Agnostic Egalitarianism

Liberal democracy is a set of interlocking and partly conflicting values and practices and yet behind all this complexity can be detected a general stance of amazing coherence. I can think of no better name for this stance than agnostic egalitarianism. This egalitarianism is agnostic in that it pleads a conscientious ignorance as to whether people are equal or unequal, in what respects, to what degree, and so on. Despite appearances, this egalitarianism has not given up nature as a point of reference and has no time for luck egalitarianism beyond philosophical speculation. Poised between nature and convention, it rejects any claim to knowing who are fit to rule, who are more deserving of the better places in society, and what the good life is. The first ignorance provides a rationale for electoral politics based on universal suffrage, the second for equality of opportunity, and the third for a certain understanding of liberty. These upshots of the ignorance of nature are egalitarian in a sense, yet the resulting egalitarianism is capable of generating very serious inequality of outcome, even in the name of equality. This inconsistency has its source in a lack of conviction about what people are like in relation to one another in the most natural state of affairs and in a corresponding egalitarianism of sorts that serves as a convention or discovery procedure to reveal nature. But it is impossible for this nature ever to be adequately revealed, and thus agnostic egalitarianism ends up with neither truth nor equality.

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