

ONE

IN SEARCH OF A LOST ARCHIPELAGO

C'est sortir de l'humanité que de sortir du milieu; la grandeur de l'âme humaine consiste à savoir s'y tenir.

—Pascal

The Many Faces of Moderation

Almost three centuries ago, Montesquieu claimed that human beings tend to accommodate themselves better to middles than to extremities.¹ Remembering the twentieth-century Gulag and the other concentration camps would be enough, however, to make us question the power and influence of moderation over human passions. If anything, the last century has confirmed John Adams' warning that, "without the great political virtues of humility, patience, and moderation . . . every man in power becomes a ravenous beast of prey."² Nonetheless, it is difficult to be passionate about moderation, a complex and difficult virtue, with a discreet and sometimes obsolete charm, which is unlikely to appeal to everyone. It is, moreover, equally hard to act like a moderate, for moderates are often marginalized, derided, ignored, or simply forgotten, while moderation itself is "stigmatized as the virtue of cowards and compromise as the prudence of traitors."³

As such, moderation is bound to be a contested concept reflecting the ambiguity of our moral and political vocabulary. "With a subject of this sort," Harry Clor has recently remarked, "one does not prove things, yet one can make arguments more or less rationally defensible in light of pervasive experiences. This is an arena in which moral absolutes are very hard to come by."⁴ The difficulty of agreeing on a definition of moderation is reflected in the wide range of views on its ethical, institutional, and political dimensions, as well as in the fact that moderation may not be suitable to all circumstances. Beginning with Aristotle, philosophers have highlighted a few paradoxes surrounding the principle of the excluded middle, and have argued that in some cases, an appeal to moderation might, in fact, be a logical fallacy. Known as the *argumentum ad temperantia* or "false compromise," such an appeal implies that the positions being considered represent extremes on a continuum of opinions, and that such extremes are always wrong, while the middle ground between them is always correct. In reality, some positions and arguments do not admit of a coherent middle, and not every compromise between extremes is always legitimate. Under some circumstances, in fact, *tertium non datur*: only extreme positions are possible, though not necessarily desirable. In other words, the principled pursuit of balance can sometimes create severe imbalances, which should be avoided if at all possible.⁵

The paradoxes do not stop here. The concept of moderation has been understudied, even though the works of many writers viewed as moderates—Aristotle, Montesquieu, Burke, and Tocqueville—are well known. They employ various concepts related to moderation, but their writings are not commonly seen as belonging to a larger tradition of political moderation. This explains in part why moderates have rarely been regarded as constituting a coherent alternative tradition of thought and have instead been considered exotic voices in the wilderness, too different one from another, or too weak to form a coherent political tradition.⁶

Furthermore, the tradition of moderation as a mode of argument and a form of political action lacks well-defined boundaries. While moderation is often interpreted as a temperament, a state of mind (disposition), or a trait of character, this view does not give due consideration to its institutional facets. Moreover, when defined as a virtue, moderation most often refers to political leaders and is interpreted as being oriented toward others, when in fact it can also be regarded as a virtue regulating our conduct with respect to ourselves. Last but not least, while moderation might also be taken as a synonym of reasonableness, a desirable form of civility, or an antonym of fanaticism, it is important to remember that it is *not* always rational or possible to espouse moderate positions. This might lead us to conclude that moderation is only a circumstantial virtue with limited relevance and appeal.

Having already suggested that it is virtually impossible to offer a single definition of moderation, I am prepared to admit that sometimes it might be easier to define moderation by looking at what it opposes: extremism, radicalism, zealotry, fanaticism, “terrorism,” or madness.⁷ More specifically, moderation opposes absolute power, conflict, tension, polarization, violence, war, and revolution. It can also be interpreted as an antonym of rigidity, stubbornness, dogmatism, utopianism, perfectionism, or moral absolutism. Some might argue that moderation is more than a sensibility but less than a doctrine. The perspective adopted in this book departs from this view and argues that a moderate agenda *cannot* be reduced to a minimalist program justified exclusively by the fear of—and the mere opposition to—extremes.

The question remains: what do moderates stand for? It would seem to me that they affirm three basic attitudes. First, they defend pluralism—of ideas, interests, and social forces—and seek to achieve a balance between them in order to temper political and social conflicts. Second, moderates prefer gradual reforms to revolutionary breakthroughs, and they are temperamentally inclined to making compromises and concessions on both prudential and normative grounds. They acknowledge that the best course of action in politics is often to “rally around the part least bad among your adversaries, even when that party is still remote from your own views.”⁸ Third, moderation presupposes a tolerant approach which refuses to see the world in Manichean terms that divide it into forces of good (or light) and agents of

evil (or darkness). It consists in a distinct political style that stands in stark contrast to the overconfident *modus operandi* of those whose world is dominated by black-and-white contrasts. Moderates refuse the posture of prophets, even if sometimes they, too, may be tempted to make grand historical generalizations and predictions. Anti-perfectionists and fearful of anarchy, they endorse fallibilism as a middle way between radical skepticism and epistemological absolutism, and acknowledge the limits of political action and the imperfection of the human condition.

In practice, the institutionalization of political moderation sometimes amounts to—but is *not* limited to—finding a center between (or a neutral power above) all parties; more generally, though, it implies building “moderate” government, which may take various institutional forms. While it may be tempting to equate centrism with moderation, an identification between the two must *not* be taken as a universal axiom, for we can find moderates on the left, at the center, and on the right of the political spectrum. When moderates advocate the virtues of the center, theirs is a morally, ideologically, and institutionally complex center, and it should not be identified with weakness or opportunism.

Moderates have worn many masks over time: the Stoic (Seneca); the prudent man (Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Gracián); the trimmer (Halifax, Oakeshott, Necker); the skeptic (Hume, Kant, Montaigne); the pluralist (Madison, Berlin); the liberal in the middle or between two worlds (Tocqueville); the critic of zealotry, fanaticism, and enthusiasm (Burke, Hume); the eclectic (Cousin); and the “committed observer” (Aron, Walzer). Among the concrete examples of moderate agendas, one could mention: the *juste milieu* between revolution and reaction; Ordoliberalism (in post-war Germany); social-democracy in Sweden as a middle ground between pure free market capitalism and full state socialism; and the New Deal in the United States. There were also political movements that have claimed to follow the principles of moderation: the Prague Spring movement of 1968 (“a revolt of moderates,” as Milan Kundera once claimed); the Solidarity movement and the “self-limiting” revolution in Poland; Charter 77 in former Czechoslovakia; and the doctrine of the “Third Way” (in the United Kingdom under Tony Blair).

The Skepticism toward Moderation

Moderation has all these faces and virtues, but it is nonetheless an inconspicuous virtue prone to understatement. How can one be enthusiastic about something that lacks charisma, carries the connotation of small-mindedness and philistine dullness, and promotes what Nietzsche once denounced as bland or soft moralism? “Moderation sees itself as beautiful,” he wrote, but “it is unaware that in the eye of the immoderate it appears black and sober, and consequently ugly-looking.”⁹

The social sciences and the humanities have surprisingly little to say about the place of moderation in the hierarchy of virtues and tend to dismiss it as an elusive concept that cannot be rigorously defined. Major works such as John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision*, Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*, Quentin Skinner's *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, and Leo Strauss' *Natural Right and History*, as well as classic accounts of American society such as Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (a book that celebrates America's moderate political culture) pay scant or no attention at all to moderation, although the latter is related to many topics addressed in their pages. Moderation is conspicuously absent from the index of these books and from other recent works such as Deirdre McCloskey's *Bourgeois Virtues* (which praises prudence and temperance), Nancy Rosenblum's *On The Side of Angels* (which devotes an entire chapter to centrism and extremism), Avishai Margalit's *The Decent Society* (which celebrates a virtue—decency—that has many things in common with moderation), or Cass Sunstein's *Going to Extremes* (which explores the reasons leading people to espouse extremist positions in politics).

This reluctance to theorize about moderation has several causes. One of them is that moderation has often been understood as a vague virtue, too imprecise to be rigorously analyzed. To the extent that it connotes a certain character trait, or a habit of mind that is liable to change over time, its universe appears uncertain and fuzzy, defying apodictic and universal statements. With such a topic, one is forced to deal only with nuances of gray, leaving stark colors to others. It is in fact impossible to discover or to formulate moral absolutes and universal laws that define moderation. Recognizing moderates in actions is far easier than describing in theory what they stand for.¹⁰

Second, in ordinary language, a moderate person carries the connotation of someone incapable of making firm decisions or having strong feelings. Thus, moderation has sometimes been equated with docility, indecision, pettiness, and submissiveness, traits of the weak or the meek, that those who prefer bolder and manlier ways eschew. Moderation has been equated with “petty” politics, based on compromise and small steps, as opposed to the immoderation that characterizes “grand” politics, based on war and conquest.¹¹ Thus defined, moderation appears a bland and incoherent virtue, the opposite of fortitude and decisiveness, and incompatible with firmness and clarity of purpose. The most developed and brilliant societies of the past, Fourier once argued, were those that risked the most and displayed a great deal of immoderation in their pursuit of the good life. “Where has civilization made most progress?” he asked. “This happened in Athens, Paris, and London, where people have not been friends of moderation.”¹² Similarly, echoing Proudhon's argument that radicalism and enthusiasm can also be seen as preconditions of greatness, Marx justified radicalism by claiming that “to be radical is to go to the root of the matter;” adding that

the root is man himself.¹³ On this view, moderation (as opposed to radicalism) appears as a negative or weak virtue, one that does not leave a memorable impression, while boldness and assertiveness tend to produce elevated emotions, enlivening our sense of dignity. As a second-best virtue, moderation seems therefore unable to quench our thirst for greatness and glory, a virtue best left to the tepid, middling, shy, timorous, indecisive, and lukewarm individuals who are, allegedly, incapable of great “heroic” acts and stories.¹⁴

Third, on many occasions, moderates’ ideas have been dismissed as a mere expression of political opportunism or egoism, and the adjective “moderate” has been applied to the person who is too willing to engage in whatever compromises and tactical maneuvers suit his or her temporary interests. Often times, we admire those who stand firmly on absolute principles and whose universe consists entirely of primary colors and sharp contrasts. Hence, an unchanging viewpoint is generally considered a great and necessary virtue in statesmen, while moderation, which implies a middling mind open to compromise, is not. As Isaiah Berlin once noted, we tend to be impressed by self-absorbed politicians who march with determination and sometimes even ruthlessness toward their goals and stubbornly pursue their own one-dimensional vision.¹⁵ In turn, as Norberto Bobbio reminded us, the symbols used to describe successful politicians are the fox (shrewdness) and the lion (force) rather than the lamb (innocence).¹⁶

To radical spirits—from Rousseau and Marx to Schmitt, Sartre, and Foucault—whose flamboyant rhetoric fascinates us through its combination of romantic revolt and intransigence, we are willing to grant a privilege that, as Bobbio remarked, is commonly denied to the majority of mortals: that is, the right to be immoderate, even the right to condone the occasional use of violence for the sake of “nobler” ideals.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, in the Pantheon of great heroes one will find few moderate spirits, earthly glory being more often granted to those who have *not* been moderate, who conquered states and built powerful empires. It pays to be immoderate, it seems. Radical or extreme gestures and flamboyant words can create bold and colorful narratives, and these are arguably much more attractive than moderation. This is why we tend to underestimate those thinkers and actors whose universe consists mostly of various nuances of gray, who believe that in politics we do not have to choose between good and evil, but between what is preferable and what is detestable. As for the moderates themselves, they distinguish themselves through their own blend of prudence, self-restraint, and skepticism, reminding us that politics is a messy and tangled business far from a romantic quest for ultimate truths and certainty.

The peculiar nature of moderation is further illustrated by the fact that the latter is *not* a virtue for all seasons and all people. As Tocqueville remarked, “in times when passions begin to gain control over the conduct of human affairs, it is less what people of experience and knowledge think that deserves attention than what fills dreamers’ imagination.”¹⁸ Moderation is

sometimes viewed as a positional or circumstantial virtue, much like Aristotle's *mesotes* (middle), the exact location of which ultimately depends on the position (and strength) of the extremes that it seeks to temper. As such, moderation designates a stance that is far from ideologically fixed and whose contours are surprisingly fluid. What is moderate today might not be so tomorrow, and what was moderate in the past would not be viewed in the same light today. Being a moderate in the context of the 1920s and 1930s, when the values of parliamentary democracy were under assault, was radically different from being a moderate today, when democracy is the uncontested dominant political ideology in the entire civilized world. All this suggests that there are times when moderation is a virtue and other periods when it might be a political liability. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn would not have been successful in challenging the orthodoxy of the Soviet communist system had he adopted a more moderate approach. Sometimes, only immoderate voices like his or Antigone's can successfully oppose tyranny, which explains why moderation is a double-edged sword. Its universe is multi-dimensional and its relevance depends on particular circumstances, further complicating its status as a stand-alone political agenda.

Last but not least, another critique of political moderation calls into question its commitment to promoting democratic principles and values. Jonathan Israel has recently argued that a great deal of the achievement of the Enlightenment was made possible by the efforts of its radical representatives who endorsed many of the democratic ideals we take for granted today. Drawing its roots from Spinoza and Bayle, the radical Enlightenment (in Israel's view) could not have achieved its goal of transforming the political and social framework of modern society by relying upon a moderate agenda. Reshaping public opinion and doing away with obsolete privileges required a radical and bold approach that did not allow for compromise on key issues such as equality, toleration, and pluralism. Israel's radical Enlightenment endorsed a package of basic concepts and values including rationalism, equality of all mankind (racial and sexual), individual rights, secular universalism, justice, toleration, freedom of belief and of expression, and democratic republicanism.¹⁹ As such, according to Jonathan Israel, the radical approach of Diderot, Helvétius, and Paine was in irreconcilable tension with the political moderation praised by Montesquieu, Ferguson, Hume, Smith, Voltaire, and Turgot, the main representatives of the moderate Enlightenment. In Israel's words, the latter "was inherently antidemocratic, anti-egalitarian, and reluctant to concede a full toleration,"²⁰ seeking to limit the scope of reason and the use of rationalism as a political tool of social criticism.

While there is some truth in all of these critiques, it is also important to remember that radical philosophical rhetoric was sometimes used as an original strategy for promoting moderate political reform. A cursory look at key entries in the *Encyclopédie* (including those signed by Diderot himself, such as the one on political authority) shows that a certain degree of mod-

eration in one area made radicalism in another possible, while radicalism with regard to some issues was accompanied by moderation on others.²¹ Several entries by Jaucourt (such as the one on legislative and executive power) put forward a strong case for two principles connected to political moderation: the balance of powers and bicameralism, while others regarded consent and public opinion as key principles of any legitimate political regime. Not surprisingly, as we shall see later, during the French Revolution, moderation was denounced as a weapon used by dangerous intriguers and “traitors” of the nation, singled out for their commitment to “radical” principles, or for their alleged lack of civic allegiance and dubious commitment to the values of the fatherland.²²

What many critics of moderation forget is that there are circumstances in which even remembering or evoking the idea of moderation would be enough to brand someone as traitor or an enemy of the people, and that moderation and the mean are *not* the morality of the herd, as Nietzsche once said. Appearances notwithstanding, moderation is, in fact, a *difficult* virtue for courageous minds.²³ As Burke once argued, moderation must be clearly distinguished from “the counterfeits of pusillanimity and indecision” and requires “a deep courage” and resoluteness when one must stand up against the voice and wishes of the majority.²⁴ Searching for the mean is always a demanding task, arguably more difficult than making one’s journey along paths that are more extreme, because the mean is multi-dimensional and acting like a moderate requires balancing and weighing various principles in every situation rather than relying on a single set of universal principles or values. It presupposes reasoning and deliberation, but it can never rely on reasoning alone, since it also demands intuition, foresight, and flexibility. Therefore, a politics of moderation requires a complex mix of vision, boldness, and self-control, along with courage, patience, and a knowledge of the circumstances. In order to survive, moderates must always be *en garde*. They are obliged to blend the innocence of the dove with the shrewdness of the serpent.²⁵

Moderation in the Classical and Christian Traditions

The ancients did not share the moderns’ skepticism toward moderation. On the contrary, they regarded the latter as a cardinal virtue, opposed to the “extremism” of barbarians whom they considered to be incapable of following a rational middle course. The classical concepts of mean, moderation, and the middle share the root “med” which evokes the idea of driving something back to its natural measure.

Aeschylus’ claim (in the *Eumenides*) that God gives the victory to moderation in every form expressed the classical belief in the power of this virtue identified with reasonableness and just measure. A few centuries later, the idea of the “golden mean” (*aurea mediocritas*) played a key role in Hor-

ace's *Odes*,²⁶ where it was also associated with proportion, just measure, and balance. Equally important, the doctrine of the mean also appeared outside of ancient Greece and Rome, occupying an important place in Confucius' writings and the *Bhagavad Gita* in which the mean was exalted as a way to maintain inner balance and mental harmony. "Perfect is the virtue which is according to the Mean! Rare have they long been among the people, who could practice it!" wrote the author of one neo-Confucian treatise, *The Doctrine of the Mean*. The opening paragraph of the text quotes the following aphorism attributed to Chung-ni: "The superior man embodies the course of the Mean; the mean man acts contrary to the course of the Mean."²⁷

To understand the ancients' uses of moderation we must pay special attention to their conventional linguistic assumptions and vocabulary, which point to the existence of a close relationship between moderation, the golden mean, mixed government, and temperance.²⁸ The best place to explore this connection is in Aristotle's works, most notably the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. But already a few decades before Aristotle linked moderation to prudence and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), Plato had famously defined it (in the *Republic*) as the virtue that allows us to control or temper our passions, emotions, and desires. In another Platonic dialogue, the *Charmides*, Plato reflected on the relationship between *sophrosyne* and self-knowledge.²⁹ One of Plato's recent commentators has suggested a possible parallel between the "dialectical moderation" in the *Charmides* and the treatment of *sophrosyne* in the *Republic*, arguing that "the moderation of the intellectual/philosophical types . . . is shown to result primarily as a function of their intellectual interests and the sublimation and symbolic reintegration of the lower energies into the pursuit of knowledge."³⁰ Although *sophrosyne* was primarily understood to be a virtue of the soul, it also had several important institutional implications in Plato's writings. As one scholar put it, Plato was arguably the first man to systematically reflect on nearly every aspect of a balanced government, and he proposed specific ways of preventing the decay of political institutions and maintaining social order.³¹ In the *Laws*, he wrote favorably about the mixed constitution of Sparta, which wisely divided power among four groups whose conflicting ambitions were moderated by a state council composed of three hundred sixty Spartans.

More so than Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's books allow us to follow the transformation of moderation from a predominantly ethical concept, germane to prudence, practical wisdom, and temperance, into a prominent *political* virtue. Books 2 and 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are the *locus classicus* for examining the connection between moderation, prudence, and practical wisdom, as well as for the definition of virtue as a mean between extremes. According to Aristotle, "excess and deficiency are characteristic of vice," while "the mean of virtue."³² On this view, virtue is identified with choosing what is intermediate—that is, "the mean relative to us," defined by

reference to reason—and the mean must be sought and followed because it preserves order and freedom in society.³³ “A master of any art,” Aristotle argued, “avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this.”³⁴ Note here the seminal distinction between the middle and the mean. The middle is defined in relation to the extremes, whereas the mean is always designated in relation to the person who makes the decision and must take into account the shifting configuration of external factors and circumstances. Right action amounts then to finding the mean relative to *us* in each particular case, and for this no theoretical or universal formula exists. The mean is not one-dimensional, but multi-dimensional, and we must always assess and evaluate the context of our choices in order to decide on the appropriate course of action at the “right” time, in the “right” place, and with regard to the “right” people.³⁵

Aristotle’s claim that moderation can be attained only through experience and practice and that it is to be understood only in the context of specific situations leads to the conclusion that there can be no “science” (or theory) of moderation, since the latter is a mean between art and science. In Aristotle’s view, moderation is a difficult virtue not suitable to the young, and this for at least two reasons. First, it presupposes experience, which can be gained only through trial-and-error over time; second, it is never easy to find the mean and the middle, and some actions (theft, murder) or feelings (envy) admit of no mean. In such cases, we may never be “correct” and must rely only on our discernment and foresight, trying to be as reasonable as possible by using our intuition and common sense in order to adjust our actions to “particulars” rather than universal rules.³⁶ The solution proposed by Aristotle amounts to a form of trimming between extremes that requires careful thought and prudence: “We must also examine what we ourselves drift into more easily . . . we must drag ourselves off in the contrary direction; for if we pull far away from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall reach the intermediate condition.”³⁷

Aristotle identified two extremes: being overly changeable and inconstant (opportunism), and being too inflexible and rigid (dogmatism). In choosing a mean between these two courses of action, Aristotle’s moderate politician seeks a middle ground between strict adherence to principles and artistic improvisation.³⁸ This also requires the cultivation of individual character so as to create a moderate citizen body practicing self-restraint. Paraphrasing Aristotle, one might then say that no one can be moderate (and prudent) without also being good and virtuous. The extent to which a person may deviate from the middle path before becoming blameworthy is not easy to determine by abstract reasoning and is contingent upon context and circumstances. “Such things,” Aristotle claimed, “depend on particular facts and the decision rests with perception. So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily hit the mean and what is right.”³⁹ Sometimes, we may have to

forgo moderation to find the proper course of action. The idea that moderates, in order to remain faithful to their principles, might sometimes have to incline toward extremes is arguably one of the most intriguing implications of Aristotle's argument.

The individual type of moderation described by Aristotle found its institutional home in the concept of *mixed government*, defined as a combination of several forms of government in which power is shared by various groups and is exercised according to a combination of rules and procedures.⁴⁰ A mixed constitution was seen from the very beginning as an effective remedy for the concentration of political power. Although not all of those who have defended mixed constitutions were political moderates, there is a significant affinity between this concept and the idea of political moderation.⁴¹ A proponent of *juste milieu*, Aristotle favored a mixed constitution on logical, prudential, and normative grounds. First, since virtue presupposes finding the mean between extremes, it follows logically that the constitution that gives priority to the middling ranks in society would be the best. Second, Aristotle viewed mixed government as a prudential middle ground between the extremes of pure democracy and oligarchy. He defined it as a type of constitution that does not grant unlimited authority to any group and uses a combination of democratic, oligarchic, and aristocratic standards for assigning political rights. To this end, Aristotle proposed a mixture of institutional mechanisms and electoral practices (election by lot and ballot) meant to secure the stability of the constitution and prevent revolutions.

Third, Aristotle offered a normative justification for mixing democratic and oligarchic elements and principles. The existence of a mere balance between classes, he argued, is no guarantee of social peace and prosperity. "Revolutions also break out when opposite parties, e.g., the rich and the people are equally balanced, and there is little or no middle class."⁴² Hence, what is really needed for the preservation of a constitutional regime is the existence of a third moderating class in the middle: the more elements a constitution brings together, the more stable and just a political regime is. Mixed constitutions, Aristotle believed, satisfy the requirements of justice and fairness and grant a special role to the citizens of the middle class, arguably the strongest supporters of moderate government. On this view, a polity with a large middle class is far more stable than one in which this class is weak. The middle class, Aristotle claimed, is law-abiding and easily submits to authority, being free from factions and dissensions. "In that condition of life men are most ready to follow rational principles,"⁴³ and are conscientious about fulfilling their political and social obligations.

At first sight, Aristotle's theory might appear as an ideology justifying the particular interests of a single class as beneficial to the entire society. His description of mixed government in *Politics* IV:11, for example, grants precedence to a middle class arguably endowed with all the qualities required for creating and maintaining constitutional government. Nothing is explic-

itly said here about the necessary blending between the interests of various classes, a theme that would loom large in Cicero's writings. Nonetheless, Aristotle addresses this important issue in IV:9, where he gives specific recommendations for combining oligarchic and democratic procedures and principles in setting property qualifications and in the daily administration of justice. Moreover, in books 5 and 6 of *Politics*, Aristotle examines the best ways of preventing civil wars and revolutions, highlighting the importance of combining the interests of the rich and the poor in the government of the city. Hence, the simultaneous emphasis on the virtues of the middle class and the need to create a genuine balance of power in the state should be seen not as a contradiction in Aristotle's writings, but as a proof of his thesis that mixed government comes in various forms and is compatible with a wide range of constitutional arrangements.

Aristotle's skepticism about the ability of simple forms of government to stave off corruption was shared by Polybius, Plutarch, and Cicero, who also praised the virtues of mixed constitutions in their political and historical writings.⁴⁴ Plutarch had words of praise for Lycurgus' statesmanship, which combined soulcraft and statecraft to create a viable political regime whose strength came from its judiciously balanced constitution.⁴⁵ While Polybius considered three forms of mixed constitutions—those of Sparta, Carthage, and Rome—he clearly preferred the latter, because it allowed for territorial expansion and the attainment of power, something that the constitution of Sparta made impossible. In book 6 of the *Histories*, Polybius ascribed the success of the Roman republic to its mixed constitution combining monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements in a judicious way.⁴⁶ Simple forms of government, he affirmed, are by nature subject to revolutions, periodic changes in social structure, mores, and lifestyle, which statesmen can learn to anticipate and the consequences of which they can effectively address by striving to maintain a balance between the rule by one, the few, and the many.⁴⁷ Polybius paid special attention to the separation of functions between the senate, the consuls, and the people. The first had complete control over expenditures and revenues, the second made decisions on military issues, and the *populus Romanus* had the right to award honors and punishments.

While Polybius' conception of mixed government granted each of the three elements (monarchy, oligarchy, democracy) an almost equal share in the exercise of political power, Cicero took a different route. He did not describe the Roman constitution as a simple mixture of diverse elements, but as a harmonious synthesis between democratic and oligarchic elements (as represented by the consuls, the senate, and the popular assemblies) creating "an equitable balance of rights and duties and responsibilities."⁴⁸ In Cicero's *On the Laws*, the senate plays a key role as a stabilizing and moderating institution. Senators, Cicero believed, should be chosen from those who have held office, and no one should be allowed to reach the highest position without the approval of the people. This requirement, he added, "is

moderated by the fact that in our law the authority of the senate is strengthened. . . . For it works out that if the senate is in charge of public deliberation, and if the remaining orders are willing to have the commonwealth guided by the deliberation of the leading order, then it is possible through the blending of rights, since the people have power and the senate has authority, that that moderate and harmonious order of the state be maintained.”⁴⁹

In *On the Commonwealth*, Cicero referred to mixed government as a “blended and mixed” (I:45) form, “an alloy of all three” (I:54), providing for a proportionate combination of dissimilar elements. He insisted that the constitution of Rome was both “moderate and balanced” and praised its “moderately blended form of commonwealth”⁵⁰ which combined equality, fairness, and stability. In his view, a mixed constitution was similar to a choir in which the singers’ voices blend harmoniously:

In playing the lyre or the flute, and of course in choral singing, a degree of harmony must be maintained among the different sounds, and if it is altered or discordant a trained ear cannot endure it; and this harmony, through the regulation of very different voices, is made pleasing and concordant. So too the state, through the reasoned balance of the highest and the lowest and the intervening orders, is harmonious in the concord of very different people. What musicians call harmony with regard to song is concord in the state, the tightest and the best bond of safety in every republic; and that concord can never exist without justice.⁵¹

This elegant passage is remarkable for a couple of reasons. First, it draws attention to the relationship between musical harmony (*concentus*) and social concord (*consensus*) which, in turn, are produced by the proportionate blending of unlike tones, and the agreement among dissimilar elements, brought about by a fair and reasonable blending together of the upper, middle, and lower classes, just as if they were musical tones. Cicero had in mind a concrete example, the Roman constitution in its best days, long gone by the time he came to write these beautiful lines. Second, although the passage suggests that this harmonious blending of classes and interests is the best guarantee of liberty, order, and justice in a state, Cicero believed that the senators and the wealthy members of the landed class should play a larger political role than the rest of the citizens. This ought probably be taken as an indication of Cicero’s fear of excess and his concern with restoring and preserving the balance of powers in the state rather than as an ideological endorsement of a narrow set of class interests.

Moderation as temperance and self-restraint also occupies a key place in the Christian tradition, being regarded, along with prudence, as a cardinal virtue and the mold and “mother” of all the other virtues. The Desert Fathers believed that “everything which is extreme is destructive,”⁵² and Chris-

tian theologians argued that moderation is *not* incompatible with fortitude, courage, and wisdom. In fact, they claimed, no one can be wise and courageous without also being prudent (and moderate) at the same time. In a certain way, the whole structure of the Christian view of man affirms the pre-eminence of prudence and moderation under the guise of temperance, which explains why the Christian view of moderation does not carry the usual connotations of mediocrity, selfish utilitarianism, and small-mindedness, being instead associated with true nobility of spirit and human dignity.⁵³

This ordering of the virtues that grants pride of place to prudence and, vicariously, to moderation, was not accidental. For Christian theologians have argued that justice, fortitude, and temperance achieve their “perfection” only when they are founded upon prudence (and moderation), which implies a superior ability to make right decisions and choices, and a corresponding ability to realize one’s full potential. On this view, moderation and prudence, while they do not in themselves constitute the perfection of human beings, are nonetheless indispensable if the latter are to carry through their impulses and instincts for right acting, and if they are to transform their naturally good predispositions into real virtues.⁵⁴ As such, moderation and prudence are the “true” measure of justice and goodness: what is moderate and prudent coincides with what is good. As Josef Pieper has pointed out, this understanding of moderation had little to do with the common (emasculated) image of this virtue as the opposite of any form of exuberance. Not only do moderation and prudence imply the proper directing of volition and action toward objective reality; they also presuppose the ability to gain an objective perception and superior understanding of reality in such a way that our knowledge of ends and the appropriate means for reaching them derives to a great extent from moderation and prudence. On this view, the latter are necessary to the attainment of moral virtue as well as to the execution of justice for the common good. The complex relationship between prudence and moderation as temperance was examined in detail in St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, in which he offered a classical treatment of prudence (XXXVI, 2a2ae 47–56) and temperance (XLIII, 2a2ae 141–154 and XLIV, 2a2ae 155–170). Although Aquinas did not explicitly refer to moderation, his theory of prudence and defense of temperance, deeply embedded in the Christian tradition, are relevant for our discussion of the classical faces of moderation.⁵⁵ Appropriating Aristotle’s equation of prudence with practical wisdom, he rejected the latter’s claim that *phronesis* can ever operate without the aid of first principles. Nor did Aquinas believe that prudence is only about means. Instead, he emphasized that prudence is concerned with the attainment of the good and is always dependent on first principles. He then went on to distinguish prudence as “wisdom in human affairs” from “wisdom pure and simple,”⁵⁶ and insisted that prudence as practical wisdom comes in different forms that must be distinguished one from the other: sham prudence, genuine but incomplete

prudence, and genuine and complete prudence. “He who contrives fitting means to a wrong end,” Aquinas wrote, “has false prudence, for his adopted end is not a genuine end, but merely resembles one.”⁵⁷ This false prudence, as St. Paul reminded us, is that of sinners (*prudentia carnis mors est*).⁵⁸ A prudent man who pursues the end appropriate to some specialized employment (i.e., the prudent sailor or trader) has incomplete prudence because his goal is not the universal end for human beings and represents only a sectional or particular interest. The person who fails to act after reaching a sound judgment on important matters in life has incomplete prudence as well. This type of prudence is common to the upright and the wicked alike. Referring to the highest form of prudence, Aquinas noted: “There is the genuine and complete prudence which, with a view to the final good for the whole of human life, rightly deliberates, decides, and commands. This alone is prudence pure and simple, and in sinners it just cannot be.”⁵⁹ Since it requires time and experience, that is, the practice of making good and effective decisions, prudence does not come automatically from nature, although “the aptitude for prudence is from nature.”⁶⁰ It is a particular skill, comprised of the ability to make fair assessments and pursue realistic goals, quickness of wit, and the capacity to shoot at a mark and hit the point.

Early Modern Faces of Moderation

Sixteenth-century political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Claude de Seyssel, Louis Le Roy, and Étienne Pasquier drew inspiration from Polybius’ and Cicero’s theories of mixed government. It is in their writings that the connection between the mixed constitution and moderate government came to the fore two centuries before Montesquieu.⁶¹ Unlike Cicero, Machiavelli did not insist on the connection between mixed government and *concordia ordinum*. In book 1 of his *Discourses*, he emphasized that social tensions, if properly channeled through adequate institutions, could, in fact, be a source of progress and liberty rather than turmoil and anarchy. This, Machiavelli insisted, was demonstrated by the Roman constitution, which owed its excellence not only to the judicious blending of monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements, but also to the proper institutionalization of the disunion and quarrels between the senate and the people.⁶²

Seyssel’s *La Monarchie de France*, written in 1515 and published in 1519, took over from the tradition of mixed government several key themes from the ancient theory of *concordia ordinum*. He described an ordered monarchy as a regime characterized by harmony, consonance, union, and correspondence among all estates, adding that “the affairs of the kingdom prosper to the extent to which the kings . . . are attentive in upholding this union and correspondence.”⁶³ Seyssel’s argument in favor of a mixed constitution was, in fact, an indirect apology for a moderate form of monarchy based on

the interdependence of mutually limiting powers and authorities. As Nannerl Keohane pointed out, “the notion of complex legal and institutional constraints against the exercise of a *volonté desordonnée*, and the notion of power increased rather than diminished by such constraints,”⁶⁴ recur as key themes throughout Seyssel’s work. The authority of the king was to be regulated by three “bridles” limiting the will of the monarch: religion, justice, and “*la police*” (the latter different from what we understand by this term today). Seyssel emphasized the role of good laws, ordinances, and intermediary bodies in tempering the power of the monarch, and maintained that they were supposed to act in concert with customs, past examples, and the multitude of offices and magistracies. He granted to *parlements* and courts of justice the important political role of setting procedural patterns for the government of the kingdom.

Seyssel’s ideas were developed by another sixteenth-century proponent of moderate monarchy, Étienne Pasquier, in *Recherches de la France*,⁶⁵ in which he commented on the institutional architecture of what Montesquieu later called “Gothic” government. Like Seyssel, Pasquier stressed that, in a moderate monarchy, the potentially arbitrary power of the king must be held in check by a complex institutional framework and legal instruments. In this well-ordered ideal monarchy, the authority of the king could never be absolute, being restrained and moderated by multiple sources of power, privileges, and rights. Both Pasquier and Seyssel defended a system of balance of powers *sui generis* in which the nobles and the *parlements* were regarded as effective countervailing forces capable of limiting the authority of a monarch invested with divine right.

The image of moderation as antidote to (political and religious) zealotry, fanaticism, and extremism appeared in the writings of several other well-known sixteenth- and seventeenth century writers. Montaigne’s *Essays*, for example, can be interpreted as a sophisticated defense of moderation and temperance, two indispensable virtues that can prevent us from losing measure and composure in our pursuit of goodness, virtue, and justice. After confessing that he liked natures that are temperate and moderate and that “there is no pleasure, however proper, which does not become a matter of reproach when excessive and intemperate,”⁶⁶ Montaigne claimed that moderation represents the true greatness of man, whose “most glorious achievement is to live . . . life fittingly,”⁶⁷ that is, with temperance and without eccentricity. Far from being equated with dullness, this type of moderation has its own excellence which derives from understanding that the real “greatness of soul,” as Montaigne wrote, “consists not so much in striving upwards and forwards as in knowing how to find one’s place and to draw the line.”⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Montaigne added, it is much easier to make one’s journey along the margins, “where the edges serve as a limit and a guide, rather than take the wide and unhedged Middle Way; but it is also less noble, less commendable.”⁶⁹ La Bruyère closed his famous *Caractères* by reminding the

reader (in a section entitled “*Des esprits forts*”!) that moderation is a divine virtue, whereas everything that partakes of the extremes is imperfect and shares in the shortcomings of all human beings.⁷⁰

Taking up a distinctively Aristotelian trope and following in Montaigne’s footsteps (to some extent), Pascal offered one of the most memorable accounts of moderation as the virtue appropriate to the human condition. In his view, our limited mental and physical powers are nothing but a reflection of our middling nature, equally incapable of absolute knowledge and complete ignorance. Pascal’s restless man—*le roseau pensant*—stands in the middle between non-being and infinity, limited in his intellectual and physical faculties, unable to know the whole truth, but not entirely ignorant either. He wanders over a vast plane, always uncertain of his final destination, but always cautious to avoid the extremes. Nature, Pascal concluded, has placed us in this middle, and the greatness of the human condition consists in knowing how to remain there. Since we can never achieve absolute certainty or stability, we must try to accommodate ourselves to our middling human condition and make the best of it. Leaving this middle would amount then to abandoning humanity, since our frail reason is easily deceived by appearances and is ever incapable of seeing the “true” forms beyond the shadows of reality.⁷¹

Baltasar Gracián wrote extensively about the link between moderation, prudence, and temperance, three concepts that loomed large in his writings, especially in the *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* (1647).⁷² Quoting the ancient dictum *Est modus in rebus*, he argued that moderate (and prudent) people always look for measure in everything. They avoid being overly moralizing and pedantic, even when they are sure to be right, and are reluctant to ever take their principles to extremes. “Push right to the extreme and it becomes wrong,” Gracián wrote. “Press all the juice from an orange and it becomes bitter. Even in enjoyment never go to extremes. Thought too subtle is dull.”⁷³ In his view, “keen observation, subtle insight, and judicious inference”⁷⁴ are the prerequisites of that “judicious moderation”⁷⁵ without which there can be no sound judgment. As such, moderation is related in Gracián’s works to a concept with deep roots in medieval theology—*syndéresis*, a natural virtue of the soul that, as *scintilla conscientiae*, gives us the inner knowledge of moral truths that is needed in order to live well.⁷⁶

Drawing on ancient authors, Fénelon remarked that the wisdom and excellence of all governments consist in finding the middle between two extreme forms of liberty “moderated only by the authority of the laws.”⁷⁷ The ethical image of moderation as a form of self-restraint and control of one’s passions appeared in Antoine Furetière’s famous *Dictionnaire universel* (1690), which defined moderation as “a virtue regulating all passions,”⁷⁸ and in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*, where moderation was equated with *sang froid* and the sound judgment that enables us to find the just measure in everything.⁷⁹ All of these meanings reappeared half a century later in Jaucourt’s entry on this topic in the *Encyclopédie*. Jaucourt defined moderation

as a cardinal virtue capable of restraining human passions and insisted that it is always the outcome of prudence and temperance. As such, he argued (quoting Horace), moderation is inseparable from moral integrity and represents the source of true happiness on Earth.⁸⁰

A few words about the connection between moderation and the ideal of *l'honnête homme* are also in order.⁸¹ While the roots of the latter can be traced back to the sixteenth-century image of the courtier, the best place to examine it is in the writings of seventeenth-century French writers, where it designated the person who effortlessly combines sociability, gallantry, and propriety with liberty, civility, and a strong sense of individuality. *Honnêteté* was described as the quintessential art of excelling in everything that concerns the amenities and delights of life. By implication, its exercise required a sense of order and propriety, measure, and moderation.⁸² The ideal of *l'honnête homme* was inseparable from the image of the person who shies away from exaggerations and extremes, who combines wisdom and gaiety, erudition and politeness, firmness and flexibility, reason and wit.⁸³ At the same time, in the moralists' writings, *honnêteté* retained its ethical image as a virtue capable of tempering human passions with a view to finding the *juste milieu* between excess and deficit. "The extremes are vicious," wrote François de Callières in 1695, and affectation of any kind destroys even the most beautiful souls.⁸⁴ Moderation was not only regarded as a virtue of *l'honnête homme*, but was more broadly seen as capable of tempering great vices such as concupiscence, *amour propre* (vanity), and avarice.

A more critical view of moderation can be found in the writings of La Rochefoucauld, who claimed that people make a virtue of moderation only in order to limit the ambitions of great men and console their mediocre souls for their limited fortune and merits.⁸⁵ In reality, he argued, moderation can bring about neither security nor glory. In one of his maxims, La Rochefoucauld admitted: "Moderation is like sobriety: one would love to eat more, but one fears hurting oneself."⁸⁶ He praised boldness as a countervailing element to the alleged mediocrity of moderation: "Moderation cannot have the merit of fighting ambition and of subduing it; they are never found together. While moderation is the languor and laziness of the soul, ambition is its activity and ardor."⁸⁷ Almost half a century later, Lord Kames disagreed precisely with this view when commending "moderation in our desires and appetites" because it "fits us for doing our duty" and contributes "the most to happiness." He added that "even social passions, when moderate, are more pleasant than when they swell beyond proper bounds."⁸⁸

Another face of political moderation, *trimming*, appeared around the same time in the writings of George Saville, Marquis of Halifax (1633–1695), and half a century later in Hume's historical and political writings. Halifax penned the classical definition of the moderate politician as a mediator between contending parties in his essay, "*The Character of a Trimmer*," written in 1684–85 and published in 1688 (under the name of Halifax's uncle, Sir William Coventry).⁸⁹ Halifax's trimmer resembled Plutarch's

portrait of Pericles: “the pilot of a ship who, when a gale blows up at sea, makes everything tight, trims his sails, and exerts his seaman’s arts to the utmost, disregarding the tears and entreaties of the seasick and terrified passengers.”⁹⁰ Halifax associated moderation with the art of compromise needed for maintaining equipoise between different interests, groups, and powers in any commonwealth. “This innocent word *Trimmer*,” he wrote, “signifieth no more than this, That if Men are together in a boat, and one part of the company would weigh it down on one side, another would make it lean as much to the contrary; it happeneth there is a third Opinion of those, who conceive it would do as well, if the Boat went even, without endangering the passengers.”⁹¹ During Halifax’s time and shortly thereafter, the word “trimmer” had pejorative connotations derived from the strong religious controversies of that period. It meant not only a “man of moderation” and a “man of Latitude,” but also a “neutral” and uncertain person, as well as a “traitor.”

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider, for example, the portrait of Halifax drawn by Hume, who practiced an original form of (methodological) trimming in writing the *History of England*, a sophisticated attack on—and correction of—previous Whig and Tory interpretations of the development of liberties and rights in England. As Hume himself acknowledged in his essay “Of the Protestant Succession,” the historian who belong to neither party (Whig nor Tory) must “put all the circumstances in the scale and assign to each of them its proper poise and influence,” aware of the fact that “there scarcely ever occurs, in any deliberation, a choice, which is either purely good, or purely ill.”⁹² True to this moderate outlook, Hume also believed that there is no more effective method of promoting a socially and politically beneficial end than “to encourage moderate opinions, to find the proper medium in all disputes, to persuade each that its antagonist may possibly be sometime in the right, and to keep a balance in the praise and blame, which we bestow on either side.”⁹³ One might expect that Hume would have endorsed Halifax’s trimming, but in reality, his portrait of the latter was far more nuanced. For Hume, Halifax was “a man who possessed the finest genius and most extensive capacity,” but who affected a specious form of neutrality between the parties that was “more natural to men of integrity than of ambition.”⁹⁴ Be that as it may, the main merit of Halifax’s essay is to have given the term “trimmer” a more positive connotation, while also reminding his readers that trimmers, due to their eclecticism, are notoriously difficult to place on the spectrum of modern political ideologies. They share a number of affinities with both the conservative and liberal traditions, but neither can fully claim the trimmer as their faithful representative.⁹⁵

In the eighteenth-century, along with Voltaire and Smith, Hume put forward a trenchant critique of fanaticism as a dangerous form of immoderation, one that they all equated with intolerance, corruption of the mind, and ignorance. For Hume, fanaticism represented a “bad” type of enthusiasm, one that had degenerated into superstition. As an antonym of “modera-

tion,” this form of corrupted enthusiasm arises from a presumptuous pride and confidence in one’s power and intellect that persuades the zealous leaders of fanatical sects to falsely bestow upon themselves a dangerously sacred character. This type of immoderation, Hume warned, often produces “the most cruel disorders in human society” and is an enemy to civil liberty, while “true” enthusiasm is “a friend to it.”⁹⁶ In his article on fanaticism in the *Encyclopédie*, Deleyre insisted that, of all the corrupters of moral sentiments, fanaticism has always been among the greatest and most dangerous ones because it is a “blind and passionate zeal born of superstitious opinions, causing people to commit ridiculous, unjust, and cruel actions without any shame or remorse.”⁹⁷ Among the several causes of (religious) fanaticism, Deleyre mentioned flawed dogmas (“Truth does not make any fanatics,” he confidently remarked),⁹⁸ “atrocious morals,” the misinterpretation of duties, and religious intolerance and persecution. The condemnation of religious fanaticism during the Enlightenment pitched those who opposed “enthusiasm” against the defenders of superstition, obscurantism, and prejudice. As Chicaneau de Neuville remarked in 1756, “fanaticism is contrary to wisdom, moderation, and the true spirit of Christianity.”⁹⁹ Voltaire provided a trenchant critique of fanaticism as a form of immoderation in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764).¹⁰⁰ As soon as fanaticism penetrates into someone’s mind, he claimed, the malady is almost incurable. Worse, often times the laws themselves are ineffective in combating fanaticism and those touched by this illness end up being led by crooks (“*fripons*”) who give them arms and motivation to pursue their dangerous ideals.

Yet fanaticism proved to be a remarkably ambivalent passion, for in the works of some authors both its positive and negative connotations could coexist. Arguably, the most interesting case in point was Rousseau. On the one hand, in *Lettres sur la providence* (1756), he criticized the irrational nature of fanaticism as a “stupid and blind furor,” and in *Émile*, he argued that “it is less the strength of arms than the moderation of hearts which makes men independent and free.”¹⁰¹ On the other hand, in the same book he also described fanaticism as a strong passion capable of inspiring people and making them despise death. Comparing fanaticism with philosophic indifference which “resembles the tranquility of the state under despotism,” Rousseau argued that the first, “although more deadly in its immediate effects than what is today called the philosophic spirit, is much less so in its consequences.”¹⁰²

What conclusions can we draw from our brief historical foray?¹⁰³ First, over time, moderation came to designate, in addition to one of the main characteristics of statesmen and legislators, an important trait of political institutions and laws, or the outcome of a particular institutional structure. Second, it is important to note the strong connection between moderation and institutional complexity, an idea that would resonate later with Montesquieu, Mounier, Necker, Mme de Staël, and Constant. Third, classical authors praised the institutional framework of mixed government, not only

because the latter blended various social interests and elements, allowing them to coexist harmoniously, but also because it made it extremely difficult for any group to impose its will over others and exercise arbitrary power.¹⁰⁴ Fourth, linked to the idea of mixed government was the image of *balance* as expressed in the constitutional “checks and balances” that regulate and restrain competition for power. Balance also signified a proportionate combination of diverse social elements, either as a blending or a fusion, as demonstrated by several articles in the *Encyclopédie*.¹⁰⁵ While in theory it is possible for a constitution to be moderate without relying on a mixture of social elements, in practice most moderate governments have been characterized by a certain mixture or balance between social, political, and economic interests. As d’Holbach argued, the progress of any state is impossible in the absence of a “just equilibrium” between all the groups and classes in society that prevents any one of them from encroaching on the others. “All authority beyond measure,” he wrote, “placed in the hands of a few members of society, is established at the expense of the safety and well-being of all.”¹⁰⁶ As we shall see later, the constitutional interpretation of balance loomed large in the works of Mounier and the Coppet group, and the image of *scale* eventually came to be regarded as an appropriate metaphor (though not the only one!) of political moderation.