture of excellence and equality. The munificent outfits the city's triremes, with a view to the city's self-preservation—incidentally creating the need for the many to provide a strong navy. He gives the city opportunities to participate in the sacred things—for example, votive offerings—elevating all souls equally. He commissions beautiful art, monuments, buildings, bringing to all an education in the beautiful. As the discussion of the magnanimous is said to represent a "second" depiction—that of the philosopher (*Post. An.* 97b14–26)—so munificence reveals a "second" representation: that of the poet, who pleases and educates the many. Perhaps as important is that the poet needs the many—without an audience, his work would be futile. That need establishes a kind of mutual interchange between the poet and the many. Thus, munificence, one of the great virtues, provides on two levels the possibility of harmonizing the seemingly opposed qualities of equality and excellence.

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Aristotle is famous for arguing that virtue is the end of political life, indeed, that "virtue must be a care for every city, or at least every one that is named so in truth." Yet as Mary P. Nichols shows in her chapter on the *Politics*, Aristotle gives a greater place to equality and freedom than is recognized. Nichols begins with his treatment of the family in Book 1 of the *Politics*. By attacking despotic rule of a husband over his wife, and of a father over his children, Aristotle prepares for his proposal of a form of rule that belongs to political life, a shared rule that he calls "political rule." Such rule is appropriate for human beings who are free and equal, in the sense that they are political by nature because they possess reason or speech. She then examines Aristotle's discussion of the claims to rule in Book 3, especially the claims of equality or free birth, wealth, and virtue. His famous sixfold classification of regimes gives the rule of the many in the common interest (polity) a central place, while he claims that the rule of "a king over everything," an individual of preeminent virtue, deprives the others in the community of the honors they deserve. Finally, Nichols shows how Aristotle's mixed regime of Book 4, including one based on a well-off middle class, and his regime in Book 7 that "we would pray for," mingle the principles of equality and excellence. Excellence or virtue must bow to equality, in reverence rather than submission, precisely because equality best allows excellence to flourish in the give and take of political life that requires citizens and statesmen to develop and exercise the virtues of moderation, justice, and prudence.

From the peaks of Greek antiquity, we turn first to representatives of classic modernity: Spinoza, Fénelon, and Montesquieu. In his chapter on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, Steven Frankel begins by noting that Spinoza does little to conceal the distinction between the few and the many, along with his contempt for the latter. Nonetheless, he makes a strong case in favor of equality and democracy. According to Frankel, the key to understanding this apparent contradiction is Spinoza's doctrine of natural rights, which are rooted in our common striving for self-preservation in the state of nature. This striving or conatus has a political dimension in the sense that we interpret it in terms of freedom and choice. In addition, we privilege our individual perspective and do not recognize the wisdom of others. In this sense, nature does not privilege reason over passion. We are equal in the sense that we experience our conatus individually, according to our particular capacity and passions, and our evaluation of the good is particular to us as well. Natural right reflects the authority of our particular account of the good. In this practical sense, nature lends authority to

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the appearance of equality. Spinoza builds the case for democracy on this conviction even as he reminds philosophers of the superiority of reason.

We are delighted to include a chapter on Fénelon, a tremendously popular writer in the France of his day who deserves to be more widely read today. Ryan Patrick Hanley notes that Fénelon's chief contribution to political philosophy, his epic *Telemachus*, was written to instruct the heir of Louis XIV in the virtues of political rule. But the text also has another dimension. Conceived as a continuation of Homer's *Odyssey*, *Telemachus* also represents a Catholic archbishop's effort to provide an alternative to Homeric virtue. Hanley surveys Fénelon's novel synthesis of Christian conceptions of equality with ancient conceptions of political virtue in an effort to preserve greatness even within an ever more egalitarian world.

Frank Rohmer notes that though consistently cited as the most thorough proponent of the principle of separation of powers, Montesquieu was for more than two centuries an author more cited than carefully read. The seemingly disjointed character of his writings, involving multiple perspectives and lacking clear linear development, has understandably led those scholars who have seriously delved into the morass the author presents to varied and contradictory interpretations of his work. Intentionally perplexing, the desultory style of Montesquieu's three great works, *Persian Letters*, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, and *The Spirit of the Laws*, reflects the complexity of a world of unfolding Ovidian Metamorphosis in which forms change into other forms as human nature is refracted by historical experience in which climate, geography, laws, and culture exert formative forces both physical and spiritual. Montesquieu's overriding purpose was to describe the motion of human things with a comprehensive science of politics, thereby deepening the appreciation of existing political orders, even if imperfect, to a decent and humane life and counseling moderation to those whose reformist impulses would impel them in the direction of perfectionist revolutionary zeal.

As the first great critic of early modernity, Rousseau is the turning point in the history of ideas. Pamela Jensen explores several aspects of the story of *Emile*, Rousseau's imaginary pupil, and "the magician-Socrates" and considers their implications for reconciling equality and excellence. She connects the issues of *amour-propre*, the need to promote a "constant curiosity" in *Emile*, and the introduction of the first book in Emile's education—the novel *Robinson Crusoe*. She suggests that in order to avoid a dangerous rivalry between the tutor or governor and Emile, Rousseau establishes a rivalry between Emile and Robinson Crusoe. Finally, she considers how

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Rousseau the philosopher shields philosophy from attack and seeks to forge an alliance between philosophers and nonphilosophers; perhaps the best and for Rousseau the most important way to reconcile equality and excellence.

Andrea Ray observes that in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes liberal market-states as societies that both recognize individuals as equals insofar as they are all rights-bearers and deeply alienate those individuals from society by way of that recognition. Yet, unlike later theorists such as Marx, Hegel seeks to maintain much of the liberal state including property rights. Ray argues that Hegel instead approaches the problem of liberal alienation by examining how we are deficient under liberalism—how our self-actualization is hindered and how we fail to flourish as human beings within such a society. In doing so, Hegel suggests that the problem with liberalism is not so much that recognizing individuals as rights-bearers is wrong, as that such recognition is not enough. For a society to be conducive to human excellence, therefore, Hegel maintains that we must look beyond the form of life described by seventeenth-century liberalism to *Sittlichkeit*—an ethical order that permits a broader array of recognition by conceiving of the individual as deeply interwoven with the group without simply reducing the individual to a mere part of the group.

Our volume next turns to two additional thinkers of what we might call mature modernity, Tocqueville and Kierkegaard. Tocqueville distinguishes two forms of the love of equality, one "manly and legitimate," the other "debased." John Koritansky observes that Tocqueville's great work, *Democracy in America*, is intended to demonstrate the political and social structures whereby what we may call the nobler of these two forms can persist. Moreover, for Tocqueville, the sort of nobility that is potentially compatible with democracy is not merely a watered-down relic of aristocratic nobility but is rather a true reflection of human greatness.

Do all great thinkers have a concept of excellence? Christopher Colmo puts this question to Kierkegaard, and finds that his concept of excellence is embodied in men of excellence: Socrates, Shakespeare, or Mozart. But as these names make clear, excellence thus understood belongs to what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic realm, the realm of more and less, where even excellence is finite. Excellence and mediocrity face a common despair in this finite realm where all is vanity. This despair fully embraced opens the way for all equally to imbue their individual talents with eternal validity as their task in life. Duty becomes a way to regain what despair took away.

We conclude the book with chapters on Nietzsche and Rawls, two contrary perspectives from postmodernity, the one despising equality for its

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betrayal of human greatness and the other insisting on equality as necessary to decent political life. As Timothy Sean Quinn shows, few thinkers have written so movingly about nobility, or with such undisguised hostility toward equality, as has Nietzsche. Quinn attempts to shape Nietzsche's concept of nobility in light of his rejection of liberalism by taking a synoptic look at writings across the entire ambit of his oeuvre, from the early essay "The Greek State" of 1871 to *Beyond Good and Evil*, which contains his most complete articulation of human nobility as it is manifest in the figure of the philosopher. Tracing Nietzsche's attack on equality on behalf of the dignity of philosophy in this fashion helps to clarify both the attractiveness of Nietzsche's views and their dangers.

John Rawls is universally recognized as a major theorist of egalitarian liberalism but less often noted is his concern with the conditions of excellence. Michael Zuckert traces the theme of excellence in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, and assesses its success as an effort to make room for excellence in a theory devoted primarily to equality. Although Rawls intends to reconcile equality and excellence, Zuckert finds that he has not done better than the liberal tradition in this elusive endeavor. Zuckert draws a conclusion fitting our book as a whole: it is "the tensions inherent in human nature and society that make anything but an imperfect and fraught reconciliation impossible."

The chapters of this book not only bear out Zuckert's conclusion, they also remind us that not every good principle can exist fully in a society at the same time. Excellence may need to give way to equality if there is to be justice; likewise, equality may need to moderate its demands if human excellence is to have the protective space it needs to flourish, to the benefit of all. If Tocqueville, our perceptive interpreter of American democracy, is correct, the danger to liberty in our time appears to come not from an excessive privileging of excellence—whether intellectual, moral, or civic—but from an unhealthy, because unreasoned, love of and demand for ever greater equality. However this may be, the chapters of this book will allow readers to gain a sweeping overview of the tension between equality and excellence as it has been articulated by political philosophers from Greek antiquity to modern times.

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