Abstract

Moral Wayfinding in the City of Man:
Recovering the Political Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr

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During the past twenty years political realism has experienced a renaissance. Self-identified realists understand themselves as responding to the tendency in Anglophone political philosophy to reduce politics to "applied ethics." They argue, in contrast, that politics is a distinctive sphere of human activity characterized by thoroughgoing and ineliminable disagreement and conflict, in which ordinary moral concerns do not obtain. Realism is a broad church with a long history but in the American political tradition the midcentury theologian and public intellectual Reinhold Niebuhr is considered a founding father. Yet Niebuhr has been largely forgotten by contemporary realists and cast aside as a historical property or Cold War relic. This dissertation reconstructs Niebuhr's political thought in order to expand our sense of what political realism might be. While many contemporary realists advocate for morally agnostic theories of *modus vivendi*, Niebuhr demonstrates that the realist perspective can accommodate more demanding and democratic aspirations. I describe Niebuhr's approach to political theory as "moral wayfinding," a practice which identifies the hazards and attractions of collective life without forsaking the imperative for reparative action. While other political realists prioritize political efficacy, Niebuhr emphasizes melioration through democratic means. I begin by reconsidering Niebuhr's doctrine of man and self-interest. I then explore the relationship between his moral psychology and account of self-government and democratic virtue. I conclude by explicating the way in which justice anchors the practice of moral wayfinding and supplies the ultimate good which politics can seek.

Moral Wayfinding in the City of Man:
Recovering the Political Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Reading Niebuhr in New Haven

On a hot June day in 2013 two dozen activists gathered at the AFL-CIO Central Labor Council in New Haven, Connecticut. The Council building, 50 feet from the Long Island Sound, sits at the crossroads of the immigrant Fair Haven and industrial Mill River neighborhoods. These activists are about to participate in a "value-based leadership" training. It's lost on no one that a momentous election season is about to begin. New Haven's long-serving mayor has decided not to run after ten terms in office, and recent efforts to replace Democratic Party stalwarts on the Town Committee have been successful.[1] The fall elections promise a sea of change – maybe even a realignment. But that's not what people are huddled in the Labor Council to discuss.

A consultant has been hired to run a series of exercises to give the activists the opportunity to reflect on why and how they do what they do. Political and labor leaders offer their personal stories and testify to the difference between "values-based" and "transactional" politics. What decisions come from their vision of how they would like the world to look? What decisions are merely routine – or even compromising – but nevertheless necessary as they fight for the change they want to see?

At one point the moderator asks: Are people motivated by values or interests? She instructs the room to organize itself into two groups based on the answer to that question. People share their views within the groups. Some are more philosophical and abstract; others are concrete and anecdotal. The groups agree that "values" and "interests" might

[1] Paul Bass, "New Hope for New Haven, Connecticut" *The Nation* (January 25, 2012); Jennifer Klein, "New Haven Rising," *Dissent Magazine* (Winter 2015).

be mutually reinforcing. Indeed, many admit that their own journey to political activism was inspired by both their immediate material interests and by their aspirations for a kind of change that might not personally affect them. These are deeply democratic concerns. Those who actively participate in competitive political systems do not merely consider the most effective ways to influence policy or process outcomes; they also think about what compromises they are willing to make and the actions they are willing to take to pursue their ultimate goals.

I had not seriously considered these questions before that day. My presence at the "values-based leadership training" was somewhat improbable. I had moved to New Haven only ten months earlier to begin graduate school. During that time, I found myself swept up in a social and political movement that would take me from that Labor Council retreat to leadership positions in the graduate student union and on New Haven's Board of Alders (its city council).

I did not know it at the time but my journey to study the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr began in that room, as I started to take my own political agency seriously. It was there that I first wrestled with many of the anxieties animating this project. Niebuhr, as we shall see, is a political thinker's political thinker. He wonders aloud, and often, about the uneasy relationship between strategy and principles, action and ethics, and their balance in an imperfect world.

But this anecdote also provides the opportunity for something of a disclaimer. In an autobiographical interview in 1957 Niebuhr remembered New Haven as "rather disillusioning" because "it looked like a middle western industrial town, which is exactly what it was – an industrial town. It had nothing of the romance that my imagination

might have invented it with."[2] Needless to say, I have had a very different experience of the Elm City. My time here has been personally and intellectually formative, and my political experiences have brought me joy and struggle. But these experiences have also provided fodder for serious political reflection. I only hope to accurately record some insights gleaned and lessons learned from my brief but intense engagements in what Niebuhr would have called the "brutalities" of political life.

This project started its life as an account of the political history of love in which Niebuhr was meant to play a bit part. But then I encountered *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*.[3] I was immediately drawn to the book's confessional style. Reinhold was struggling with questions about how to act and lead; why people presented simultaneously as both selfless and selfish; the moods of doubt and exuberance that characterize our efforts to improve the world. Political theory can be abstract. Scholars often draw on examples to illustrate concepts. But Niebuhr was different – I saw in him a political actor and participant who developed a language to reflect on his experience as it was happening. This was deeply appealing.

The tendency to universalize our own experience is very strong. There is also a strong tendency to learn too much from our early adulthood. Perhaps we come into our own in these decisive years – things settele for us in a way that they have not before, and we come alive to our own responsibility as we care, love, and lose intensely. Indeed, the conventional biography of the apostate tends to privilege early disenchantment:

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[2] "The Reminiscences of Reinhold Niebuhr," 1957, page 13, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University.
[3] Elisabeth Sifton, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics* (New York: Library of America, 2015).

conversions often happen after burnout or heartbreak sustained in the pursuit of an ideal. Niebuhr's disillusioning experiences pastoring in Detroit supplied a template, even the *urtext*, for a lifetime of reflection. The puzzles he first encountered there would stay with him for the rest of his life.

This dissertation is inextricably bound up in my own journey in the labor movement and electoral politics. I have seen and felt the lengths to which individuals will go to fight for ideas they believe in. And I have learned how difficult it can be to distinguish those ideas from the communities of interest in which they are born. As scholars of political behavior have long known, we have finite resources – time chief among them – and ongoing participation can require extraordinary levels of emotional commitment.[4] Political meetings become nonnegotiable, fixed points in our days and weeks by which we measure the passage of time.[5] In my experience it is belief and community that make this possible. But there are hazards, too. Political passion can be explosive. We are stuck between the possibilities that such moral aspirations open up for us and the hazards they create.

The political campaign is a noisy organization. While workers, organizers, and volunteers may share an overriding objective, there are multiple purposes afoot. Ask of them why they are there and they will likely say something about how the world is not the way it should be, and this victory will make necessary change incrementally or radically more possible. But social scientists – to say nothing of novelists – know that we

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[4] Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie. *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
[5] Francesca Polletta. *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

are not always the most reliable narrators. We are prone to self-aggrandizement, self-deception, and post-facto justification; we are proud and want to think highly of ourselves and the work we do, to feel that what we care about is important.

Politics vivifies and dramatizes these ordinary dynamics. We know this intuitively, but it can be seen microscopically in the moral vanity that pervades collective life. Our moral ambitions – including the desire to improve the world – are not at all incompatible with selfishness or egoism. One does not need to approach the world as if all decisions should be rendered by the logic of the dismal science to be deeply self-interested, protective of that most valuable resource: our own self-regard.

Such observation has led many to abjure political life – to argue that we are too rotten for this business and that people are better off pursuing their own private comforts than entering a realm that brings out the worst in people. Yet I have also seen people grow immeasurably in the process of a political awakening, gathering a richer and more complete sense of themselves. In my work with faith leaders, especially, I have come to appreciate the special contribution of religious life to social justice. The small community of a university in a mid-sized American city affords a rare vantage point to see what tangible, measurable difference political energies, no matter how imperfectly applied, can make in rendering common life more just and peaceful.

For all our unmistakable differences, Niebuhr and I have remarkable similarities, and I have returned to his work for personal guidance as well as intellectual study. He has helped me understand politics. My modest hope is to translate some of that experience into a language intelligible to political theorists who want to know what the fuss is all about.

Acknowledgements

Over the course of this project I have accumulated many debts. It seems graduate school is never as straightforward as we might like it to be. My extracurricular political adventures put me in the way of obstacles as well as opportunities, and the completion of a project of this scope and ambition would have been unimaginable without the supportive community in New Haven and beyond.

My committee – Jean-Christophe Agnew, Adam Eitel, Bryan Garsten, and Karuna Mantena – have been steadfast in their wisdom and guidance. Jean-Christoph's Olympian and intellectually wide-ranging perspective on American political culture made for the kind of rich and meandering conversation from which real insights are born. Adam's "Introduction to Christian Ethics" course was instrumental, and his addition to the committee offered new energy and inspiration to explore the deep puzzles. Bryan asked the hard – and best – questions while still helping imagine the best version of the project. I would not have found Niebuhr without Karuna, with whom I first read *Moral Man* in a course on "Means and Ends in Politics." Karuna saw me through countless iterations of this project, always attending to the questions that mattered; she was a model adviser, for she helped me find my voice and gave me the confidence to follow my instincts. I am only beginning to recognize the many ways in which she has made me a sharper and more charitable reader and thinker.

In addition, I profited from conversations with many members of the Yale faculty. In particular, I would like to thank David Bromwich, Beverly Gage, Phil Gorski, Noreen Khawaja, Nancy Levene, Katie Lofton, Sam Moyn, Andy Sabl, Ian Shapiro, Stephen

Skowronek, Linn Tonstad, and Patrick Weil. Bill Frucht from the Yale University Press helped me take a step back and consider the argument more broadly.

My colleagues in the Yale Political Science Department have provided a lively and eclectic environment for my own intellectual development. This work is immeasurably richer for the ongoing dialogue with Alyssa Battistoni, Josh Braver, Carmen Dege, Lucas Entel, Lisa Gilson, Anand Gupta, Mie Inouye, Alexander Kolokotronis, Lizzie Krontiris, Darren Nah, Hari Ramesh, Alicia Steinmetz, and Becca Traber. Additionally, the Spring 2017 reading group on "political realism" led by Karuna Mantena, Giulia Oskian, Andy Sabl, and Steven Smith provided a vibrant forum to consider many of the central ideas of that intellectual tendency; I learned a great deal from both the conveners and my fellow participants.

This dissertation spent years as a set of conference papers. Audiences, respondents, and panelists offered patient and thoughtful comments at the annual meetings of the New England Political Science Association in 2016 and 2018, the Midwest Political Science Association in 2018, and the Northeastern Political Science Association in 2017 and 2018. I would especially like to thank Arlene Saxonhouse and Isak Tranvik for their thoughtful and probing comments at the 2017 meeting of Northeastern.

In the summer of 2018, I led a discussion section of the "Grand Strategy" seminar for students from Yale-NUS College. Though Niebuhr was not on the syllabus, he was in the background of much of that conversation as we engaged with the history of IR realism and the politics of the Cold War. I learned so much from these remarkable students, and their intellectual passion and ambition continue to inspire me.

I have enjoyed the company of many intellectual and political fellow travelers during my time at Yale. My time in graduate school would have been unimaginable without the friendship and comradeship of Grey Anderson, Alyssa Battistoni, Kate Brackney, David Milton Brent, Josh Braver, Jonny Bunning, Hanna Ehrlich, Ted Fertik, Max Fraser, Adom Getachew, Jacob Greenberg, Stephanie Greenlea, Tobi Haslett, Leana Hirschfeld-Kroen, Lucia Hulsether, Dan Luban, Daniel Jenkins-Steinmetz, Yahel Matalon, Lukas Moe, Josh Nuni, Josh Phillips, Zelda Roland, Simon Torracinta, Hillary Taylor, Gabe Winant, and Lindsay Zafir. Andrew Forsythe and Josh Cayetano patiently guided me through the world of Christian ethics. Shelly Amen and Fred Koerner are not Niebuhr scholars or even political theorists but their influence on my own intellectual and personal development is unmistakable and I am grateful to have been in their care. I want to thank Hazel Carby for her friendship. Ongoing conversations with Dylan Montanari and Adwait Parker have kept my intellectual spirits fired.

I have been fortunate to have many wonderful intellectual mentors. Mickey Morgan taught me social philosophy at the Oakwood School. Nancy Luxon introduced me to the classics of political thought at the University of Chicago. But in New Haven I have also enjoyed a different kind of mentorship, a new kind of education. I have learned and grown from tremendously gifted and visionary leaders and organizers: Herb Brockman, Adam Marchand, Scott Marks, Gwen Mills, Alphonse Paolillo, Jr., Jorge Perez, Anita Seth, Susan Valentine, and Tyisha Walker-Myers. The civic life of New Haven has enriched me and this project in many ways. My constituents, friends, and neighbors in the 8th Ward have welcomed me into their living rooms and kitchens for so many memorable meals and conversations, and I cherish my colleagues on the Board of

Alders and the dedicated civil servants that have committed their talents to city government.

I can't count the number times over the past few years that I doubted myself and despaired at the state of this project and my graduate school career. But I could always count on my parents; their love and confidence has truly buoyed me. Their unwavering support for my academic and political endeavors means more than they can ever know. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

Introduction: A Morally Inclined Realism

I. Why Niebuhr, Again?

Journalists had suspected it for months but the news finally broke on October 23, 2017: the mysterious Twitter handle belonged to former FBI Director James Comey.[1] The Tweets were mundane, but the fact that they were coming from one of the most controversial figures in American life made them interesting. Comey, after all, had been the unlikely protagonist of a very public political saga since at least October 2016, when he announced additional investigations into Secretary Hillary Clinton's private emails, leading many Democrats to blame him for her general election loss. His abrupt firing in May 2017 raised suspicion that President Donald Trump was intervening to obstruct the Agency's investigation into links between his Presidential campaign and Russian intelligence services. Amidst this palace intrigue the secret social media account of such a prominent figure was bound to draw attention. So did Director Comey's Twitter handle: "Reinhold Niebuhr."

Who was this Niebuhr? And what did Comey have to do with him? Reporters described Niebuhr as a "prominent theologian" who was "once unavoidable." Jack Jenkins wrote that "beginning in the 1930s and extending into the 1960s, Niebuhr's various treatises on the intersection of Christianity and public life were at the center of innumerable public debates, and his voice was a constant in conversations about the moral dimensions of war, use of nuclear weapons, and civil rights." Steven Weitzman noted that Comey was not the only Niebuhrian in high office. Niebuhr had long been the

[1] Feinberg, Ashley, "This is Almost Certainly James Comey's Twitter Account." *Gizmodo,* March 30, 2017.

"moral and spiritual compass" for the powerful. "According to Niebuhr," he wrote "people need to shed their self-righteous illusions and perfectionist pretensions to set their sights on more modest solutions." Others mentioned Niebuhr's most famous contribution to American culture, the "serenity prayer," adopted as an official meditation by Alcoholics Anonymous and other organizations since the 1940s.[2] Niebuhr evoked an attitude of political and moral seriousness. Comey's critics on both sides found the invocation rich, if not outright hypocritical.[3]

Interest in Niebuhr increased upon the release of Comey's April 2018 memoir which opened with an epigram from *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and which recounted Comey's undergraduate thesis at the College of William & Mary, a comparative study of Niebuhr and evangelical leader Jerry Falwell. "Niebuhr saw the evil in the world, understood that human limitations make it impossible for any of us to really love another as ourselves," Comey wrote "but [he] still painted a compelling picture of our obligation to seek justice in a flawed world."[4] Comey, throughout the book, seemed to offer himself as an exemplary product of this teaching.

Following *L'affaire Comey* journalists left and right offered their takes. But this was not the first time since Reinhold's death in 1971 that his name had found its way into

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[2] Michelle Boorstein, "Why Did James Comey Name his Secret Twitter Account 'Reinhold Niebuhr'? Here's What We Know," *The Washington Post,* October 24, 2017.
[3] Writers found some irony in the fact that former FBI head J. Edgar Hoover had kept a thick file on Niebuhr's political activities. Cf. Paul Elie, "A Few Theories About Why James Comey Might Call himself 'Reinhold Niebuhr' on Twitter," the *New Yorker*, April 3, 2017; K. Healan Gaston, "James Comey Read a Lot of Reinhold Niebuhr. Did He Learn Anything?" *Christian Century*, May 3, 2018; Drew Christiansen, "Politicians Love to Quote Reinhold Niebuhr. James Comey Actually Gets Him," *America Magazine*, November 20, 2017.
[4] James Comey. *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018), 13.

public life. Niebuhr has had many renaissances – one inspired by President Jimmy Carter's admiration; another by the invocation of Niebuhr's name by supporters and opponents of the "war on terror" and the invasion of Iraq; and, most prominently, by then-Senator Barack Obama's statement in a 2007 interview with *New York Times* columnist David Brooks that Niebuhr was his "favorite philosopher."[5] These revivals occurred at somewhat different junctures in American political life but the nature of his public reception has been fairly consistent.[6] The same questions were accompanied by essentially the same answers: How did this German-American theologian become such a prominent voice in the midcentury? What great eternal lessons did he teach? Where are the Niebuhrs of today? It is not surprising that these revivals have been so predictable: any figure beatified by mainstream political culture will be simplified by the process. Niebuhr is no exception.

Niebuhr's academic reputation is more complicated. Historians and religious studies scholars largely view him as a historical relic – anguished but naive, a stand-in for the midcentury liberal "vital center." Among theologians he has been viewed in alternating moods of intense, even hagiographic, admiration, and deep suspicion. Political scientists and philosophers, who were a major audience during his lifetime, today relegate his name to footnotes about the birth of international relations. IR scholars, meanwhile, may recall the "Augustinian moment" to which he contributed, but his influence has vanished in a field that is more likely to turn to rational choice models and game theory

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[5] Richard Crouter. *Reinhold Niebuhr: On Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

[6] For the best histories of Niebuhr's revivals, cf. Robert B. Horwitz, "The Revival of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Foreign Policy Fable," *Public Culture* 28, no. 1 (2015); K. Healan Gaston, "Then as Now, Why Niebuhr?" *Modern Intellectual History* 11, no. 3 (2014).

than readings of Hobbes or St. Paul. Leftwing activists, secular and religious, often view him as politically compromised, an unreconstructed Cold Warrior who came too late to the anti-war and Civil Rights Movements. Conservatives, meanwhile, have claimed him as one of their own – an American Burke, an avowed anti-communist warning against rash and radical political projects.

"Why Niebuhr?" is, in some ways, then the wrong question. It already assumes that we know what Niebuhr was, is or means. A great deal of Niebuhr scholarship rushes into the business of evaluating his ideas or his legacy on the basis of a shared understanding of his contribution. Interpreters thus subject Niebuhr to an up or down vote: Reinhold as moral visionary or reconciled villain. Even those who develop more nuanced analyses still do so to persuade epigones or skeptics. That is not my project. I am interested in answering "Why Niebuhr?" without forgetting the prior question, "What Niebuhr?" I aim to recover and investigate what Niebuhr thought about politics – to read Niebuhr politically, in ways that are legible to the concerns of contemporary political theory as it is practiced in the Anglophone academy.

Many historical figures say curious things about the nature of politics. Some illuminate unusual, untimely ways of thinking about politics. Others are more familiar and, we may say, *merely* historical. In short: not all historical perspectives on politics are worth recovering. But I argue that Niebuhr is more than just an historically influential thinker; he is a distinctive and first-rate political thinker with valuable contributions to ongoing debates about the passions, democracy, and justice.

During Niebuhr's lifetime this was a fairly uncontroversial claim. But his reputation has suffered as the disciplines have evolved and political, cultural, social, and

religious histories have transformed. As I shall demonstrate, too many scholars take what Niebuhr said, wrote, thought, and believed for granted. They disagree about his relevance or obsolescence, his virtues and his shortcomings, but spend less time than they should actually examining his work. I seek to move beyond the familiar frames and tropes.

Contemporary political theory offers fertile ground on which to reconstruct and reconceive of Niebuhr's contribution. Since at least the 1980s political realists have sought to move beyond what they see as the tendency in Anglophone political philosophy to reduce politics to "applied ethics." They argue, in contrast, that politics is a distinctive sphere of human activity characterized by thoroughgoing and ineliminable disagreement and conflict, in which ordinary moral concerns do not obtain.

While political realism is a broad church with a long history, in the American political tradition Niebuhr has long been considered a founding father. Yet he has been cast aside as a historical property or Cold War relic. This has been an expensive oversight. For Niebuhr expands our sense of the boundaries and possibilities of political realism. While many contemporary realists advocate for morally agnostic political theories of *modus vivendi*, Niebuhrian political theory demonstrates that the realist perspective can accommodate more demanding and democratic aspirations. I describe this approach as the practice of "moral wayfinding," which identifies the hazards and attractions of collective life without forsaking the imperative for reparative action. While political realists often counsel subjects on ways to become merely effective in their aims, Niebuhr adds a moral corrective: to use democratic means to leave the world more peaceful and just than they found it.

As we shall see, some accounts of Niebuhr's thought have identified these themes or lessons, but few studies have done the conceptual work necessary to reconstruct his politics. Political theorists, in particular, have largely stayed away. There are good reasons for this and significant challenges associated with the task at hand which must be confronted before we can begin the interpretive work.

II. Reading Niebuhr Politically

From the 1940s to the 1970s Niebuhr was the subject of significant study by political scientists. He taught courses in the Department of Politics at Princeton.[7] A 1960 volume of Niebuhr's political writings was overseen by an editorial board including Charles Burton Marshall, Hans Morgenthau, E.E. Schattschneider, and Arnold Wolfers[8] – a book that earned a review in an 1961 issue of *The Review of Politics*.[9] He was compared to Sheldon Wolin, Theodore Lowi, Isiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, and other more familiar names in 20th century political thought.[10] In 1973, the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association held a special session to examine Niebuhr's

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[7] Reinhold Niebuhr Collection, Library of Congress, Box 41.
[8] Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Applications to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960).
[9] James P. Scanlan, "Max Weber and Reinhold Niebuhr Systematized," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 1961): 534-538.
[10] Dennis L. Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," *Journal of Church and State,* Volume 17, Number 2 (Spring 1975): 299; Robert Booth Fowler, "Peter Gay and the Politics of Skeptical Liberalism" in *Politics & Society* (March 1970); Edward A. Purcell, Jr. *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism & the Problem of Value* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1973); Hans Kelsen, "Foundations of Democracy." *Ethics* 66, no. 1, part 2, "Foundations of Democracy" (October 1955).

thought and legacy.[11] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. put him in the tradition of "American liberal democracy" stretching back to Jefferson and Jackson.[12] Morgenthau, meanwhile, went so far as to as to call Niebuhr the "greatest living philosopher" and the most original American political thinker since John C. Calhoun.[13]

But disciplinary attentions have shifted. Niebuhr has dropped from political science syllabi, field exams, and conference presentations. He has become, instead, a subject of largely historical and cultural interest to the secular academy, though ever-present in theological circles. In part this has to do with the evolution of the disciplines themselves.[14] But there have also been significant changes in the larger political and religious culture. No matter the cause, however, we must recognize some of the challenges with reading Niebuhr as a political theorist in 2019.

> The *Oxford Handbook of Political Science* entry on political theory reads:
>
> > [The] traditions, approaches, and styles [of political theory] vary, but the field is united by a commitment to theorize, critique, and diagnose the norms, practices, and organization of political action in the past and present, in our own places and elsewhere. Across what sometimes seem chasms of difference, political theorists share a concern with the demands of justice and how to fulfill them, the presuppositions and promise of

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[11] Charles C. Brown. *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International): 246; "The 1974 APSA Annual Meeting Preliminary Program," *PS* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1974).
[12] Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 126.
[13] Daniel Rice, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau: A Friendship with Contrasting Shades of Realism," *Journal of American Studies* 42 (2008).
[14] John G. Gunnell. *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); John G. Gunnell. *Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986);
Robert Adcock. *Liberalism and the Emergence of American Political Science: A Transatlantic Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); David M. Ricci. *The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship, and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

> democracy, the divide between secular and religious ways of life, and the nature and identity of public goods, among many other topics.[15]

At first glance, this definition seems solicitous to Niebuhr's projects and concerns. He demonstrates serious and sustained interest in justice, democracy, secularism, the passions and the interests. But there are reasons why, with a few notable exceptions, contemporary scholars of politics have stayed away from Niebuhr.[16]

Niebuhr was not a systematic thinker. He preferred to call himself a "circuit rider" or a "preacher" more than a scholar, and he often described his thought as being motivated more by "the pressure of world events" than extended study.[17] Though he taught at Union Theological Seminary and visited at other institutions throughout his career, even his theological training was limited, and, as we shall see, is viewed with some suspicion by those in the religious academy.

While I argue that there are coherent and compelling themes, insights, and arguments that can be identified in the corpus, Niebuhr is not a system-builder. He uses words like "liberalism" and "democracy" with less rigor and consistency than we might

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[15] Robert Goodin, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[16] Joshua L. Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism: Political Ethics and Ethos in Reinhold Niebuhr's Thought," *The Review of Politics* 78 (2016); Mantena, Karuna. "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (May 2012); Karuna Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics," in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, eds. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Marc Stears. *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Colm McKeogh. *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Pragmatic Approach to Just War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

[17] Larry Rasmussen. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 4; Richard Fox. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 11.

prefer.[18] Niebuhr was also rather undisciplined. His training at the Yale Divinity School earned him the equivalent of a terminal Master's degree, and he abandoned advanced study for lack of interest in the more formal and technical aspects of theology. Throughout his work, Niebuhr liberally drew upon literary, political, and religious sources in ways that left specialists unsatisfied.

The lack of an obvious formal system can make it difficult to track Niebuhr's intellectual evolution. This has led some scholars to devise rather schematic accounts of his intellectual and political phases. Stone organizes Niebuhr's thought into a neat chronology, even trajectory: "liberal, socialist, Christian realist, and pragmatist liberal."[19] This makes good sense of his political views but as we shall see there is more continuity than change over time in his political thought. I demonstrate that while Niebuhr adjusts his positions, those adjustments deepen and extend a consistent and coherent set of intuitions. He is not the moving target that scholars have made him out to be.

From the 1910s to the 1960s he examined the exercise of power; the nature of responsibility; the presence of coercion; the character of justice; the challenges of psychology; the nature of perfectibility; and the possibility for ethics in public life. These anxieties sound general because they are. But the way in which he approaches them are particular, and his arguments are wound tight with conceptual nuance. Indeed, the Davis and Good edited *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics* was an intellectual collage, stitching

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[18] Kegley and Bretall, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 441.
[19] Ronald H. Stone. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 8-10.

together hundreds of passages from nearly fifty years of writing.[20] (It is not insignificant that Niebuhr approved the final product.[21])

In addition to nearly two dozen books, Niebuhr published some 2750 essays, articles, editorials, columns, book reviews, and pamphlets, in addition to hundreds of unpublished sermons and speeches.[22] Historians and journalists have combed through the archives to piece together Niebuhr's religious, political, and personal biography. But reconciling the corpus can be daunting: it can be hard to know where to start and where to end. I have limited my study in large part to the major texts that I think provide the most comprehensive and telegraphic window into Niebuhrian politics: *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1928), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1939), and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944).[23]

This is not a complete, journalistic, or biographical account of Niebuhr's life and thought. Many excellent historical accounts capture the controversy around the interpretation of Niebuhr's life, religion, and politics.[24] These studies offer invaluable

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[20] Davis and Good, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*.
[21] Scanlan, "Max Weber and Reinhold Niebuhr Systematized," 537.
[22] Charles C. Brown. *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 5.
[23] *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*. Ed. Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America, 2015); Reinhold Niebuhr. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932); Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Reinhold Niebuhr. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1959).
[24] Richard Fox. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Martin Haliwell. *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005); Harry B. Clark. *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994); Ronald H. Stone. *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: Mentor to the Twentieth*

background. But my aim is different. Except where they illuminate concepts in the major work I intentionally avoid much incidental writings, speeches or lectures. In addition, while Niebuhr continued to write until the late 1960s but as readers have noted, the quality and originality of his output diminished following his stroke in 1951.[25]

Too many Niebuhr scholars insist on – or even assume – a close a link between Niebuhr and Reinhold, between the philosophical and theological core of his writing and his worldly actions. I do not. Given that Niebuhr was a thinker in the big church of American pragmatism I recognize that I am walking a delicate line: it is undeniable that Niebuhr was shaped by – and understood himself to be shaped by – dialogue with political, religious, and intellectual interlocuters. But Niebuhr was not only speaking to his contemporaries. He dialogued with a greater, older tradition as well. It is undeniable that Niebuhr played an outsized role in American public life, founding organizations, organizing colleagues, advising the powerful, and providing an influential language for understanding political dilemmas of his age. But past studies have spent too much time

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Century (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Harlan Beckley. *Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan, and Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Daniel F. Rice, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an American Original* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009); June Bingham. *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972); Paul Merkeley. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account* (Montreal: McQuill-Queen's University Press, 1975).

[25] Sizemore writes that after that point Niebuhr "continued to elaborate with a few novelties" the themes that had preoccupied him previously." Russell Sizemore. "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Rhetoric of Liberal Anti-Communism: Christian Realism and the Rise of the Cold War." PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1987, cited in Martin Halliwell. *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr & American Intellectual Culture* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 133.

recounting what it is that Niebuhr said and did, instead of examining, more closely, what he wrote and what its implications might be for us.

Other public figures cut a similar silhouette. Walt Whitman, James Baldwin and Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, intervened in political life, wrote copiously, and fairly unsystematically, but are nevertheless deemed appropriate subjects of study by scholars of American political thought.[26] These thinkers did not write philosophical treatises and so scholars have had to reconstruct their views from a variety of source material intended for non-academic audiences. Meanwhile, Nietzsche and Arendt are well-known for their elusive, non-systematic or anti-systematic styles but have nevertheless generated veritable intellectual cottage industries. So systematicity, volume, and political engagement are not enough to explain what the absence of Niebuhr scholarship in political theory. The most obvious candidate, then, would be religion: Niebuhr is an inescapably religious thinker. By that I mean he is a thinker who cannot be read apart from the faith tradition he practiced and which supplied ideas, symbols, and images to his thought.

There are good reasons to be nervous about reading theology politically. We live in a "secular age" and while non-pluralistic thinkers are still studied, positive political

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[26] John E. Seery, ed. *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2014); Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People," *The Review of Politics* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2007); George Kateb, "Walt Whitman and the Culture of Democracy," *Political Theory* 18, no. 4 (November 1990); Lawrie Balfour. *Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Susan J. McWilliams, ed. *A Political Companion to James Baldwin* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2017); Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds. *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Brandon Terry, ed. *Fifty Years Since MLK* (Boston: Boston Review, 2018).

theory – the kind of work that seeks to recuperate insight from the history of political thought – is often limited to thinkers who can be read as taking for granted that there will be conflict over our deepest assumptions, and that these should be, in some sense, outside of politics.[27] Niebuhr was a practicing, believing Christian who wrote about the role of Christians in political life. But the story does not end here: there are significant debates about the extent of Niebuhr's Christianity and its relationship to his political thought, as I shall now explore.

III. How Christian is Niebuhr?

This seems like a strange question to ask about a Christian theologian. While he enjoyed prestige among secular audiences Niebuhr was, after all, a trained minister, almost exclusively employed by religious institutions, and the religious leitmotifs and concepts in his work are unavoidable.[28] Yet there are serious interpretive controversies about his theological commitments and their relationship to his political thought. There are, in a sense, two separate questions: How Christian was Reinhold? And how Christian was Niebuhr?

Contemporary political theorists tend to tread carefully around Niebuhr's theology. They either bracket its relationship to his political thought or ignore it entirely.[29] Morton White described "atheists for Niebuhr" as that group of intellectuals, historians, and policymakers who shared Niebuhr's analysis of the world without

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[27] Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[28] As Hollinger notes, Niebuhr "had always been willing to address the cultured despisers" but was "not comfortable about living with them and never felt he had as much to learn from them as they did from him." Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues,* 217.
[29] Cf. Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism"; Stears, *Demanding Democracy.*

accepting his religious assumptions.[30] This phrase has typically been understood as a derisive sociological description. But White actually meant to describe a category mistake: there could be no "atheists for Niebuhr" because Niebuhr was thoroughgoingly religious. White saw Niebuhr as resolving all questions about human psychology and morals to faith in the ultimate grace of God.[31] That was the beginning and end of the story. He called Niebuhr "a devotee of the "high priori" road that begins with a theology based on faith,"[32] and claimed that "Niebuhr without theology is a pale Niebuhr indeed."[33]

Niebuhr bears great responsibility for these broad characterizations. As Hollinger and others have noted, while he traveled somewhat freely between religious and secular spheres, he avoided many potentially fruitful encounters with leading thinkers of his time that would have required more precise philosophical translation. He is not known to have any correspondence with Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss and he warily and selectively approached his secular peers. Scott writes that while Niebuhr "lived in two worlds [the religious and the political]" he was "never fully at home in either."[34] Indeed, the traffic between Niebuhr and the secular academy was markedly one-way: he was largely interested in thinkers who were interested in him.

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[30] This cohort included David Brion Davis, George Kennan, Peter Viereck, and C. Van Woodward. Cf. "Martin Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Irony of American History: A Retrospective," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 2 (February 1993): 163-3.
[31] Morton White. *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (New York: Viking, (1976), 248.
[32] White, *Social Thought*, 258.
[33] White, *Social Thought,* 259, 259.
[34] Nathan Scott, Jr., ed. *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 102.

While secular critics think Niebuhr is too Christian, religious critics argue he is not Christian enough. Niebuhr's one-time UTS colleague Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about him that "The man seemed to talk about anything but God."[35] Milbank and Hauerwas, meanwhile, claim that Niebuhr treats Christianity instrumentally – not as a source of wisdom or subject of belief but a mystical and ineffable mythic tradition no better or worse than any other. Hauerwas goes so far as to say that "It appears that for Niebuhr God is nothing more than the name of our need to believe that life has an ultimate unity that transcends the world's chaos and makes possible what order we can achieve in this life. Niebuhr does not explain why he thinks anymore would feel compelled to worship or pray to a god so conceived."[36]

Elsewhere Hauerwas argues that inasmuch as Niebuhr developed a Christian ethics he took his subject to be "America...not prophetic Christian faith, let alone the church in which it is formed."[37] Milbank similarly claims that Niebuhr lacks the theological or prophetic imagination necessary to give the Word its due.[38] Gilkey agrees: "Niebuhr was, first and foremost, a political theologian, developing an account of the

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[35] Charles Marsh. *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 106.

[36] Stanley Hauerwas. *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 131, 499.

[37] Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 466. John Bennett wrote that "Niebuhr is basically a theologian who sees the implications of his theology for Christian ethics, but he has never addressed himself primarily to the Church as Church." Scott, Jr., ed. (1974), 16.

[38] Milbank argues that for Niebuhr "the most one can hope for in a Christian attuite to politics is the strategic modification and application of specific aspects of an agapic ideal, then Radical Orthodoxy rejects this as a failure of imagination. It rejects what it sees as the Niebuhrian view that 'politics is basically technology, a matter of the manipulation of physical forces.'" John Milbank. *Nuclear Realism & Christian Reality: The Poverty of Niebuhrianism* (London: Jubilee Group, 1986), 241.

divine concerned above all with the social existence of human beings and with the health and disease of that existence."[39] Niebuhr harbored many intellectual insecurities and readily admitted that he practiced – and preached – a kind of "bastardized theology," not the systematic sort developed by his brother, Yale Divinity School professor H. Richard Niebuhr, or his own colleagues at UTS.[40]

The neo-orthodox Protestant movement deserves more time and attention than we can give it here.[41] But it is worth noting the differences between Niebuhr and other central figures in that tradition. Niebuhr's major theological rival, Karl Barth, influentially claimed that theology should begin with "the Word of God" as it appears in scripture. Niebuhr rejected this idea. Experience was his starting point and participant observation his source material. The theological concepts of the Old and New Testaments were the texts available to him, in his tradition, to make sense of that experience. In this way, I read him, as many have, as a "Christian pragmatist."[42]

But we have not yet satisfied the secular critics. They may find the study of religion interesting, illuminating, and historically "important," and read Niebuhr and the

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[39] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 20.

[40] "Niebuhr never presumed to be a systematic thinker or theologian. He spoke self-mockingly of his "bastardized theology." Nathan Scott, Jr., ed. *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, 101.

[41] Gary Dorrien. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Eric Gregory, "Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodoxy of the Young John Rawls," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007); Christopher H. Evans. *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

[42] John Patrick Diggins. *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Cornel West. *The Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); John Coffey. *Political Realism in American Thought* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977).

neo-orthodox Protestants in order to understand why their thought was influential – not because it is necessarily insightful, or inasmuch as there are insights they must, constitutionally, be severable from theological premises. If the account of moral and political life depends on such premises and on interpretations of Biblical myth then, they worry, that Niebuhr must be only narrowly available. They essentially ask, as White did, can there be "atheists for Niebuhr"?

As a matter of fact, of course, there were and have been, just as there have been "atheists for King" or "atheists for Malcolm." As Martin Marty writers, there are public figures who draw upon a "governing faith and worldview" to convey insight to readers who do not share their assumptions.[43] In addition, we should remember that thinkers within Niebuhr's own religious tradition question his adherence to it. But such conflict indicates a family quarrel – that Niebuhr is finally religious before he is political and that this presents a problem for readers outside his faith tradition. I am persuaded by Lovin's explication, however:

> Niebuhr would not deny the theology, but he would defend his claim as a public intellectual on more pragmatic grounds. Ideas do not become public because they are certifiably uncontaminated by faith. They become public by providing coherence to more limited and fragmentary ideas that are widely shared among the diverse people who make up the public. Niebuhr would go on to say that this coherence falls far short of universal meaning. It simply makes sense of things to a lot of people who happen to be involved in the conversation, here and now. That "limited rational validation," however, is available to the truths of faith, too.[44]

There is another claim embedded in the passage: that there are articles of faith equivalent to theological commitments imminent in much of our political and moral commonsense.

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[43] Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr," 173.
[44] Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 56.

Niebuhr made this explicit in his 1937 essay "The Truth in Myths."[45] There he distinguished between primitive and permanent myths, the former of which could be dispensed with because they were contradicted by scientific law. But more permanent myths were valuable, even essential, and also always already present in even secular thought. It's not "turtles all the way down" for Niebuhr; there is a bottom to interpretation beyond which you hit unproven and unprovable assumptions. Those assumptions, he thinks, are not subject to blind faith. They are artifacts of accumulated intuitions formed by experience of the world – and that is, in part, how we verify and validate them for ourselves.[46] But to avoid "obscurantism" and illusion, Niebuhr thinks it is necessary to unearth and avow deep assumptions, to subject them to the light of day, to critical and ethical scrutiny.[47]

The myths contained in the Biblical tradition are valuable because they evoke our intuitions about our individual and social character.[48] More importantly, they offer a bulwark against either worldly absorption or total despair at the state of things.[49] Even the knowledge acquired by faith must be tested by experience – our lives in the world should

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[45] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1937).
[46] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 158.
[47] In a 1956 letter to Morton White Niebuhr defines an "obscurantist as "any one who obscures the realities of life by myth, dogma, preconception or absolute presupposition. But by that definition all of us are obscurantist in some sense. The only way out is by such honest inquiries as you propose." Correspondence from Reinhold Niebuhr to Morton White, July 22, 1956, Box 53, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[48] Durkin goes so far as to describe Niebuhr as more "mythologist" than theologian. Kenneth Durkin. *Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Company, 1990), 77-8.
[49] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 156.

not stand totally apart from that which supports our sense of how things are. "A truth of faith," Niebuhr writes in *Nature and Destiny*, "is not something that stands perpetually in contradiction to experience. On the contrary, it illumines experience and is in turn validated by experience."[50] There is thus an ongoing tension between faith and experience. The unfolding of life through history should not stand apart from faithful deliberation.

That fact of our incompletely rational knowledge of the world makes *public* theology possible in the first place – it collects or magnifies insights that we might otherwise ignore, even disavow. Public theology as Niebuhr practiced it, recognizes the incompleteness behind our ordinary assumptions and intuitions. Niebuhr does not attempt to replace such incompleteness with definitive answers. Secular critics sometimes assume that he offers some final, even dogmatic, solutions to this problem, which turns his existential interest into a kind of potted, final sentence about biblical truth and faith.[51] But his gesture to orthodoxy should not interpreted as sympathetic to fundamentalism: "Man is his own most vexing problem," Niebuhr opens *Nature and Destiny*.[52] He recognizes his own attempt to wrestle with the problems of existence as partial and itself incomplete.

IV. After Loss: Recovery or Burial?

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[50] *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 63.
[51] By "public theology" I do not mean that Niebuhr intended for theological ideas to be propagated through the state. He strongly opposed President Nixon's White House services not only because he thought they undermined the secular state but also because they undermined truly "independent" religion. Cf. Kruse, *One Nation Under God,* 256.
[52] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume I,* 1.

Aesthetic and architectural tastes tend to skip a generation. There are similar fashions in social and political thought: those writing only decades before us seem more antiquated – and less surprising – than their classical or ancient counterparts. This is especially true when our relative contemporaries seem to not fully grasp where things were actually going. We cannot help but Monday-morning-quarterback. Niebuhr and his moment feel both proximate, chronologically, but distant, historically. Epigones and critics agree, which lends a curious, binary character to much of the literature. What do we do now that Niebuhr has been "lost" to history? Should he be revived? Or more permanently entombed?

In 1972 Michael Novak said that although Niebuhr had only died the year before it "seemed like ten."[53] Biographer Richard Fox describes Niebuhr as a "time bound" thinker, calling on readers to "respect [his] pastness."[54] There can be something stubbornly midcentury about Niebuhr. Though he lived from 1892 to 1971 he was most intellectually fruitful during the peak of the social, political, cultural, and economic détente spanning the middle years of the century, what historians call "the New Deal Order." The steady deterioration of that order started in the early 1970s and has continued unabated.[55] He also operated in an era of "compression" – the compression of wages[56] as

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[53] Gary Dorrien. *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 220.
[54] Richard John Neuhaus, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 1-3.
[55] Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds. *Th Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
[56] Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo, "The Great Compression: The Wage Structure in the United States at Mid-century," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 107, Issue 1 (February 1992).

well as the historically unusual compression of partisan polarization.[57] A now-infamous American Political Science Association panel in 1950 recommended the parties become more ideologically polarized to increase democratic choice.[58]

Niebuhr was and will always be ineluctably tied to the political culture of the Cold War. He was active in Cold War organizations, wrote voluminously about Soviet-American competition, and drifted, like many in his generation, from youthful socialist to adult, "mature" anti-communist. Many of Niebuhr's conceptual categories seem to reproduce the binary nature of international ideological and political competition that permeated the culture. This can make Niebuhr seem exceptionally at home in the cultural, political, and economic lifeworld of the Cold War midcentury.

The religious landscape has undergone major transformations as well. The collapse of the Protestantism establishment in the 1960s and 1970s made way for the rise of the Evangelical movement, replacing the somber, and high-minded public theology of liberal Protestants with more charismatic, less ideologically ambiguous, more inerrant interpreters of scripture.[59] Thoroughgoing pluralism and the rise of the "nones" has also

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[57] Hahrie Han and David W. Brady, "A Delayed Return to Historical Norms: Congressional Party Polarization After the Second World War," *British Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 3, (2007).
[58] "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties," *The American Political Science Review* 44, no. 3 (September 1950).
[59] George M. Marsden. *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Gary Dorrien. *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Kevin M. Kruse. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Molly Worthen. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

deconcentrated the center of American religious life. The latest Pew Research Center survey finds that 22% of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated.[60]

In her memoir, Niebuhr's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, describes the way in which her father and his generation of liberal Protestants have been "eclipsed" by the transformation of the American religious sphere.[61] The "spiritual marketplace" of the midcentury was renewed and vibrant – some 47% of Americans attended weekly services.[62] The mainline Protestant denominations were dominant. Religious questions pulsed through the culture. It is, indeed, unimaginable, that a Union Theological Seminar professor could make the cover of *Time Magazine* as Niebuhr did in 1943. Dorrien and Hollinger argue that the vacuum left by Niebuhr and his cohort of neo-orthodox, high minded, liberal Protestants ushered in a more immediate, emotive, orthodox, Evangelical Protestantism to center stage.[63] Hollinger goes so far as to claim that Niebuhr cleared the way for a more ideologically aggressive, inerrant, fundamentalist Protestantism to take hold.[64]

Some Niebuhrians are nostalgic. They long, at least, for the social conditions under which serious-minded public theology could come into being.[65] Epigones bemoan

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[60] Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," 2014, http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/

[61] Elisabeth Sifton. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 31.

[62] Robert S. Ellwood. *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[63] Charles C. Brown. *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 3-4.

[64] David Hollinger. *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 211-213.

[65] As Gregory notes, "many invocations of Niebuhrian liberalism (or laments about its demise) resemble the nostalgic invocations of medieval sacramentalism or the purity of the early church of the martyrs that sometimes characterize followers of Milbank and

the "lost world" or lifeworld that he has come to represent. "This is not Reinhold Niebuhr's world," Lovin writes.[66] Ross Douthat's chapter on Niebuhr in his 2012 book *Bad Religion* is even entitled "the lost world." He and his "age [are] lost to us now, almost beyond recall. [Niebuhr's] was the last moment in American life when the churches of the Protestant Mainline still composed something like a religious establishment capable of setting the tone for the culture as a whole."[67] Elshtain writes that that "civic consensus" that Niebuhr assumed has vanished and that "there cannot be a contemporary Niebuhr as the culture that gave rise to Niebuhr and which he could assume, no longer exists."[68] In an era of deep partisan polarization, it is not hard to understand the appeal of a thinker operating in a less openly conflictual political culture.[69]

There is a more permanent source of Niebuhrian longing. Niebuhr enjoys a status not unfamiliar to scholars of political thought – the founder of a school. Though he was by no means the only Protestant theologian to reengage orthodox Christianity, among his generation of theologians he became the most prominent popular and charismatic

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Hauerwas," two major anti-Niebuhrians. Eric Gregory. Eric Gregory. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustine Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 19.

[66] Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 60.

[67] Ross Douthat. *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 20.

[68] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Niebuhr's 'Nature of Man' and Christian Realism," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power,* Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54.

[69] Liliana Mason. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Alan I. Abramowitz. *The Great Realignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Morris P. Fiorina. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate* (Palo Alto: Hoover Institution Press, 2017).

translator. Like Leo Strauss, Niebuhr staked his political project on the recovery of a submerged, pre-modern tradition and spent his intellectual career engaging and elaborating that lost tradition for the sake of increased clarity and perspective on the problems viewed as contingent and tractable by liberal positivists.[70] Niebuhr scholarship, like Strauss scholarship, tends to be partisan, even binary. The existence of a school and an inheritance can do that to a thinker.[71]

For every Niebuhr scholar who yearns for his recovery – or the recovery of the social conditions that made him possible – there is another who considers his decline an indication of intellectual and political progress, moving beyond the tired, antique tropes of what Mark Grief calls "the age of the crisis of man."[72] Stevens writes that "nostalgia for Niebuhr and the liberal consensus of which he was an architect is misplaced…since his brand of public theology is passé, ill-suited for addressing today's grassroots religious insurgencies."[73] While Stevens describes the growth of liberation theology and other third world alternatives to the mainline Protestantism which Niebuhr represents, we might also mention the significant political movements about which Niebuhr has less to say. He is

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[70] Few intellectual historians and scholars of religion or politics have picked up on the homologies between Niebuhr and Strauss. Though they had no formal correspondence or relationship both occupy roughly analogous locations in their respective fields, representing tendencies, even orthodoxies, with devoted followings and inciting strong reactions from a diverse collection of dissidents and interlocuters. Most prominently, both sought to recover a submerged tradition – "classical political philosophy" for Strauss and "the classical tradition in theology" for Niebuhr. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 124.

[71] For more on the debate over Strauss's legacy, cf. Steven B. Smith, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Catherine H. Zuckert. *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Anne Norton. *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[72] Mark Greif. *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[73] Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free,* 43.

just not a thinker for the "age of fracture" that has followed the decomposition of the midcentury political and economic order.[74]

Both epigones and the critics treat him as a historical property, already assuming, essentially, that his time has passed and that the work of the scholar is to assess his public legacy or the tendency he represents. As Hulsether writes, Niebuhr scholarship and criticism has transformed Reinhold into the "image of stale intellectual food: if it could be judged healthful at all, it already seemed well digested."[75] Hulsether identifies space between the extremes of hagiography and condemnation. He evokes both "a kind of obsolescence" and "a distinctive new stage within an ongoing legacy."[76] That is what I attempt here. Part of this will involve looking beyond Niebuhr's "political views" to see his "political thought" – the more permanent set of propositions and arguments he made about the political world.

V. Reinhold's Politics

Niebuhr was an unusually vigorous political participant. He wrote editorials, founded journals, led organizations, served as counsel to statesmen, and broadcast his views publicly and prominently. Scholars have thoroughly examined his political evolution, his policy positions, and his practical activity – important, even essential, aspects of any full and rich biography. But I wager that they are more distracting than

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[74] Daniel T. Rodgers. *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert O. Self. *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012); Chris Hedges. *Death of the Liberal Class* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).
[75] Mark Hulsether "After Niebuhr" in Daniel Rice, ed. *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an American Original* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 345.
[76] Hulsether, "After Niebuhr," 339.

helpful to reading Niebuhr as a political thinker. By that I do not mean that Niebuhr can or should be completely extracted from his context. Instead, the tendency to read Niebuhr purely politically has come with the cost of treating him as a historical property, which makes it much harder to consider the full range of his political thought and easier to develop rather potted or summary accounts of "Niebuhr's politics."

There are important distinctions between "political thought" and "political views," between what Niebuhr said and did about politics, and what his written work allows us to say and do about politics. As we see in the history of political thought, a philosopher's own contemporary positions may be relatively free-floating from the potential readings that their perspective on politics makes possible. That said, scholars are mostly right about the content and evolution of Reinhold's politics. My ambition is to tip the scale towards the "thought," and to demonstrate that the two are less closely aligned than we might think.

Excessive attention to Niebuhr's actual, practical "views" can make him seem fairly uninteresting – an unapologetic Cold War liberal. Jan Werner-Müller defines Cold War liberals as endorsing a "prudential approach to politics; this prudential management of value conflicts in turn was best entrusted to cultivated bureaucratic elites."[77] Niebuhr's friend and confidant Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s concept of the "vital center" was seen to caution against ideological extremes and embrace, not without anguish, that "The best one could hope for in domestic and foreign policy…was the gradual alleviation of

[77] Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom: On 'Cold War Liberalism,'" *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no. 1, 45.

suffering rather than the creation of a new world."[78] Haynes goes so far as to claim that Schlesinger "secularized" Niebuhr.[79] Indeed, throughout his life Schlesinger was steadfast in his belief that Niebuhr contributed special insight to a mature perspective on political and social life.[80] Others describe this brand of midcentury political thinker and activist in terms of welfare at home but intervention abroad, admixing anti-communism and hawkishness with a limited defense of the welfare state and opposition to ascriptive hierarchy. In his public life Niebuhr was guilty as charged.[81]

To the left flank of Niebuhr scholarship, his proximity to the center of American political power from the 1940s onward seems to render him a compromised figure: court philosopher, not prophet; propogandist for American power in the Cold War; late-comer to the struggles against white supremacy and the Vietnam War; in short, a figure who cannot and should not survive 1989. Suspicious of the way in which Niebuhr was taken up by political elites, such scholars charge him with guilt by association. Swomley calls

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[78] Richard H. Pells. *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 137.

[79] John Earl Haynes. *Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 119; Niebuhr's "vocabulary, if not his theology, had a profound effect on Arthur Schlesinger...[who] peppered his prose with Augustinian (and Freudian) references to the tensions, uncertainties, and anxieties that afflicted people in the twentieth century." Pells, *The Liberal Mind,* 136.

[80] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *The Vital Center* "The Soviet experience, on top of the rise of fascism, reminded my generation rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect, and that the corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world. We discovered a new dimension of experience — the dimension of anxiety, guilt and corruption...as Reinhold Niebuhr has brilliantly suggested...we were simply rediscovering ancient truths which we should never have forgotten." Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1997), xxi; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr," *New York Times*, September 18, 2005.

[81] Cherniss notes, however, that Niebuhr's "critical, antielitist and antiestablishment instincts reflected in [his] thought set him apart from some other Cold War liberals." Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism," 88.

Niebuhr a voice in the "propaganda chorus" cheering on the Second World War who broadcast an excessively uncritical perspective on the American achievement of "a tolerable answer to the problem of...making freedom compatible with justice and stability."[82]

LeFeber argues that the Christian realists set the stage for the American stance in the Cold War intervention in Vietnam and became "theological apologists for American foreign policy and...the American way of life."[83] He claims that Niebuhr's realist perspective might say something interesting about the national interest but proves useless when considering ethical questions facing the individual. He argues that Niebuhr succumbs to a tendency to which Niebuhr *himself* was openly critical: the "capture" and capitulation of the prophet to the purposes of the status quo.[84] In Kleinman's political biography of Niebuhr and Henry Wallace, Reinhold comes under attack for his criticism of the Progressive Party candidate. Kleinman argues that Niebuhr helped generate establishment liberal hostility to Popular Front liberals, and that he proffered an "anti-vision" of politics consistent with Cold War liberalism. Niebuhr thus figures in this story – and many others – as either hero or villain, friend or enemy.[85]

Yet Niebuhr has also proven to be vexingly chameleon. John Coffey writes that "the fact that [Niebuhr's] Christian realism was able to accommodate diametrically

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[82] John M. Swomley. *American Empire: The Political Ethics of Twentieth Century Conquest* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), 1, 16.
[83] LaFeber writes that Niebuhr "provided a historical basis and rationale for the tone, the outlook, and the unsaid, and often unconscious, assumptions of [the early Cold War] years." Walter LeFeber. *America, Russia and the Cold War 1945-1990* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 34-41.
[84] Swomley, *American Empire*, 37.
[85] Mark L. Kleinman. *A World of Hope, a World of Fear: Henry A. Wallace, Reinhold Niebuhr, and American Liberalism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 51.

opposed political positions leads one to doubt both its theoretical and practical value."[86] For many, his ideological availability to hawks and doves, liberals and neo-conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, is proof positive that there just is not much "there there" – that his thought is empty and flexible enough to serve most any purpose.[87]

His embrace by political elites has only fanned the flames of suspicion. Since at least the 1940s he has been accused of serving as a bipartisan policy elite and intellectual who delivers moralizing bromides that help the wicked sleep at night.[88] Noam Chomsky called him a "prophet of the establishment."[89] Erstwhile admirer Cornel West, meanwhile, called him "an organic intellectual of the corporate liberal establishment."[90] A 1987 cover story in *Sojourners* magazine detailed the extent to which he made the "U.S. imperial vocation" "comprehensible to the Christian on the street." They describe him as "less a prophet than a priest of the present order," using the "logic of necessity" to constrain normative aspirations at home and justify force abroad.[91] Edward Said,

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[86] Coffey, *Political Realism*, 121.
[87] "Niebuhr was often castigated for being every atheist's favorite theologian and every conservative anti-communist's favorite liberal." Brooks, David. "A Man on a Gray Horse." *The Atlantic*, September 2002.
[88] Zubovich, Gene. "Reinhold Niebuhr, Washington's Favorite Theologian," *Religion and Politics*, April 25, 2017, http://religionandpolitics.org/2017/04/25/reinhold-niebuhr-washingtons-favorite-theologian/
[89] Noam Chomsky, "Reinhold Niebuhr," *Grand Street,* Volume 6, Number 2 (Winter 1987), 206.
[90] Cornel West. *The Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 163.
[91] Bill Kellermann, "Apologist of Power: The Long Shadow of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism" in *Sojourners: An Independent Christian Monthly* (March 1987), 16-20.

meanwhile, criticized Niebuhr's support for Israel and (Christian) Lebanon in the 1940s as implicitly hostile to Islam and democratic self-determination.[92]

Director Comey was but the latest in a long line of policymakers, politicians, and pundits who call upon Niebuhr's name and legacy for their own purposes.[93] The popular invocations of Niebuhr have lent support to the critics who consider him a kind of court philosopher. The 2003 invasion of Iraq serves as a Petri dish for the dueling Niebuhrs. His name and philosopher were invoked by both opponents and supporters of the War.[94] President Obama's invocation of Niebuhr, meanwhile, led readers to consider the Niebuhrian influence on his actions in public life.[95]

While left critics chastise Niebuhr for emboldening Cold War liberalism, another tradition of interpreters have claimed him as a conservative, an American Edmund Burke.[96] Irving Kristol in his autobiographical account of neo-conservatism described his

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[92] Edward Said. *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 30-39; West. *The Evasion of Philosophy,* 162.

[93] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, "Hillary Clinton's History of Faith is Long and Rich. This Week, She Should Talk About It," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2016; John McCain. *Hard Call: Great Decisions and the extraordinary People Who Made Them* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

[94] Crouter (2010), 9; Robert B. Horwitz, "The Revival of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Foreign Policy Fable," *Public Culture* 28:1 (2015); Gopal Balakrishnan, "Sermons on the Present Age," *New Left Review* 61 (January-February 2010).

[95] James T. Kloppenberg. *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 17-26; Gabriel Fackre. *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), xix; David Bromwich, "Self-Deceptions of Empire," *London Review of Books,* Vol. 30, No. 20 (October 2008).

[96] Emile Lester, "British Conservatism and American Liberalism in Mid-Twentieth Century: Burkean Themes in Niebuhr and Schlesinger." *Polity* 46, no. 2 (April 2014); Vigen Guroian. "The Conservatism of Reinhold Niebuhr: The Burkean Connection." *The Synthesis of Moral Vision and Political Thought* (Summer 1985); Robert Devigne. *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss, and the Response to Postmodernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Matthew Berke. "The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold

encounter with *Nature and Destiny* as decisive – calling Niebuhr one of the "intellectual grandfathers" of his political transformation,[97] seeing the wayward social and political consequences of excess enthusiasm, political expectation, and public moralism. Michael Novak and Robert Benne develop Niebuhrian theories of "democratic capitalism."[98] Sidney Hook wrote that Niebuhr's "breathes a defeatism more congenial to Toryism than his own political progressivism."[99] In the field of Christian ethics, meanwhile, Niebuhr has been called upon as a sober alternative to the contemporary "utopianism" of liberation theology.[100]As Dorrien describes, the Niebuhr "revered by neoconservatives" presents "highly masculine rhetoric of power, duality, and realism promoted an aggressive anticommunist politics."[101] Niebuhr consistently rejected these claims, seeing

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Niebuhr." *First Things* (November 1992); Wilfred M. McClary, "The Continuing Irony of American History," *First Things* (February 2002).

[97] Irving Kristol. *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 484. For more on Kristol, cf. George H. Nash. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 427.

[98] Michael Novak. *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982); Robert Benne, *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism: A Moral Reassessment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

[99] Michael Kimmage. *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 162-3.

[100] Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988); Thomas G. Sanders. "The Theology of Liberation: Christian Utopianism." *Christianity and Crisis* 33 (1973), 167-173; Michael Novak. "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Model for Neoconservatives." *Christian Century* 103, no. 3 (1986), 69-71; Robert McAfee Brown. "Reinhold Niebuhr: His Theology in the 1980s." *Christian Century* 103, no. 3 (1986), 66-68; John C. Bennett. "Continuing the Conversation: Liberation Theology and Christian Realism." *Christianity and Crisis* 33 (1973), 197-8; Craig L. Nessan, *Orthopraxis or Heresy: The North American Theological Response to Latin American Theology*, (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986).

[101] Gary Dorrien. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 128. Elsewhere, Dorrien defines neo-conservatism as the "intellectual movement originated in former leftists that promotes militant anticommunism, capitalist economics, a minimal welfare state, the rule of traditional elites, and a return to traditional cultural values." Gary Dorrien. *The Neoconservative*

the emergent conservative political tradition of Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley as far too comfortable with hierarchy and far too hostile to redistribution.[102]

It is possible to say something definitive about how Reinhold understood his own politics. But I largely abstain from adjudicating disputes about Niebuhrian "ideology." This is not to figure Niebuhr as a philosopher of the "third way," but instead to insist on the violence done to a thinker as subtle and sophisticated as Niebuhr by making him a definitive property of the "left" or the "right."

VI. Whither Realism?

The past twenty years have seen a renaissance of self-styled "realists." In its late 20th and early 21st century iteration political realism has been developed largely as a reaction to the "high liberalism" associated with Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian political philosophy.[103] (Though it may be argued that realism always necessarily figures itself against a "less realistic" mainstream – even Machiavelli understood himself as an innovator. He was not in the business of detailing "imagined republics and principalities

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Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 8.

[102] Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 142; McKeogh, *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 143. "Any conservatism which is merely interested in the preservation of some *status quo* would be anathema for any one who had drawn inspiration from the Old Testament prophets. American conservatism, which is nothing more than a decadent liberalism, would be doubly unacceptable. My conservatism relates to an increasing appreciation of the organic factors in social life in contrast to the tendencies stemming from the Enlightenment which blind modern men to the significance of these organic factors, and treat the human community and its instruments of order and justice as if they were purely artifacts." Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Reply to My Critics," in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 434.

[103] William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory,* Volume 9, Number 4 (2010), 386.

that have never been seen or known to exist in truth."[104]) Contemporary political realism is a capacious, catholic tendency; there are many realisms and many realists.

Moral realists contend that normative statements cannot be reduced to emotive statements or subjective preferences.[105] Some political realists argue that political theory ought to be normatively responsive to things "really happening" in the world, and, in particular, to the facts and findings of social science.[106] Isiah Berlin describes the "sense of reality" as anti-theoretical; a posture developed through historical and literary reflection, marked by empathy and imagination over a formal system that makes perfect sense of human behavior.[107] Other political realists reject the idea that political theory ought to start with norms and moral aspirations that are disconnected from the political world operates or, perhaps, ever could.[108]

J.S. Maloy, meanwhile, defines realism as a politics shorn of illusion: "bend[ing] to worldly complexity and see[ing] adaption as the characteristically human response. A realist doubts whether the unique spiritual or intellectual traits of humans are clues to any definite meaning, purpose, or teleology in the universe. For the sake of practical adaptation, realism prepares us to compromise abstract ideals, even "humane" and

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[104] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61.
[105] Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed. *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
[106] Ian Shapiro. *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[107] Isaiah Berlin. *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their Histories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998).
[108] Alice Baderin, "Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (2014).

"civilized" ones."[109] This political realism most closely resembles the realism of international relations.

In international relations, realism has a quite technical meaning. It describes an approach to the world order that takes for granted conditions of legal and moral chaos and understands states as self-interested actors competing over finite resources. Bell, Epp, Scheuerman, and McQueen argue that this "realism," while nested in a rather distant subdiscipline should nevertheless be read by political realists in political theory.[110] Indeed, Guilhot demonstrates the way in which the history of realism as a distinct political tradition has its roots in both international relations and political theory.[111] That "first wave" of international relations has morphed into various neo-realisms that deploy technical and scientific tools to examine interests, games, and strategies.

Niebuhr called himself a realist, and he has been considered foundational for both international relations realism and the realism of contemporary political theory.[112] Yet

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[109] J.S. Maloy. *Democratic Statecraft: Political Realism and Popular Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

[110] Duncan Bell, ed. *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); William E. Scheuerman, "The Realist Revival in Political Philosophy, or: Why New is Not Always Improved," *International Politics* 50, no. 6 (2013); Alison McQueen, "Salutary Fear? Hans Morgenthau and the Politics of Existential Crisis," *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture*, Volume 6 (Winter 2017); Roger Epp. *The Augustinian Moment in International Relations: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition* (Aberystwyth: Department of International Politics, University College of Wales, 1991).

[111] Guilhot chars the self-conscious genesis of the school of "political realism," though he often treats the fabrication of the tradition as excessively conspiratorial. Cf. Nicolas Guilhot. *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[112] He was a present and active participant at the 1954 Rockefeller Foundation conference that announced the "invention" of IR. Guilhot, Nicolas, ed. *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

there are important ways in which his thought departs from their contemporary conventions. I argue that Niebuhr shares much with an parallel realism that, as Mantena describes, "neither forsakes an agenda of reform nor sacrifices ethics at the altar of power politics."[113] This realism shares some surface analyses of public life with other contemporary realisms but has more normative motivations – not just to empower political actors in an imperfect world, but to prioritize its improvement, as well.

Let us consider what Niebuhr actually said about "political realism." He writes that it is "the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power."[114] Already we see some important differences with other realisms. For one, "realism" does not describe a propositional or systematic account, an ideology or an "exact doctrine." It is, instead, dispositional – about perspective, emphasis, and attention to the ways in which moral or political life do not adhere to norms of reciprocity, mutuality, civility, fairness, and justice. The idea of a realism as a "disposition" has some affinities with theories of genre not as an ontological category but a "structure" through

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[113] Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (May 2012), 456.
[114] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

which the audience can make sense of character and plot.[115] The genre, on this account, becomes more perspective than dogma, more "style" than creed.[116]

Dispositions, to be sure, can have prescriptive implications. A realist disposition, in particular, can get out of hand. George Orwell argued that paying too much attention to our faults and blemishes could be dangerous. He defined political realism as the tendency "to overrate the part played in human affairs by sheer force…[and to] argu[e] from this that one cannot pally to politics the same moral code that one practices or tries to practice in private life."[117] We can imagine an even more severe reactions to this attention: the atrophying of moral expectations of politics at all, collapsing the distinction between what "is" and what "ought" to be.

First, while Niebuhr argues for attention to our shortcomings his realism is morally inclined. That is, there are binding moral demands external to political life that still obtain within it. For him, those demands are informed by the idea that *agape* love is an ultimate norm. He does not merely think that it would be "nice" if "the law of love" were the overriding principle that should govern our conduct. He understands it to be true in a deep sense. He argues, however, that that does not mean these demands can be easily, or ever, fully realized in our world. His account of human fallenness renders the absolute norms and demands of Christian morality relatively unavailable to us. Thus,

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[115] "Genre, we might say, is a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning. In using the word "constraint" I don't mean to say that genre is simply a restriction. Rather, its structuring effects are productive of meaning; they shape and guide, in the way that a builder's form gives shape to a pour of concrete…Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place." John Frow. *Genre* (London: Routledge, 2005), 10.
[116] Robert Hariman. *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[117] Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free*, 31.

while *agape* occupies something of a noumenal realm in moral life, Niebuhr does not take biblical faith or teachings to be a categorical imperative. We will always get in the way of our own attempts to realize our greatest moral aspirations. That said he does not think of ultimate norms as therefore irrelevant. Remember, they are also true, *real*, but at the same time "impossible" because of the kinds of beings humans are, historically.

Unlike realists who describe morality as entirely conventional or nominalist, Niebuhr thinks of the moral as a category that is both prior to the political, while at the same time stands in tension with it. This tension finds expression in Niebuhr's famous description of *agape* love as an "impossible possibility." By that he means that there is some traffic between the City of God and the City of Man, rendering some version of perfect ideals derivatively relevant to worldly life. His concern with justice as an approximation of *agape* makes him an unusual kind of political realist.[118]

Second, Niebuhr does not theorize *modus vivendi* as the *summum bonum* of public life. Other political realists with similar analyses of human limitations seek institutional arrangements to secure mere peace, order, and security. Niebuhr, in contrast, has a more robust account of the relationship that citizens can and should pursue with one another. He is a thoroughly democratic thinker, operating with a particular conception of democracy. Niebuhrian democracy is not merely about the distribution of or competition over power but also a way of getting on in the world that makes it possible for us to live and fight together. This account is also informed by the role of *agape* love as law, as thoroughly motivating and underwriting norms of cooperation. As we shall see, Niebuhr

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[118] Matt Sleat. *Liberal Realism: A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 135.

develops a strong relationship between democratic means and just ends. This view can be contrasted with other democratic realists, historical and contemporary, who call upon extra-democratic measures like representation and counter-majoritarian institutions to channel or corral democratic passions – or who imagine democratic government as the most efficient container for ineliminable conflict.

Third, Niebuhr is not an instrumentalist. Political realists are preoccupied with the problem of dirty hands: the fact that we do things in politics that we would not at home, and that these things might just be a necessary part of achieving our political goals. Some accept the reality that proverbial lemons must be squeezed to make lemonade. Others celebrate extremity or cruelty as politically productive, even revolutionary. Niebuhr has long been seen as a standing somewhere in the middle – lamenting the fact that politics is a tragic sport but offering little hope that such tragedies can be reduced or minimized, let alone eliminated. I read him very differently. I argue, by contrast, that Niebuhr develops means by which we can and should get on in the world effectively and morally. I describe this as the politics of "moral wayfinding," a descriptive and prescriptive account of navigating public life.

This ethic has an audience in mind. It is not the policy elite or elected officials. Niebuhr, instead, is interested in those who want to pursue politics in competitive government responsibly, who have some relationship to political power. This is not a theory of rebellion in the totalitarian state, but it is also not a theory (exclusively) for Presidents. It is for the protestor, the labor organizer, the PTA leader. All these figures will, in their attempt to intervene in politics through democratic – or undemocratic – institutions encounter hazards, opportunities, and dilemmas. The Niebuhrian political

subject seeks to be effective but not callous, moral but not scandalized by the vices of others, and imaginative but not detached from the proximate politics of the possible.

VII. The Politics of Moral Wayfinding

Though the term "wayfaring" dates to the 16th century, "way-finding" made its way into English in 1960, with the publication of Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City.* Lynch argued that people developed "mental maps" to navigate chaotic urban space. They organized these maps, organically, but he observed that there were technologies – street numbers, route markers, signs – that assisted and shaped this process. He called these "way-finding devices" and he argued that they help commuters refine their "spatial orientation," developing an "image" or "mental map" of their surroundings.[119]

Paul Arthur and Romedi Passini describe "way-finding" as "spatial problem solving" — "the process of reaching a destination, whether in a familiar or unfamiliar environment." It is a tripartite cognitive process:

> ...*decision making* and the development of a plan of action; *decision execution*, which transforms the plan into appropriate behavior at the right place in space; *information processing* understood in its generic sense as comprising environmental perception and cognition, which, in turn, are responsible for the information basis of the two decision-related processes.[120]

Design, planning, and physical infrastructure can make it easier for individuals to find their way in dense urban life, though the ease of navigation will depend in part on how efficiently individuals make decisions, map, and process.

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[119] Kevin Lynch. *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).
[120] Paul Arthur and Romedi Passini. *Wayfinding: People, Signs, and Architecture* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1992), 25.

Way-finding differs from other technologies of urban life. Way-finding tools help commuters order and make cognitive, visual sense of their surroundings. Unlike highways, stop signs, traffic signals, roads or sidewalks, way-finding aids are unlikely to make legal demands on spatial behavior or punish violations of proscribed travel. Instead, way-finding technologies help travelers map their surroundings by identifying salient attractions, hazards, points of interest, in multiple directions. Thus, way-finding, while not a modern concept, is nevertheless a modern technology: it only becomes necessary in a dense urban landscape of residents and transients, communities and strangers, where decisions must be made and paths must be chosen. Indeed, Arthur and Passini title their introduction "Who will help me find my way?"[121]

This is Reinhold Niebuhr's approach to political theory.[122] He sees the task of political theory as orienting his readers and his public to attractions – and especially hazards – that might inform our reasoned judgment. To extend the analogy, Niebuhr does not build directional highways or even install stanchions to restrict pedestrian flow. Systematic philosophers develop logics of construction. Instead he identifies multiple directions without committing to a single destination. He thus offers the tools for moral and political judgment but does not think those judgments can be made absent engagement, action, and experience. Recall that realism is a disposition, not a doctrine – a genre, not a language or system. It does not banish illusions or ideology but demands self-awareness, skepticism, and vigilance.

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[121] Arthur and Passini, *Wayfinding*, v.

[122] While my approach shares some affinities with recent account of Niebuhr's "political ethos," I break with Cherniss in emphasizing the justice-oriented nature of wayfinding. Cf. Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism," 60.

To complicate the analogy for a moment we must imagine that the signals and signs that Niebuhr constructs are installed in a field of quite endless possibility. It's easy to get lost. The posts that help us find the way – or a way – serve a prescriptive function, too. Some hazards may be too large to avoid but at least we can know they are coming. Other hazards, like wind tunnels or unfinished sidewalks, will force us to adjust our path. We may even have no choice but to encounter these hazards head-on. The project of moral wayfinding thus has both descriptive and prescriptive features.

The descriptive features are clear: the signs identify things that are actually there. But the prescriptive features can be easy to miss. First, the signs must recognize hazards as a problem to identify them as such in the first place. Second, the signs will also help to try to lead us where we want to go, and help us try to avoid most hazardous routes – routes that may end poorly. Third, the political realm may be vast but it should be possible to learn it in such ways that we ourselves can become moral wayfinders, becoming less reliant on signs and signals. But for now, moral wayfinding tools can train our moral muscles and orient us to the world we must traverse.

This concept of "moral wayfinding" invites a comparison to the most famous statement of political ethics by a realist, Max Weber's 1919 lecture "The Profession and Vocation of Politics." This essay is especially worth considering both because of its prominence in the literature and because it is very likely that Niebuhr was among its early American readers. As Fox notes, Niebuhr and his brother were keenly interested in Weber and read him, untranslated, in the 1910s, well before his American renaissance.[123]

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[123] Lawrence A. Scaff. *Max Weber in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

There are important rhymes between these two accounts of how to do politics "realistically," but the dissonances help illuminate what makes Niebuhr's realism distinctive.

Political realists love to give advice. *The Prince*, whether sincere or parody, is addressed to practical actors. Weber, too, speaks to those who seek to intervene in the world through political action. But the advice of political realists does not tend to be ethical. The realist seeks to understand the way the world works so that she can more effectively pursue her purposes without succumbing to common errors brought on by disruptive illusions and distracting just-so stories. There is something morally agnostic about most political realism, though it nevertheless undertakes a kind of wayfinding: realists identify and visually indicate the hazards of political life. But this wayfinding project can lack clear normative motivation – or a particular destination.

Niebuhr, in contrast, presents a more morally inclined realism. He recognized the "dirty hands" problem as ineliminable: the City of Man is crowded with conflict, coercion, and injustice. Our imperfect interventions are inevitable, even necessary, but those interventions should, as much as possible, be motivated by a desire for repair. Niebuhr identifies the hazards and attractions even when they are unavoidable because he thinks we are morally responsible and, ultimately, morally ambitious enough to want to do what we can to minimize their harms. Many of those hazards and attractions are internal; we are wired to lose our way, not just to encounter others who have done so. But the best we can hope for turns out to be quite significant.

Weber addressed his ethic, famously, to those seeking to make the political life their profession, their career. He offers lessons about political leadership, and by this he

had something very particular in mind – a responsibility with the power a state wields in successfully claiming the "monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory."[124] Politics was also the distribution and preservation of power within and without state institutions. Within states he argues that there are multiple forms of rule – some depend on tradition, others on charisma, other on the law itself – but that to make a life out of politics one must balance the right kind of relationship between normative commitment and practical orientation, between "conviction" and "responsibility," between "passion, responsibility, and judgment."[125] Weber recognizes that the possession of political power delivers emotional jolts or rewards, and these can lead to "vanity, the mortal enemy of all dedication to a cause" and the source of much self-deception.[126]

This vanity can produce tragic consequences for the leader and others, for she will begin to lose the perspective on herself and sense of responsibility that are necessary to make sober decisions. But politics cannot be entirely sober – the leader must keep in mind her fiery convictions in the face of disappointment and the work of politics, described infamously as the "slow, strong drilling through hard boards."[127] Weber calls on this vocational politician to muster both heroic commitment and sobriety, inured to the inevitable frustrations associated with collective life.

From a distance, Weber and Niebuhr offer very similar analyses of the social world. Both worry about the disenchanting nature of modern, commercial society. Both

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[124] Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," in *Max Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 310-11.
[125] Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," 352.
[126] Ibid., 353.
[127] Ibid., 369.

recognize the pervasiveness of coercion and even violence in politics. And both urge a balance between normative aspirations and the less perfect work of making ends possible in the world. But there are important differences, too.

Niebuhr is not merely interested in lighting a way for political entrepreneurs to realize their ends. He is also interested in the nature of those ends and insists that they will bear some relationship to the means pursued. His conception of leadership, as we shall see, is also significantly more democratic. He, too, addresses those who make politics vocational – who, in some sense, want to change the world – but he does not think that such change will be possible by heroic individual acts alone. He recommends democratic humility as both the least morally compromised and most politically effective ethic to bend a stubborn world to one's own ends – ends that will depend upon the idea that tolerable peace and collective life should be made possible even after an intense conflict.

Niebuhr is also significantly more demanding. Weber argues that there are ways in which the political entrepreneur can rise above the dangers associated with politics. This is not the case for Niebuhr. The political elect – the ostensibly virtuous – remain vulnerable to the hazards of collective life which are, after all, both internal and external. As we shall see, that need not require political subjects to abandon their aspirations, but those aspirations should be pursued in a spirit of critical self-reflection, not heroism.

The true "vocation" to take on political work requires a kind of fortitude, maturity, hard-heartedness, and patience. These things take the right perspective on the "slow, strong drilling through hard boards" – the thankless and frustrating work that constitutes collective life. But this is not a moral perspective. It is "ethical" inasmuch as it

concerns a way of acting appropriate to a profession. That is a rather thin and permissive normative sense.

The practice of moral wayfinding is ultimately a practice of searching, seeking, and acting in the world; pressing for its horizons, but balancing aspiration with the foreknowledge of our ultimate limitations. This is not a political practice of the jaded but stubborn, wise but committed politico. Niebuhr cares too much about how we do political action to celebrate the career bureaucrat or the unsung legislative soldier. The Niebuhrian archetype, by contrast, will be more "moral entrepreneur" than political operator.[128] They will attempt to broaden our sense of the socially possible, necessary, of the subject of our concern, lighting the way through hazards but never ignoring or neglecting their enduring power. Thus, for all his ostensible breaks with the dewy-eyed political idealism he would dismiss in the early 1930s, Niebuhr ultimately endorses a "realistic" disposition on the basis that it provides a more practicable way to reach a similar destination – not to put politics out of business as such, but to make our lives together as peaceable and loving as possible.

VIII. The Plan of the Dissertation

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[128] I borrow this term from Posner who defines moral entrepreneurs as those who "typically try to change the boundaries of altruism, whether by broadening them, as in the case of Jesus Christ and Jeremy Bentham, or by narrowing them, as in the case of Hitler…they don't do it with arguments, or at least good ones. Rather, they mix appeals to self-interest with emotional appeals that bypass our rational calculating faculty and stir inarticulable feelings of oneness with or separateness from the people (or it could be land or animals) that are to constitute, or be rejected from, the community that the moral entrepreneur is trying to create." Richard Posner. The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 42.

Political psychology is "first philosophy" for Niebuhr. Chapter 1 ("Niebuhr's Parish Politics: Psychology After the Fall") examines how he draws upon an interpretation of the Biblical myth of "origin sin" to develop an account of passion, ambition, and interest. While his reliance on scripture inspires some understandable trepidation, I argue that Niebuhr is much closer to Hobbes than to Calvin: he argues that his doctrine of man can be verified by way of experience, historical analysis, and self-reflection, not Biblical "truth." The doctrine is "true" inasmuch as it captures the way things are for us, not in its inerrancy or historical, physical accuracy. I reconstruct his argument for the political superiority of the doctrine by exploring his criticisms of Freud and psychoanalysis as insufficiently political, excessively pessimistic, and ultimately "unrealistic." The doctrine of man has important implications for politics, too, which I explore in chapter 2 ("Private Virtues, Public Vices: Reconsidering Niebuhr's Account of Self-Interest").

Political realists often attend to the pervasiveness of self-interest, and in this respect, Niebuhr is no exception. But scholars rarely specify what it is that these selves are so interested in. Most simply assume that we are utility-seeking creatures. Niebuhr, I argue, offers a different account: we do not just want objects and resources, we also want to do right, to be good. Self-interest has as much to do with self-love and self-absorption as pleasure-seeking. The freedom and imagination that makes it possible for us to pursue our desires to be good can be twisted. Private virtues can become public vices – individual altruism can contribute to aggregate egoism. The "paradox of patriotism" demonstrates the extent to which Niebuhrian "realism" about interest is actually a psychology of desire. Many thinkers who conceive of political subjects as restive,

desirous, and inclined to conflict end up with non-democratic or anti-democratic political prescriptions. Niebuhr takes a different path, which I explore in chapter 3 ("Niebuhr's Democratic Realism: Self-Government and Effective Action Beyond the State").

For many realists, politics should, first and foremost, address the concentration and misuse of power. Non-democratic realists suggest reducing the sources of conflict that threaten civil peace. Democratic – or republican – realists endorse institutions intended to organize and distribute power, or recommend moral education to produce citizens capable of governing and being governed. Many interpreters have taken Niebuhr to be this kind of thinker. But I demonstrate that Niebuhr conceives of democracy as a relationship between political subjects, not merely their organization by and in competitive institutions. Further, he argues that while democratic norms are capable of preventing inevitable conflict from descending into riotous rivalry and restraining inevitable injustice, democracies also create the conditions for the kind of rich and decent life of which we are capable. I illustrate Niebuhr's conception of "democratic humility" with reference to his controversial theory of nonviolence.

I conclude with justice ("The Horizon of the Political: Toward a Niebuhrian Theory of Justice"). In contrast to political realists who discount its place in political philosophy I consider justice to be an essential, if elusive, concept for Niebuhr. In both the beginnings and the ends of politics, justice anchors the practice of "moral wayfinding" and represents the ultimate political good. Niebuhr conceives of justice as an always already imperfect approximation of *agape* love, reconciliation, and brotherhood. He thus attends to the felt insufficiency associated with processes of justice as well as the subjective and affective work involved in suturing the bruises left even when *de jure*

justice has been achieved. Justice is the work of politics but also its horizon of possibility, impossible to achieve but necessary to seek. This completes the argument, started in this introduction, that Niebuhr develops a much more morally demanding, democratic political realism than the going alternatives.

Chapter 1
Niebuhr's Parish Politics: Psychology After the Fall

I. Political Psychology as First Philosophy

Folk theories of political psychology abound. Approach those who meet in coffee shops and bars to solve the world's problems and you will find lively debates about the way people are, what can be changed (or not) about them, and maybe even why.[1] These are rarely systematic accounts. They are just-so stories, formed by anecdote, blending intimate experience and observation. Every political person operates with some view about motivation, and this will have something to do with a sense of human tendencies, passions, and internal constitutions. The cynical are likely to call on our flaws as evidence for limited political aspirations – the status quo, unacceptable and frustrating as it might be, will appear as the horizon of the possible, so self-absorbed and untrustworthy are those fellow citizens whose efforts would be necessary to make real change in the world. The optimistic, meanwhile, may recount examples of consensus and goodwill to support the idea that most people are fundamentally good, but hampered by imperfect institutions and bad actors.

Contemporary political theorists largely avoid this kind of work. Robust theories of human nature are seen as antique, leaden, and normatively expensive. Political realists tend to be more open to examining what we want, why we want it, how we recognize – or misrecognize – ourselves. But these discussions travel under titles like "the politics of the emotions," and they largely refrain postulating essential features of the human. That

[1] Cf. William A. Gamson. *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

reticence is understandable given the propensity for false universality and essentialism; indeed, many scholars are drawn to theories of the human that emphasize plasticity over continuity.[2] As Jean Bethke Elshtain writes, the academy has installed large, blinking "off limits" signs "at the border of the territory of theological and ethical anthropology,"[3] in particular. But there is no way to read Niebuhrian realism without understanding his doctrine of man, which lives squarely at that border territory.[4] Political psychology[5] is Niebuhrian "first philosophy."[6]

In order to understand the practice of moral wayfinding we must first understand the source of the conflicts and foibles – internal and external – that generate worldly hazards and the problems of politics. In the following two chapters I will outline Niebuhr's account of the way we are. First, we will explore the psychology of sin, then

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[2] Cf. David Couzens Hoy, ed. *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).

[3] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Niebuhr's 'Nature of Man' and Christian Realism" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power*, Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 44.

[4] "Niebuhr considered himself under no obligation to preface his position by unpacking his anthropological presuppositions. They *were* there, of course, but given the nature of political debate, they remained unarticulated." Elshtain, "Niebuhr's 'Nature of Man,'" 45. Niebuhr devoted his major works to "a validation of [a] Christian understanding of human nature, and his assessments of political choices and issues rested on it, even when they did not explicitly discuss it." Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism,* 2.

[5] Niebuhr's conception of political psychology is much less formalized and scientific than that offered by contemporary political science. The *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* defines the field this way: "Political psychology applies what is known about human psychology to the study of political behavior, focusing on individuals within a specific political system...Political psychology, at the most general level, is an application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics." Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy, eds. *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[6] "Niebuhr has made the problem of the nature of man central to his many and otherwise extremely diverse interests and concerns." Peter Homans. *Theology After Freud* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1970), 19.

we will examine its implications for collective life — how our private virtues become public vices. It would be tempting to react to these accounts with quietism, withdrawal, or cynicism, but instead, as we shall see, Niebuhr counsels the development of attitudes of judgment and action. As Elshtain notes, many scholars avoid the broad territory of "theological anthropology." I aim to show that there are reasons to approach this subject with less trepidation than we might expect.

For all the ways in which Niebuhrian psychology builds upon theological ideas, Niebuhr ends up making the case that "original sin" is psychologically and politically superior to the going alternatives. While we cannot understand his account apart from engagements with Augustine and Pelagius, there is much in it that resembles the kind of philosophical mythmaking found in moral psychologists like Plato or Nietzsche.[7] Further, as I shall demonstrate, Niebuhrian psychology has its roots in participant observation – his experience leading a congregation and a community in Detroit. There, he began to develop a method of social analysis balancing the proximity of the microbiologist with the perspective of the cosmologist – a charge not dissimilar from that of philosophers or activists attempting to understand and realize the implications of normative demands in practice. As Fox writes, the Bible was for Niebuhr, "a symbolic organ," a touchstone for wisdom and insight, but not the "starting point of reflection." For Niebuhr, "theology was reflection upon practical experience, not reflection upon the biblical experience itself."[8]

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[7] Cf. John M. Cooper, "The Psychology of Justice in Plato," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1977), 151-157; Robert B. Pippin. *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[8] Richard Fox, "Niebuhr's World and Ours" in *Reinhold Niebuhr Today*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapid: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 51.

Unlike other Christian realists, Niebuhr looked to the world before the scriptures.[9] He drew upon his theological tradition to develop a doctrine of man that he took to be attuned to the way we are.

Niebuhr reacted against the moral and political world into which he was born. He sought to challenge the common sense that many of his colleagues took for granted precisely because it got the human being so wrong,[10] reading human foibles as bugs not features, contingencies or interruptions of normal operating procedure. But Niebuhr was not born rejecting liberal optimism. It took a journey for him to reach his account of human nature. Niebuhr was initially puzzled by the presence of selfishness, pride, shortsightedness, and tribalism in public life. But he came to make sense of both the predilection to err and to be full and responsible agents capable of creative, moral action.

This chapter retraces his steps. I begin by rereading his parish diary, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic,* which presents problems in search of a theory, representing the trenchwork from which he would draw much insight. I then explicate the doctrine of original sin, among the most pivotal and controversial features of his "Christian realism."[11] Finally, I revisit Niebuhr's writings on Freud and psychoanalysis, which clarify the psychological and political stakes of original sin.

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[9] Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44.

[10] "...That injustice, a result of ignorance, will recede before education; that the forward march of civilization makes it wrong to challenge gradualness; that the character of individuals, not social systems, guarantees justice; that appeals to love and brotherhood will ultimately prevail; that goodness brings happiness; and that wars arise from the tragic errors of stupid people." John Coffey. *Political Realism in American Thought* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977), 80.

[11] Reinhold Niebuhr. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics.* Elisabeth Sifton, ed. (New York: Library of America, 2015).

To the secular reader – and skeptic – it can be tempting to argue that Niebuhr outsources his account of human nature to blind faith in scriptural truth. I demonstrate, by contrast, that his recovery of neo-orthodox concepts has a more pragmatist character. He was led to original sin by way of participant observation and self-knowledge. As we shall see, he does not think the doctrine of original sin can be verified exclusively through textual understanding or faith alone. Instead, the Christian tradition supplies an anthropological vocabulary to help explain how subjects are robustly, morally capable and responsible and yet spoil even their own best laid plans.

II. The Pastoral Perspective

Reinhold Niebuhr's name conjures images of high politics.[12] Kenneth Thompson called him a "Master of International Thought" in a volume beatifying the canon of early International Relations theory.[13] Niebuhr supplied the influential moral language of "Christian realism" to describe the moral dilemmas of statecraft and American power in a fallen world.[14] But Niebuhr did not start thinking about politics on an international scale. His account of political and moral life developed from more than armchair reflection

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[12] Indeed, Rasmussen argues that Niebuhr's "elite bias" left him with little to say about ordinary moral life. Larry Rasmussen. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 33.

[13] Kenneth Thompson. *Masters of International Thought* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

[14] Niebuhr's student, Roger Shinn, described Christian realism as the "Realistic…appropriation of Christian faith...often recovering orthodox traditions neglected in the modern church [and] in its realism…alert both to the Word of God and to the latest news from European and Asiatic battlefronts…it constantly sought the relation between the good news of the gospel and the daily news of the world." Eric Patterson, ed. *The Christian Realists: Reassessing the Contributions of Niebuhr and his Contemporaries* (New York: University Press of America, 2003), 6.

about the world order. From 1915 until 1928 Niebuhr served as pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan. He had graduated from Yale Divinity School less than a year before taking the post, assigned by the German Evangelical Synod of which he was a member. Though he continued to preach, Niebuhr, affiliated with the Union Theological Seminary from 1928 until his retirement in 1960, never again led a congregation. The experience at Bethel left a mark on Niebuhr: in the 1950s he said that time in Detroit had "fired [his] political interest."[15] Martin Marty has argued that "it is possible to trace almost every eventually developed view of the religious community in action back to [Niebuhr's] root experience in the Detroit parish...[where] he learned the limits of prophecy in the politics of the parish."[16] What did he learn from his time in Detroit?

Niebuhr learned about the politics of religious organization and the psychological dimensions of political life. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* consists of journal entries from his time pastoring at Bethel. The title suggests *bildungsroman*: a story of spiritual formation; a growing tree that has shed leaves in its maturation; an uneasy resolution in the journey from youthful uncertainty and exuberance to mature confidence.[17] Indeed, one contemporary reviewer described the book as "a series of

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[15] In Detroit in the 1920s, he "experience with this great technical center with all its engineers, and the inadequacy of what I regarded American politics to be" which, he said, "fired my political interest." "The Reminiscences of Reinhold Niebuhr," 1957, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York, New York, 8.
[16] Nathan A. Scott. *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 20; Larry Rasmussen. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 8.
[17] As Fox writes, however, Niebuhr did, even in the early 1920s have "a good number of settled convictions and the confidence to express them, not only with firmness but with wrath." Fox (1996), 49.

paragraphs, longer and shorter, in diary form, revealing a spiritual pilgrimage."[18] But Niebuhr wrote that he wanted the book to be more than personal or particular autobiography.[19] Instead it should "illustrate the typical problems of a modern minister in an industrial and urban community" and register "what seem to be more or less typical reactions of a young minister to such problems."[20]

The "ministry" means something quite expansive for Niebuhr: the organizational, spiritual, pastoral apparatus necessary to preserve and grow a congregation of people who could decide to spend their Sundays elsewhere.[21] The ministry is a political office. The minister, he observes, inevitably comes into conflict with the world beyond the Church because he sees the act of pastoring as speaking to commitments "in direct conflict with the dominant interests and prejudices of contemporary civilization."[22] Elsewhere he describes this as a conflict between absolute scriptural demands for charity, altruism, and love and the "dehumanizing" alienation of "a civilization which unites men mechanically and isolates them spiritually." The minister should be absolute, imaginative, visionary,

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[18] Reinhold Niebuhr Collection, Box 57, Folder 14, Library of Congress.
[19] The first University of Chicago edition of the book carried an additional publisher's note: "The author's reluctance to have this book published is all the more reason for the publishers' desire to have it see the light of day. The author felt that the book would be regarded as presumptuous criticism. It is natural that he would feel that way, for he is one of those rare men who see more error in themselves than they see around them" Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 107.
[20] Reinhold Niebuhr. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America, 2015), 3.
[21] Indeed, in 1924 Niebuhr claimed that nearly a third of the congregants "had no prior Christian commitment at all." Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 62.
[22] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 4.

demanding, persuasive, and evangelical, prophesizing against the grain of a disenthralled, transactional, and material society.[23]

But Niebuhr claims that the minister must also be a statesman.[24] Like ministers, statesmen lead, make judgments and decisions about their organization. Ministers represent their congregations, their denominations, their faith, not unlike political figures. In this sense, they already partake in the particular – they are responsible for their flock, their people, their corner of the world. But statesmen, unlike ministers, balance their affiliations and convictions with other purposes: they must be willing to compromise, trade, and negotiate.[25] Ministers are not necessarily more moral than statesmen – "opportunists" like Abraham Lincoln are not necessarily inferior to "prophets" like William Lloyd Garrison. But they should be judged on terms that account for the "limitations of human society" that the statesman, and not the prophet, must confront.[26] The minister has the quality of both prophet and statesman: idealistic and worldly,

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[23] Ibid.

[24] By the end of the volume Niebuhr replaces "statesman" with "diplomat." Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 130. Niebuhr had toured Europe in 1923 – the trip, financed by benefactor Sherwood Eddy, exposed him to George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells as well as Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald. Though the book covers roughly fifteen years in Niebuhr's rise it also omits significant events and developments – correspondences, national tours, publications, and growing relationships with social, intellectual, and political elites. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 108.

[25] The colloquial distinction between "politician" and "pastor" is captured well by Rev. Jeremiah Wright who, following then-Candidate Obama's repudiation of his sermons, said at the National Press Club: "Politicians say what they say and do what they do based on electability. I do what pastors do. He [Obama] does what politicians do." "Reverend Wright at the National Press Club," *New York Times*, April 28, 2008.

[26] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 7.

principled and practical, and subject to criticism by those who would prefer she pick a side instead of navigating between this world and the world to come.[27]

A minister, like a statesman, must "[deal] with situations as well as principles" with particulars and generalities: "In specific situations, actions must be judged not only in terms of absolute standards but in consideration of available resources in the lives of those whom the minister leads."[28] Statesmen do not choose their subjects, and ministers do not choose their congregants. They can work to grow and shape the congregation and earn their trust, but their religious faith and practice are bound to be relatively diverse and certainly not identical to their leader's. The statesman-minister analogy raises a dilemma. What kinds of compromises are acceptable for the minister to make, in accommodating the "available resources" of her congregants?

The statesman may sacrifice long-standing convictions for proximate ends in transactions with allies, opponents, and institutions in an imperfect world. Part of what it is to be "responsible" as a statesman is to know when and how to negotiate – to have and hold a bottom line.[29] Prophecy, in contrast, is an "irresponsible" business. Prophets are not responsible to the conventions of this world but to the truths which they disclose – truths that may disrupt, disturb, and challenge. That vocation for the absolute, however, does not automatically confer virtue. Self-deception is a hazard of the ministry, as it may

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[27] The idea of the minister as both prophet and statesman shares some characteristics with recent descriptions of the political organizer. Vijay Phulwani, "The Poor Man's Machiavelli: Saul Alinsky and the Morality of Power," *American Political Science Review* 110, Number 4 (November 2016).
[28] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 6.
[29] Ibid.

also be for the public-facing statesman who basks in admiration and writes off opposition.[30]

Ministry and statecraft require constant practical judgments and interpersonal dealings, balancing high, universal ideals with particular, contingent circumstances. "Every conscientious minister," he writes, faces a "sense of futility" because of the felt distance between absolute normative demands and ordinary, imperfect life in and among the congregation. That futility issues not just from the moral disconnect but from the fact that "we live our lives microscopically while we are able to view the scene in which we labor telescopically."[31] This tortured phrase is worth our attention. First, we use telescopes to see things in the sky that cannot be seen clearly by the naked eye. To say that we "labor microscopically" is curious since microscopes are necessary precisely to see worldly objects in greater detail than it's possible to achieve with normal, naked eye observation. Second, Niebuhr does not contrast "microscopic" and "macroscopic" perspectives as we might expect. Under that description the minister has the tools and perhaps the experience to see ordinary social life with greater context and clarity.

The minister – like her parishioners – lives and labors so close to the ground that she can be seduced by the very small and lose sight of the life-sized. But at the same time, she also looks up – not to see the whole sky but to focus on and magnify particular points, with the assistance of a mediating instrument. That "telescopic perspective"

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[30] The pastor is "easily fooled by extravagant conceptions of his own moral stature, held by admiring parishioners." Ibid., 5. McCorkle identifies "the prophet-statesman dynamic" as a major tension in Niebuhr's writing. Cf. Mac McCorkle, "On Recent Political Uses of Reinhold Niebuhr," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics God and Power.* ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.
[31] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 4.

imparts some extra wisdom or clarity about what happens closer to the ground, but the pastor cannot act while her gaze is directed too extremely high or low.

While the entries in *Leaves* were completed between 1914 and 1928, the preface was written in 1929 during a revolution of lens technology. Between 1928 and 1929 alone there were a dozen *New York Times* articles announcing scientific breakthroughs thanks to larger telescopic mirrors, especially the new telescope at Mt. Wilson Observatory in Los Angeles, California.[32] In October 1928 Princeton astronomer Henry Norris Russell published an article about the "distant wonders" to be revealed by the construction of a new 100-inch reflector at Mt. Wilson. "Nebulae millions of light-years away" will be observed, recorded, and understood.[33]

A January 5, 1929 article proclaimed that "the Great Telescope at Pasadena Will Penetrate Unexplored Space, Where There Is Material Which Must Throw Light on Human Beginnings, Meaning and Destiny." A May 10, 1929 article proclaimed Einstein's "field theory," the claim that "beams are bent" following observations of an eclipse in Sumatra. But the article contains a suggestive subtitle – "Telescope as Microscope's Aid" to describe the way in which Einstein could draw conclusions about the behavior of very small particles from observations of very large bodies.[34] In March of that year Edwin Hubble had discovered that the universe was expanding at a constant

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[32] "To Tell of Big Telescope.; Dr. Thomson Will Describe 200-Inch Instrument in Radio Broadcast." *New York Times,* November 23, 1929.
[33] Henry Norris Russell, "Some Possibilities of the New Telescope." *New York Times*, October 29, 1928.
[34] "Theory Supported, Einstein Declares; Observers in Sumatra Cable Him Check of Star's Rays Near Eclipse Was Good." *New York Times,* May 10, 1929.

rate, a discovery made possible by calculating observations at Mt. Wilson.[35] We do not know whether Niebuhr encountered these articles. But 1929 was a banner year for telescopic discovery. The public sphere was rife with strong claims made for the particular kinds of knowledge about ourselves and the universe that could be acquired from looking up and looking closely at the stars.[36]

The "telescopic" perspective poses hazards: spend too much time looking up and you may lose track of what is going on around you. It can be disorienting to squint and make out the details of blinkering, faraway objects. Telescopic observations must also be interpreted to be sensible to us. The objects we see in the sky are very old, unimaginably old – images or traces of worlds and stars as they were hundreds, thousands or millions of years ago. These are not real time observations and yet Niebuhr suggests that the minister who can "[view] the scene in which [she] labor[s] telescopically" imparts some value on that worldly work. Ten years later in *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr would reprise the image: "historic Christianity…Accustomed to a telescopic view of life and history…does not adjust itself as readily as it might to the microscopic calculations and adjustments which constitute the stuff of moral life."[37] Again he notes the tension between the beauty and galactic grandeur of the Gospels and the everyday "calculations and adjustments," decisions – perfect and imperfect – that compose moral life on earth.

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[35] Gale E. Christianson. *Edwin Hubble: Mariner of the Nebulae* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[36] The telescopic view "saves us from too much self-deception. [Those] who are engaged in the espousal of ideas easily fall into sentimentality. From the outside and the disinterested perspective this sentimentality may seem like hypocrisy. If it is only sentimentality and self-deception, viewed at closer range, it may degenerate into real hypocrisy if no determined effort is made to reduce it to a minimum." Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 4.

[37] Reinhold Niebuhr. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 150.

What is the right balance between the "microscopic" and "telescopic"? Keeping in mind that the absolute demands contained in the gospels can mitigate moral capitulation, and reconciliation. It is not difficult to be captured and disenthralled by the world of the market and the state. Their demands are immediate, unavoidable. The minister must navigate her role as "prophet" and "statesman." But she must also balance the "microscopic" and "telescopic" perspectives of the world. She can do this most effectively by attending to the homologies – the rhymes, the resonances – between the eternal and the earthly, and use her knowledge of both to understand and address the microscopic dilemmas she faces in her vocation.

In the following section I will explore what some of those "microscopic" human dilemmas taught Niebuhr about the psychological dimensions of political life. The phenomena he observed throughout his time in the ministry troubled the "normal science" of his liberal Protestantism.[38] These anomalies challenged his conception of social and political life in ways that would provide the raw material sustaining his future philosophical and theological reflections.

III. Two Anomalies on the Way to Original Sin

In Detroit, Niebuhr confronted the economic inequality and stratification associated with the rapid growth of an industrial city – a process of urbanization and proletarianization that was becoming ubiquitous in America by the early 1920s.[39] His role

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[38] Thomas Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[39] Olivier Zunz. *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

building and leading a largely professional, interdenominational congregation gave him a vantage point on the city's social dynamics.[40] His congregants were the middle-class managers, engineers, and foremen benefitting from the explosion of the automobile industry embodied by Henry Ford's meteoric rise. Detroit, America's fourth largest city by 1920, was adding nearly 1000 new residents per week.[41] The distribution of city goods and services was as unequally distributed as the spoils, costs, and burdens of industrialization itself.[42] Bethel, like much of Detroit's civil society, was (initially) ethnically and (consistently) racially segregated, though Niebuhr had effectively de-Germanized it by 1920.[43]

At Eden Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School, Niebuhr was immersed in Social Gospel teachings. Gary Dorrien describes the Social Gospel as a "network of movements"[44] that organized religious resources for a "transformative social mission."[45] Like their Progressive counterparts, Social Gospel pastors and activists believed they possessed both the charge and the tools to address contemporary crises: labor unrest, social inequality and war.[46] They believed that reasoned deliberation and cooperation

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[40] By the early 1920s Niebuhr – assisted by Detroit's staggering population growth – had helped transform the congregation from majority German ethnic to a "thriving, interdenominational, middle class community." Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 61.
[41] Ibid., 62.
[42] Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality*, 92.
[43] Lizabeth Cohen. *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Sifton ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 893.
[44] Ronald C. White Jr., C. Howard Hopkins, John C. Bennett, eds. *Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), xviii.
[45] Gary Dorrien. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.
[46] Eldon Eisenach. *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1995), 59-60, 102-3.

made it possible to peacefully resolve political and industrial conflicts. These background assumptions frame Niebuhr's response to practical problems encountered in the ministry. After being appointed in 1930 as the Dodge Professor of Applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary Niebuhr would shock the Social Gospel tradition with the publication of his broadside *Moral Man & Immoral Society* (1932).[47] But years before he wrote *Moral Man*, his encounter with practical "situations" forced him to revisit and ultimately revise his assumptions about human nature.

First, he noted the difference between individual and group behavior. Near the end of his time preaching at Bethel, Niebuhr expressed some disappointment about the moral character of his parishioners.[48] In their private lives they might be generous, principled, and devoted to family, friends and community, but in their professional or public lives they acted very differently: "the same middle classes which seem so blind to the larger moral problems of society have, after all, the most wholesome family life of

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[47] I agree with the scholars who have thrown doubt on the extent of Niebuhr's apostasy from social gospel doctrine. Fox and Durkin argue that *Moral Man* extended themes already present in *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*. Others agree that *Moral Man* ultimately avows the "social Christian" tradition that employs theological concepts in order to reform and improve social relations. West characterizes Niebuhr as an internal critic, while others claim that Niebuhr overestimated his philosophical differences with interlocutors like John Dewey and social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbach. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 134; Kenneth Durkin. *Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Morehouse Publishing Company, 1990), 26-7; Dorrien, *Soul in Society,* 6, 91, 93; Charles Marsh. *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 105; Cornel West. *The Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 155; Harry B. Clark. *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 39-40; Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Reinhold Niebuhr: New Orthodoxy for an Old Liberalism," *American Political Science Review* 56 (December 1962).

[48] In 1924 Niebuhr claimed that nearly a third of his congregants "had no prior Christian commitment at all." Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 62.

any group in society."[49] How could the foremen and engineers be so faithful, moral, noble and loving privately but callous and complicit to the "brutalities" of commercial society in the workplace?

There are a number of ways to address this puzzle. Some might argue that the norms sustaining the "wholesome family" themselves conceal and reproduce unjust norms and hierarchies in both private and public life. Others would explain that their piety is superficial and unserious, and that they do not understand the moral or political demands of following the gospel – that they are, in a sense, only selectively "good Christians." Still others might argue that there is something natural about the love that people extend to those nearest to them – that, in short, the limited domain of moral concern should not surprise us. A few years later Niebuhr himself would argue that the good-natured, easy-going private moral conventions of the commercial classes are deeply compatible with their public immoralities.

There are interesting and important sociological, theological and political aspects of this puzzle, but in *Leaves* Niebuhr identifies its psychological aspect: individuals can be captured by the norms and habits of institutions, firms, and groups with which they identify or are identified. Those individuals are unlikely to admit to their capture, and so might become defensive or offer rationalizations that attempt to explain away their

[49] "The moral nobility of unselfish parenthood, the pathetic eagerness of father and mother to give their children more of life than they enjoyed; the faithfulness of wives to their erring husbands; the grateful respect of mature children for their old parents; the efforts of this and that courageous soul to maintain personal integrity in a world which continually tempts to dishonesty, and the noble aspirations of hearts that must seem quite unheroic to the unheeding world." Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 67-8.

behavior as consistent with their overall account of themselves.[50] People are prone to justify why they do what they do even when they know it might not be good or right – they do not want to be weighed down by guilt so they find reason to redeem their actions and affiliations that they actually believe in.

We see the world from an "interested" vantage point, constrained by circumstance and experience.[51] Our "life philosophies," he writes in a 1927 entry are "determined by peculiar and individual perspectives…[In addition to] pressures of environment, influences of heredity, and excellences and deficiencies of teachers."[52] The problem, he thinks, has both to do with the way we come to know things and what we want (as well as how we want it). "Man is imperialistic and even parasitic in his nature," he writes, which creates conflicts when subjects advance their "expansive desires" at the expense and to the exclusion of others. These desires must be compelled by social and psychological forces, educated and "brought under sufficient discipline to make social life possible."[53]

Our expansive, desiring desires have the power to overtake us and swamp our capacity to see beyond ourselves and occupy third-personal positions, especially in conflicts in which we are engaged. The "imperialism" that inheres in our desire to

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[50] "Cynics sometimes insinuate that you can love people only if you don't know them too well; that a too intimate contact with the foibles and idiosyncrasies of men will tempt one to be a misanthrope. I have not found it so. I save myself from cynicism by knowing individuals, and knowing them intimately. If I viewed humanity only from some distant and high perspective I could not save myself from misanthropy. I think the reason is simply that people are not as decent in their larger relationships as in their more intimate contacts." Sifton, ed. (2015), 67

[51] This account bears some relationship to Sen's theory of "positional objectivity," the idea that "positionally dependent observations, beliefs and actions are central to our knowledge and practical reason." Amartya Sen, "Positional Objectivity" in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1993).

[52] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 89.

[53] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 63.

achieve our ends can make it difficult for us recognize our own biases and prejudices. He advises that people hold their "life philosophies with decent humility and a measure of skepticism" without submitting to the temptation of total "subjectivism and skepticism" that might devolve into a world of open conflict devoid of reason-giving.[54] But he does not yet have a theory explaining why any of this is the case. Absent that he also does not yet have a sense of what it might be possible for us to do to avoid or diminish these limitations.

Second, Niebuhr is anxious about how to lead, to persuade, and to motivate. Though known as a powerful preacher, Niebuhr was, early on, surprisingly ambivalent about his vocation. He understood it as his duty to use church teachings to reform, improve and repair broken individuals in a broken world. But he was uneasy and uncertain about how to carry out the task. In a 1922 entry he contrasts his resting state – "critical and circumspect...meditat[ing] upon men and events" – with his time at the pulpit, where he feels "possessed by a kind of madness which makes [my] utterances extravagant and dogmatic."[55]

While toggling between these modes might be uncomfortable, even alienating, he seems to accept, practically, that his role in the ministry – again, a political role – calls for a different mode of thought and address because "audiences are not easily moved from their lethargy by cool and critical analyses. An appeal to the emotions is necessary and emotions are not aroused by a careful analysis of facts but by a presentation of ideal values."[56] Effective, motivating ministry will, then, require rhetoric, exuberance,

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[54] Ibid., 89.
[55] Ibid., 31.
[56] Ibid.

shorthand that may not be sensitive to the "facts" but will deal with abstractions, aspirations, and values.[57]

Some years later he observed a colleague "[charming] people...into righteousness."[58] He agreed that it was better to "pull" than to "push" people to become their best moral selves, but he lamented that that "charm" and inducement may come at the price of "some insupportable generalization...which obsesses my mind and makes it difficult for me to see the general truth with which the speaker wants to impress."[59] While the minister may know that she must deal in "insupportable generalizations" that stir and incent the congregation, what might the repetition of such generalizations do to the "general truth" on which they rest? Where Plato might tolerate the circulation and generation of a noble lie – or noble lies – Niebuhr is more anxious about the emotional surfaces that gloss over deeper truths.

It is easy to bore a public. Repeating what one actually thinks to be the case might be insufficient, too complicated to be compelling. People need more than the rehearsal of facts or scripture to awaken. But what practices of rhetoric and oratory are appropriate? There are dangers associated with deploying either "a warrior's grimness" or "childish

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[57] In a letter to the *New Republic* published in the 1910s, Niebuhr reflected on the importance of motivation and enthusiasm in politics as well. He lamented that "[liberalism] lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks...It is the philosophy of the middle aged, lacking the fervency of youth and its willingness to take a chance and accept a challenge." Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 59.

[58] "On the whole, people do not achieve great moral heights out of a sense of duty. You may be able to compel them to maintain certain minimum standards by stressing duty, but the highest moral and spiritual achievements depend not upon a push but upon a pull. People must be charmed into righteousness. The language of aspiration rather than that of criticism and command is the proper pulpit language. Of course it has its limitations." Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 66.

[59] Ibid., 63.

sentimentalities" that shirk "the burdens of the world."[60] Sermons can be both too pessimistic and too optimistic. Pessimism risks inviting inaction, withdrawal, and disengagement. Optimism risks exuberance, excessive hope, even excessive faith. But given the kinds of beings we are, how are we and how should we be moved to think or act to respond to an imperfect world? What trade-offs are involved in one approach over another? What psychological mode should a responsible and effective political or religious leader conjure?

These anomalies challenged Niebuhr's assumptions but *Leaves* offered no answers. It is a strikingly untheoretical text. But the "microscopic" experiences forced Niebuhr to adjust his "telescopic" perspective, and to revise his conception of the relationship between the supernal and creaturely worlds. He came to encounter – or "rediscover" – an account that helped to make sense of the world as he saw it, a "true myth" to be taken "seriously but not literally."[61] Like Christian scripture more generally, Niebuhr saw religious text as a source of moral reflection, not a "divine law book" with unambiguous meaning.[62] Scholars have recounted Niebuhr's journey to original sin.[63] I

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Dorrien, *Soul in Society,* 94; Langdon Gilkey. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 156.
[62] Richard Crouter. *Reinhold Niebuhr: On Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24.
[63] Gary Dorrien. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Andrew Finstuen. *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Christopher H. Evans. *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013); Roger Epp. *The Augustinian Moment in International Relations: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition* (Aberystwyth: Department of International Politics, University College of Wales, 1991).

will not rehash their findings here. Instead I will reconstruct this most vital account of moral psychology which underwrites his conception of political life.

IV. Reading Augustine in Manhattan[64]

Niebuhr was among the most prominent, but not the only, 20th century intellectuals to read Augustine. As Epp and Guiholt write, Augustine enjoyed a "moment" among philosophers, political thinkers, theologians, and those recovering and creating the tradition of political realism.[65] As we have seen, there are many features of the Augustinian tradition that stand in tension with Enlightenment conceptions of freedom, reason, and perfectibility – not to mention the secularization of moral and political thought in modernity.[66]

The doctrine of original sin can be a hard pill to swallow. The modern sense of who and what we are bristles against the idea that humans are constitutively crooked. Freedom, for thinkers of the high Enlightenment, was perfected in the exercise of pure reason, "to make public use of one's reason in all matters."[67] While philosophers, psychologists, and social theorists in nineteenth and twentieth centuries cast doubt on this

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[64] Niebuhr started reading Augustine seriously only after his appointment to the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in 1930. Ronald H. Stone. *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 67-8.
[65] Epp mentions Wittgenstein, Arendt, Carr, Zimmern, and Toynbee. Epp (1991), 7.
[66] Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the extent to which the Enlightenment is itself a secular achievement. Cf. Talal Asad. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003); Michael Allen Gillespie. *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
[67] Immanuel Kant. "An Answer to the Question What is Enlightenment?" in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History,* ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

picture,[68] even those who argue that the humans are deeply imperfect often believe that such kinks can be righted. Modernity as a philosophical and political project depends on at least the aspiration for freedom – to get out from under the yoke of tradition or custom and to make or remake ourselves. Original sin, by contrast, seems to put absolute limits on what we can expect from ourselves or our lives together, now and forever.[69]

Critics of Niebuhr have made his embrace of the doctrine primary evidence of his anti-Enlightenment or "counter-modernist" tendencies to anti-rationalism and revelation over reason.[70] Yet Niebuhr did not adopt the doctrine for exclusively theological reasons. He also argued that it was empirically accurate, verifiable by self-reflection, and with reference to our world and its history. Niebuhr revives the Hobbesian ambition to produce a psychologically persuasive theory of politics that can be verified by reference to our own experiences, desires, and fears. "*Nosce teipsum, read thy self*," Hobbes writes in the introduction to *Leviathan*.[71] Intuition plays a similar role in contemporary Anglophone philosophy – the plausibility of the Rawlsian conception of a "reflective equilibrium" depends in large part on the way in which it engages our considered, pre-

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[68] Isiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in Isiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Mark Lilla (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[69] Deinstag argues that pessimism denies that "the application of reason to human social and political conditions will ultimately result in the melioration of these conditions." Joshua Foa Deinstag. *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 18.

[70] Nicolas Guilhot. *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Noam Chomsky, "Reinhold Niebuhr," *Grand Street,* Volume 6, Number 2 (Winter 1987); Jason W. Stevens. *God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010).

[71] *Leviathan*. Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994).

philosophical notions of fairness.[72] Niebuhr thinks that original sin is something like that: a way in to understanding why we are the way that we are that does not require giving up on our pre-theological sense of the facts of the world or history. "Original sin" is not even, necessarily, an object of belief. Faith, as Lovin writes, merely "coordinates" the knowledge gained from living in the world into a "deep and wider system of coherence," but it should not "contradict the rest of what we know."[73] He makes a further, more contentious argument. No theory of politics or morals can be innocent of deep assumptions. There is a givenness in all things we think, inherent in the kinds of creatures that we are – some submerged account of ultimate value and deep truth that goes undisclosed or forgotten. Niebuhr makes his priors explicit while examining and criticizing the disavowed assumptions that structure other accounts of collective life.[74]

The doctrine of original sin helped Niebuhr to make sense of what he recorded in *Leaves* – and why people were the way that they were. This is not a new ambition. As Stephen Greenblatt writes, the fall "addresses who we are, where we came from, why we love and why we suffer. Its vast reach seems part of its design."[75] Niebuhr made the myth relevant to politics.[76]

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[72] John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[73] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism,* 24.
[74] "At the heart of any philosophy, however explicitly it might be based on scientific inquiry or rational speculation, lay[s] its views on these human issues, on the questions of the meaning of life. For him each philosophy's understanding of fate and the tragic, of human evil and human renewal, shaped all of its other speculations about reality and knowing." Gilkey (2001), 21.
[75] Stephen Greenblatt. *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: Norton, 2018), 8.
[76] Finstuen persuasively argues that Niebuhr was among a generation of Cold War theologians and religious leaders – left and right – who revived the doctrine of original sin. Andrew Finstuen. *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

There are significant debates about the history of the fall, its reception, resurrection, and circulation as both centerpiece and controversy.[77] It is sufficient to note, however, that it was not obvious that a few dozen lines in *Genesis* would become so pivotal and controversial in religious, cultural, social, and political life.[78] Just as it has not always been obvious that this doctrine would become so vital, the implications of original sin were not immediately clear.

Augustine came to the doctrine of original sin through experience. He was unsatisfied with the explanation for human behavior offered by the Manicheism to which he had subscribed. The process of his conversion, well-documented in the *Confessions*, was in part inspired by his own youthful transgressions – his embarrassment and shame at his sexual promiscuity, pride, and destructive impulses. The most memorable example he offers comes in Book II of the *Confessions*. The adolescent Augustine and his friends came upon an abundant pear tree. They stole the pears – not to eat them – but for the sake of stealing. They fed them to nearby hogs. Reflecting on this event some thirty years later Augustine notes that the act was "foul" and "I loved it" for "our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed…I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself."[79] Augustine and his friends were not overtaken by an evil force as his Manichean faith might suggest. There was something inside of them impelling them to do something unnecessary, and evil, for no good reason at all.

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[77] Cf. Jacobs (2008); Greenblatt (2018); Gary Anderson. *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
[78] Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve,* 109.
[79] *Saint Augustine's Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 29.

This forced Augustine to reconcile some difficult thoughts. God was good and perfect and all things, including human beings, were made in his image. Yet there was suffering and evil in the world that could not be attributed to independent, external spirits. How could the children of God act so badly, so often? He argued that yes, Adam and Eve were perfect, but expelled from the Garden of Eden for their violations of God's orders they and all of their descendants – all of us – have been forever changed, morally deformed, saved only by God's grace through infant baptism. For Augustine, "We are all marked from the beginning with evil. It is not a matter of particular acts of cruelty or violence, specific forms of social pathology, or this or that person who has made a disastrous choice...There is something deeply, structurally, essentially wrong with us."[80] Sin is the "ultimate preexisting condition," universal, unwanted, ineliminable.[81]

Augustine insisted that the fall described a historical sequence of events. While he had previously attempted to read the story as an allegory in *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, by the time of the *Confessions* and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, he had settled on an inerrant interpretation. The true believer, he thought, was required to take the story as an "unvarnished representation of historical reality and to convince others to take it that way as well."[82] Making it historically true changed its lessons – especially about sensual sin. The fact that our sexual impulses could overwhelm and dominate all others was evidence enough that we are not fully free and responsible. The sexual organs and reproductive process were themselves tainted by the fall. Augustine

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[80] Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve,* 109.
[81] Jacobs, *Original Sin,* xiv.
[82] Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, 111.

thought that Adam and Eve, by contrast, could control their corporeal urges and reproduce as they were meant to, without surplus, involuntary arousal.[83]

Augustine's account scandalized his contemporaries. The influential monk Pelagius and his followers found this picture far too bleak. They were, by contrast, moral optimists who did not think people – babies! – were born in sin. Instead, human beings were innocent until proven guilty by their own acts. We are, on this account, full moral agents, fully responsible for our deeds, good and bad. The Pelagians adopted something akin to social constructionism to explain bad behavior: we sin because of the "long custom of sins" that characterize our imperfect society.[84] The Pelagians contested Augustine's inerrant interpretation. The "fall" did not describe a historical event. It was a myth, a symbol, a lesson about the choices we face every day.

For all his surface optimism, Pelagius turned out to be much more morally demanding.[85] A.J. Jacobs writes that for him "every choice is unimaginably momentous: the clear implication that perfection is both possible and obligatory is that those who fail to obey – at any point – are in danger of eternal damnation."[86] Thus Brown writes that Pelagius and not Augustine "harps on the terrors of the Last Judgment," for every mistake and sin could only ever be a "deliberate act of contempt for God."[87] Pelagianism was thus a "recipe for profound anxiety."[88]

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[83] Ibid., 118.
[84] Ibid., 105.
[85] B.R. Rees. *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004); Peter Brown. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Herbert A. Deane. *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).
[86] Jacobs, *Original Sin,* 52.
[87] Ibid., 53.
[88] Ibid.

Where Augustine sees everyone as guilty until baptized innocent, Pelagius sees everyone as innocent until damned by their own sin. The line between a Pelagian conception of action and moral responsibility does have the advantage of being more direct. But Augustine seems more tolerant; so long as moral agents are baptized and make amends there is room in the Church for their foibles, for the "whole spectrum of human feeling."[89] The Pelagian view lost historically; his name became a heresy, a term of abuse. But it is worth recounting this classical debate about original sin in order to provide some context for Niebuhr's intervention. Adam and Eve's sin is not the sin of carnality but of pride and unbelief.[90]

V. The Influence of Anxiety

We are flesh and blood. We feel pain, we have strong appetites, and we will, all of us, die. Our time is limited in this world. But Niebuhr thinks that we are – and have – more than this. Unlike other animals, we can understand and confront our finitude. We can see the world around us for what it is. We can employ reason to create and solve problems. We also have souls, and our spirits can outlive the body's inevitable organic death – reaching beyond and "transcending" the boundaries and limits of natural existence, standing "outside of nature, life, [herself], [her] reason and the world."[91] But

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[89] Brown, *Augustine,* 54.
[90] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 137-9.
[91] In *Nature and Destiny, Volume I* Niebuhr writes that "man is a creature, subject to nature's necessities and limitations; but he is also a free spirit who knows of the brevity of his years and by this knowledge transcends the temporal by some capacity within himself." Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1,* 3.

there are tensions between the creaturely human and the spiritual beings that we are. There is a civil war within us. We are divided against ourselves.[92]

Our creaturely desires are made bottomless by the resources reason provides.[93] We can do so many things to realize our wills – we can intervene in the world to "reorder and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby *make* history."[94] But we understand that we can never get everything that we want because, in contrast to our desires, we are finite, embodied, and limited. This friction between infinite appetite and finite ability makes us anxious. We worry about our security, about why we do what we do, why others do what they do, what the truth of the matter is, whether life has the kind of meaning that can justify its difficulty. Our internal lives resemble political institutions stressed by civil conflict. This is a permanent and unresolvable condition. But it is also a condition that testifies to our freedom. The very fact that we can conjure new ideas, imagine possibilities, occupy our mind with the way things might – and should – be indicates the kinds of freedoms native to our species. The human imagination, for Niebuhr, shares in the divine.

But anxiety can also get us in trouble. It is Janus-faced. On the one hand, anxiety inspires creative, searching attempts to understand ourselves. But it can also make us want to resolve the questions that make us anxious in ways that put ourselves as creatures

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[92] We are "torn creatures, always tempted by *superbia* (pride) and the *libido dominandi* (the lust to dominate)." Terry Cooper. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Psychology: The Ambiguities of the Self* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 47.
[93] Niebuhr echoes Hobbes. In Chapter xi of *Leviathan* he writes that people are inclined to "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power." Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 158.
[94] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1,* 1.

at the center of the universe.[95] Anxiety is not a sin. The internal civil war can never be won, but as we shall see it can be meliorated. Pride is usurpation, a coup, dictatorship.[96] It is an attempt to forget that there ever was civil conflict in the first place, but it will fail because the internal civil war is ineradicable.[97] But it will also produce social evils that interrupt the delicate moral balance of the universe – that affect and harm others.[98]

While pride is the "beginning of all sin,"[99] in the face of existential anxiety about our finitude we can choose to take another path. There is usurpation and there is withdrawal into ourselves, into our creatureliness, our sensuality – what Weber might call a "mystical flight from the world."[100] Prideful sins attempt to overcome the fact that we cannot master our place in an infinite universe; sensual sin fully embraces our creaturely finitude.[101] Douglas Ottati describes sensual sin as the opposite of the "inordinate self-assertion" of pride. Instead, sensuality represents the "attempt to insulate ourselves and perhaps grow numb." To sin sensually is to drown our anxieties in worldly pleasure, to

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[95] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 103.
[96] In a 1966 letter Niebuhr wrote that "My definition of [sin] would be consistently, "the universality and persistence of man's self-regard." "Reinhold Niebuhr Letter," 1966, Box 4, Reinhold Niebuhr Archive, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminar.
[97] "We *really are* insecure. Our insecurity is not a psychological distortion. It is our essential nature. We are ontologically or structurally anxious. This is our fundamental makeup. It is a mistake to turn *this* level of insecurity into a psychological problem which can be therapized and healed. It cannot be psychologically cured." Cooper, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Psychology,* 37.
[98] Niebuhr often described racism as the definitively prideful sin. "What is race prejudice," he asked, "but white man saying he is essential man?" Reinhold Niebuhr, "Seminar: The Social Gospel (1962)," Reinhold Niebuhr Audio Collection, CD N665 37, Union Presbyterian Seminar, Richmond, VA.
[99] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ethics of Augustine (1960)," Reinhold Niebuhr Audio Collection, CD N665 23, Union Presbyterian Seminar, Richmond, VA.
[100] Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," in *Max Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 368
[101] Niebuhr (1996), 179

numb ourselves to the hazards and pains of the world, or to withdraw entirely, to flee from our relationships and responsibilities.[102] Sensual sin might mean total obsession and absorption in our private, material lives, not just – or even mainly – excessive consumption or moral decadence. This is a familiar tendency. We seek escape or exile from a tragic, disappointing, frustrating world.[103] Self-preservation is necessary, but there are moral dangers when it becomes a way of life.

The tendency to sin inheres in human freedom: we can only sin because we are and remain free to do so.[104] This leads Niebuhr to walk a delicate line. Human beings are perfect because they are made in God's image (*imago dei*), but they also have the ability to choose what to do with their divine freedom – how to address the universal condition of anxiety.[105] Sin is the ineliminable tendency to err in our solutions to that basic and "vexing" problem of the human condition.[106] To sin is to hide from finiteness, to parody the divine.[107] But while sin might be inevitable it is not necessary; it is not of a piece with our essential nature: we were made perfect but blemish our perfection.[108] We know and

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[102] Douglas Ottati, "The Niebuhrian Legacy and the Idea of Responsibility," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (October 2009), 413; Dennis L. Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," *Journal of Church and State* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 292.

[103] This kind of self-absorption does not require total disengagement from the world. Indeed, Niebuhr often accused pacifists – especially Christian pacifists – of sensual sin. Colm McKeogh. *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Pragmatic Approach to Just War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

[104] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 94.

[105] Sin cannot "therefore…be attributed to a defect in [human] essence. It can only be understood as a self-contradiction, made possible by the fact of [human] freedom but not following necessarily from it." Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1,* 17.

[106] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1,* 1.

[107] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 103.

[108] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1,* 242.

feel this, too. Guilt and regret accompany willfully bad behavior. These moral attitudes may even enhance our desire, as they did with Augustine and his pear-stealing friends.

Religious myths are not historical records: the "primitive" myth of historical Eden, historical Adam, Eve, and serpent can be dismissed. It is too mystical, too inconsistent with what we actually know about causality in the natural world.[109] But there are "permanent" features of religious myth that "deals with aspects of reality which are supra-scientific" – which exceed scientific understanding, which convey moral and spiritual mysteries about why we are the way that we are. The fall is a "permanently true" myth in this sense: original sin speaks to our present moral condition.[110] The story appeals in precisely the way that Greenblatt describes because it captures the fundamental moral drama of being alive – we are prideful and we let our imperious natures get in our own way, even when we know we should do the right thing.[111] This is the sense in which the fall is "true" for Niebuhr.[112]

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[109] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths," in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1937), 118.

[110] Niebuhr, "The Truth in Myths," 119.

[111] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 136.

[112] For a more extensive discussion of religious myth, cf. "Meaning, Mystery, Myth, and Revelation" in Gilkey (2001), 53-78. By the 1960s Niebuhr had essentially given up on the language of original sin, admitting that he had committed an "unpardonable pedagogical error" in opposing "modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture." He did not abandon the basic structure of his political psychology but did recognize that describing the source of our existential anguish as "original sin" was distracting and potentially unnecessary. Epp (1991), 20. In a 1960 lecture Niebuhr argued that the Greek and Christian traditions were united in their analysis that pride is generated by "the failure to acknowledge that we are creatures and that we die." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ethics of Augustine (1960)." For additional work on this question, cf. Larry Rasmussen. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 18.

Gilkey evocatively describes Niebuhrian sin as "an undertow, a strong bias, an unconscious determiner of our conscious acts on the surface of our experience: our thoughts, our intentions, and our plans, decisions, and external actions."[113] Cooper writes that we are simultaneously "free and bound,"[114] though it would be more precise to say that for Niebuhr we are "bound" exactly because we are "free." Free action can be self-undermining. It is possible to sell ourselves into moral and appetitive slavery. But speaking of sin as permanent bondage, a rushing tide, a tic or a universal genetic mutation can seem to release us from moral responsibility for doing bad things. This was Pelagius's worry.

The philosophical debates about free will and constraint are extensive. At the risk of summary, however, we can claim Niebuhr as a "compatibilist" – someone who thinks that limits on free will do not eliminate the grounds for holding agents morally responsible.[115] Free action is compatible with the knowledge that to be created in this world is to already be damaged and imperfect. Niebuhr is not arguing that God made us evil.[116] Adam and Eve sinned in their disobedience in ways that reverberate down to us, but we are still faced with choices about what to do. The "undertow" that Gilkey describes is not the same as a guilty sentence. It is a strong current, and like all strong currents we can swim with it or against it. Even the strongest swimmer, however, cannot will a current out of existence. Indeed, she can only get where she wants to go by

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[113] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr, 132.*
[114] Cooper, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Psychology,* 49.
[115] Cf. Susan Wolf. *Freedom within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Gary Watson. *Agency and Answerability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[116] "Sin is a distortion of our essential structure, not the loss of that structure. In other words, nothing within the human package fates us to sin." Cooper, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Psychology,* 43.

adjusting her route in accordance with her assessment of its strength and her strength, its power and her ability. Niebuhr finds evidence of that "undertow" everywhere. It is felt daily. We are built in such a way that even the most persistent self-deception cannot guard against guilt felt before, during, and after sin.[117]

The 20th century revival of original sin was no accident. In the middle years of that violent, tumultuous century the stakes of international conflict became existential in ways that ordinary people could fully grasp and fear. Sin could help explain the presence of human evil in the world, and anxiety captured the psychic condition of many. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in the *Vital Center* (1949) described anxiety as the "official emotion of our time."[118] W.H. Auden won the 1948 Pulitzer Prize for his long poem *The Age of Anxiety,* a phrase also borrowed by the Buddhist existentialist Alan Watts, who titled the first chapter of his 1951 book *The Wisdom of Insecurity.*[119] Leonard Bernstein would adapt Auden's poem into a monumental 1949 symphony-cum-ballet.[120]

Christians were not the only people interested in sin and anxiety. As Louis Menand writes, the "Cold War discourse of anxiety" suffused the culture.[121] Both church attendance *and* visits to the therapist peaked in the postwar era.[122] *Life* magazine called

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[117] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1*, 256.
[118] John Burnham, ed. *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 203.
[119] W.H. Auden. *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Alan Watts. *The Wisdom of Insecurity: The Message for an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Vintage, 2011).
[120] Leonard Bernstein. *The Age of Anxiety: Symphony No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra (After W.H. Auden).* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1949); James Wierzbicki. *Music in the Age of Anxiety: American Music in the Fifties* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).
[121] Burnham, ed. *After Freud Left,* 189.
[122] Robert S. Ellwood. *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

this "the age of psychology," too, captured as it was by promises of secular, religious, and pharmaceutical cures for psychic ills.[123] The competition for hearts, minds, and souls was fierce in ways that are difficult to fathom in contemporary American life. Theologians like Niebuhr engaged directly with the claims of psychoanalysis. We might expect Niebuhr to embrace Freud – both theorized an internally divided self, upending the Enlightenment conception of the subject as coherent and self-possessed. But Niebuhr also disagreed with Freud's account of human freedom. These disagreements have political stakes which we shall now explore.

VI. Politics on and off the Couch

In his preface to the 1957 volume marking the centennial of Freud's birth, historian and sociologist Benjamin Nelson wrote that "Freud seems destined to be the bridge from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Century."[124] The table of contents of *Freud and the 20th Century* reads like a roster of midcentury intellectuals: literary critic Alfred Kazin, psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson, art historian E.H. Gombrich, Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain, and then Niebuhr.

While Freud's American reception has always been fraught, the "age of anxiety" saw a highpoint of interest in the Viennese physician,[125] with philosophers, artists, and

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[123] Andrew Finstuen. *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 20; Burnham, ed., *After Freud Left,* 202.
[124] Benjamin Nelson, ed. *Freud and the 20th Century* (New York: Meriden Books, 1957), 10
[125] Louis Menand, "Freud, Anxiety and the Cold War" in John Burnham, Ed. *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 189.

literary critics, like Lionel Trilling, taking up the mantle in their critical reflections on the culture.[126] Although Freud was essentially unknown during his first and only visit to the United States, to Clark University in 1909, by midcentury "[his] ideas had become a conspicuous – indeed, unavoidable – part of the American cultural landscape."[127] Kazin remarked in his essay that in addition to having become a "household name....[Freud's] name dominates many a household one could mention."[128] Freudianism was viewed by many, for a brief time, as an effective and scientific therapeutic practice, and Freud himself occupied the role of a prophet or "epic poet" with "the artistic feeling for the integrity of a dynamic whole."[129] The contributors to the volume were, by and large, not practicing psychoanalysts but intellectuals who read Freud as a cultural and political thinker. Where the contemporary development of clinical psychology has thrown doubt on both the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, writers in the midcentury – even those critical of Freud's account of the mind – took the benefits of Freudian talk therapy for granted.

Niebuhr's contribution to the volume ("Human Creativity and Self-Concern in Freud's Thought") was not his first engagement with Freud. Niebuhr had examined Freud and psychoanalysis in *Interpretation* (1935), *Nature and Destiny* (1939), and *The Self and Dramas of History* (1955),[130] as well as occasional academic and journalistic writings of the period. Niebuhr was quite solicitous to some of Freud's project. Richard Fox writes

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[126] Michael Kimmage. *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 142.
[127] Burnham ed., *After Freud Left,* 3.
[128] Nelson, *Freud and the 20th Century,* 13.
[129] Ibid., 103-4.
[130] Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

that both thinkers "shared a profound sense of the self divided, unaware of its own deepest drives, destined to disappointment in its quest for happiness. The self was neither at peace with itself nor at home in the larger culture."[131] For Niebuhr and Freud, the economy of desires is permanently unstable and somewhat obscure to us. Without consciously knowing it, people are at war with themselves, prone to frustration and tragedy. This picture of the self stands in tension with what Niebuhr derisively calls the "lullaby songs" of the Enlightenment. Freud criticized the soothsaying optimism about the reconciled, coherent, free, and reasoning moral subject, and did so from within the Enlightenment tradition.[132] Further, Niebuhr saw Freud's conception of human nature as deeply challenging to the old promise that progressive moral improvement was possible, or that, through more and better reasoning people might find themselves more cooperative, collaborative, living in social peace. This was an illusion and a tyrannical wish at that.[133]

But for all the ways in which Niebuhr saw Freud as a fellow traveler he was also suspicious. It should be said that some of Niebuhr's criticisms should strike the sympathetic Freudian as unfair.[134] Niebuhr's Freud is indeed more vulnerable to charges of single-factor causal explanations than it might be to later Freud or Freudians.[135]

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[131] Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 180.
[132] Niebuhr noted that Freud had a more "complicated view of the 'nature' of man than the Enlightenment" and "much more realistic view of the 'reason' of man than the rationalists of the Enlightenment." Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 263.
[133] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 91.
[134] John E. G. Irwin. "Niebuhr's Critique of Freudian Psychoanalysis," *Journal of Religion and Health* 14, no. 4 (October 1975).
[135] Indeed, in the 1964 preface to Volume 1 of the *Nature and Destiny of Man* he wrote that "since the delivery of these lectures [in 1941] modern 'ego-psychology,' particularly as elaborated by my friend Erik Erikson, has developed this paradoxical position of the self scientifically. I agree with this position but it would have prompted some changes in

Nevertheless, Niebuhr's arguments illuminate why Niebuhr's political realism is so thoroughly psychological.

Niebuhr argues that Freud renders human beings unhistorical and unfree. The theory of the unconscious may admit that institutions, norms, and cultures change but it can only regard those changes as happening to us – not being made by us. Freud agrees that the human being is internally conflicted, but not that it has the freedom to create or destroy. Human reason is ambiguous, even heterodox. But it is always *interested* and cannot be "completely emancipated from the particular and parochial interests of the individual and collective particular."[136] The expansion of reason-giving, in short, does not guarantee permanent peace or harmony: people can give reasons for their actions after the fact or can use the capacity to reason to occupy a third-personal perspective. Further, as Niebuhr wrote in *The Self and the Dramas of History*, Freud neglected the way that people do have the freedom, ability, and responsibility to break with the psychic and moral conventions and interests that seem to confine them.[137] Freud's account of the human being was excessively deterministic – too diminishing of the capacity to critically survey and engage with the moral world that we, in part, create.[138]

There is a refrain at the center of Niebuhr's critique. He poses it this way in his 1957 essay: why does Freud have so little to say about politics? Or, put another way, why

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my statement of the reality." Irwin, "Niebuhr's Critique," 5. For additional discussion on Niebuhr's relationship with Erikson and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, cf. Martin Halliwell. *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr & American Intellectual Culture* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), pp. 131-160

[136] Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 269.

[137] Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 256.

[138] Ibid.

has Freud so "little direct influence on social and political theory"[139]? It is worth parsing what these questions are actually asking. Is it that Freud, unlike, say, Marx or Rousseau, has not inspired social and political action? Or that Freud's theories cannot be employed to analyze social and political life?[140]

Niebuhr's working definition of "moral and political theory" leaves something to be desired. "Moral and political theory" he writes is "concerned with the problem of harnessing, beguiling, and occasionally suppressing the residual egotism in the creative endeavors of good, as well as evil, men."[141] In other words, moral and political theory takes people as they are and imagines what might be done to make them all – good and bad – a bit better. It is primarily a normative project, aimed at understanding people in order to design ways for their common lives to be less hampered by their ineliminable flaws. Freud, as we have seen, was deeply interested in understanding those flaws, but Niebuhr thinks he provided few resources to do anything about them.

Freudian pessimism weighs us down. Joshua Deinstag describes Freud as a "metaphysical pessimist," who "attribute[s] much human unhappiness to our status in the universe, about which we can do nothing."[142] That does not mean that Freud abjures engagement in the world – his "talking cure" would not make sense if he thought all

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[139] Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 266

[140] This is a strange claim because even in Niebuhr's own time Freud was viewed as having things to say about politics. Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, for instance, sought to combine insights from Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism, or even by others who contributed to the *Freud* volume. Niebuhr seems to have in mind a more constrained view of what counts as politics – a theory of freely chosen action in the world that involves the possibility of change. Cf. Eli Zaretsky. *Political Freud: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[141] Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 260.

[142] Deinstag, *Pessimism,* 106.

attempts to ameliorate the sources of our suffering were bound to fail. But we are unfree, shackled by forces beyond our control in ways that make it very difficult to imagine serious change over time. Deinstag writes that for "metaphysical pessimisms" the fact of human finitude is extremely important, but the possibility that human beings might grow and change, err and falter, over some generations falls to the wayside. The real action, he writes, happens between the unchanging individual and the malevolent universe.[143]

Niebuhr, too, induces limits on our moral possibilities. Sin cannot be eliminated. It is a condition of coming into being in this world. But it stands in constant, unresolvable tension with our more perfectly created selves. This makes human life – especially human social life – both always uncanny and eerily familiar. We are capable of finding new ways to wrestle with permanent problems and to grow and change in the process of the unfolding conflict between our dueling tendencies. Freud understands half the picture, sin but not freedom. This produces what Niebuhr calls "romantic pessimism" – structure with no agency, revolution with no government, a desire for transformation with no hope of its achievement.[144] The Freudian pessimist finds her gaze seduced by infinite

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[143] "The burdens of a temporal existence fall nearly as heavily on the first humans as on the most recent, though, to be sure, our species was not really human until it became amenable to these burdens. Although there may be, to these pessimists, some particularities of our culture that accentuate our susceptibility to suffering, the sources of that suffering are such that all are subject to them. Human beings inhabit a universe that they would be justified in calling malevolent if it could be shown to have an author (which, to them, it does not)." Ibid.

[144] Most damningly, Niebuhr wrote that "Freudianism is a typical product of the uneasy conscious of that portion of the upper middle class which has discovered the realm of chaos under the pretenses and partial achievements of rational order and discipline, but is unable to unwilling to find a basic solution for the problem which it has discovered." And that "The romantic pessimism which culminates in Freud may be regarded as symbolic of the despair which modern man faces when his optimistic illusions are dispelled; for under the perpetual smile of modernity there is a grimace of disillusion and cynicism." Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume I,* 53, 121.

microscopic and telescopic observation. But she sees the same thing everywhere, and finds no reason to stop looking up – or down – and face the world as it is here, with us.

Not all pessimisms disqualify an account of the human from being relevant to "social and political theory." Niebuhr reads Hobbes as another "great dissenter from the optimism of the Enlightenment."[145] But he argues that Hobbes has what Freud lacks: "direct influence on political and social theory." The line between the Hobbesian account of the person and the Hobbesian account of the state is clear. Hobbes' view that reason can never been redemptive or disinterested, that personal and political morals are mere convention, and that the particular intrudes on all collective endeavors,[146] was "so consistent that it led to political absolutism, of the projection of an absolute political authority which would be capable of suppressing the anarchy of particular and parochial interests."[147] Hobbes argues that most people, most of the time will act from "particular and parochial interests," but that reason can lead them out of fear and anarchy to the covenant establishing a central authority that will "suppress" their interests, settle disputes, and enforce an authoritarian peace. Hobbes' suspicion about human capacities led him to embrace absolute rule – an empire of reason that identifies reason with absolute freedom and order.[148] In short, the psychological problems that Hobbes identifies can be tolerably (or, perhaps, intolerably) addressed through political prescription.

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[145] Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 267.
[146] Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 268
[147] Ibid.
[148] Niebuhr parrots a familiar contemporary view that Locke, by contrast, could be seen as a proto-democrat because he understood that reason was a more ambiguous form, useful for both the cause of justice and injustice. Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?" *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014).

Freud's theory lacks "relevance" politically because of the way in which he organizes the human being. Freud "pictures an ego, which is bedeviled, not by organized and coherent ambitions in conflict with other interests and ambitions, but with the anarchy of passions within and below the level of selfhood." The "anarchy of passions" and "cauldron of seething excitement" renders the sources of psychological conflict completely non-rational – "[equating] the bond of the self to its own interests too simply with its natural impulses and necessities."[149] People, on this account, become deeply unfree, fundamentally constrained by events and impulses they cannot repair or control. Niebuhr takes Freud's id to be a powerful, even tyrannical, element of psychic organization that is also largely biological, pre-social, and pre-historical.[150] Freud cannot explain the fact that bad behavior – our worst and most self-destructive tendencies – are not merely expressions of a corrupting and commanding unconscious, but might actually be produced voluntarily in ways that make us responsible.[151]

In his 1957 essay, Niebuhr makes few theological arguments. Pelagius and Augustine are nowhere to be found. Instead he makes the psychological and political case for original sin.

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[149] Ibid., 267-9.

[150] "Freudianism pretends to explain all the complexities of man's spirit in biological terms but fails to explain how biological impulses should have become transmuted into such highly complex spiritual phenomena." Niebuhr (1996), 42-3; This complaint about Freud's "naturalism" invites and anticipates other psychoanalytic theories that trace the social and political sources of the unconscious. Niebuhr, notes, however, that neo-Freudians and post-Freudians like Harry Stack Sullivan, Karen Horney, and Erich Fromm pay a high price for expanding the "scope of causes": threatening the universal ambition to mobilize a basic insight about pleasure-seeking behavior they easily end up with excessively micro, nominalist, and historicist replacements for the drives. Niebuhr, "Human Creativity," 270.

[151] Ibid., 274.

> ...the doctrine of original sin surveys a broader aspect of human nature and behavior than the Freudian pessimism. For it suggests a corruption of self-regard in human nature, which is historical rather than natural because it is a corruption of man's freedom and not some inertia of nature operating against that freedom. A realistic political science assumes the facts implied in the doctrine though it may know nothing of the doctrine.[152]

Niebuhr argues that for all the ways in which Freud seeks a "scientific substitute" for the Christian doctrine of man, there is not getting away from original sin. The lessons of the fall are latent even in secular theories that do not avow its influence.

What political prescriptions follow from the doctrine of original sin? On one hand, fallenness seems to counsel against utopian projects aimed at human improvement.[153] These are more trouble than they are worth, likely to be prideful and morally bombastic. But the doctrine also seems to have illiberal political implications that push in the other direction: the state might be called upon for coercive moral regulation, intruding on the business of its citizens choices and values, in an effort to minimize evil or even make citizens good. Recall, however, that sin is a universal tendency: there are no philosopher kings free of its reach. Even those socially recognized to possess virtue will falter – and falter, in particular, because their righteousness can be blinding and deceptive.

Niebuhr's doctrine of man and original sin generates, instead, an unsettling and demanding political disposition. Cooper calls it a "hermeneutics of sin," the idea that the universe we know in our history will always and forever contain the seeds of "violence,

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[152] Ibid., 276.

[153] George Kateb. *Utopia and Its Enemies* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 198; Eyal Naveh. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Anti-Utopian Liberalism: Beyond Illusion and Despair* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002).

horror, and cruelty" that require vigilance, attention, and action to meliorate.[154] John Patrick Diggins similarly calls upon Paul Ricoeur's famous phrase to describe Niebuhr as a practitioner of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," penetrating the placid surfaces of social and moral life.[155]

To follow this account of political psychology is to be always and forever alert. Sin is not a Manichean or mystical force in the world. We are not "possessed" by evil. The freedom that makes our most creative ventures possible can get out of hand. That same freedom is pregnant with dangers. Social virtues like humility and contrition can minimize sin, and a decent society should cultivate these.[156] But while such social virtues might help us approximate brotherhood they will never be enough to completely right the world.

Accepting the doctrine does not just demand a different perspective. It is not an exclusively individual moral or theological ethic, and Niebuhr does not pursue *Ideologiekritik:* puncturing illusions will not change the state of the world. But the doctrine does not obviously lend itself to a political program. Perspectives on human limitations can travel many paths and recommend many political regimes. In the next chapter I begin the process of translation: how psychology becomes political. As we shall see, Niebuhr's positive account of politics builds from his assessment of the kinds of creatures that we are. While the inner struggles with anxiety can seem quite private, in the next chapter I consider, more directly, what original sin means for politics. For that

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[154] Cooper, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Psychology*, 51-2.
[155] John Patrick Diggins, "Power and Suspicion: The Perspectives of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Ethics & International Affairs*, Volume 6 (March 1992).
[156] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume I,* 177, 183, 185, 209.

we shall revisit Niebuhr's account of self-interest. As I argue, the Niebuhrian doctrine of man complicates the relationship between interests and values, and sophisticates our sense of what it means to be "self-interested" in the first place.

Chapter 2
Private Virtues, Public Vices:
Reconsidering Niebuhr's Account of Self-Interest

I. The Values and the Interests

Political realists often characterize collective life as plagued by deep and ineradicable disagreement.[1] But why? Do people genuinely disagree about values? Or do they just have opposing interests? It can be hard to tell: people rationalize, justify, and dissemble their true motives. Analytic distinctions can simplify the murky roots of conflict, too. Although scholars rarely posit single factor casual stories, the distinction between values and interests remains salient.[2] The source of political disagreement has prescriptive implications. Those who hold that we are motivated by sincerely held beliefs are more likely to claim that rational deliberation can lead to resolution.[3] In contrast, those who hold that we are motivated by self-interest are more likely to claim that minds cannot be changed and so threat, sanction or force will most effectively settle conflict.

The distinction can be illustrated by a crude analogy between politics as the activity of negotiating bottom-lines, or as an argument over conflicting ideal states. If politics resembles commercial negotiation then we can understand actors as motivated chiefly by a desire to end up better off, maximizing their return on time, effort, and expense, even if that means sacrificing some principles of good behavior. Pressure,

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[1] William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010).
[2] Cf. Rogers M. Smith. *Political Peoplehood: The Role of Values, Interests, and Identities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
[3] Sincerely held religious beliefs might be less flexible than those concerning views about fairness, distribution, justice, etc.

sanction, and brinkmanship may persuade them to compromise or adjust their bottom line.

If, instead, politics more closely resembles philosophical debate, then political actors will be motivated by a desire to develop the most normatively or rationally defensible account. People enter philosophical or political debates to advance their claims, but they do so through reason and in ways that make them more likely to revise their own positions. While their intuitions might be influenced by experiences that, in turn, shape their sense of identity, they must also be willing to submit their assumptions to rational scrutiny. Deliberative democrats wager that the robust exchange of reasons and arguments, pursued under the right conditions, may lead actors to change their minds and, perhaps, their behaviors, too.[4]

While the difference between conceptions of politics as commercial negotiation and philosophical debate can diminish at the margins, "political realists" often think about politics as looking more like the former than the latter. For all its internal diversity, there is reasonable consensus among realists that politics is a "distinct" and "autonomous" domain "subject to norms that cannot be derived from individual morality."[5] Politics, in this view, operates by a logic apart from the moral considerations that might be present in other spheres of life.

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[4] Cf. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. *Democracy and Disagreement: Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics, and What Should Be Done About It* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
[5] Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," 385.

Stears writes that many so-called political realists fully support "self-interested, partial and potentially coercive political action."[6] Geuss suggests reducing political questions to Lenin's formulation "Who whom?"[7] Estlund claims that ethical notions are "always rationalizations of preferences" and that "humans will tend to form moral judgments that would justify or advance their preferences and interests."[8] Interests, costs, and benefits – not moral values or aspirations – are said to tell the real story.[9]

Niebuhr is often considered to be this kind of realist. George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and a generation of twentieth century realists in international relations and political philosophy considered him an intellectual patriarch, the dean of a movement, a "master" of the style.[10] He was a present and active participant at the 1954 Rockefeller Foundation conference that announced the "invention" of international relations.[11] These classical realists did not understand the world order with reference to norms of cooperation or considerations of justice, but instead in terms of the persistence of amoral conflict over security, resources, and the national interest.[12] Niebuhr avowed the realist

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[6] Marc Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion," *British Journal of Political Studies* 37, Number 3 (July 2007), 547.
[7] Raymond Geuss. *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[8] David Estlund, "Methodological Moralism in Political Philosophy," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2017), 369.
[9] Jean Bethke-Elshtain, "Niebuhr's 'Nature of Man' and Christian Realism," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power,* Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52.
[10] Kenneth Thompson. *Masters of International Thought* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
[11] Guilhot, Nicolas, ed. *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[12] While there are some differences between "IR realism" and in realism in Anglophone political theory, Bell and Scheuerman persuasively argue for more contact between these traditions. Historians of international relations, meanwhile, argue that "realism" among

appellation, developing his distinctive account of "Christian Realism" over decades of academic, theological, and public work. Accordingly, accounts of Niebuhr's politics highlight the role of self-interest. Langdon Gilkey writes that for Niebuhr,

> Political existence represents a contest of power, a conflict of wills driven by *interest*, the interest of each competing group, be it a class or a nation. Political life is thus not primarily a clash of theories to be carried on and directed by theoretical minds; nor is it one resolved by some mode of rational adjudication, persuasion, or agreement. The interests that dominate and drive groups are those of self-concern for the power, security, and status of the group; these interests are stubborn and resourceful. They will allow themselves neither to be persuaded nor deflated; they cannot be checked, limited, or overthrown except by the opposition of another and stronger group.[13]

Patterson describes Niebuhr's Christian Realism as the view that "although individuals may be guided by ethical guidelines, the behavior of groups rarely was. Instead, groups usually behaved in terms of self-interest, although they cloaked such egoism in moralistic slogans."[14] Niebuhr himself defined Christian Realism as a willingness to "take all factors...into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power."[15]

This account resembles the following description: political disagreements and conflicts reflect the clash between intrinsically, ineradicably incompatible, opposed

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thinkers in the international sphere is a historical and ideological formation and that the "realist tradition" of Western Political Thought was fabricated in the process. Duncan Bell, ed. *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); William E. Scheuerman, "The Realist Revival in Political Philosophy, or: Why New is Not Always Improved," *International Politics* 50, no. 6 (2013); Nicolas Guilhot. *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[13] Langdon Gilkey. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 33-4.

[14] Eric Patterson, ed. *Christianity and Power Politics Today* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.

[15] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner's & Sons, 1953), 119.

interests. Beliefs are superficial, epiphenomenal, produced by "stubborn and resourceful" interests that mask their primordial origin. Social groups struggle over power, not ideas.[16] Powerful groups do whatever they can and say whatever they need to say in order to maintain their power.[17] Even facially selfless acts may actually dissemble self-interested motives.[18] A tradition of political realists with which Niebuhr was associated even considered "selfishness, in the case of nations, to be not only reasonable, but moral."[19]

But there are puzzles. What exactly are these self-interested selves so interested in? And why? As Mansfield notes, political philosophers tend to treat interest inexactly.[20] They often return to an economistic understanding of interest as utility – "a bundle of preferences revealed in behavior."[21] This understanding of interest draws a straight line between what we want and why we disagree or fight. If politics is about "who gets what, where, when, and how" then political conflict becomes a showdown between political actors struggling over finite resources.[22] Self-interest primes and organizes political actors for the battle.[23]

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[16] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* xxxi.
[17] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 34.
[18] This echoes Augustine's concern that "pride lurks even in good deeds to their undoing." Cf. Jean Bethke Elshtain. *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 49.
[19] Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Stanley Hoffman's Critique of Hans Morgenthau's Political Realism," *The Tocqueville Review* XXXIX, no. 2 (2018), 64.
[20] "Self-interest, like other modern doctrines, has been subjected to a process of sedimentation that has covered it with layers of mud." Harvey C. Mansfield, "Self-Interest Rightly Understood," *Political Theory* 23, no. 1 (February 1995), 48.
[21] Ibid., 59.
[22] Harold D. Lasswell. *Who Gets What, When and How* (New York: Peter Smith Publishers, 1990).
[23] As Mansfield writes, the very concept of "interest" assumes that "interests are *opposed* to one another, yet their abstraction from personal character makes them similar. One butcher's interest is the same as another's although also opposed. The sameness enables

Niebuhr has a different account. For him to be self-interested is not mainly to act on the basis of evaluated or calculated risk, benefit, and reward to pursue material reward. It is, more precisely, the condition of self-absorption, self-regard, and self-entanglement – a face of pride, born of sin's stubborn undertow.[24] Niebuhr echoes what Rousseau says about *amour-propre*: self-love concerns the desire for social – or moral – recognition.[25] Competitive, commercial social life creates conditions for pathological egoism. This is not an account of *homo economicus* but of epistemological overconfidence, moral narcissism, and imperiousness.[26] We do not just seek to satisfy and justify our proximate material desires; we also want to believe that we are doing the right thing in the first place.[27] Self-interest takes many forms: self-love, self-

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opposed interests to counteract in a system that as a whole is abstracted from group, ethnic, or national characteristics." Mansfield, "Self-Interest Rightly Understood," 59.

[24] As Thompson writes: "[Man] is always righteous in self-analysis and feels security in his self-esteem....[and] To overcome social anxiety, man seeks to increase his power over his fellows before they should dominate him first. The struggle for power is an example of the rivalry which takes place at every level of human life." Dennis L. Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," *Journal of Church and State* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 290-293.

[25] Frederick Neuhouser. *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[26] For background on the Christian – and specifically Augustinian – conception of self-love, cf. Oliver O'Donovan. *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Herbert A. Deane. *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963). Hirschman's intellectual history of the transition to the modern language of self-interest remains without parallel. Albert O. Hirschman. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Mansfield helpfully identifies a shortcoming of the tradition that Hirschman helped inaugurate: "It is not simply wrong, but it is not enough, to understand your pride as opposed to your interest. The relations of pride to interest is the chief problem of the doctrine [of the passions and the interests]." Mansfield, "Self-Interest Rightly Understood," 62.

[27] Niebuhr's position can be contrasted with other realists of his generation. Carr, for instance, argues that morals are conceived of exclusively by and for dominant interests. Cf. E.H. Carr. *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

righteousness, and self-deception.[28] This represents a clear break with what Mansfield describes as the "*unerotic*" character of modern self-interest as disembodied and invested more in the object of interest than in the self that's interested.[29]

Niebuhr thus rejects both politics-as-negotiation and politics-as-philosophy. The conception of politics-as-negotiation gets important things right about the way that social groups behave but important things wrong about why social groups behave the way they do. Meanwhile, the conception of politics-as-philosophical-debate gets important things right about our normative motivations but important things wrong about how social groups actually interact. The fact that politics looks like both negotiation and debate makes disagreement and conflict more tangled, contentious, and intractable.

I illustrate these finer points of Niebuhrian self-interest by examining the "paradox of patriotism" in both "Patriotism and Altruism" (1914) and *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). That "paradox" helps connect Niebuhr's account of our internal constitution to the nature and dynamics of public life.

II. Niebuhr and James on Patriotism

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[28] Outka notes that Niebuhr's conception of self-love as "nefarious" and concerned largely with "aggrandizement" neglects an alternative conception of self-love which might be "both a requirement and an existential possibility in relations of mutual love." In this case, self-love refers to "the agent's regard for his own integrity, his endeavor to stay with his own considered insights and commitments." This may map on to Niebuhr's conception of "moral obligation," which can lead us to actually do the right thing. Gene Outka. *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 34-5.

[29] "Your interest takes your self for granted; it does not examine the self to which it belongs. Paradoxically, self-interest is uninterested in the self; it is not introspective." Mansfield, "Self-Interest Rightly Understood," 60.

Like many of his colleagues at Yale Divinity School in the 1910s, Niebuhr was puzzled by the young war in Europe.[30] The war seemed so clearly "iniquitous," and "the sin and the injustice…so evident" that they expected "that the moral conscience of the nations would revolt against the impending struggle."[31] But such manifest "iniquity" did not seem to dampen popular enthusiasm for the conflict, or the martial energies of combatant nations themselves. Why? What made otherwise good people support a bad war? Though Niebuhr himself would come around to supporting the War, in 1914 he pondered these questions in a course paper, "Patriotism and Altruism," that went on to win the Carnegie-sponsored Church Peace Union prize.[32] The paper bears the influence of the Social Gospel tradition that saturated the liberal Protestant tradition that Niebuhr and his colleagues drew upon to attempt to inspire the repair of the world. They also entered into a live conversation among pacifists about how to turn the sources of aggression and militarism against war.

Less than a decade before Niebuhr wrote "Patriotism and Altruism," William James delivered a speech at Stanford University, "The Moral Equivalent of War." While Niebuhr only mentions the essay twice, James's text looms large in this early work. Indeed, "Patriotism and Altruism" tends to be read as a significant entrée into Niebuhr's public writing but, substantively, little more than a footnote to James.[33] I aim to show, by

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[30] Ronald H. Stone. *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 22

[31] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Patriotism and Altruism (1914)," Box 16, Folder 1, Library of Congress, 1.

[32] Richard Fox. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 35.

[33] John Patrick Diggins. *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 12.

contrast, despite their similarities, Niebuhr's disagreements with James are illuminating and important.

Both James and Niebuhr are struck by the way in which modern wars facilitate the exercise of salutary moral capacities. This, they agree, makes the elimination of international conflict more challenging. James argues that pacifists cannot merely oppose war: they must also recognize the "higher aspects of militaristic sentiment" and develop measures to channel those permanent and admirable traits for creative, civic ends. These "higher aspects" include "patriotism" (which "no one thinks discreditable") as well as "hardihood," courage, boldness – facilitated by war, "the supreme theater of human strenuousness." James admires these tendencies. The problem is that, in modern life, they are monopolized by destructive international conflict. Martial virtues will not be eliminated but a "moral equivalent of war" can provide the opportunity for their productive exercise in the interest of the common good.[34]

Like James, Niebuhr examines the source of martial tendencies. Why do individuals overlook the manifest "sin and injustice" of war and the "primarily selfish and immoral" purposes for which wars are fought? Like James, Niebuhr argues that wars offer the opportunity for the exercise of potentially valuable "military instincts and ideals." These socially recognized virtues cannot be written off. Niebuhr is more ambivalent about patriotism than James, however. Niebuhr does not register typical complaints about patriotism. Though he calls patriotism a "passion," his account largely brackets its emotional manifestations; the familiar phrase "love of country" does not

[34] William James. *The Moral Equivalent of War and Other Essays*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

appear in the essay, neither does the word "love," nor descriptions of political emotions – though he observes that the "passion" of patriotism "charms" and "seduces." He does not condemn patriotism as non-rational tribalism. The problem with patriotism is also its promise: by satisfying the desire for ethical, meaningful action, sacrifice, and belonging, patriotism can lead to more conflict, not less.[35]

Human beings look out for themselves but also seek to realize virtues, and to do right for others, too. Collective activities like those undertaken in wartime provide individuals the opportunity to exercise such virtues: it "has appealed to the best of men" and "not only to man's noblest instincts but developed them as well."[36] For the individual, war often represents "the highest expression of his altruism...and an opportunity for expression of some of man's noblest passions."[37] Niebuhr does not argue that war appears to develop salutary virtues, or that war develops perverse versions of salutary virtues.[38] Instead, war provides a social and institutional context to exercise virtues like trust, mutual concern, and, above all else, altruism – one's willingness to sacrifice for another. International conflict in modern commercial society produces conditions of solidarity and civic duty in which both civilians and combatants are expected to contribute to a common enterprise that overcomes conventional divisions within the nation-state.[39]

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[35] Niebuhr, "Patriotism and Altruism," 1.
[36] Ibid., 3.
[37] Ibid., 2-3.
[38] Niebuhr rejects some military virtues. He questions James's conception of "hardihood" as well as "ruthless determination, developed especially among the leaders of battle, that wills to achieve its end at any cost." Others, he hopes "will lose their place among true virtues as they become less indispensable to men in times of permanent peace." Ibid., 5.
[39] Many prominent films made about World War I celebrate the salutary conduct of soldiers while indicting their cause as morally problematic or even meaningless. Cf. *La*

Although individuals may aspire to realize social virtues like cooperation, collaboration, and sacrifice, it can be difficult to turn appealing values into motivating action.[40] We expect and demand selflessness from our families and, to a lesser extent, our immediate communities, but these qualities are unusual enough in public life to be recognized and celebrated as civic virtues, acts that go beyond the call of duty. Individuals must be inspired or compelled to pursue their nobler passions – they can be jealous of their time and energies, and they will not sacrifice either unless they believe they are doing so for a reason that matters. War inspires selfless commitments because it conjures high, even existential, stakes: defense of both the immediate, subnational community, and the more expansive community in which it is embedded.[41]

National ideas have percolated to such an extent that individuals can feel personally threatened by faraway combatants. Patriotism channels the narrow love for the communities we know into a more expansive concern for the communities of which we imagine ourselves a part.[42] The "secret and the power" of our altruism comes from our

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Grande Illusion. Jean Renoir. Paris: Réalisations d'Art Cinématographique, 1937; *Paths of Glory*. Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles: Bryna Productions, 1957.

[40] Niebuhr, "Patriotism and Altruism," 5.

[41] Ibid., 6.

[42] Niebuhr echoes Burke here: "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections." Edmund Burke. *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 47.

"loyalty to a community."[43] Defending that which we know most intimately becomes the "highest cause of sacrifice."[44]

On the surface Niebuhr and James can seem to tell the same story. Both claim that socially recognized martial virtues can be reoriented towards more constructive, civic ends. James famously and influentially recommends national service. Niebuhr, on the other hand, argues that the Church can assimilate martial virtues for a universal and constructive end of perpetual peace. Unlike James, however, Niebuhr identifies hazards associated with these virtues which makes his own easy solution to the problem less persuasive. The dangers he associates with patriotic self-sacrifice are structural. The nation at war may deploy collective self-sacrifice most violently, but we can imagine many other instances in which the altruism of believers gets out of hand. Indeed, by *Moral Man* he would cast doubt on the both the idea of perpetual peace as well as the extent to which a "priestly" institution like the established Church can escape worldly corruption.[45]

"Patriotism and Altruism" makes two important points. First, aggregate individual acts of self-sacrifice can contribute to corporate selfishness. Without knowing or intending it, the goodwill and altruistic impulses of individuals make social groups more efficiently and powerfully self-serving. Unselfishness recruited by a cause or identity

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[43] "It is a rather pathetic aspect of human social life that conflict is a seemingly unavoidable prerequisite of group solidarity." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 48. Guilhot traces the influences of Schmitt's conception of the "friend/enemy" distinction in both secular and religious IR theory. Nicolas Guilhot. *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 76.

[44] Niebuhr, "Patriotism and Altruism," 6-7.

[45] Niebuhr, *Moral Man.*

becomes group selfishness quite rapidly. Second, that material self-interest alone cannot explain political motivation. Ideas, aspirations, and, ironically, virtues themselves, when exercised collectively, can produce the kind of passionate attachments that intensify conflict between all competing corporate bodies. Partisanship requires partisans, which self-interest alone does not generate, and partisanship generated by moral aspiration has a hold on us.[46]

This breaks with the conventional view of Niebuhrian realism as rooted in an analysis of material self-interest. But that should not be surprising: young Reinhold was embedded in a theological and political tradition he would soon abandon. In an interview given in the 1940s, Niebuhr said that it was midway through his time in Detroit that he "underwent a fairly complete conversion of thought which involved rejection of almost all the liberal theological ideals and ideas with which I ventured forth in 1915" – the year "Patriotism and Paradox" was published.[47] Many scholars make the strong claim that *Moral Man* breaks with the "liberal assumptions" pervading Niebuhr's early work.[48] But although there are significant differences between "Paradox" and *Moral Man* there is also a shared concern with the moral and psychological dimensions of political conflict. As I demonstrate, *Moral Man* actually extends, deepens, and elaborates the account of motivation offered in "Patriotism and Paradox."[49]

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[46] This follows some recent scholarship on the ideological source of conflict in Hobbes' account. Cf. Arash Abizadeh, "Hobbes on the Causes of War: A Disagreement Theory," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 2 (May 2011).
[47] Coffey, *Political Realism,* 79.
[48] Ronald H. Stone. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 59
[49] Fox notes that Niebuhr's formulation in "Patriotism" was "strikingly suggestive of the structure of his own *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, still eighteen years in the future." Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 35.

III. The Paradoxes of Moral Ambition

Moral Man and Immoral Society addresses a question nascent in "Patriotism and Altruism": What is the relationship between private moral attitudes and public life? How does private virtue become public vice?[50] This question reaches back to at least to the dawn of competitive, commercial society.[51] As Parrish argues, while eighteenth century philosophers agreed that human vices were natural and ineradicable they also argued that vicious individual behavior, coordinated and scaled up, can lead to virtuous outcomes – or at least outcomes that look virtuous and have tolerably virtuous consequences.[52] But anxiety about the relationship between individual moral actions and mass political

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[50] Niebuhr explicitly adopts this language in *The Irony of American History* (1952) where he writes that "virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue." According to Crouter, "Irony results when what seems fortuitous is seen, upon reflection, to be not merely fortuitous, but driven by pride and self-interest." Richard Crouter. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

[51] Niebuhr cites a passage from Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* on the prideful roots of good deeds: "The humblest man alive must confess that the reward of a virtuous action, which is the satisfaction that ensues upon it, consists in a certain pleasure he procures to himself by the contemplation of his own worth; which pleasure, together with the occasion of it, are certain sings of pride, as looking pale and trembling at any imminent danger are symptoms of fear." Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 55, quoting Bernard De Mandeville, "An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue," in *The Fable of the Bees.* As Biggar notes, *Moral Man* echoes Luther's "realistic distinction between the "realm" of the Gospel, and the "realm" of political life." Nigel Biggar, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Political Possibility of Forgiveness," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power,* Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 142.

[52] Pierre Nicole, for instance, agreed with Augustine and the Christian tradition that "self-love [was] entirely vicious from an ultimate point of view" but they argued that it "was nevertheless capable of producing *all* the beneficial social effects that would be achieved by perfect charity." John M Parrish. *Paradoxes of Political Ethics: From Dirty Hands to the Invisible Hand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24. Also, cf. Istvan Hont. *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

behavior was also alive in Niebuhr's time as well. Thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and David Reisman worried that in the twentieth century, human personality had come to be dominated and swamped by mass society, bureaucracy, and totalitarianism.[53] Niebuhr stands somewhere between the Enlightenment moralists and the modern social theorists: he rejects the idea that private vices produce public benefits, but also offers a less historical gloss on the problem than his contemporaries, accepting that hazards of moral psychology are enflamed by modernity without being unique to it.

Those who take Niebuhr to be primarily a theorist of brute self-interest do not have much to say about the moral transition from the individual to the collective. Their position is understandable, too, in light of Niebuhr's intellectual evolution: as he came to adopt a more explicitly Augustinian account of human nature and original sin he seemed to dispense with the distinction animating *Moral Man.* In later years he considered "Immoral Man and Even More Immoral Society"[54] or "The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities"[55] more appropriate titles for the book.[56]

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[53] David Reisman. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, 1973); Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991). Cf. Richard H. Pells. *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).
[54] Paul Merkeley. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account* (Montreal: McQuill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 83.
[55] Reinhold Niebuhr. *Man's Nature and His Communities* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 22.
[56] In *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) Niebuhr writes that: "Human finiteness and sin are revealed with particular force in collective relationships; but they are present in even the most individual and personal relationships." Reinhold Niebuhr. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meriden, 1959), 115.

But it would be wrong to attribute to Niebuhr the view that individual and group behavior are the same.[57] For one, they have the capacity for self-reflection, self-control, and balance that groups lack. This can help explain why individuals are not as eager as groups to turn disagreements into all-out conflict.[58] But more importantly, Niebuhr's account of political conflict does not make sense absent the claim that individual self-interest generates the kinds of passionate attachment that render social groups more self-seeking.

There are some groups – trade associations or labor organizations – whose members are purely motivated by their material interests. Those groups work to reflect and magnify their own members' self-interest: rub their superficial plans and ideals raw and you will find naked, material self-interest lurking underneath.[59] Though it is not insignificant that even social groups organized to pursue pure brute, material self-interest will generate and, crucially, believe stories about their more extensive moral mandate.[60]

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[57] "While Niebuhr's later writing blunted the sharp distinction between moral man and immoral society, which the book title exaggerated at that, he continued to argue that collective pride was the more entrenched and dangerous." Roger Epp. *The Augustinian Moment in International Relations: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the Reclaiming of a Tradition* (Aberystwyth: Department of International Politics, University College of Wales, 1991), 13.

[58] Keiichi Takaya, "Dewey vs. Niebuhr on Social and Moral Imagination," in *Journal of Educational Thought*, No. 3 (Winter 2006), 214.

[59] Niebuhr criticized the Protestant theoretician of nonviolence, Richard Gregg for assuming "that men fight only for some ultimate human desire which can be reconciled with the ultimate desire of their foe upon a higher level." He argued, instead, that "the oligarchs of our dying capitalism" would "probably continue fighting for power even after they had begun to suspect that every essential human value could be conserved in a new form of society." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Militant Pacifism" *The Nation* (Vol. 139, No. 3624), 718.

[60] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 95.

But the real action in politics happens when social groups appear to transcend material self-interest. The party, the coalition, the nation, the social movement fighting for justice. Niebuhr thinks these corporate forms are self-interested too, but in a more unusual way. By rewarding individuals who exercise salutary virtues that support their animating, moral aspirations, these social groups become more, not less, self-seeking. That view is only possible if Niebuhr thinks that individuals and groups are wired differently.

An inchoate version of this argument appeared in "Paradox." There, Niebuhr tried out the idea that aggregate altruism can turn into self-seeking egoism. But *Moral Man* explains how this happens: individuals pursue their plans, aspirations, and conceptions of the right and the just, and these aspirations cannot be reduced to brute self-interest or post-facto justification.[61] Two important implications follow for his account of self-interest. First, we are often not even aware that we are self-interested; second, just because we want to do the right thing doesn't mean we are not self-interested. But the fact that we are self-interested does not mean that we are totally depraved, either.[62]

IV. Is Self-Interest a Sin?

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[61] Lovin argues that Niebuhr sets himself apart "apart from a more rigid sort of political realist, who insists that to be realistic about politics, one must deny the reality of "values," "goods," or "norms." Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

[62] "The inclination of the individual to consider other than his own needs. Without this capacity for justice, the harmony and order of communities would depend purely upon coercion. In social philosophies such as that of Thomas Hobbes, the presupposition that men are consistently egoistic naturally leads to political conclusions in which freedom is sacrificed to the supposed necessities of order and no guarantees of justice are given." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," in Henry Boulding, *The Organizational Revolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 240.

Recall Niebuhr's account of the civil war in the soul: we are free but finite and so constantly anxious about who we are and where we stand. That anxiety, abetted by our freedom, can become prideful or sensual sin: we put ourselves at the center of the universe or withdraw entirely and abjure responsibility for this world and our place in it. But the soul hosts additional dramas as well.

It is curious that Niebuhr's hard-boiled manifesto opens with a discussion of the imagination. Indeed, imagination shows up in the first paragraph of *Moral Man.* Niebuhr writes that no whatever the technological, social or political advances we may see, it will never be possible to satisfy all "human needs" and especially not possible to satisfy all "human wants,"[63] and this has something to do with our imagination. (Like Plato or Hobbes, Niebuhr connects the head to the gut.[64]) The imagination, like our freedom, is a "gift" and a "curse." Imagination can expand our sense of obligation and mutuality by allowing us to see beyond our arbitrary standpoints in the world. But it can make us restive[65] and supercharge our appetites which are "fed by [our] imagination, and [we] will not be satisfied until the universal objectives which the imagination envisages are

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[63] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 1.

[64] Plato. *Gorgias* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 488e-499e; Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), Chapter xiii.

[65] The affinities with Hobbes are striking. Coli writes that "Hobbes constructs the conception of the imagination as a mental process connected with memory, without which men would be devoid of passions, but also of any talent or intelligence. Hobbes's theoretical revolution thus brings together two terms, passion and reason, regarded as opposites by the tradition. For him, not only is reason a calculus at the service of the passions, but the very rationality of the calculus is defined by the capacity of passion to guide the imagination and identify the means for reaching the desired objective." Daniela Coli, "Hobbes's Revolution," in *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850*, eds. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, Daniela Coli (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 74.

attained."[66] The imagination can be a powerful tool in our moral and political life, but it can also be easily captured by our creaturely needs.[67] It is, in short, ambiguous.

All sentient beings desire proximate ends but we are also different. The fact that we are free and possessed of imagination makes our impulses less orderly, organized, and disciplined.[68] It also makes it possible for us to want more than food, drink or sex. Frankfurt describes these more expansive desires as "second order" – the desire to determine and pursue long-term plans and priorities.[69] Niebuhr agrees: we have moral ambitions. We possess "a sense of obligation toward the good, as [our] mind conceives it."[70] We might not be right about what it is good to do or want but we are nevertheless wired to want to do what we take be the right thing.[71]

The desire "to do right"[72] is a powerful, non-rational reflex that resembles Rousseau's account of *pity* – a primordial, unsophisticated ethic of care and concern,

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[66] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 44.
[67] "Man will always be imaginative enough to enlarge his needs beyond minimum requirements and selfish enough to feel the pressure of his needs more than the needs of others" Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 196.
[68] "For nature has not established the same degree of order in the human as in the lower creature...Instincts are not as fully formed in human life, and natural impulses may therefore be so enlarged and extended that the satisfaction of one impulse interferes with the satisfaction of another." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 30.
[69] Harry Frankfurt. *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[70] Ibid.
[71] "Whatever its peculiar character, the important fact, for our purposes, is that men do seem to possess, among other moral resources, a sense of obligation toward the good, however they may define it...its general tendency is to support reason against impulse...Historically it is related to both the rational and the impulsive elements in human nature. While it is not underived, it is at least as unique as the capacity for conceptual knowledge. Like conceptual knowledge it may be strengthened and enlarged by discipline, and may deteriorate by lack of use." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 37-8.
[72] Ibid.

though Niebuhr thinks the seat of that concern is far less universal.[73] The reflex nevertheless generates a strong desire to improve an imperfect and repair the world. Mansfield argues that "while passions operate *against* reason, interests do the *work* of reason even though they are not under reason's command." Niebuhr's picture of the non-rational sources of moral obligation shares something with this account, but he does not so clearly distinguish moral impulses from passionate ones. Both are at work in developing the self we find worth getting interested in.[74]

But our non-rational, moral reflexes have competition. Recall the "undertow" of sin. Reason, like imagination, plays an ambiguous role in this ongoing drama. If the soul is a state then reason is its legislature; but the members of that legislature come from other chambers, other impulses. Reason has statutory power that can only be effectively exercised with a mandate from a plurality, even a majority, of its members. Reason can thus help to order and balance our impulses.[75] But that balance is uneasy, and our prideful impulses dominate, too.

Our unique capacities activate both our moral reflexes and exaggerate our egoistic impulses. Reason, in particular, is not sovereign: it can justify our prideful actions before, during, and after the fact. It can even intensify our pride, offering egoistic impulses new and more effective, creative, devious forms of expression. Reason can also make us more

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[73] We should note that pity and justice are not equivalent. They may even be in some tension: When we "consider, or even to prefer, the interests of others to our own" it's not about "sympathy" – instead "harmonious social relations depend upon the sense of justice as much as, or even more than, upon the sentiment of benevolence. This sense of justice is a product of the mind and not of the heart." Ibid., 26-9

[74] Mansfield, "Self-Interest Rightly Understood," 49.

[75] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 30.

forcefully, powerfully egoistic than the creatures of "non-rational nature."[76] It does not take a field biologist to remind us that we humans are more sophisticated and devious: we "fight battles with instruments in which mind has sharpened nature's claws; and [our] ferocities are more sustained than those of the natural world"[77]; "human passions are always characterized by unlimited and demonic potencies of which animal life is innocent"[78]; "Human conflicts are more deadly than animal conflicts precisely because man is spiritual."[79] The fact that we have reason, imagination, and the capacity to becoming feeling believers makes our conflicts – our politics – bloodier and fiercer, and makes it much harder to resolve our differences.[80]

Niebuhr is not an immoralist. It is possible to do the right thing, to identify and pursue the moral way. But it is not easy. To do so we must see, vividly, the impulses and motivations that shaping our situation – this includes reflecting on our own, often obscure, motivations.[81] The legislative branch of our souls, when staffed and organized in

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[76] "The force of egoistic impulse is much more powerful than any but the most astute psychological analysts and the most rigorous devotees of introspection realize.... Reason may check egoism in order to fit it harmoniously into a total body of social impulse. But the same force of reason is bound to justify the egoism of the individual as a legitimate element in the total body of vital capacities, which society seeks to harmonize...Reason may not only justify egoism prematurely but actually give it a force which it does not possess in non-rational nature." Ibid., 40-1.

[77] Ibid., 43.

[78] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny Volume 1,* 179.

[79] Niebuhr, "Politics and the Christian Ethic, 26; 26; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Militant Pacifism."

[80] This echoes Hobbes' claim that imagination and capacity for speech – not merely the intensity of corporeal desire – aggravate social competition. Cf. Philip Pettit. *Made With Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[81] "No one can penetrate into the secrete place where the curious mixture of motives, which lie at the basis of every human action, is compounded. Even the author of the action has some difficulty in doing so." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 225. Elsewhere he claims that "only the agent of an action knows to what degree self-seeking corrupts his socially

the right way, makes it possible to "appreciate the needs of other life," to "become conscious of the real character of our own motives and impulses," to "harmonize conflicting impulses in our own life and society," and to "choose adequate means for approved ends."[82] Reason helps us realize these capacities.[83] To some extent increased "social intelligence and moral goodwill"[84] can mitigate social conflict, and help political actors clear away the most immediate sources of their conflict. But even then, we have a hard time getting out of our own way – the strong undercurrents of vice interrupt our most virtuous endeavors:

> [The] insinuation of the interests of the self into even the most ideal enterprises and most universal objectives, envisaged in moments of highest rationality, makes hypocrisy and inevitable by-product of all virtuous endeavors. It is, in a sense, a tribute to the moral nature of man as well as proof of his moral limitations; for it is significant that men cannot pursue their own ends with the greatest devotion, if they are unable to attribute universal values to their particular objectives.[85]

Our moral and egoistic impulses will always compete. While the moral impulse can motivate selfless action, the egoistic impulse will find a way in, and attempt to inflate our

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approved actions." Ibid., 258. "The self has, in fact, a mysterious identity and integrity transcending its functions of mind, memory, and will." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner's & Sons, 1953), 124.

[82] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 28.

[83] "The measure of our rationality determines the degree of vividness with which we appreciate the needs of other life, the extent to which we become conscious of the real character of our own motives and impulses, the ability to harmonise conflicting impulses in our own life and in society, and the capacity to choose adequate means for approved ends. In each instance a development of reason may increase the moral capacity." Ibid., 28.

[84] Ibid., xxxi.

[85] Ibid., 45.

moral achievement, to make it appear even more grand and universal than it is. Hypocrisy is inevitable precisely because we care so much about our moral lives.[86]

The hypocrisy of large groups is even more inevitable. The felt obligation to do good, when scaled up and attached to the purposes of a social group intensifies that group's self-seeking.[87] As in "Patriotism and Altruism," Niebuhr denies that individual patriots are drawn to their allegiance for entirely selfish reasons.[88] While individuals may enjoy some vicarious identification with a strong, unified, corporate entity, it is the fact that patriotism combines "unselfishness and vicarious selfishness in the individual" that gives it such force.[89]

V. The Morality of the Crowd and the Nation

In John Steinbeck's Depression-era labor drama *In Dubious Battle*, the worker's camp doctor (Doc Burton) gives a speech to party organizer Mac McLeod. Burton says:

> ...group-men are always getting some kind of infection. This seems to be a bad one. I want to *see*, Mac. I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a

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[86] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 95; "All of our important deliberate actions seem to us to be good, to be according to the moral law, or, in modern usage, according to our moral ideals or values." Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 110.

[87] "All of our important deliberate actions seem to us to be good, to be according to the moral law, or in modern usage, according to our moral ideals or values. Hence the hypocrisy of all politics: each policy, favorable to a particular class, race, or nation, parades itself as devoted to higher values." Ibid.

[88] "Patriotism is a high form of altruism, when compared with lesser and more parochial loyalties; but from an absolute perspective it is simply another form of selfishness. The larger the group the more certainly will it express itself selfishly in the total human community...The larger the group the more difficult it is to achieve a common mind and purpose that the most inevitably will it be unified by momentary impulse and immediate and unreflective purposes." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 48.

[89] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 94.

> group isn't himself at all; he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you.[90]

The passage reflects a conception about the pathology of crowds and organizations common in 20th century literature and social psychology. Many worried that collective enthusiasm for social and political movements was irrational, contagious, and dangerous.[91] Crowds and institutions swamp conscience and remake individuals in their own image, rendering "group-men" or "company men" devoid of authentic inner life. Niebuhr's anxiety is somewhat different.

Recall that reason is ambiguous, a seat of power, not a motive force in our constitution: our moral impulses may call on it to claw back our egoism, but our egoism may call on it to inflame our self-seeking. The social group is unwieldy, not organized. Niebuhr does not think that bad groups ruin good people. Or that good causes go astray when groups attempt to realize them. Instead, imperfect people who commit their energies, efforts, and attention to ideals that they find worthy, and just can, in the process, make social groups more selfish and less moral[92] – inclined to whim and impulse, less capable of self-reflection, and more prone to delusions of moral grandeur and hypocrisy.[93] Moral ambitions suture and bind collective projects.

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[90] John Steinbeck. *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 113.
[91] Gustave le Bon. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Dover, 2002).
[92] "Modern men fight for their causes with a fury of which only those are capable who are secure in the sense of their righteousness. Thus all modern social conflicts are fought for "Kultur," for democracy, for justice, and for every conceivable universal value." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 202.
[93] "Individual limitations have a cumulative effect in human societies, and the moral attitudes, which tend to diminish them, are decreasingly adequate, when they are directed toward masses of men and not to individuals." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 25. The larger the group" he writes "the more difficult it is to achieve a common mind and purpose and the more inevitably will it be unified by momentary impulses and immediate and unreflective purposes." Ibid., 48.

As we have seen, Niebuhr thinks that moral ambition aggravates conflict. But we might wonder under what conditions conflicts *do not* implicate some passionate attachment or true belief. Political disputes also involve a sense of desert, a desire for vengeance, and any number of grievances that are not simply material or pecuniary. Wars often concern conflicting claims to sovereignty, border rights, power, nationhood or self-determination. Politics does not resemble commercial transaction after all: there is often, but not always, something more at stake in political conflict, and that fact makes it more intractable and intense. It would be easier to solve our conflicts if people didn't believe so intensely in what they were doing.

There is a reason why patriotism supplied the urtext of his social analysis of races, parties, and organizations.[94] But there are some distinctive traits of nationalism that deserve our attention. National identity, while organized by political elites, spans traditional cleavages, and nationalisms demonstrate the ways in which the intermingling of moral ambition and self-seeking help groups cohere. Niebuhr is keenly aware of the way in which distance mitigates the reach of moral concern – we care about the proximate and the visceral. The nation is ordinarily too vast and impersonal to impress itself on the average citizen. Nations only truly "arrive at full self-consciousness [once] they stand in vivid, usually bellicose, juxtaposition to other nations."[95] National conflicts

[94] While Niebuhr describes patriotism as a national sentiment, the problem that it illustrates is not isolated to national loyalty. As his discussion of the "attitudes of the proletarian class" demonstrates, he uses the term to describe the political loyalty of the working class as well – calling it a "sentiment of patriotism" Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 150.
[95] Ibid., 96.

are the deadliest and national "fervor" can be incendiary.[96] While nations may fight over land or treasure the real currency – power, self-seeking, self-regard – makes international conflict so fervent. Nations vigorously claim both their uniqueness and their universality:

> At such a time the nation's claim to uniqueness also comes in sharpest conflict the generally accepted impression that the nation is the incarnation of universal values. This conflict can be resolved only by deception. In the imagination of the simple patriot the nation is not a society but Society. Though its values are relative they appear, from his perspective, to be absolute. The religious instinct for the absolute is no less potent in patriotic religion than in any other. The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred, which is one reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion and patriotism merging in the process.[97]

The nation also tends to make universal claims for itself, especially under threat, in conditions of political conflict. Patriotic hypocrisy may be specific in some ways but it also dramatizes the familiar distance between action and self-regard, between behavior and projection, given the ways in which all social groups amplify the moral weaknesses of individuals but lack the checks, internal and external, that prevent their greatest excesses.[98] Let us close by considering the implications of this account for politics.

VI. The Politics of the Moral Imagination

The perennial call for a "national conversation" comes at the heels of every crisis surrounding divisive social issues, racial, gender or sexual difference in America.[99] The

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[96] Ibid. Nicolas Guilhot traces the influences of Schmitt's conception of the "friend/enemy" distinction in both secular and religious IR theory. Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment,* 76.

[97] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 96.

[98] "A perennial weakness of the moral life in individuals is simply raised to the nth degree in national life." Ibid., 107.

[99] Cf. John Hartigan, Jr. *What Can You Say?: America's National Conversation on Race* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010).

call recognizes the way in which honest and open-minded dialogue about difficult political issues can be challenging given partisan or ideological assumptions. These make it relatively easy for citizens to ignore inconvenient information and rely on their priors instead of assessing a situation on its own terms. Organizers hope that such civic events can force a people to see beyond their shorthand understandings of issues, step outside themselves, and begin to see the world differently, through the eyes of their interlocuter – quite literally an *other*.

Niebuhr would be skeptical of this measure, or at least our greatest hopes for it. While individuals may relax their prejudices and assumptions in the course of dialogue, moral or rational persuasion alone cannot actually resolve conflicts.[100] Moral suasion is unlikely to change minds because our felt moral obligations already incline us to think that we are doing the right thing. We do not want to think about ourselves as self-seeking, but instead as moral agents pursuing good ends. Purely rational arguments are likely to fall flat, too. After all, reason draws its power from our battling impulses.

Arguments, claims, and data will be received by interested reason. This makes it difficult for people to see beyond themselves. No matter the size of such a conversation it will be had by and between individuals. But individuals are not the main problem. This is not to let them off the hook: the way we are in the world inclines us to injustice. But political conflicts are about social group competition, and no political dispute can be resolved absent the engagement with the group dynamics that underwrite it.

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[100] "Complete rational objectivity in a social situation is impossible…Since reason is always, to some degree, the servant of interest in a social situation, social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone, as the educator and social scientist usually believes. Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 2-3.

Political disagreement and conflict resemble neither commercial negotiation nor philosophical debate.[101] Disagreements and conflicts cannot be perfectly resolved by either threat, force or sanction *or* by establishing the right conditions for the exchange of moral or rational arguments. People are wired to affiliate, to want the last word, and to believe in what they are fighting for. The Niebuhrian account of political psychology seems to suggest fairly limited political horizons. Asked in the late 1930s what it was that he rejected in "liberal" Protestantism and politics Niebuhr replied "primarily 'faith in man.'"[102] Given our restive, self-righteous natures the best we might hope for is permanent *modus vivendi*, mere order. Individuals may be prone to greater moral aspirations, but it would be unrealistic to expect those to turn to anything but frustrating, endless conflict.

But as we have seen, Niebuhr does not think that it is possible to take a step back from public life, or, as we shall see, that it is wise to try to eliminate the psychological and emotional hazards that make politics so perilous. He argues that we are, in fact, wired to want to intervene into the world and attempt to improve it. Niebuhr, the "moral wayfinder," alerts us to the hazards associated with the way we are organized and constituted. Understanding the hazards ahead of time, coming to know when and where

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[101] "The contractual relations of business enterprise have been regarded as too simply normative for all human relations...most human relations, from those of the family to those of the inchoate world community, have a greater degree of "destiny" and a smaller degree of revocable choice in them than those of the business community. In these relations human beings and communities are bound together in such a way that it may be neither possible nor desirable to contract out of the relation if it proves vexatious, or to eliminate an inefficient member if he proves recalcitrant." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," in Henry Boulding, *The Organizational Revolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 243.

[102] Donald B. Meyer. *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1960), 241.

to expect them, can help us act more effectively in the world and in ways that minimize their effects.

Niebuhr does not merely give advice so that political entrepreneurs can more effectively pursue their ends. His intended audience is more restrictive: political actors who seek to increase justice in the world. They will stumble (we all stumble) but there are measures and methods that can make the work of politics more moral. As we shall see in the next chapter, Niebuhr's account of democracy follows on this pattern. There are many thinkers in the history of political thought who held similarly bleak views about the persistence of human flaws. Early modern philosophers and moralists, in particular, also considered what to do with restive, selfish, passionate subjects.

Unlike the Ancients who sought to transform or at least train citizens, the moderns – even the non-democrats – recognized that polities could not choose their political subjects, and that the people were imperfect in fairly permanent ways. Most sought institutional remedies. Hobbes organized the state around undermining the sources of vice, authorizing a state with the power to remove public controversy – to see the political as, essentially, a tool to suppress our worst qualities to make decent life possible. Rousseau, meanwhile, preserved some secularized sense of *imago dei* – some trace of perfectibility – but wagered that it had been so covered over by devious convention, custom, and history that it could only be recovered by rather extreme interventions and profound moral reeducation. Madison and the republican tradition, meanwhile, did not think it was possible to eliminate vice but argued in favor of non-democratic institutions that could manage its excesses. Apart from Smith, few classical moralists sought non-state solutions to private – or public – vice, and even Smith sought a solution through the

right organization and functioning of market institutions to turn foibles into benefits. As we shall see, Niebuhr does not go down these paths.

The discreet actions or virtues of political actors are not enough to effectuate justice. Private virtues may become public vices, but private acts do not trump collective action. It will, in short, be necessary to enter the moral minefield of groups, parties, and organizations. Indeed, that's exactly where Niebuhr goes: he becomes a democrat. Self-governing institutions are important checks on concentrated power. We are stubborn and tend to want to covet what we have, and, further, to tell stories about why our possessions are justly earned. Those in possession of power do not lose their moral ambition, while those who are outside of power – and even oppressed by it – may have imperfect analyses of the world, they can also see things more clearly precisely because their sense of self is not tied up with the moral prestige of the status quo. Niebuhr comes close to arguing that democratic government has epistemological advantages: capturing and ensuring competition between the perspectives of differently placed political subjects.

But as we shall see, Niebuhr conceives of democracy as more than an institutional arrangement. Democracy also indexes a kind of relationship between political subjects – to hold one another as subjects deserving respect even after intense conflict. This is a delicate balance, but he argues that certain democratic virtues can prevent political conflicts from descending into riotous rivalry, restraining injustice, and creating the conditions for the kind of rich and decent life of which we are capable. In the next chapter I argue that moral wayfinding is a thoroughly democratic practice, not just an individual ethic.

Chapter 3
Niebuhr's Democratic Realism:
Self-Government and Effective Action Beyond the State

I. Democracy and Sin

Let us begin with a stylized proposition: pessimism about human nature tends to lead to skepticism about democracy. Pessimists worry that ordinary people cannot be trusted to govern themselves and so institutional constraints become necessary to reign in the fickle, partial, and emotional excesses associated with popular rule. Enlightenment liberals came to develop measures like counter-majoritarian institutions and representation to safeguard limited self-government, but these were not, at the outset, considered technologies of democracy.[1] While theologians from Aquinas to Luther to Calvin may have believed in the equality of sinners before God, their theological egalitarianism did not extend to politics, as many in the Christian tradition embraced hierarchy and domination as solutions to the problem of worldly chaos.[2]

It is curious then, that Niebuhr – a Christian theologian thought to be pessimistic about human nature – has come to be so identified with a historically influential defense of democracy. Craig argues that the 1944 lecture *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*[3] established Niebuhr's reputation as the "the archetypical American 'Cold

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[1] Bernard Manin. *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[2] Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 155.
[3] Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense.* In *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*. Elisabeth Sifton, ed. (New York: Library of America, 2015).

War' intellectual"[4] due to his embrace of democracy against totalitarianism. For many, *Children of Light* represents what Dunn calls the "dismally ideological"[5] democratic tradition, characteristic of Cold War liberalism.[6] Smith argues that, for Niebuhr, "democracy balances the central organizing power of the community against the equilibrium of the particular powers within the community."[7] Niebuhrian democracy, on these accounts, cannot be distinguished from the midcentury pluralism of the "vital center."[8] Others take the book to be less an account of democracy than the most definitive and comprehensive statement of Niebuhr's "neo-conservative anti-communism."[9]

As we have seen, Niebuhr, while a founding "political realist" also departs from many of the positions associated with that tradition.[10] His democratic thought is no

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[4] Benjamin Alpers. *Dictators, Democracy & American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 269.

[5] John Dunn. *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). In 1967 Niebuhr's friend W.H. Auden said that "words like Communism, Capitalism, Imperialism, Peace, Freedom, Democracy, have ceased to be words the meaning of which can be inquired into and discussed, and have become right or wrong noises to which the response is as involuntary as a knee reflex." W.H. Auden. *Acceptance Speech by W.H. Auden Upon Receipt of the 1967 National Medal for Literature* (New York: National Book Committee, 1967).

[6] Jan-Werner Muller, "Fear and Freedom, On "Cold War Liberalism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (2008).

[7] Michael Joseph Smith. *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 112.

[8] K. Healan Gaston, "A Bad Kind of Magic": The Niebuhr Brothers on "Utilitarian Christianity" and the Defense of Democracy," *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 1 (2014); Richard Fox. Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 220; Daniel Rice. *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Later works are far more vulnerable to this line of criticism. Cf. Paul Sigmund and Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Democratic Experience: Past and Prospects* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1969).

[9] Michael Kimmage. *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 142.

[10] For the state of the art of democratic realism, cf. Matt Sleat, ed. *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018);

exception. He agrees that self-government should not be justified by reference to optimistic accounts of human intellectual or moral capacities. Democracy, instead, generates institutional constraints on the exercise of power to restrain abuse and prevent tyranny. But democracy also does much more: it activates human potential and facilitates the free exchange of ideas and purposes. Niebuhr, like Stout, accounts for democracy as a tradition associated with "enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct," in addition to a set of institutional arrangements.[11]

Thus unlike the Cold War liberals to whom he is often compared, Niebuhr does not ultimately endorse democracy as the "least worst" regime or as an arrangement of power.[12] As we shall see, Niebuhr theorizes both the hard and soft stuff of democratic life – systems and visions, laws and practices, actions and attitudes. While these dueling features of his democratic thought can seem to be at odds I aim to demonstrate how they cohere. In so doing, I recover his account of democratic life as a set of relationships between subjects, not merely between subjects and institutions. Democracy, for Niebuhr, is a form or mode of social relations, a field of political interaction.

The practice of moral wayfinding alerts agents to the internal and external hazards and attractions of political life. Many of these cannot be avoided but they can be navigated more or less effectively. The "way" in moral wayfinding is supplied by a

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J.S. Maloy. *Democratic Statecraft: Political Realism and Popular Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[11] Jeffrey Stout. *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

[12] "What mattered, above all, was that democracy, as Aron once put it, wrote history in prose, and not in verse – it was the sober, least violent option, to be chosen by those who had learnt not to look to history for poetry of any sort." Müller, "Fear and Freedom," 55.

conception of justice as the worldly approximation of *agape* love, which we shall explore in the next chapter. So described, moral wayfinding can sound like a personal ethic. But it is not only that.

For Niebuhr, actors who are sufficiently alert to the hazards and attractions of political life, and who seek to realize just ends, must employ democratic means to achieve their ends. They will work with others to make the world more just and treat their fellow citizens as deserving of respect and concern, such that tolerably peaceful life can resume even after intense conflicts. In short, moral wayfinding has a thoroughly democratic character.

II. Democracy at Twilight

Dahl describes democracy as "the political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources and institutions they need in order to govern themselves."[13] Niebuhr never offers such a parsimonious definition. He was, indeed, a reluctant democrat, and *Moral Man* pulls no punches. In that text, "democracy" stands in for representative, competitive politics characteristic of commercial society and Niebuhr argues that while democracy has loosened the bonds of the *ancien régime*, it has also failed to produce genuine political or economic equality. Indeed, he claims that democracy cannot be read apart from the birth of the free market, and it is no coincidence that the "special interests" of the "commercial classes" who "conceived and developed" this new political system remain well-represented by it. Democratic systems replace the power of traditional,

[13] Robert Dahl. *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.

patrimonial authority with the economic power of the merchant class. The ostensibly free, open political system remains captured by elites; they're just new to the scene.[14]

But *Moral Man* does not simply rework Marxian criticisms of democracy. It also presents an inchoate democratic theory. For all Niebuhr's frustrations with democracy he writes, suggestively, that "it will be possible to do justice to those aspects of the democratic creed which transcend the interests of the commercial and industrial classes and add a permanent contribution to the history of social life."[15] One must read between the lines to find that project in *Moral Man*, as I shall do later. But Niebuhr's democratic theory comes fully into view in the 1944 lecture-turned-book, *Children of Light.* Niebuhr continues to distinguish between actually existing democracies and the real thing, presenting democracy as "characteristic fruit of a bourgeois civilization,"[16] a historical-political reality as much as an idea of self-rule. Before excavating the insights of democratic thought Niebuhr attends to the kinds of arguments and assumptions that support actually existing democracies.[17] He claims that the "real wisdom" of democratic life has been obscured by naive faith in human capacities that makes democracy vulnerable to cynicism and attack from without. He foregrounds certain attitudes and assumptions as necessary to successfully understand, navigate, and preserve democratic politics.

Though *Children of Light* is Niebuhr's most systematic treatment of democracy, the book says relatively little about actually existing democratic politics and provides no

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[14] Reinhold Niebuhr. *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932), 14-15.
[15] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 15.
[16] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 354.
[17] Ibid., 357.

succinct definition of democracy. There is scant mention of elections, representation, campaigns, legislative dynamics, executive power, civic culture, or participation – the mainstays of democratic thinking, even in the 1940s. This has led many to resign the work to the benighted category of "dismally ideological" midcentury democratic theory, where "democracy" was meant as a political counterpoint to "totalitarianism," not an internally complicated and contested subject worth interrogating.

But *Children of Light* is much more than a Cold War tract. It presents an original and challenging democratic theory. Niebuhr rejects the "folk theory"[18] of democracy associated with excessive optimism about human nature and overconfidence in the ability of political actors to act in a spirit of mutuality and good faith. But self-government also makes decent, rich coexistence possible for its citizens. To paraphrase the most famous line in *Children of Light*, democracy is possible – and necessary – because of the capacity "for justice," not just the "inclination to injustice."[19] Democracy, for Niebuhr, is the political system most capable of checking the foibles *and* realizing the possibilities of our common life. In order to properly understand what democracy can do, however, we must first understand what it does not – and cannot – do. For that, we must turn to the distinction between the "children of light" and "darkness" that animates Niebuhr's argument.[20]

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[18] Christopher H. Achen & Larry M. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[19] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 354.
[20] This analogy shares some important features with the Jamesian distinction between "healthy" and "sick souls," developed in *Varieties of Religious Life*. Cf. Charles Taylor. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 33-8.

Niebuhr often situates himself against ideal-typical opponents. "The Social Gospel," "liberalism," and the "natural law tradition" are among the most prominent and consistent. No opponents are as vexing or elliptical as the "children of light" and "darkness." The "children of light" include, at least, Marx (and Marxists), liberals (and liberal Protestants), Locke, Dewey, utilitarians, Adam Smith, and Hegel.[21] Strange bedfellows indeed. While many such "children of light" are not democrats, according to Niebuhr they nevertheless advance the "sentimental" assumptions about human nature that underwrite many flawed conceptions of self-rule.[22] They are united by their faith in the ability of human beings to overcome their self-interest and self-absorption – whether through moral reform, institutional sanction or zealous creed.[23]

Harries argues that the "children of light" share a progressive sense of history, and an abiding faith that better education, deeper consciousness, and the deployment of reason could resolve conflicts.[24] While they do not deny that self-interest can frustrate social cooperation, they overestimate the ease with which political coordination problems can be resolved and "underestimate the peril of anarchy in both the national and the international community."[25] According to Lovin, "children of light" think it is possible – perhaps too possible – to temper self-interest and render universal normative laws more effective in political life.[26] Inasmuch as they defend democracy they do so because they

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[21] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,*363, 370-3, 377.
[22] Ibid., 362.
[23] He later acknowledges two varieties of "children of light": "naïve and sophisticated." Ibid., 444.
[24] Richard Harries, "What Makes Us Think That God Wants Democracy?" in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power,* Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 155.
[25] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 362.
[26] Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 41.

believe that "people have moderate desires and will live at peace with one another if they are given the chance to do it."[27] Democracy for such "children of light" is a simple – even obvious – possibility for human beings.

Niebuhr worries about both the attitudes and institutions that issue from the children of light. As Lovin writes, the "children of light" are too confident in the "power of democratic ideas to transform self-interested politics…They think that most people really want to pursue the general good and can easily moderate their pursuit of self-interest." This leaves them with expectations that democratic politics will simply work because people want it to, or because democratic fellow feeling will inspire people to overcome their moral ambitions and see past their limited perspectives in the service of cooperation and mutual respect. This just isn't the way Niebuhr thinks politics, democratic or otherwise, actually works. Excessive optimism may also obscure the omnipresence of those who do not subject their own interests to any higher moral judgment, those with atrophied capacities for moral obligation. Democratic society, as we shall see, does not and cannot eliminate this peril. It is as ineradicable as sin itself.

The membership of the "children of darkness" is quite exclusive: Niebuhr only mentions Hobbes and Luther by name.[28] For them, public life is totally constrained by human selfishness in ways that make truly democratic politics unworkable: they are "moral cynics, who know no law beyond their will and interest."[29] Their conceptions of right and law are tied purely to convention. For some of these "children of darkness,"

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[27] Ibid., 43.
[28] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 372, 380; Alpers notes that Niebuhr left the identity of the cynical children of darkness fairly elusive. Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy & American Public Culture,* 271.
[29] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 361.

political systems require wise and absolute caretakers to achieve stability and order. But the references to early-modern absolutists can be misleading. The "children of darkness," writes Lovin, "may be dewy-eyed idealists" but for them "every ideal in the end refers back to the interest and power of the group where their commitments are centered."[30] These "children" may want things for others but for them, power and self-interest are the beginning and the end of political life; they are thoroughly cynical, they reject the idea that human beings could be motivated by anything other than self-interest. They come to confuse this psychological assessment with a decision-rule – an "is" with an "ought." They treat instances of cooperation and mutuality as totally exceptional, even unnatural.[31]

The "children of darkness" are self-centered but morally un-self-reflective. "Judgment stops…once they have found a justification for their claims," writes Lovin.[32] The "children of light" often unrealistically resolve the tension between self-interest and the general interest, but these "children of darkness" fail to extend cynicism about human nature to themselves or to those they deem morally or intellectually fit enough to ensure *modus vivendi*. They neglect the ways in which they might become oppressive, cruel, and tyrannical. They are too quick to self-justification and self-glorification. They refuse to subject their rigid certainty to proper moral scrutiny because they deny that there might be any value in doing so.

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[30] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 38.
[31] They act "as though [human egoism and the ineluctable tendency of human beings to expand their interests at the expense of others] is the only force at work" in public life. Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics,* 155.
[32] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 40.

The "children of light" do not provide a persuasive or durable justification of democracy.[33] Their arguments are vulnerable to the Thrasymachean skepticism of the "children of darkness." Yet Niebuhr seeks to reconcile these perspectives. *Children of Light* takes its name from a passage in Luke 16:8 which appears as its epigraph: "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."[34] Niebuhr seeks to combine insight from "the children of this world," the children of darkness, with the hopefulness and moral ambition of the idealists, the children of light.[35] This recalls a motif from *Moral Man*, which described politics as a "twilight zone" – a liminal, ethical estuary at the transition between day and night, sun and moon.[36] Low light trains us to see more clearly.

> The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove…They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community.[37]

The "wisdom of the serpent" may be necessary for the establishment of a brute *modus vivendi* or mere political order. But the efforts to "beguile, deflect, harness and restrain

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[33] "Democracy has quite a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history. The excessively optimistic estimates of human nature and of human history with which the democratic credo has been historically associated are a source of peril to democratic society; for contemporary experience is refuting this optimism and there is a danger that it will seem to refute the democratic ideal as well." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 353.

[34] Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 351. The phrase also appears in Ephesians 5:7-14.

[35] Let us bracket Niebuhr's contentious organization of thinkers as either "of light" or "darkness": he overstates the optimism of many Enlightenment liberals who actually offered more nuanced accounts of self-interest and moral psychology. Instead we can attend to his argument about why optimistic assumptions and justifications of democracy are dangerous.

[36] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 81.

[37] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 378.

self-interest" must also preserve an expansive sense of belonging, mutuality, and interdependence. The serpent lives close to the ground. It is intelligent, swift, strategic, and predatory – terrifying and tempting. The dove, by contrast, evokes soaring tranquility, naivete, and vulnerability; a Biblical omen of peace and reconciliation after a punishing storm. In politics, these images correspond to concepts like coercion and liberation, violence and peace, strategy and imagination.

Niebuhr indeed argues that democracy balances some tension between "order" and "freedom" or "government" and "creativity," the familiar distinction between democracy as an institutional form and as a normative aspiration or way of life. But it is not obvious that the give and take between the hard stuff and soft stuff of democracy – let alone the spirit of "light" and "dark," "serpent" and "dove" – can be easily combined. Such perspectives tend to stand in tension for a reason. In the following section I suggest how that tension might be resolved.

III. Norm and Form, System and Vision

Niebuhr has often been described as a twentieth century Madisonian. Stone frequently makes the comparison and Niebuhr himself often invokes the American Founders.[38] Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. writes that, for Niebuhr, because "ordained authority...is all the more subject to the temptations of self-interest, self-deception, and self-righteousness...Power must be balanced by power."[39] Smith argues that, for Niebuhr, "Democracy, properly understood, is the best form of government because it

[38] Ronald H. Stone. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 99, 160-5.
[39] Kegley and Bretall eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 126; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Long Shadow" *New York Times,* June 22, 1992.

provides a method to cope with the basic problems of community. Democracy balances the central organizing power of the community against the equilibrium of the particular powers within the community."[40] Gregory, meanwhile, claims that "Liberal democracy is the least bad form of government because it recognizes government's limited, sin-constraining role."[41] Niebuhr describes democratic rule in ways that echo Madison of the *Federalist*: "irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice" and so democracy puts "checks upon the power of the ruler and administrators and thus prevent it from becoming vexatious."[42] Elsewhere he writes about fanaticism as among the "greatest perils to democracy" and describes democracy as the détente "between individuals and groups" in ways that recall the constitutional counterbalancing of powers and interests.[43]

Niebuhr, like Madison, takes pride and self-interest seriously, not only as moral or theological problems but as political problems too. *Children of Light* often draws from *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which presented the most developed account of his theological anthropology.[44] While human capacities for creativity are inordinate so too

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[40] Michael Joseph Smith. *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 112.
[41] Eric Gregory. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustine Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 11.
[42] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 354.
[43] Matthews defines Madison's "bedrock notions of stability, balance, and equilibrium, as the goals of a system designed automatically to balance liberty and rights with power and authority." Richard K. Matthews. *If Men Were Angels: James Madison & the Heartless Empire of Reason* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 173.
[44] Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation Volume I* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

are our ambitions, lusts, and desires.[45] Sin remains a powerful current – an "undertow"[46] in our moral lives and Niebuhr often presents the state as a container meant to restrain fallible, capricious citizens.

But Niebuhr also describes democracy in more morally expansive language. *Children of Light* contains statements fairly at home in the sentimental accounts he rejects. Democracy speaks to the "spiritual stature," "social character," "the uniqueness and variety of life" and the "common necessities of all men"; it "maintains freedom within the framework of order."[47] "A free society," he writes "is justified by the fact that the indeterminate possibilities of human vitality may be creative" and "democratic institutions are the cause, as well as the consequence, of cultural variety and social pluralism."[48] Democracy facilitates man's "essential freedom" ability to make history, to "elaborate communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent."[49]

Democracy does not merely check interests and restrain the tendency to "injustice." It makes certain forms of political and social life possible. Democracy is right, even good, for us. It satisfies the desire to self-organize and explore multiple ways of being in the world. It speaks to the fact that we are not constituted in "total depravity" but defined by freedom – to err, to create, to imagine, and to be morally responsible for ourselves and others. As we shall see, the democratic is tumultuous, even agonistic. But

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[45] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 367-8.
[46] Langdon Gilkey. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 132.
[47] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 358.
[48] Ibid., 390, 422.
[49] Ibid., 358.

the feverish conflict comes from the fact of our freedom, not our enslavement to passion or vice. We are both better and worse together, in public, but democracy creates the conditions under which we regulate and balance each other.

Indeed, in contrast to historic anxieties about the leveling nature of popular rule, Niebuhr argues that the open-endedness in democratic encourages rich variety, speaking to our nature as creating, desiring, making, and social creatures.[50] We are problematic creatures, too, of course, but we are not only or merely that. The fact of our doubleness generates a much more robust, even maximalist endorsement of democracy than the Madisonian "realism" attributed to Niebuhr leads us to expect.

Modern critics of democracy worried that modern forms of social and political organization might sever long-standing but delicate virtues.[51] They claimed that democracy disrupts traditional, organic social relations and replaces them with middling, conformist individualism inimical to the cultivation of authentic freedom or creativity. Niebuhr, by contrast, argues that democratic life is thoroughly social.

Democratic life depends on social cooperation and conflict that recognizes interdependence while also enabling the free expression of individual capacities. Through democratic politics we seek freedoms that can only meaningfully be realized and exercised together, in community. He finds the individualism of actually existing

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[50] This position echoes Mill, among others. Cf. John Stuart Mill. *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991); John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty* (New York: Dover Publicans, 2002).

[51] Edmund Burke. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America,* Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

democratic theory especially objectionable.[52] Political realists in democratic theory tend to be negative libertarians about democracy: they worry more about the forms of domination that democracy prevents rather than the practices of freedom it enables. Niebuhr shares their concern that democracy plays some role in distributing power and preventing its excessive concentration, but he cuts a different – and wider – conceptual silhouette.

Though he does not discuss specific representative institutions, Niebuhr argues that democratic pluralism generates the conditions for popular participation and voice. Democracy does not only "contain" conflict but also the seeds for the pluralistic pursuit of human purposes, to "elaborate communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent."[53] Niebuhr rejects libertarian notions that freedom exists only in the absence of the state, or that politics will always only be an intrusion into social life. But while he criticizes "bourgeois"[54] democrats for conceiving of freedom as only "necessary for the individual," he nevertheless recognizes the potential for state power to produce conditions inimical to democratic creativity.

> ...though it is true that government must have the power to subdue recalcitrance, it also has a more positive function. It must guide, direct, deflect and rechannel conflicting and competing forces in a community in the interest of a higher order. It must provide instruments for the expression of the individual's sense of obligation to the community as well as weapons against the individual's anti-social lusts and ambitions.[55]

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[52] As "bourgeois vision" crumbles you have to "distinguish and save what is permanently valid from what is ephemeral in the democratic order." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 359.
[53] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 358.
[54] "Bourgeois individual" is an illusion and the "sense of bourgeois self-sufficiency" and he rejects the "mastery over historical destiny" implied by social contract theory. Ibid., 358, 384-5.
[55] Ibid., 380.

Community and society are necessary because "men have never been individually self-sufficient"[56] and "[man] cannot fulfill his life within himself but only in responsible and mutual relations with his fellows."[57]

We are interdependent[58] and become most completely ourselves in community. Community requires order, norms, expectations: "the individual cannot be a true self in isolation...the essential freedom of man...requires a contrived order in his community."[59] There is a unpredetermined, even chaotic, nature to human possibilities and "vitalities" that makes us "perpetually creative and capable of producing new forms."[60] These are sourced in the same "expansive...ambitions, lusts, fears, and desires" that can lead to practices of unfreedom, domination, and even evil. Humans are, he thinks, released from many of the "natural and historical processes" over which they have dominion.[61] Democracy invites change, conflict, and transformation while also limiting their severity and extremity.

The two faces of Niebuhr's democratic thought can be captured by the familiar distinction between the "norm" and "form" of democracy – between institutions and constitutions organized to manage democratic activity and the ephemeral, disruptive, and "fugitive" nature of democratic practices themselves.[62] For Wolin and other radical

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[56] Ibid., 385.
[57] Ibid., 358.
[58] Consider the Augustinian conception of neighborly community. Cf. Hannah Arendt. *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 106.
[59] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 359.
[60] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 382-3.
[61] Ibid., 389.
[62] Sheldon Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy." In *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy,* edited by J. Peter Euben, et. al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive

democrats, democracy has a spiritual quality threatened or even extinguished by governing institutions. John de Gruchy, meanwhile, identifies democracy as both a "system" and a "vision."[63] Unlike Wolin, de Gruchy does not make the strong claim for the conflict between "system" and "vision" but he nevertheless identifies some friction between these conceptions.[64] There may be some gap or deficit between the experience of democratic government and the aspirations of democratic actors. This dynamic is captured, in part, by the well-worn protest slogan "this is what democracy looks like." That slogan speaks to the processes associated with democratic conflict and change. It also speaks to the aspirations for some political end that the claimants contend will increase their voice, influence, and power and, in so doing, expand and improve democratic life.

For Madison and many of the Founders, the sense that men were *not* good or rational angels led to their endorsement of "auxiliary precautions"[65] meant to prevent tyrannical minorities (or majorities) from sowing discord in the young republic.[66] In addition to the legislated ascriptive hierarchy written into many founding documents, the anti-democratic arguments, assumptions, and institutions in the early republic has led generations of scholars and activists to call into question the democratic *bone fides* of the

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Democracy." In *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political,* edited by Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[63] John de Gruchy, "Democracy," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought,* Adrian Hastings, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 157.

[64] For de Gruchy "democracy must always be seen as an ongoing project towards the realization of that vision." Harries, "What Makes Us Think That God Wants Democracy?" 165.

[65] Matthews, *If Men Were Angels,* 174-6.

[66] For Madison, "except in rare, extraordinary situations" — "stability" was the "leading priority." Matthews also notes Madison's low opinion of "rational abilities" and fear of the "potential power" of the people. ibid., 174.

Founders.[67] But Niebuhr does not make explicit reference to such republican infrastructure.

Indeed, Niebuhr seems to argue that democratic power is the most reliable check on institutions themselves.[68] There are many reasons to worry that democratic limits on power are ultimately unreliable: democratic limits are subject to constant revision as governing coalitions wax and wane. It would not be hard to believe that Niebuhr implies the existence of "republican" or "liberal" checks on democratic power – rights, countervailing and competing powers, anti-majoritarian institutions. But *Children of Light* makes little mention of such institutions,[69] suggesting more optimism about the prospects of full-throated self-government than we might expect from a Madisonian.

Is this a coherent account of democracy? Wolin and the tradition of radical democracy identifies a fundamental tension between democratic institutions and democratic ambitions. Realist democrats, meanwhile, argue for increased attention to the role the democratic institutions play in distributing power and holding it accountable, as opposed to enabling participation or certain forms of life. As we have seen, Niebuhrian democracy wants everything all at once: aspirational visions of democratic end states and recognition that democratic institutions are necessary regulate self-interest and diminish

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[67] Robert A. Dahl. *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Wolin calls Madisonian democracy "meritocracy with a human face" that cannot be called "synonymous with democracy." Matthews, *If Men Were Angels,* 24-25.

[68] For Lovin and other Niebuhrians, democracy is necessary because while people and institutions must have power to "supply necessary order…Once they have power, we can be sure we will have order; but we cannot hope for justice unless there are democratic limits on their power." Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 44-5.

[69] This position resembles Ober's recent work. Cf. Josiah Ober. *Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

evil in the world. Niebuhrian democracy can appear to be theoretical pastiche; the tension feels unresolved, the position incongruent.

Yet Niebuhr channels an old insight. Order and legitimacy are hard to come by, and deserve our normative emphasis, but they are not valuable in and of themselves. Recall the most famous passage from *Leviathan.* Hobbes writes that in the absence of civil peace through the compact of wills "there is no place for industry...no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society..."[70] Political coordination that brings about a *modus vivendi* makes social goods possible. Agents may contract out of fear of violence and cruelty, but they want bigger and better things out of politics too, and "mere order" can accommodate these visions as well.

Unlike the Hobbesian absolutist state, Niebuhrian democracy permits – indeed invites – the exchange of ideas and purposes. But both Niebuhr and Hobbes justify their chosen ideal regime on the basis that it is most appropriate to human psychology. The regime must effectively establish order even as it facilitates the "limited warfare" that Hobbes seeks to eliminate.[71] Niebuhr, unlike Hobbes, does not merely construe the people as the one-time source of authority but as the ongoing decision-makers who alone can be trusted and held responsible for their common life together *in spite of the fact* that

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[70] Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 76.
[71] Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Applications to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 188; D.B. Robertson. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 67.

they are not perfectly built to do so. Unlike theorists of democracy who claim its epistemological benefits, Niebuhr seems to argue in favor of self-government exactly because only humans can address their own mistakes.[72] As we shall see, this is not a seamless or uninterrupted process, but the practice of moral wayfinding enables political subjects to navigate public life in ways that make tolerable peace possible and prevent conflicts from descending into riotous rivalry.

IV. Humility for Realists

Humility can be hard to come by in politics. Competitive government is a full contact sport: political actors argue and battle at neighborhood meetings and in legislatures. Opponents may end up compromising, ceding ground or even accepting defeat, but people participate in democratic politics because they want to make claims, not friends. People are unlikely to revise the opinions that brought them to participate in the first place, even when they find themselves on the losing side of a public conflict. Democracies might require majorities to govern but they are also good at producing stubborn, zealous factions not known for their modesty, diffidence or circumspection.

Democratic politics can be exhausting, too. The tug of war between temporary winners and losers can take a toll on participants. Not everyone gets their way. Their voices are not heard or respected. They may be unpersuaded by the promise of future political victory. That resentment can turn ugly, leading to despair that either removes actors from the democratic process or produces ego injury that stokes the flames of

[72] Melissa Schwartzberg, "Epistemic Democracy and Its Challenges," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (May 2015).

political vengeance.[73] Niebuhr worries about this dynamic. He worries, in particular, because the idealistic assumptions that underwrite folk theories of democracy can set us up for failure. The psychological or emotional consequences of democratic idealism are just as concerning as the fact that its assessment of the world might be wrong.

In 1944, anti-democratic political movements were ascendant, and Niebuhr worried that democratic theories that over-promise might be vulnerable to attack – not just military but conceptual and ideological as well.[74] But the argument can be extracted from and examined outside of its wartime context. As we have seen, for Niebuhr democratic life requires an uneasy balance between skepticism of existing institutions and some faith in the goodwill and mutuality of fellow citizens. The experience of democratic politics can challenge our confidence in the ability of competitive government to deliver what we want. Skepticism can turn to distrust and disappointment to cynicism threatening norms of cooperation and mutuality.[75]

These are not new problems. In the past philosophers have proposed republican mechanisms – countervailing institutions, representation, constitutions – to preserve civil peace in self-government. Others have emphasized the cultivation of private or moral attitudes as measures to counteract the destabilizing features of democratic life. Niebuhr

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[73] For a rich empirical and theoretical study of this phenomenon, cf. Nina Eliasoph. *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[74] For a thorough and quite moving examination of Christian attitudes towards the war, cf. Alan Jacobs. *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[75] Matt Sleat, "Hope and Disappointment in Politics," *Contemporary Politics* 19, no. 2 (2013).

argues that virtues as well as institutions can prevent democracy from descending into riotous rivalry that threatens order.

Democracy calls to mind the arts of oratory, rhetoric or negotiation – the skills of persuasion and organization that make for effective participants in the political process.[76] Niebuhr makes an argument for an additional, unlikely set of democratic virtues: humility, contrition, and mercy. The ordinary language sense of humility would suggest real tension with the qualities necessary to participate in democratic culture. Humility can seem undermining, disempowering, quietist or excessively cautious. But that is not the conception of humility found in *Children of Light.*[77]

Humility starts its life as a religious concept for Niebuhr. Religious humility does not come from relinquishing or diminishing belief. Instead, it comes from "profound religion" and profound religious faith, which recognizes the difference between the demanding, non-historical ideals of "the divine" and the conditional, historical limits of "human creatureliness." Such religion understands its own limitations as but a human and faltering effort to reach the divine. Such faith "ought to teach [believers] that their religion is most certainly true if it recognizes the elements of error and sin, of finiteness and contingency which creeps into the statement of even the sublimest truth."[78] Before

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[76] As Wallach points out, however, for the Greeks there were serious tensions between *arete* and democracy – recall that for Plato the "democratic soul" was disordered, chaotic, and prone to hostile takeover by the appetites. John R. Wallach. *Democracy and Goodness: A Historicist Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[77] Beem writes about Niebuhr's democratic humility but do so with reference to kinds of political and moral education as measures to combat contemporary partisan polarization. Christopher Beem. *Democratic Humility: Reinhold Niebuhr, Neuroscience, and America's Political Crisis* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015).

[78] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 427.

we can attend to the implications of this claim it is worth considering the controversy that surrounds it.

There are many historical examples one could call upon to challenge the link between religion and humility. But I agree with Rice that it is more of a normative aspiration for the particular neo-orthodox Protestantism that Niebuhr exhumes and advocates than a claim about the history of Christianity.[79] There is still something uncomfortable about the way in which Niebuhr identifies democratic virtues and democratic government with a particular Christian theological outlook. Is Niebuhr offering a "religious defense" of democracy? Or sacralizing it, and transforming this worldly object into the subject of religious faith and attachment? No: Niebuhr opposed this kind of approach to democratic thinking, critical as he was of excessive "devotion to democracy" as a naïve national creed. Instead he argued that Christianity offered a "robust defense of democracy" that recognized its internal faults while defending against attacks from without. Democracy, in short, required some extra-democratic defense to remain vibrant and vital.

Niebuhr's brother, the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, came to worry that Niebuhr treated religion as excessively "utilitarian," a "power" more than a deep and divinely revealed truth. This concern became political as the religious, and specifically Judeo-Christian, defense of democracy was taken up by ideological writers like Will Herberg who argued that "non-believers could not be good democrats."[80] The

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[79] Rice, Daniel. "Kelsen and Niebuhr on Democracy." In *Hans Kelsen in America: Selective Affinities and the Mysteries of Academic Influence*, edited by D.A.J. Telman (New York: Springer, 2016) 116, 141.
[80] George H. Nash. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 101.

deployment of these arguments in this way led Niebuhr to loosen the conceptual bonds between "prophetic religion" and democratic life.[81] But that could have been Niebuhr's position all along. Democracy, as Lovin writes, could never be "vindicated by its claims to moral purity or its connections to religious truth."[82]

Even in *Children of Light* Niebuhr admits that most religious faiths do not generate anything like the "religious humility" he describes. The effort to cultivate this virtue will be ongoing.[83] But it contains the seed of the "highest form of democratic toleration." Such toleration is significantly more demanding than conventional liberal notions of "tolerance."[84] Democratic toleration informed by religious humility assumes that people will continue to believe – and disagree about their core beliefs – but that they may nevertheless be capable of understanding their own moral and epistemological limits in ways that allow them to understand others as sources of genuine insight.[85] This attitude should not encourage brute knowledge acquisition or moral tourism. Democratic life is not a character-building exercise. Instead it requires a degree of openness towards one's fellow citizens that can bracket substantive disagreements and treat them as fellow-travelers also stumbling, staggering to figure out their way.[86]

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[81] Gaston, "A Bad Kind of Magic," 24-7.
[82] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 40.
[83] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 428.
[84] Wendy Brown. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
[85] "Religious toleration through religiously inspired humility and charity…requires that religious convictions be sincerely and devoutly held while yet the sinful and finite corruptions of these convictions be humbly acknowledged; and the actual fruits of other faiths be generously estimated." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 430.
[86] "Niebuhr believed that democracy was necessary precisely because the children of darkness were correct about human nature. Since humanity and all it creates are open to sin and corruption, everything must be subject to criticism. This is only possible in democracy. Echoing the pragmatism of William James, Niebuhr argues for religious,

Niebuhr does not forget that those entering the political realm are self-interested – they intervene in public life because they want things intensely. But deeply held beliefs, held in the right way, should lead believers to respect and tolerate believing – and non-believing – others.[87] He has great hopes for democratic humility – that as a regulative norm in democratic politics it will contribute political attitudes consonant with civic cooperation.[88]

Aquinas's account of humility looms large here.[89] Thomas, like Niebuhr, draws together humility and hope. We do not hope to breathe, eat or drink (unless we are very ill), but we do hope for goals that can only be achieved with difficulty – goals that will require courage or magnanimity to achieve. Thomas, like Niebuhr, thinks we are prone to excessive hope; in fact, we seek out excessive hope. Because it is so hard to know what our limits actually are we end up wanting things that we can never achieve and inviting dispiriting, frustrating disappointment. Humility, for Thomas, puts a check on this

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ethnic, and class pluralism based on the contingency of all theological, social, and political knowledge." Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy & American Political Culture,* 270.

[87] Value pluralism requires that those with strongly held beliefs not relent but instead recognize their own limited perspectives – "to proclaim [their] highest insights while yet preserving a humble and contrite recognition of the fact that all actual expressions of religious faith are subject to historical contingency and relativity." He continues with an even more counterintuitive thought, that "religious faith ought…to be a constant fount of humility" because religious truth, as such, recognizes "error and sin…[the] finiteness and contingency which creeps into the statement of even the sublimest truth." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 429; "Religious toleration through religiously inspired humility and charity is always a difficult achievement. It requires that religious convictions be sincerely and devoutly held while the sinful and finite corruption of these convictions be humbly acknowledged." Ibid., 430.

[88] Parker Palmer writes that "humility plus chutzpah equals the kind of citizens a democracy needs." Parker J. Palmer. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 93.

[89] I am indebted to Adam Eitel for suggesting this parallel.

excessive hope. Those possessed of humble temperance understand their limits and know what is within and without their reach. Humility correctly estimates limits.

Humility has a democratic quality, too. In preventing the humble from reaching too far it does not necessarily restrict their hopes. Humility instead leads the humble to realize that they cannot achieve great hopes on their own. They will need help from others to accomplish difficult things, to look beyond themselves and their familiar surroundings to gather the energy and talent necessary to realize their hopes. While Niebuhr rarely engaged with Aquinas one cannot help but see parallels with his account of the virtue: self-knowledge about the limits of individual human efforts, as well as the epistemological and affective limits that one confronts when attempting to do the difficult work of intervening in public life.[90]

"Humility" can seem out of place in a hard-hearted theory of *realpolitik*.[91] Given human tendencies to self-absorption and self-interest, the demand that political actors shed their self-righteousness and recognize their limited perspective can seem excessive, even "unrealistic." But the humble disposition is not quietist. It does not check action. It is also not an affective or effective insurance policy against disappointment: disappointment can never be completely avoided in politics. Humility is instead "fount" –

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[90] Gregory Pine, "Magnanimity and Humility According to Aquinas," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 82, no. 2, April 2018; Michael Foley, "Thomas Aquinas' Novel Modesty" *History of Political Thought* 25, no. 3 (2004).

[91] According to Sigwart, the "ethics of realism" in a democracy demand skepticism, critical engagement, and "an uncompromisingly anti-illusionist attitude from every citizen, a specifically democratic "discipline of thought" which, however, is neither primarily based on moral relativism nor even cycnicms, nor, at least not primarily, on a traditional understanding of *common sense* or on practical reason...but rather on a peculiar understanding of political and intellectual heroism" Hans-Jorg Sigwart, "The Logic of Legitimacy: Ethics in Political Realism," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 3 (Summer 2013), 432.

a deep well, a source – of the kinds of action that preserves cooperation and mutuality without acting as though goodwill alone can guarantee these ends.[92] It is also an ordering disposition, an ethical perspective on politics that ensures it does not become the source of our ultimate value. It reminds us that there are more important things in this universe than this fight or the next one. Such humility mitigates the dangers that turn pride into fanaticism and imperils democratic life.

In reconstructing Niebuhrian humility as "realistic" ethic we can see most clearly how Niebuhr thinks opponents ought to actually hash out their political visions. For passionate advocates to get what they want in a democracy they must be willing to admit that they might want the wrong thing for the wrong reasons (or the right thing for the wrong reasons) and also be prepared not to get it, without losing sight of what brought them to care so deeply in the first place.

V. Pacifism without Peace, Brutality without Violence

Historically, democracy was associated with mob violence, instability, and chaos.[93] But the tides have turned. Today there are strong elective affinities between democracy and nonviolence.[94] Scholars have argued that nonviolent civil resistance movements are likelier to achieve their goals and produce durable democratic

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[92] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 437; Kegley and Bretall argue that "democratic life, decency, and justice" are more effectively realized "under the banner of a genuine humility than they had under the banner of an illusory perfectibility." Kegley and Bretall, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 150.
[93] H.L. Mencken. *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1926).
[94] James Miller. *Can Democracy Work? A Short History of a Radical Idea, from Ancient Athens to Our World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

institutions.[95] Schell notes that the successful revolutions in the final decades of the 20th century were largely nonviolent and democratic.[96] Political violence is seen to end the democratic conversation, to undermine the institutional mediation or containment of conflict over values and interests. Radical democrats who conceive of the democratic as spontaneous, disruptive, and precious might endorse expressive violence, but this is largely not the sense of the democratic with which Niebuhr operates.

For Niebuhr, political action is a messy, compromised, and compromising business. Political actions are open-ended and uncontrollable, with unintended consequences that touch unintended audiences and communities. Pickets, work stoppages or acts of civil disobedience are effective precisely because they put the brakes on normal civil and commercial relationships – they exact costs borne by the political actor undertaking the action or the public (antagonistic or not) at whom the action is directed. There are important moral distinctions between the costs of violent and nonviolent action but Niebuhr argues that those distinctions are not absolute. There is coercion at the end of a gun and coercion in the hands of the protest movement or shift manager. The distinctions between these modes of coercive action are therefore "pragmatic rather than intrinsic," and depend on circumstance and strategy rather than absolute moral demands.[97]

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[95] Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
[96] Jonathan Schell. *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York: Holt Books, 2004), 47-51.
[97] "The social consequences of the two methods are different, but the differences are in degree rather than in kind. Both place restraint upon liberty and both may destroy life and property. Once the principle of coercion and resistance has been accepted as necessary to the social struggle and to social cohesion, and pure pacifism has been abandoned, the

In addition to troubling the distinction between violence and nonviolence he also argued that worldly peace was deceptive. Even absent overt violence, conflict, or contention, powerful social groups exercise non-violent formal and informal economic and political power to maintain their dominance. "Peace" understood as compromise, resolution, or the termination of visible political conflict can be surface, illusory, and biased in favor of an unjust status quo.[98] This was not merely an empirical complaint that actually existing peace has been imperfect or that a more perfect peace has not yet been achieved. Instead Niebuhr argued that true peace was just not possible on earth. He even questioned to what extent pacifism was possible as he argued that all political actions involved some amount of interruption or intervention that could throw an equilibrium off-balance.

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differences between violence and non-violence lose their absolute significance, thought they remain important." Davis and Good, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics,* 141.

[98] This view owes much to Augustine, who saw wordily peace as important achievement that prevents anarchy and makes cooperation possible but incomplete because "perfect and eternal peace will only be found in the City of God." As Deane writes, "The state and the peace that it maintains are viewed as instruments which minimize and regulate overt conflict and so allow men to live and work together; by their cooperative efforts all men can promote their long-term interest in obtaining the goods and services that they require during this mortal life." But "True peace is the absence, not only of overt conflict, but of all resistance, contradiction, and opposition. It is clear that as long as we live in this world, true peace is completely unattainable; the life of the wicked is a life of strife and conflict, and even "the saints and faithful ones" must constantly wrestle with the devil, with the law of sin in the flesh, and with the troubles and desires of this world." Herbert A. Deane. *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 103, 99; The influence of this line of Augustinian perspective on peace can be seen in King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He writes that "we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with." Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

Niebuhr's account of political action can thus seem like a strange place to find his democratic thought. Many scholars treat Niebuhr's anti-pacifism as the last word on his politics.[99] Coffey, for instance, writes that Niebuhr's "answer to the means/end problem in politics led him to a radically utilitarian recipe of breaking eggs to make historical omelets."[100] Others consider him an outright militarist.[101] Indeed, Niebuhr can seem to

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[99] Niebuhr's anti-pacifism, while historically influential, has been criticized often narrow and flat-footed and unfair to the nonviolent tradition. Nevertheless, some pacifist Christians were vulnerable to Niebuhr's attack. We can see some support for this judgment in writing by Fellowship of Reconciliation leaders anxious about contemporary labor struggles. Cf. Joseph Kip Kosek. *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 49; John Haynes Holmes, "Has Pacifism Become Impossible?" in *Peace is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*, ed. Walter Wink (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 13. For an account of Niebuhr's measured support for intervention into World War II, Cf. Charles C. Brown. *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International), 99.

[100] John Coffey. *Political Realism in American Thought* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, (1977), 82.

[101] Pacifists have long bristled at Niebuhr's account. John Howard Yoder argues that Niebuhr neglects a tradition – both secular and religious – that abjures violence and embraces pacifism as a personal "ethical principal," as opposed to a "political policy for states." John H. Yoder. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism* (Zeist, The Netherlands: Heerewegen Pamphlet Number 1, 1954), 7. It should be said that Niebuhr acknowledged and admired the moral courage of this tradition while also criticizing its political limitations. Niebuhr writes that Gregg "implies…that policies of non-resistance are invariably prompted by cowardice. This hardly does justice to certain types of pacifist idealism which may have been too individualistic to be politically either realistic or effective but which were informed by a high type of courage." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Militant Pacifism" *The Nation* (Vol. 139, No. 3624), 718; Like Yoder, Childress argues that Niebuhr cherry-picks pacifisms vulnerable to criticism while excluding more normatively and politically tenable alternatives. Childress (1974), 491. Further, scholars argue that Niebuhr confuses the "ought" with the "is": the proposition that any non-violent state of affairs conceals tumult and coercion, does not, on its face, justify political violence. In his cover story on Niebuhr for *Sojourners*, Kellermann writes that in "Why the Church is Not Pacifist" Niebuhr sets up weak opponents but that "swept along effectively in [Niebuhr's] attach are varieties of Christian nonviolence with greater depth and range. There is no indication that he really comprehended the revolutionary pacifism of A.J. Muste…with a single sweeping sentence Niebuhr shrugs off nonviolent resistance as patently unbiblical." Bill Kellermann, "Apologist of Power: The Long Shadow of

render the "dirty hands problem" moot: why shouldn't every tactic be on the table when any tactic will involve profound moral compromise?[102] *Moral Man* suggests that violence could help achieve just political ends[103] and that "it may be necessary at times to sacrifice a degree of moral purity for political effectiveness."[104]

But for all his saber-rattling, Niebuhr also expresses ambivalence about both the political efficacy and ethical permissibility of violence.[105] He does not celebrate political violence as an end in itself, uniquely expressive or valuable in advancing goals.[106] Indeed, he worries that "a too consistent political realism" about political means can "consign society to perpetual warfare"[107] characterized by cycles of futile conflict.[108] Yet he equivocates about the normative and strategic benefits of nonviolence over violence.

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism" in *Sojourners: An Independent Christian Monthly,* March 1987, 18.

[102] "Means are not completely neutral, but on the whole, they are judged not of themselves but in terms of the ends they serve…" Reinhold Niebuhr. *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 24.

[103] "If a season of violence can establish a just social system and can create the possibilities of its preservation, there is no purely ethical reason upon which violence and revolution can be ruled out." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 132.

[104] Ibid., 244.

[105] In preliminary notes for the "Ethics of Social Change" (the original title of *Moral Man*) he wrote: "Violence. The communist doctrine. Reasons for it. Inevitability in Russia. The fact of economic determinism. Examples of intransigent privileged communities. Limitations of violence." Reinhold Niebuhr. "Notes on the Ethics of Social Change," July 16, 1931, Box 57, Folder 12, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress.

[106] We might contrast his ambivalence about violence to full-throated theorists of violence from Machiavelli to Sorel who saw something normatively defensible – even necessary, creative, valuable – in spectacles or experiences of political violence. Here, too, we see some affinity with Augustine who has "no inclination to glorify war or military victory or to forget the sufferings and cruelties that are an inevitable part of wars between nations or between groups or classes within a society." Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine,* 52.

[107] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 231.

[108] Ibid., 234.

On one hand, he argues that mass nonviolence is the method of social change most capable of removing society from "cycles of futile conflict" and preventing an unstable "uneasy equilibrium" or "coerced peace" between interminable opponents.[109] He writes that violence raises the "perils of complete disintegration" in a social conflict[110]; it is "always morally dangerous,"[111] "a great evil" that "ought to be avoided if at all possible."[112] But he refuses to completely reject violent coercion. These are the words of neither an avid warmaker nor a principled pacifist.[113]

It is worth comparing Niebuhr to more full-throated theorists of political violence.[114] This tradition does not merely consider spectacles or experiences of political violence as unfortunate or necessary but also justifies them as politically creative and intrinsically valuable. Machiavelli's conception of Princely cruelties as "badly used or well used"[115] found voice in twentieth century radical thought, left and right, that counseled the strategic deployment of public political violence to incite institutional, cultural, and social transformation.[116] Sorel argues that revolutionary violence might help the working class "recover their former energy" and get out from under the yolk of liberal

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[109] Ibid., 231-2, 234.
[110] Ibid., 169.
[111] Ibid., 172.
[112] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 169.
[113] Niebuhr distinguishes between social justice and international conflict. Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 235.
[114] Yves Winter. *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Georges Sorel. *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); B.K. Jha, "Fanon's Thoery of Violence: A Critique," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (July – September 1988).
[115] Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[116] Mark Juergensmeyer, "Christian Violence in America," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558 (July 1998): 88-100.

reformism.[117] Fanon, meanwhile, claims that the violence characteristic of colonial institutions and culture must be "appropriated" by the colonized in the process of their transformation into agents of self-determination.[118] Violence, in this tradition, is not merely a tool to change power relations between the dominated and the dominators. It also produces new kinds of political subjects and political orders. While Niebuhr does not conceive of violence in this way,[119] he also does not follow those like Arendt who write violence out of politics altogether.[120]

Niebuhr rejects pacifism but he is far from a pure instrumentalist. He does not unambivalently sanction political violence or demoralize political action as some claim.[121] He does, however, argue that coercive actions are compatible with democratic politics in ways that break with many conventional accounts. In the following section I attend to his account in an effort to expand our sense of political action in Niebuhrian politics.

VI. The Politics of Coercion

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[117] Sorel, *Reflections,* 78.
[118] Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Paperback, 2005), 6.
[119] Augustine, too, has "no inclination to glorify war or military victory or to forget the sufferings and cruelties that are an inevitable part of wars between nations or between groups or classes within a society." Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine,* 52.
[120] While in *The Human Condition* Arendt argued that violence was "mute," by *On Violence* she stated that it was entirely un-political or anti-political. Schell remarks that for Arendt "violence, even when used in the service of goodness, lies outside politics and is destructive of it. And to the question what the role of nonviolent action in politics is, her answer was: politics *is* nonviolent action." Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 26; Hannah Arendt. *On Violence* (New York: Harvest Book, 1969), 4; Jonathan Schell. *The Unconquered World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2003), 226.
[121] Coffey, *Political Realism,* 122.

Niebuhr often sounds like an agonist.[122] He describes public life as "brutal"[123] and claims that religious and secular liberals misunderstand the "brutal character of the behavior of all human collectivities" and the "brutalities of the conflict of power as basic to the collective history of mankind."[124] Society is a "jungle," a "twilight zone," "a perpetual state of war" in which "conflicting interests can never be completely resolved."[125] He once called the First World War definitive of "life as it is lived on this little sphere."[126]

But how can that conception of political life be compatible with democratic norms, attitudes, and institutions? Contemporary liberal political philosophers often tie the legitimacy of political action to norms of cooperation, impartiality, and reasonable persuasion.[127] Political acts that violate processes of reasonable persuasion are considered

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[122] Stears defines agonoism as "the potential for actual enjoyment, liberation and hope in aspects of the bleak coercive political world...[there is] something to be valued about the arbitrariness, fixity-less, contestations of a politics characterized by perpetual disagreement and the pursuit of stability in a society characterized by disorder." Mouffe, meanwhile, writes that it is "To affirm the perpetuity of the contest is not to celebrate a world without points of stabilization; it is to affirm the reality of perpetual contest, even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimension of contestation." For her "the political" denotes "the dimension of antagonism...constitutive of human societies, while...'politics' [is] the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political." Marc Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion," *British Journal of Political Studies,* Volume 37, Number 3 (July 2007), 545;
Chantal Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2009); Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.

[123] Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 4, 64.

[124] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* xxx, 155.

[125] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 81, 171, 19, 5.

[126] Reinhold Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," *The Christian Century* XLV (Sept. 27, 1928), 1163.

[127] "The legitimate state is non-coercive, and a non-coercive state requires citizens prepared to engage in political action on a wide range of issues in a non-coercive way...[and] Politics...should be a process of reasonable persuasion. It is the search for mutually acceptable solutions to common problems, dependent on the identification of

to be unjustifiable because they undermine the rules of the game. They introduce force where there should be conversation and debate, opening the door to threats that might undermine norms of respect, reciprocity, and the civil peace that they uphold. Even by Niebuhr's own account democracy requires mutuality, respect, and coordination as well as institutional vigilance and checks on power.

In recent years scholars have come to justify non-rational persuasion and extreme action on democratic, republican or liberal grounds. Stears has argued that there is less tension between legitimate, liberal political ends and coercive means than we have been led to expect.[128] Aitchison, meanwhile, develops normative criteria under which social movements can engage in "coercive disobedience" as a last resort for political actors who lack effective participation rights.[129] For Niebuhr, coercion is necessary and legitimate because political actors are wired in ways that make change through rational deliberation or moral suasion so challenging. It is hard to change hearts and minds but easier – and not necessarily less effective – to raise the costs of action or inaction. But Niebuhr is not morally cavalier about coercion – it is a lamentable feature of political life reflective of the distance between the City of Man and City of God. Coercion can be used well, *democratically*, to make the resumption of relative peace and common life possible after

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impartial principles that can be shared between citizens despite their otherwise deep and continuing disagreements." Marc Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion," *British Journal of Political Studies* 37, No. 3 (July 2007), 540.

[128] Stears, "Liberalism"; Marc Stears. *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[129] Guy Aitchison, "Domination and Disobedience: Protest, Coercion and the Limits of an Appeal to Justice," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 3 (2018).

conflict.[130] We cannot always know the effect of our argument or actions ahead of time. But the spirit in which we approach political conflict should be shaped by our expectation that we will have to go on living and working with our opponents. The process of coming to resume our lives together is not automatic. But democratic humility can make political contrition and reconciliation possible.

Political conflicts can end with hard feelings, not compassion or sympathy. The winning side – if there is a winning side – may be more likely to gloat than to reach out to those who have lost the round. The losing side, meanwhile, might misinterpret or misconstrue the sources of their setback. Self-reflection, as we have seen, is an expensive currency in politics. Given these challenges, what might political contrition look like in practice?

One theory comes from Digeser who defines political forgiveness as "an illocutionary act of self-disclosure" that requires a public to witness that "the debt has been forgiven and the invitation to restore a relationship."[131] It has to work to count as such. It cannot be an effort. It must take effect. It must involve action and not just words or attitudes. The paradigm case is the relationship between creditor and debtor. When the creditor forgives the debtor's outstanding bill she releases that debtor from responsibility and absorbs the unpaid debt. It does not matter why this happens. Forgiveness is not a sentimental activity. Digeser is a "realist," and his defense of political forgiveness can be distinguished from those seeking full and complete reconciliation, harmony, and

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[130] Excessive self-righteousness, by contrast, can inure political actors to losing future allies during conflict. Self-righteousness can, of course, motivate evangelism. But conversions are not mostly, or always, democratic.

[131] P.E. Digeser: *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.

brotherhood – the kinds of things we might expect from the City of God. But political forgiveness is not a trivial or technical arrangement. The political relationships that are worth restoring through forgiveness are important to us, the agents are worth standing in a relationship of "concern and respect." This, crucially, will not always work but there are still reasons to try.[132]

Democratic humility is not a sentimental disposition, and contrition is not a merely affective performance. Results matter for Niebuhr, too. But as we shall see when we turn our discussion to justice, he also recognizes the "remainders" – the intangible feelings, good and bad, that will influence our attempt to reconcile *politically*.[133] We must attend to these too, but we can only do so when we approach political conflict with a spirit already assuming that debts will be repaid and relationships restored. To engage with political agents as democratic equals we must approach them in a spirit that assumes that they deserve our concern and respect. Democratic humility cannot accomplish this feat on its own but it sets the stage for processes that might allow disputes to be resolved and citizens to return to the tolerable peace that allows them to live and create together.[134]

VII. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Nonviolent Coercion for Democratic Politics

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[132] Indeed, Timothy Garten Ash suggests that "the reconciliation of all with all is a deeply illiberal idea." Digeser, *Forgiveness,* 10, 14.

[133] Bonnie Honig. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[134] "Is there any possibility of being genuinely creative except [under the conditions that] historical catastrophes disturb all our complacencies? Much of [Augustine's] creativity came out of the tremendous shock of the fall of Rome." "Ethics of Augustine (1960)," Reinhold Niebuhr Audio Collection, CD N665 23, Union Presbyterian Seminar, Richmond, VA.

Philosophical concern with coercion goes back to Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. In the *Summa*, St. Thomas defines the "necessity of coercion" as the circumstance in which "a thing must be, when someone is forced by some agent, so that he is not able to do the contrary," rendering the consequent action "altogether repugnant to the will" and involuntary. Aquinas contrasts coercion to the voluntary which is defined by that which is "according to the inclination of the will."[135] Thinkers have long disagreed about if and why coercive action is a problem for agency, dignity or moral responsibility. Atchison offers a philosophically ecumenical definition of coercion as "imposing costs on some political course of action or making it impossible to pursue by force."[136]

As we have seen, Niebuhr neglects fine-grained normative analysis or technical definition. He uses "coercion" liberally and often interchangeably with "power." It is nevertheless possible to reconstruct a more subtle and sophisticated account of Niebuhrian coercion. For him, coercion has (at least) two valances: vertical and horizontal. By this I mean that he conceives of coercion as a relationship of action between both disparately situated agents and similarly situated agents. Thus, the state might have a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force but citizens in a democratic polity might also coerce one another in the course of disagreement, persuasion, and engagement.

He writes that while "All social co-operation on a larger scale than the most intimate social groups requires a measure of coercion" states cannot "maintain [their]

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[135] Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Second and Revised Edition. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. I.Q82, A1.
[136] Aitchison, "Domination and Disobedience," 667.

unity purely by coercion." The coercive power of the state is thus a necessary but insufficient condition of its survival. Niebuhr agrees with Schmitt, to some extent, that ordinarily "covert" coercive state power only becomes visible in exceptional situations and "moments of crisis."[137] This vertical account vests coercive powers in the state through police and other enforcement mechanisms. It should be said, however, that unlike Schmitt or Weber, Niebuhr argues that the structural coercive power of the state cannot alone force compliance or order – social norms, civic attitudes, and ways of being in democratic life make up the difference.[138]

Coercion is not the sole domain of states or firms, however. Niebuhr also argues that political actors in a democratic polity coerce one another, too. Rational or moral suasion is challenging: people are prone to self-absorbed moral ambition, hemmed in by their partial perspectives, and prone to self-justification and false universalization. For the most part, majorities do not change minds. Instead the political and institutional power of majorities signal their "social strength."[139] Votes are not violent: social strength does not merely evoke primordial force or threats to bodily integrity. Coercion can also threaten social standing and status.[140]

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[137] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 3.

[138] Luther condoned the use of state coercion on Christian grounds, as a way to "maintain order" and observe the love commandment. He, too, worried about the dangers of coercive power in the hands of selfish princes, though as we shall see Niebuhr broke decisively with Luther and others on the kind of regime that might minimize evil in the world. Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed" in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 45, "Christian in Society II," Ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 91-8; David M. Whitford, "Luther's Political Encounters," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[139] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 3-4.

[140] "There is no inherent moral advantage in the expression of spiritual power over physical power. The propagandist uses spiritual power and the general uses physical

This theory of constituent and state power in democracy seems to channel familiar anxieties about tyrannical majorities.[141] But Niebuhr argues that tyrannical majorities are less hegemonic or powerful than we might think. Recall that majorities do not rationally persuade minorities. Minorities do not change their minds to join the victors. Instead, demonstrations of majority social strength change a minority's strategic outlook – their sense of what is or is not possible as they seek to assert themselves. There are limits: political majorities might be powerful but they are hard to come by and harder to keep together. Niebuhr confronted this challenge directly in *Moral Man* where he argued that the most serious structural challenge to parliamentary socialism was the fact that the working or non-working poor do not have sufficient power to transform the political economy. A broad-based, cross-class coalition would be necessary to take power.[142]

Coalitions take conversation, compromise, persuasion, and consensus, which seemed inconceivable to Niebuhr in the pitched and polarized labor conflicts of the early 1930s.[143] No "educational process" can "place any class in possession of all the facts, or

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power. The propagandist seeks to establish his cause by impressing the minds of others with its justice. He seeks to prove that it is not his cause, but a cause which deserves the allegiance of others. The general enforces obedience. The propagandist uses a cheaper and more lasting method than the general: but it is not morally better." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Politics and the Christian Ethic," *Christianity and Society,* Spring 1940, 24.

[141] This calls to mind Arendt's theory of constituent power. Bernstein writes that, for Arendt, "Power is a horizontal concept: it springs up and grows when individuals act together, seek to persuade each other, and treat each other as political equals." Richard J. Bernstein, "Hannah Arendt's Reflections on Violence and Power," *Iris: European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* 3, no. 5 (2011), 10.

[142] Niebuhr's unsuccessful experience running for Congress in New York on the Socialist Party ticket in the early 1930s must have influenced his sense of the limits of electoral politics as well. Richard Fox. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 99.

[143] Harland notes that Niebuhr's break with pacifism was largely precipitated by "social and industrial strife rather than international conflict" and opposition to "religious idealists" who regarded the tactics of the labor movement "as a violation of the law of

cause it to appreciate all the feelings which actuate another class."[144] Non-democratic political movements are not constrained – initially, at least – by the demand or expectation that they be supported by pluralities. Revolutionary cadres or factions simply demand the allegiance of a motivated few. Niebuhr recognizes that democratic power must be coalitional to be effectively and durably wielded. But political minorities are stubborn.[145] Coercion does not always work; consensus is hard-won and elusive.

Coercion changes a political actor's sense of what is feasible or desirable through threat, punishment, sanction – or fear of any. But threats must be supported by social forces and embedded in particular contexts to work. In the case of democratic coercion, majority power shifts but does not completely foreclose the political horizons of minority factions – especially if they are passionate, strategic, and determined.

Those who possess concentrated power tell themselves and others persuasive stories about why their possessions are justified or even necessary for the maintenance of a peaceful and decent status quo. Moral arguments cannot overcome the stubborn moral pretensions of social groups. Rational persuasion that appeals to universal norms fails to exact the kinds of costs that might force groups or individuals to change their behavior. As Gilkey argues, "some mode of 'force' is necessary" for Niebuhr, whether that is "legislation and law (not nonviolent because enforced by the unifying power of the state)" and that "in the end the searchers after justice must be willing to use some mode

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love." Gordon Harland. *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 216.

[144] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 215.

[145] "Whenever a minority believes that it has some strategic advantage which outweighs the power of numbers, and whenever it is sufficiently intent upon its ends, or desperate enough about its position in society, it refuses to accept the dictates of the majority." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 3-4.

of force to achieve their end."[146] Coercion is, in a sense, the currency of political life – the cost of doing business in politics. It does not obviate politics. Politics, instead, indexes the uneasy relationship between higher aspirations and coercive execution. Both are necessary, though the balance between them will always be provisional, unstable, dynamic. Niebuhr thus agrees with contemporary realists who draw attention to the pervasiveness of coercion in politics.

In 1953 Niebuhr published a response to economist Kenneth Boulding's *The Organizational Revolution,* a free market criticism of the "organizational society" and planned economy. "Coercion, Self, Interest and Love" further illuminates Niebuhr's conception of vertical coercion. Here, as in *Moral Man*, he claims that coercion is a necessary but insufficient component of state power: "it is obviously impossible to build either an international or any other community upon pure power. There must be other forces of cohesion than the threat of explicit coercive power."[147] Where Boulding argues in favor of a society built on free contract, Niebuhr argues that "a too strong emphasis upon freedom and contract means that the peril of injustice and tyranny has driven the social philosopher too close to the edge of the Scylla of anarchy."[148] Coercive force, in short, organizes, balances, and orders the political world to avoid the tyranny of private power.[149]

Vertical coercion, well-used, must be "covert," however. While in *Moral Man* the invisibility of coercion struck of hypocrisy, here Niebuhr sees the taken-for-granted

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[146] Gilkey, *On Niebuhr,* 35.
[147] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," in Kenneth Boulding, *The Organizational Revolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953) 242.
[148] Ibid., 242.
[149] Ibid., 238.

nature of coercive power as an indication of a decent society, if not outright political legitimacy.[150] Coercion, however, is "pregnant with both good and evil possibilities – exactly as is freedom."[151] Coercion has to be judged in part on the basis of the ends for which it is used within and without the state.[152] Niebuhr and Boulding share an account of freedom as "negative" and coercion as the interruption or domination of the will, leaving little room for a conception of freedom as anything but noninterference. But coercion is not, *prima facie*, normatively unjustified. Now we might worry, as Boulding does, that Niebuhr's position opens to the door to paternalism, arbitrary interference, and authoritarian control – coercion run amuck.[153] Read superficially, Boulding is right about Niebuhr. As we have seen, while Niebuhr conceives of coercion as a pervasive but weak force. Coercion may be pervasive but it cannot, on its own, achieve the ends for which political actors employ it. But can it be used for democratic ends?

Meetings, conversations, and debates are emblematic of life in a democracy, and rational and moral suasion are understood to be the currency – the means by which people achieve their ends democratically. Niebuhr suggests that there are some conflicts

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[150] Niebuhr also has in mind the idea that "offers" might also be coercive. Cf. Scott Anderson, "Coercion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, (Winter 2017). Niebuhr writes that "no simple line can be drawn between "devices" which involve "the fear of injury" and those which involve "the hope of benefit," the former being coercive and the latter non-coercive." Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," 239.

[151] Ibid., 242.

[152] "A rational society will probably place a greater emphasis upon the ends and purposes for which coercion is used than upon the elimination of coercion and conflict. It will justify coercion if it is obviously in the service of a rationally acceptable social end, and condemn its use when it is in the service of momentary passions." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 234.

[153] "Professor Niebuhr is afraid of freedom, seeing always behind it the specter of anarchy; whereas I am afraid of justice, seeing behind it the specter of tyranny." Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," 254.

that can be resolved by using these tools of "normal politics" and drawing upon the large repertoire of democratic arguments or moral appeals. But there are reasons to be skeptical that conversation alone can do the work we want it to do. We are anxious, prone to self-absorption and moral ambition in ways that can make us defensive when challenged, and can make it exceptionally difficult to change our minds.[154]

Niebuhr stays largely out of the mind-changing business, though as we shall see that does not mean that we can stop paying attention to moral and emotional motivations in political life. Instead, Niebuhr argues that "normal politics" is much more like "extraordinary politics" than we would like to admit. Reason and moral often suasion work because they have back up – threat or social sanction. Democratic politics is like bumper cars. We will inevitably see collisions, cause collisions, change our course to avoid collisions, protect others from oncoming collisions, and, sometimes, force others into them as we attempt to get our way and also get on with our lives.

Many political scientists consider these conflicts unusual, even "extraordinary," but Niebuhr wagers that they are much more common than we think. There is soft coercion everywhere.[155] In this sense Niebuhr has affinities with contemporary theorists who power who conceive of it as pervasive but also open to counterpunching and contestation.[156] These dynamics are vivified by the political drama of open conflict – by

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[154] "[When] the selfishness of human communities [becomes] inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertions of interest; and these can be effectively only if coercive methods are added to moral and rational persuasion." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 272.
[155] This is not dissimilar from the way in which Schattschneider frames his discussion of conflict. Contentious actions, including riots and strikes, exemplify political conflict. E.E. Schattschneider. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Boston: Wadsworth, 1975).
[156] Cf. Steven Lukes. *Power: A Radical View, Second Edition* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

what happens when political actors hit a wall in their pursuit of an end – but they are present even in the innocent neighborhood meeting.

Niebuhr thus challenges the distinction between the ordinary and extraordinary in politics.[157] As we have seen, there are good reasons to think that it resembles neither commercial negotiation nor philosophical deliberation. Instead the ordinary and extraordinary modes of politics are much more closely related than we tend to assume. The vigorous, even violent conflict that characterize episodes of intense polarization and contention are not qualitatively different from the institutionally contained ceremony or process of "normal politics." Riots, strikes, and battles merely realize what is nascent in all political conflict. Liberal philosophical norms are the exception, not the rule, and efforts to solve political problems through rational deliberation are unlikely to succeed.[158]

This has led to some confusion about his prescriptive account of political action. Interpreters often read Niebuhr as a full-throated consequentialist and neglect his nuanced and, frankly, tortured account of nonviolence. Recall that coercion is an ineradicable currency of political life, inescapable even in democratic politics. Though the moral or practical consequences of violence in political conflict are hazardous that is no reason to take violent tactics off the table. Indeed, there are no *a priori* moral differences between the consequences violent and nonviolent coercion.[159]

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[157] McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly distinguish "contentious" from "ordinary politics" which, they argue, "consists of ceremony, consultation, bureaucratic process, collection of information, registration of events, and the like." Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

[158] Stears, *Demanding Democracy,* 71.

[159] "We may argue that the immediate consequences of violence are such that they frustrate the ultimate purpose by which it is justified. If that is true, it is certainly not self-evident; and violence can therefore not be ruled out on *a priori* grounds. It is all the more

Niebuhr does argue that political ends are prior to political means: we must think about what we want to bring about in the world before imagining how to do it. But there is an important relationship between means and ends, for ends will supply the options that political actors have to go about achieving them.[160] Genuinely democratic ends take for granted that our common life together will resume after a particular conflict ends – that there will be some settlement, that there will be winners and losers. Democratic ends should thus be pursued in ways that lower the moral and emotional costs of reconciliation after conflict. This can be done, in part, by reducing the defensiveness and self-righteousness between antagonists, and that, according to Niebuhr, recommends nonviolent coercion. Unlike thinkers squarely in the nonviolent tradition, however, Niebuhr admits there may be political impasses beyond which reconciliation will no longer be possible. Under those conditions unilateral action might be justified.

Niebuhr does not dispense with the conventional tools of democratic politics. Antagonists might attempt to locate common ground in a political conflict. Such attitudes are not unhelpful.[161] But there are steep limits: appeals to common goals and values will

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difficult to do this if we consider that the immediate consequences of violence cannot be differentiated as sharply from those of non-violence, as it sometimes supposed. The difference between them is not an absolute one, even though there may be important distinctions which must be carefully weighed…It is impossible to coerce a group without damaging both life and property and without imperiling the interests of the innocent with those of the guilty." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 172.

[160] "Short of an ascetic withdrawal from the world, every moral action takes place in a whole field of moral values and possibilities in which no absolute distinction between means and ends is possible. There are only immediate and more ultimate values. Whether immediate or ultimate, every value is only partly intrinsic…Obviously, an end does not justify any means because every possible value does not deserve the subordination of every other possible value to it. Yet the subordination of values to each other is necessary in any hierarchy of values." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 174.

[161] "Moral goodwill [may try to locate harmony between groups and] qualify the self-assertion of the privileged, and support the interests of the disinherited, but it will never

run up against self-interest and moral ambition. Deliberation, reason-giving, open communication, and honesty will not be enough, and where "the selfishness of human communities" becomes "inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertions of interest; and these can be effectively only if coercive methods are added to moral and rational persuasion."[162] Effective action will be coercive: it will reshape the strategic outlook of political opponents through threat, pressure or sanction. It will largely avoid attempting to change their hearts and minds through moral suasion and rational communication.

Assertions of interest are as much about pride as brute material self-interest: what people think, believe, and want matters and will indubitably shape the means they seek to achieve their desired outcome.[163] Political actors who construe social forces – as well as their own agency and virtue – too simply are drawn to violent means. They convert a politically sophisticated tangle into a means-end problem with an easy solution.[164]

But democratic pursuits are different. Democratic actors forgo millenarian aspirations; they do not seek to end history or politics. They recognize the permanence of disagreement and that citizens must resume their common lives together, even after intense conflict. Democratic action must reckon with how to ensure that conflict between

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be so impartial as to persuade any group to subject its interests completely to an inclusive social ideal." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 272. (1932), 272.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Here we might notice some affinities with Burke's anxiety about political enthusiasm. Cf. Vigen Guroian, "The Conservatism of Reinhold Niebuhr: The Burkean Connection," *The Synthesis of Moral Vision and Political Thought* 29, no. 3 (Summer 1985).

[164] The "errors of radicalism... increase the hazards of social change and tend toward violence." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 171. "So great are the perils of complete disintegration, once violence is resorted to, that it is particularly necessary to oppose romantic appeals to violence on the part of the forces of radicalism." Ibid., 169.

[164] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 20-22.

self-interested, imperfect creatures does not prevent the restoration of social order. That does not suggest that democratic demands should be severely limited. They should be motivated by aspirations for justice, but must also be alive to the limits of possibility in this world.

Political conflict follows a familiar dynamic. Those who stake out claims and act in democratic politics will be persuaded of the justice of their claims. Those against whom the claims and acts are made will resist and become defensive, even stubborn. Such conflict "arouses dormant passions which completely obscure the real issues of a conflict."[165] Self-righteous political actors get in their own way. They can be too possessed of their own moral ambition to address the issues that might make it possible to resolve the conflict.

Nonviolence minimizes the dangers of these dynamics devolving into riotous rivalry: nonviolence "preserves moral, rational and co-operative attitudes within an area of conflict and thus augments the moral forces without destroying them.[166] Nonviolence makes political conflict less existential. It lowers the temperature so that actors and social groups can achieve some emotional and moral distance from their prejudices, assumptions, and passionate attachments, preventing the escalation and aggravation fostered by social group patriotism.[167]

Such democratic actions may less immoral and socially explosive than violence but they are still tainted by the unfortunate, even tragic necessity of conflict and coercion. Absolute commitments to nonviolence can make hypocrites out of democrats. Pacifists

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[165] Ibid., 251.
[166] Ibid., 251.
[167] Ibid., 254.

can be led to imagine their worldly interventions as morally costless,[168] and inaction as politically inconsequential.[169] Their normative line-drawing exercise is morally pretentious, politically irresponsible, and conceptually arbitrary.[170] Opposition to structural violence can persuade them that they have kept their hands clean – or even made them cleaner.[171] Niebuhr thus worries about the ego-seeking potential of pacifist nonviolence.[172] While thinkers in the nonviolent tradition acknowledge this hazard, they argue that principled pacifism actually militates against excessive self-righteousness.[173]

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[168] Reinhold Niebuhr, "An Open Letter (to Richard Roberts)," in D.B. Robertson. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 270.

[169] "It is significant, for instance, the middle-class Church which disavows violence, even to the degree of frowning up on a strike, is, usually composed of people who have enough economic and other forms of covert power to be able to dispense with the more overt forms of violence." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 168.

[170] Ibid., 167. There are curious affinities with Weber here. In the "Vocation" essay he writes that "the ethics of conviction is bound to founder hopelessly on the problem of how the end is to sanctify the means. Indeed the only position it can logically take is to *reject any* action which employs morally dangerous means. Logically. In the real world, admittedly, we repeatedly see the proponent of the 'ethics of conviction' suddenly turning into a chiliastic prophet." Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," in *Max Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 361.

[171] Colm McKeogh. *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Pragmatic Approach to Just War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 29.

[172] John Patrick Diggins. *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 291.

[173] "After reading Niebuhr, I tried to arrive at a realistic pacifism. In other words, I came to see the pacifist position not as sinless but as the lesser evil in the circumstances. I do not claim to be free from the moral dilemmas that the Christian non-pacifist confronts…I felt that the pacifist would have greater appeal if he did not claim to be free from the moral dilemmas that the Christian non-pacifist confronts." Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 27. Arendt agreed: "Non-violence…recognizes that sin is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly." Thomas Merton, ed. *Gandhi on Nonviolence* (San Francisco: New Directions, 2007), 14.

Democratic political action bears a striking resemblance to the nonviolent tradition, especially "realistic pacifism" of Martin Luther King, Jr. This is no coincidence: as Kosek writes, Niebuhr and King shared an inheritance from "the Christian nonviolent avant-garde."[174] But there are important differences. Niebuhrian "democratic action" seeks to change an opponent's strategic outlook, not necessarily her mind. That puts unilateral, non-persuasive action on the table as a real – if imperfect – option.

VIII. The Heart You Change May Be Your Own

Though they were separated by a generation, King readily acknowledged Niebuhr's influence on his own theological and political development.[175] In *Stride Toward Freedom*, King wrote that he "almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything [Niebuhr] wrote."[176] Niebuhr appears in King's most famous piece of writing, too, his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail."[177] Branch recounts that Niebuhr shook King's confidence in the Social Gospel tradition in which he had been raised. King's encounter with Niebuhr at Boston University "affected him more deeply than did any modern figure, including Gandhi."[178]

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[174] Kosek, *Acts of Conscience,* 133.

[175] King's "homespun Christian realism was reinforced and given a strong theological foundation through King's study" of Niebuhr at Boston University. This study "reinforced his sense of the need and obligation to resist injustice [though] unlike Niebuhr, King concluded that such resistance should be done nonviolently." Rufus Burrow, Jr. *Extremist for Love, Martin Luther King, Jr., Man of Ideas and Nonviolent Social Action* (New York: Fortress Press, 2014), 119; 134.

[176] Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958), 97.

[177] "Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals." King, "Letter."

[178] Burrow, Jr., *Extremist for Love,* 119, 134. Kosek, by contrast, writes that "Niebuhr was certainly a crucial figure for any educated American Protestant in the 1950s, and

Niebuhr, meanwhile praised King and lent his name and influence to Civil Rights and anti-war projects that King helped to organize. He called King "the most creative Protestant, white or black"[179] alive, "one of the great religious leaders of our time," [180] and further commended King's philosophy of nonviolence as "a real contribution to our civil, moral and political life."[181] In a televised conversation with James Baldwin following the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, Niebuhr went so far as to distinguish King's approach from pacifism, which he still opposed.[182]

Yet in many ways they are viewed as opponents on the question of nonviolence. They may have shared an Augustinian conception of sin and moral psychology, but Niebuhr, as we have seen, is widely understood to be a thoroughgoing critic of pacifism, while King committed absolutely to his version of the doctrine. Their political, philosophical, and theological proximity heightens their differences and helps us better understand the outer limits of Niebuhrian democratic action.

King referred often to his profound theological interpretations of love, hope, and sin. However, Niebuhr's specific influence is difficult to discover." Kosek argues, in contrast, that "Glenn Smiley…was the white Protestant cleric who most directly affected the course of the Montgomery bus boycott" and so the trajectory of King's leadership in the Civil Rights Movement." While accurate, this strikes me as a too narrow account of intellectual influence on a single set of events as opposed to a political perspective. Kosek, here, also neglects to take King at his word and his multiple citations of Niebuhr's influence. Kosek, *Acts of Conscience,* 217.

[179] "Introduction," D.B. Robertson, ed. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Glouster: Peter Smith, 1976), 20.

[180] "A Forward by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr," in *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. John C. Bennett, Dr. Henry Steele Commager, Rabbi Abraham Heschel Speak on the War in Vietnam* (New York: Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, 1967), 3.

[181] Ronald H. Stone. *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 234.

[182] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Meaning of the Birmingham Tragedy," September 22, 163, Niebuhr Tape Connection (N60).

King's "realistic pacifism" was shaped in part by his encounter with Niebuhr in graduate school at Boston University. King agreed with Niebuhr that nonviolence was not sinless and that its consequences could be serious. But he insisted that "true pacifism" offered the least morally compromised and most politically promising method of pursuing civil rights, social justice, equality, and integration for African-Americans. Mantena reads Kingian nonviolence as "a philosophy of action," concerned with effective social change.[183] Mantena identifies both the "tactical" and "strategic" strands of "true pacifism." Tactically, nonviolence is "uniquely poised to confuse, shame, disarm, and outmaneuver opponents," while strategically, it prepares political actors to "engender better — more just, more stable — political results than violence,"[184] and a greater likelihood of peaceful reconciliation.[185]

"True pacifism" is not exclusively ends-focused. It requires the right kind of disposition and emotional discipline. For King, the character of political actions is linked to the internal states, intentions, and attitudes of political actors. Violence depends on "hatred and disrespect for persons and dependence on physical force," while nonviolent resistance is generated by "*agape*, respect for persons, and soul-force." The intention

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[183] Karuna Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence: The Theory and Practice of Nonviolent Politics," in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* eds. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 84.

[184] Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 88.

[185] King acknowledge that "Violence often brings about momentary results," and notes that "Nations have frequently won their independence in battle." But, he argues "in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings about permanent peace. It solves no social problem; it merely creates new and more complicated ones." King, *Stride,* 212-3; King agrees with Arendt here, who writes that "The tactics of violence and disruption make sense only for short-term goal…the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world." Arendt, *On Violence,* 80.

matters: "loving nonviolence will not seek to injure or violate the opponent in any way whatever."[186] This is a tall order. Violence has an *ad hominem* character, motivated by grievance, hate, and vengeance.[187] Nonviolence should have a structural opponent: directed as it is "against forces of evil" instead of those "persons who happen to be doing the evil."[188]

Nonviolence involves "humility and self-restraint"[189] – a language that echoes Niebuhr's description of democratic action. But King has greater ambitions for nonviolence than Niebuhr. It is, for him, the "ultimate form of persuasion," it can change hearts and minds – specifically the hearts and minds of the "great decent majority" who might not otherwise be paying attention.[190] This is worth unpacking. King agrees with Niebuhr that the protest or sit-down strike is not an exercise in rational persuasion.[191] Such activities do not make arguments.[192] They are performances of commitment,

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[186] Burrow, Jr., *Extremist for Love,* 130.
[187] King, *Stride,* 156.
[188] Ibid., 102.
[189] Ibid., 220.
[190] It is "the ultimate form of persuasion. It is the method which seeks to implement the just law by appealing to the conscience of the great decent majority who through blindness, fear, pride, or irrationality can allowed their consciences to sleep." Ibid., 216.
[191] "The idea of persuasion that King had in mind was not as naive or simplistic as his radical critics supposed. Nonviolent politics are built upon the persuasive power of *direct action*. The emphasis on action was premised on the recognition that political persuasion is difficult and rare, and that, in particular, rational argumentation is not a reliable means of convincing opponents or solving disagreement…[for King] reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking." Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 92.
[192] "True pacifism [seen in Gandhi, for instance] is not unrealistic submission to evil power….It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflicter of it, sine the latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart." King (1958), 98-99.

collective speech acts that emotionally activate allies, opponents, and fence-sitters.[193] King sought to create "a community at peace with itself,"[194] "the beloved community,"[195] and which stands in contrast to a world forged by violence, "the aftermath of [which] is tragic bitterness."[196]

Nonviolent resistance has multiple audiences: the self; the opponent; and the neutral. The discipline of nonviolence transforms those who practice it; this is a vital part of what it means to do politics nonviolently for King.[197] The "principle of love" at the center of nonviolence does not refer to affection for oppressors. Instead it is *agape* love, "unmotivated, groundless, and creative" that calls on political actors to engage in actions that leave the door open to future cooperation – to treat opponents as future neighbors, friends, and comrades.[198] That ethical orientation must become a disposition, an approach, a discipline.

Loving nonviolence produces intense and contentious encounters intended to incite shame in opponents.[199] Acts of self-sacrifice can force a reckoning, inspiring both opponents and fence-sitters to engage in the kind of moral self-examination that causes

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[193] Charles Tilly. *Social Movements. 1768-2004* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[194] King, *Stride,* 21.
[195] The "ultimate goal is integration which is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living. Only through nonviolence can this goal be attained, for the aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the crated of the beloved community." Ibid., 220.
[196] Ibid., 102.
[197] In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" King calls "self-purification" the final step before "direct" nonviolent action is taken. King, "Letter."
[198] "it would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense. Love in this connection means understanding, redemptive good will…It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart, and the deployment of *agape* seeks to preserve and create community." King, *Stride,* 104-5.
[199] King, *Stride,* 98-99.

them to ultimately change their behavior (if not also their minds).[200] There is power in suffering that can force the opponent to an act of moral witness.[201] But this cannot be expected to happen instantly. It first transforms those committed to an ethic of nonviolence before, eventually, reaching the opponent and so "stir[ring] his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality."[202] King argues that political violence is destructive, not merely of life, limb or property, but, potentially politics itself. It ends conversations, leaving society in "monologue rather than dialogue."[203] Violence does not invite participation or connection. It is definitive, one-sided, and unilateral. Kingian pacifism seeks to create relationships through strain and struggle. Nonviolence initiates a process that grows "the beloved community."[204]

But even if nonviolence does not transform the heart of the opponent the acts – public, vivid, emotional – might nevertheless speak to the moral capacities of the fence sitting majority. Acts of Kingian nonviolence seek to "*persuade* a reluctant populace to actively engage in acts of moral revaluation."[205] This brings to mind Schattschneider's insight about the way in which visible conflict launches democratic politics because of the intrinsic attractiveness of a fight to the crowd.[206]

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[200] Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 88.
[201] "Faced with…[the] willingness to suffer, and this refusal to hit back," King writes that "the oppressor will find, as oppressors have always found, the thesis glutted with his own barbarity. Forced to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood of his brother, he will call an end to his self-defeating massacre." King, *Stride,* 217.
[202] Ibid., 219.
[203] "[Violence] seeks to annihilate rather than to convert…[it]…destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue." Ibid., 213.
[204] Ibid., 221.
[205] Mantena, "Showdown for Nonviolence," 92.
[206] Just two years after King's *Stride* Schattschneider wrote that "Nothing attracts a crowd so quickly as a fight. Nothing is so contagious. Parliamentary debates, jury trials,

Where Schattschneider saw conflict as intrinsically enticing, King saw the vivification of injustice through intense nonviolent conflict as a source of moral education. As William Sloane Coffin wrote, "Most people want peace at any price, as long as the peace is theirs and someone else is paying the price...the problem is not fundamentally one of rationally persuading people to be rational, but of getting them to care."[207] It takes aggressive disobedience and agitation to reveal the everyday injustice of the status quo to that status quo. Such acts of revelation might be polarizing, but disciplined, strategic nonviolence will also summon serious moral self-reflection on the part of those who might otherwise avoid the battleground.[208] The self-fashioning involved in generating the right emotional disposition for contentious – but loving – collective action aims at moral suasion.

There is much in Kingian pacifism that resembles Niebuhr's account of democratic action. Both seek treat political opponents as fellow citizens with whom our common life will resume after conflict – even intense conflict – ceases. But there are important differences, too. As Rufus Burrow, Jr. argues, Niebuhr worried that those who

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town meetings, political campaigns, strikes, hearings, all have about them some of the exciting qualities of a fight; all produce dramatic spectacles that are almost irresistibly fascinating to people. At the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict." Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People,* 1-2.

[207] William Sloane Coffin, Jr. *Civil Disobedience: Aid or Hindrance to Justice?* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1972), 31.

[208] Schattschneider served on the "advisory editorial board" organized by Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good to organize the compendium *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960). Schattschneider who, to my knowledge, published nothing about Niebuhr in his lifetime, nevertheless joined more familiar figures like Hans Morgenthau and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. on that "advisory editorial board." Good solicited Schattschneider's in a project to "spread abroad Niebuhr's insights into the political process." Correspondence from Robert C. Good to E.E. Schattschneider. Box 1, Folder 12. E.E. Schattschneider Papers, Wesleyan University.

treated nonviolence as "a way of life" risked the glorification of cooperation and mutuality which could lead them to abjure anything but the mildest forms of coercion.[209] While this prediction fails to track the historical trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement, it is not difficult to see why Niebuhr might worry about the friction between a loving, political disposition and nonviolent, strategic practices of confrontation and contention.[210]

Niebuhr would further contest King's prediction that, over time, loving self-sacrifice might produce moral shame that leads to inner transformation. All political action can have unintended consequences: shame can generate anger and defensiveness. This does not mean that Niebuhr calls for violent coercion to address intractable political conflicts – especially conflicts challenging ascriptive hierarchy[211] – but instead that he recognizes the likely limitations of certain absolute commitments to nonviolence and reconciliation. King seeks "integration which is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living…and the creation of the beloved community."[212] Niebuhr would reject the feasibility of the "beloved community" on earth and so reject the idea that political tactics aimed at transforming power relations ought to be developed with that goal in mind.[213]

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[209] Burrow, Jr., *Extremist for Love.*

[210] "True pacifism [is not] unrealistic submission to evil power….[but] rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it, sine the latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart." King, *Stride,* 98-99.

[211] "Violence could be used as the instrument of moral goodwill, if there was any possibility of a triumph quick enough to obviate the dangers of incessant wars. This means that nonviolence is a particularly strategic instrument for an oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 252.

[212] King, *Stride,* 220.

[213] "Pacifistic absolutism is sometimes justified by the argument that reverence for life is so basic to the whole moral structure that the sanctity of life must be maintained at all

Most of the time we will not change hearts or minds. Democratic persuasion and democratic action should instead be aimed at changing an opponent's strategic outlook in ways that will cause them to adjust their behavior but make it possible to resume ordinary political life. That makes violence an especially unattractive option. It is much easier to return to tolerable peace in a world in which social relations have not been so ruptured. Indeed, strategic nonviolence, especially in a mass movement in a democratic polity, might be the most effective way to produce social or political transformation. Niebuhr said as much in *Moral Man.*

The fact that Niebuhr is less committed to moral suasion than King makes him accept a wider range of political means. There are certain tactics disqualified by making moral suasion and political brotherhood normative ends. Sometimes it will be necessary to barnstorm a meeting, stonewall a vote, and take unilateral action in the pursuit of a just end. It is important that that end – and that the means – still preserve the possibility of common political life.

But Niebuhr avers that political life, even under ordinary circumstances, will be more contentious and less brotherly than we might ever hope. Democratic humility, meanwhile, is expressed as much in action as in sentiment. Humility does not require total affective self-effacement or meekness. You can be angry and humble, outraged and

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hazards. But even this rather plausible argument becomes less convincing when it is recognized that life is in conflict with life in an imperfect world, and therefore no one has the opportunity of supporting the principle of the sanctity of life in an absolute sense. Fear of the overt destruction of life may lead to the perpetuation of social policies through which human life is constantly destroyed and degraded." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 175.

humble, even, potentially, mournful and humble.[214] Democratic humility is politically demanding but also relatively permissive. It is, ultimately, a proviso, or condition of action – to approach conflicts with the understanding that they will never be final or definitive, that politics is inescapable, peace is elusive, and justice – to which we shall soon turn – will only ever be approximated on earth.

IX. Democratic Remainders

Democratic politics can feel like bumper cars. We push up against each other, we hit each other, but our bumpers are sturdy enough to prevent most people from getting hurt, most of the time. This is an imperfect analogy, of course: democratic states and organizations cause real harm to their citizens, to their residents, and to those, abroad, who never wanted to be at – or even knew about – the carnival in the first place. But the image captures just how noisy and dynamic politics can be. Stears describes this as "coercive pluralism," and claims that, for Niebuhr, it is no passing phase but a condition on the political.[215] I agree.

But such "coercive pluralism" seems to stand in some tension with the other side of Niebuhrian democratic thought that we have explored – namely the idea that

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[214] Recent scholarship has expanded our sense of the emotional repertoire of collective action to argue that rage and despair, as opposed to love and hope, can motivate political actors. Cf. Deborah B. Gould. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[215] Marc Stears describes as a program "to persuade aspirant reformers…to think about political power anew…to realize that some citizens got their way in politics not by persuading their fellows but by dominating them, not by fostering a spirit of consensus but by throwing themselves wholeheartedly into competition with their rivals, not by reaching out across factional boundaries but by better identifying potential friends and inevitable enemies." Stears, *Demanding Democracy,* 73.

democracy makes creative, expansive, pluralistic projects possible. Our intuition is that such active struggle might challenge the conditions under which people could be reliably treated with respect, as free and equal individuals. How can we write the great American novel if we are always at risk of getting bumped off course? What kinds of durable institutions can we build if politics is as turbulent as Niebuhr makes it sound? Hobbes thought that the right kind of order made all kinds normative aspirations possible, but he described that order as essentially removing political subjects from politics in the first place.

Remember that democratic persuasion and action should be undertaken in a spirit of humility that makes political contrition possible. We should argue and fight with others in ways that convey respect and concern. So, we can repair and improve our bumpers to ensure they are strong enough to protect us without weighing down our vehicles. But there are other bumpers – and also rules – whose installation we authorize and continually monitor. These measures allow us to navigate the course with more confidence, with the security of knowing that it will be possible to collaborate, to pause, to redesign, and to imagine, without facing "complete disaster."[216]

The practice of moral wayfinding alerts subjects to both the internal and external hazards of political life. It produces an ethic of vigilance and self-criticism. But it also generates the grounds for collective action – for democratically addressing political problems. This, again, lends a greater ambition to Niebuhrian political realism than pure *modus vivendi*, for democracy offers no guarantee of permanent peace or stability. Instead, the grounds of action and judgment are furnished by an account of justice as the

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[216] Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 20-22.

worldly form of *agape* love, which motivates political interventions and is its horizon of possibility.

Chapter 4
The Horizon of the Political:
Justice as the Work of Politics

I. Toward a Niebuhrian Theory of Justice

Why close with justice? On the one hand, it is not surprising that justice should be our last question given the realist complaint that normative political theorists devote excessive attention to it. Indeed, the revival of "political realism" can be seen, in part, as a reaction against the prominence of justice in the literature. Sleat argues for replacing justice as the "first political question" with "more political" alternatives.[1] Williams revisits the Hobbesian notion that we cannot even start thinking about a decent society without first securing "order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation."[2] Sangiovanni, meanwhile, argues that many political philosophers treat justice as the means by which some pre-political "moral ideal is implemented."[3] Rossi claims that by foregrounding justice, political theorists ignore the "context" and very "practice-

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[1] Sleat also claims that the revival of political realism has not been motivated by concerns about justice at all but instead by "more profound worries about the nature of politics itself." Matt Sleat, ed. *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 20. As we have seen, Niebuhr's realism was more motivated by concerns about the political limitations of common sense than by intrinsic insufficiencies in "the nature of politics," conventionally understood.

[2] Williams argues "the first political question in recognizable terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation." This position returns to Hobbes, who wrote that "whatsoever therefore is consequent at a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man...there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force...no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death." Sleat, ed., *Politics Recovered,* 4-5; Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1994), xiii.9, 76

[3] Enzo Rossi, "Justice, Legitimacy and (Normative) Authority for Political Realists," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15, no. 2, March 2012, 151.

sensitive" nature of politics.[4] These realists are skeptical of philosophical inquiries about politics that begin with an account of justice. Others worry that accounts of justice might be ideological as well. Geuss goes so far as to channel Thrasymachus's challenge to Socrates, claiming that contemporary conceptions of justice might smuggle in the common sense of political victors – that what we call justice is indeed the rule of the strong.[5]

Niebuhr often sounds like these political realists. He abjures "strict compliance" conceptions of justice[6] and argues that peace, order, and stability are moral and conceptual priorities.[7] But there are many ways in which Niebuhr is also out of step with these realists and this realism. For all his protests against the simple application of absolute norms to the messy, imperfect political scrum, he cares deeply about justice as an orienting virtue in political life, and develops a quite demanding conception of it. That

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[4] "The priority of justice is inescapably connected to moralism" because "moralist theories of justice begin from an account of what (pre-political) values should regulate the exercise of political power. They identify a set of relevant general moral commitments and proceed to apply them to politics, either in a substantive or in a procedural way." Rossi, "Justice, Legitimacy," 150, 156-7. Geuss, too, makes this claim about the *Theory of Justice*, in particular, which he argues represents "a particular style of theorizing about politics" treating "justice" as a "freestanding social ideal." Raymond Geuss. *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 70.

[5] "To think that an appropriate point of departure for understanding the politics world is *our* intuitions of what is "just," *without* reflecting on where those intuitions comes from, how they are maintained, and what interest they might serve, seems to exclude from the beginning the very possibility that these intuitions might themselves be 'ideological.'" Guess, *Philosophy and Real Politics,* 90.

[6] "Man's concern for some centuries to come is not the creation of an ideal society in which there will be uncoerced and perfect peace and justice, but a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster" Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 22.

[7] "The first task of government is to create order by preponderant power. The second task is to create justice." Reinhold Niebuhr. *Discerning Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), 46.

is not to say that he has a readymade and fully-worked-out system or an *a priori* theory of justice. Justice will always be particular and historical. But its worldly forms must also share in and "approximate" the overriding moral principle of *agape* love.[8] Niebuhrian justice is far more maximalist than we might expect.[9]

While Niebuhr used the term justice often and claimed, in his public life, to pursue just causes, most scholars find his account puzzling. For one, his conception of justice can seem to endorse the brute "balance of power." Bennett describes Niebuhrian justice as modest and meliorative, "trying to improve situations a little bit with this balancing of forces."[10] On the other hand, Niebuhr also seems to recommend that justice realize the love ethic (*agape*). Thompson has questioned what Niebuhrian justice meant "in practical terms," while Brunner went so far as to claim that Niebuhr lacked a coherent theory of justice altogether.[11] Lebacqz agrees that Niebuhr was ambiguous about the contours of justice, especially when compared to the going alternatives from natural law theory and liberal political philosophy.[12] Benne claims that Niebuhr's theory of justice is too "concrete and topical" to stand on its own, which leads Benne to supplement Niebuhr's account with a conceptual scheme borrowed from Rawls.[13] Gregory echoes the

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[8] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 97.
[9] Henry B. Clark. *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 100.
[10] Dennis L. Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts of Reinhold Niebuhr's Political Thought," *Journal of Church and State* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 294.
[11] Karen Lebacqz. *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 92.
[12] Ibid., 93.
[13] Robert Benne. *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism: A Moral Reassessment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 17, 24. Milbank and Hauerwas argue that Niebuhr fully surrenders to the "politically deficient liberalism" represented by Rawls. Eric Gregory. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustine Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 181.

dominant sense in which Niebuhrian justice has only a "shadowy social existence in politics."[14]

I aim to show that there is more to Niebuhr's account than meets the eye. Like Sen,[15] Niebuhr denies that comprehensive accounts of justice are necessary to identify injustice.[16] Nevertheless, justice provides a direction to the Niebuhrian practice of "moral wayfinding" in politics. Responsible political judgments and actions will partake in an unfolding, unfinished process to approximate the law of love (*agape*) on earth.[17] As with the conceptions of psychology, self-interest, and democracy that we have examined, there are both affinities with and breaks from political realism.

Although Niebuhr theorizes distribution, correction, balance, and order, these features are also always insufficient – justice is always never done. But justice must still aspire to more than distribution, correction, balance, and order in order to achieve them. The Niebuhrian process of making whole goes beyond redistribution, retribution, compensation, or punishment to correct inequity, domination or transgression. Justice requires that state and non-state actors pursue remedies responsive to the subjective circumstances of those on both sides of a conflict. Niebuhr provides no blueprint or

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[14] Eric Gregory. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustine Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 16.
[15] Amartya Sen. *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Walzer can also be read as representative of this tradition. Cf. Michael Walzer. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
[16] As we shall see, he further denies that it might be possible to *ever* develop such a comprehensive or systematic account in the first place. Justice is, for him, historical and political by definition, and cannot be considered *a priori*. His position speaks to the intuition and observation that transformations in our sense of what counts as just or unjust continue to evolve and deepen through moral and political struggle.
[17] I agree with Cherniss that Niebuhr's "emphasis on ethos…sets [him] apart from those recent liberal theorists who have tended to focus on institutional arrangements, and on general principles of political justice." Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism," 88.

system for determining what this justice should look like, but he points in some directions which we shall explore.

While it makes sense to close our discussion with a disquisition on some final political ideal, justice is also, ironically, the beginning of politics. It is the aspiration that should motivate the practice of moral wayfinding, but it is also the ultimate end at which responsible judgment and action should aim – and against which all judgments and actions should be measured.[18]

By that I do not mean that Niebuhr had an eschatological or teleological conception of politics that imagined an "end" to political life or the history of worldly conflict. Instead, justice represents the horizon of the political: there is something beyond it but it is not something we can ever see – for that earthly horizon is not a fixed or final point.[19] Its location is relative to our location in space and in time. Justice is an ongoing, iterative process – always incomplete, always unsatisfying – of realizing an "image" of perfect harmony, the cessation of political conflict, the realization of reconciliation, and the restoration of order that resembles life in the City of God.[20] But justice is also the

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[18] "The law of love is involved in all approximations of justice, not only as the source of the norms of justice, but as an ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 128. "The law of love is not in fact a new law but an ideal which transcends all law." Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts," 282.

[19] By contrast, Yoder argues that Niebuhr fails to make good on the idea that *agape* love is anything like a possibility for us in this world. He argues that "all this relevance can only be had at the cost of admitting first that Jesus' way is not *really* for here and now." John Howard Yoder. *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 107.

[20] "Perfect love would obviate the necessity for coercive authority because man would no longer transgress upon his neighbor's rights." Thompson (1975), 280. "The final pinnacle of grace in the realm of love is the relation between persons in which one individual penetrates imaginatively and sympathetically into the life of another." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism." In *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works*

starting place for moral wayfinding in politics – the orientation, perspective, and demand that helps political actors weigh, judge, and select from imperfect options.

Worldly justice will always leave us unsatisfied. Perfect and complete justice will not be achieved on earth, though it may be necessary, if hazardous, to sustain the illusion that it can. The gap between worldly justice and *agape* love should not diminish our ambitions. That gap should instead focus our attention on what remains to be done: to treat the wounds and address the bad feelings sustained in the processes and by the conflicts involved in getting to justice.

I further demonstrate the distance between Niebuhr and both the deflationary, "skeptical," Cold War liberals and the political realists with whom he tends to be read.[21] He does not claim that balance, peace or order are the *summum bonum* of political life.[22] Justice will always be lacking as it confronts our moral limits, but that does not mean that we should round down our expectations.[23] When it comes to justice, Niebuhr tempers his well-known admonition about the dangers of political enthusiasm: in this world, achieving imperfect justice, even temporarily, requires aspiring to something much greater – the ultimate law of existence, *agape* love.[24]

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on Religion and Politics, edited by Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America, 2015), 842. For Niebuhr, "justice was a relational term that had no meaning apart from the provisional meaning given to it through its dependence on love." Gary Dorrien. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 153.

[21] Robert Booth Fowler, "Peter Gay and the Politics of Skeptical Liberalism" in *Politics & Society* (March 1970).

[22] Matt Sleat. *Liberal Realism: A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, 53, 135.

[23] Cf. Mark Greif. *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 36.

[24] In the 1956 preface to *Interpretation* he writes: "A social ethic must be concerned with the establishment of tolerable harmonies of life, tolerable forms of justice and tolerable

II. Whither Justice?

Justice calls to mind many images: balance, fairness, correction, resolution. But anyone who has ever advocated for these ends knows that justice does not achieve itself. State or non-state actors concerned or charged with the administration of justice must enter the winding and unpredictable path of political action to make it happen.[25] After all, justice and injustice, political right and political wrong, do not merely describe a technical state of affairs but also index the relationship between thinking, feeling, and sensing subjects.[26] The desire for reparation can often be motivated by perceived grievance or loss. Experiences of injustice can incite anger and a desire for revenge, shape communities of interest, and produce misrecognition, felt as much in the head as in the bones.[27] Shklar associates injustice with the "special kind of anger" felt when we do

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stabilities in the flux of life. All this must be done, not by asking selfish people to love one another, neither by taking their self-love for granted. These harmonious must be created under 'conditions of sin.' That is, a social ethic must assume the persistence of self-regard, but it can not be complacent about any form of partial or parochial loyalty or collective self-interest." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 10.

[25] "Equality and justice cannot be achieved without the assertion of interest against interest, and without restraint upon the self-assertion of those who infringe upon the rights of their neighbors…" Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 259.

[26] Judith Shklar. *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[27] Steven Lukes. *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave, 2005). Niebuhr approaches something close to contemporary "standpoint theory" in *Moral Man:* "Those who benefit from social injustice are naturally less capable of understanding its real character than those who suffer from it. They will attribute ethical qualities to social life, if only the slightest gesture of philanthropy hides social injustice." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 80. He does think that agents can misunderstand the sources of injustice, however, as they tend to ascribe an excessively *ad hominem* character to their experiences: "[A] too simple social radicalism," he writes, "does not recognize how quickly the poor, the weak, the despised of yesterday, may, on gaining a social victory over their detractors, exhibit the same arrogance and the same will-to-power which they abhorred in their opponents and which they were inclined to regard as a congenital sin of their enemies. Every victim of injustice makes the mistake of supposing that the sin from which he suffers is a peculiar vice of his oppressor." Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A*

not get what we have been promised – when we do not get what we think we deserve.[28] Justice, meanwhile, has a more affectively capacious character. Having justice done – or doing justice – can make us satisfied, make us gloat, make us proud, make us "whole."[29] Injustices are stubborn and foot-dragging. Justice, by contrast, bears a different relationship to political time. It is more like an event than a syndrome, always only ever a temporary achievement, precarious, unstable, demanding ongoing attention.

Political realists worry that contemporary theories of justice miss these features of justice and injustice: they are excessively disembodied, third-personal, overly concerned with developing consistent, universal end state conditions. Thrasymachean – or Nietzschean – pessimisms convey anger, vengeance, and domination as the emotional currency of justice. By contrast, Rawlsian and neo-Kantian philosophical conceptions are bloodless, disenthralled, largely disinclined to consider the messier parts of the "how" of this supreme political goal.[30]

There are other traditions of thinking about justice, however. Christian political thinkers have developed an alternative approach to what justice might look and feel like. For Augustine, the father of this tradition, there are important differences between

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Christian Interpretation, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 226.

[28] Judith Shklar. *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 83

[29] Shklar notes that "somehow injustice and justice are not psychologically complimentary or symmetrical, nor are they exact opposites." Ibid., 101. For an account of the challenges associated with "wholeness" and satisfaction, cf. Adam Phillips, "On Frustration," in Adam Phillips. *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

[30] As recent work in the intellectual history of Rawls has uncovered, the relationship between Protestant neo-orthodoxy and Rawlsian liberalism is more complicated than has been assumed. Eric Gregory, "Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodoxy of the Young John Rawls," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 2 (2007).

worldly and supernal justice – "in earthly institutions, whether social, economic, or political, we find only the shadows or traces of [true justice]...[and] [t]he images differ from the originals in kind as well as in degree."[31] These "images," "traces" or "impressions" are necessary to achieve tolerable harmony and civil peace but they should not be mistaken for the real thing, the *noumenal* and essential *agape* found only in the City of God.[32] In this tradition, however, justice is a good of this world, reflective of our fallen state in history.[33] Justice can never be conceived of as a final achievement. It bears only passing resemblance to the true resolution of conflict, the remediation of inequity, and the perfection of the soul in the world to come.[34]

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[31] Herbert A. Deane. *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 98

[32] Without these "society would collapse into anarchy, and yet earthly peace and justice are always imperfect and always unstable and precarious; they are maintained by coercion and are constantly endangered by the disintegrating force of self-seeking, greed, and lust for power." Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine,* 99. Niebuhr argues that "spiritual penetration" associated with "genuine forgiveness" and love is "beyond the capacities of collective man" and is "the achievement of only rare individuals...The ideal in its perfect form lies beyond the capacities of human nature." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 104. Gerald Schlabach writes that "[f]or Niebuhr, the transcendent, the eternal – the realm wherein an ethic of pure mutuality through pure self-sacrifice could function – was like Kant's noumenal realm. It was ultimately real, but currently inaccessible to all but a very few; even for them, Jesus' ethic constitute a 'tangent toward eternity' and out of history." Gerald Schlabach, "Is Milbank Niebuhrian Despite Himself?" *Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2005), 35.

[33] Niebuhr writes that "the tentative character of all schemes of justice, since they are subject to the flow of history...We can tolerate all these hazards, relativities and tentativities because we look for a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Theology and Political Thought in the Western World." *In Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, edited by Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America, 2015), 878.

[34] Paul Weithman, "Augustine's Political Philosophy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine,* Eleanor Stump, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 235.

Many scholars read Niebuhr as either an Augustinian dividing this world from the next, and as a "balance of power" theorist, diminishing our expectations of what justice can deliver. This is not incorrect, but it is also only partial. Niebuhr did not write a theory of justice. Instead, his writings are peppered with description of multiple *justices*.[35] The multiplicity of Niebuhrian justices has contributed to the confusion about what he means by the term. I review this multiplicity before considering the limits of the "balance of power" thesis.

III. Niebuhr's Justices

Niebuhr devoted little sustained or systematic attention to justice until *Moral Man*. There he begins with a sociology of the concept – what it looks like and how it works. He describes justice in society as both "political" and "rational." He writes that, in society, justice will always reflect the arrangement of social power and interest as well as "the rational comprehension of, and arbitration between, conflicting rights."[36] This position puts him between Thrasymachus and Kant: justice cannot merely be understood as the rule of the stronger; it also reflects the confrontation and adjudication of claims.

Niebuhr does not start with an abstract theory. Even the "rational arbitration" he describes assumes conflict between subjects and institutions in the world. Unlike Thrasymachean skeptics, he argues that people can make use of a "rational ideal of

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[35] I follow Nigel Biggar's assessment that *Moral Man* and *Interpretation* offer "the most systematic presentations" of Niebuhr's view of justice, though I also add selections from *Nature and Destiny* and contemporaneous writing. Nigel Biggar, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Political Possibility of Forgiveness," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power,* Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 145.

[36] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 32.

justice" and not merely convention or custom when they address conflicts and seek redress. But this "partial ideal of justice" cannot work on its own: it must be interpreted and applied by interested actors.[37] "Rational justice" may inform particular work but that work will also always have a "political" character that depends on the arrangement of people, power, and institutions.

"Rational justice" has an *a priori* aspect that "political justice" lacks. In *Interpretation*, Niebuhr revisits this distinction. "Imaginative justice," he writes, "leads beyond equality to a consideration of the special needs of the life of the other,"[38] a "complete identification of life with life,"[39] and "moves in the direction of forgiveness, or at least to remedial rather than punitive justice."[40] It aims at not just correction, but also care – an ethical demand that recognizes what remains broken even after the essential work of legal, distributional, or punitive remedy.[41] Full, imaginative justice reflects the rare feats of total reconciliation, forgiveness, and rebuilding.

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[37] "The partial perspective of each group makes the achievement of social harmony without conflict impossible. But a rational ideal of justice, operates both in initiating, and in resolving, conflict." Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 31-32.
[38] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 102-3.
[39] Ibid., 147.
[40] "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism." In *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, edited by Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America, 2015), 840.
[41] This is not unlike his description of the conditions that might lead to the end of conflict in *Moral Man*: "If human groups, whether racial, national or economic, could achieve a degree of reason and sympathy which would permit them to see and to understand the interests of others as vividly as they understand their own, and a moral goodwill which would prompt them to affirm the rights of others as vigorously as they affirm their own." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 6-7. It is worth noting that Niebuhr provides an example of the breakdown of imaginative justice as well: "Imaginative justice leads beyond equality to a consideration of the special needs of the life of the other. A sensitive parent will not make capricious distinctions in the care given to different children. But the kind of imagination which govern the most ideal family relationships soon transcends this principle of

"Equal," "basic" or "rough"[42] justice, by contrast, is a simple but inexact conception of justice that seeks "the most stable and balanced equilibrium of social force... [to give] all life...equal opportunities of development,"[43] to generate organizational forms capable of "regulating their common interests," and "adequate restraints upon the inevitable conflict of competing interests."[44] This conception of justice resembles minimalist concerns with the equality of opportunity instead of maximalist end states.[45] It speaks to an anxiety about the dangers of concentrated power among and within social groups,[46] within institutions, and between states.[47] It is "political" and not

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equality and justifies special care for the handicapped child and, possibly, special advantages for a particularly gifted one." Ibid., 102-3.

[42] "There will never be a social order so perfect as to obviate the necessity of perfecting its rough justice by every achievement of social and moral good will which education and religion may be able to generate. But it must be clearly understood that voluntary acts of kindness which exceed the requirements of coercive justice are never substitutes for, but additions to, the coercive system of social relationships through which alone basic justice can be guaranteed." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 164-5.

[43] "Since no life has value if all life is not equally sacred, the highest social obligation is to guide the social struggle in such a way that the most stable and balanced equilibrium of social force will be achieved and all life will thereby be given equal opportunities of development." Ibid., 175-6. "There are naturally no possibilities of arriving at explicit agreements in any society about the degree of inequality which is necessary for the proper performance of different functions or for the maintenance of social incentives, or for how much equality is necessary to meet the requirements of justice." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," in Henry Boulding, *The Organizational Revolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953).

[44] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 163.

[45] Though Williams points out that equality of opportunity can have radical implications for distribution. Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality." In *Philosophy, Politics, and Society,* edited by Peter Laslett and W.G. Runcimen (London: Basil Blackwell, 1962).

[46] "Augustine's realism was indeed excessive...fails to do justice to the sense of justice in the constitution of the Roman Empire; or, for that matter, to the sense of justice in a robber band. For even thieves will fall out if they cannot trust each other to divide the loot, which is their common aim, equitably." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism" in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 128.

[47] Niebuhr writes that "[t]he whole development of democratic justice in human society has depended upon some comprehension of the moral ambiguities which inhere in both

"ethical," having more to do with restraint and balance, with dues being paid and debts being satisfied, than with opponents (strong and weak, unjust and just) imagining or resuming their common lives together.[48]

Niebuhr recognizes that the very language of equality invites questions about distribution, priority, and institutional design. But he argues that justice cannot be reduced to technical arrangements or arithmetic. Specific standards of equal justice cannot be developed *a priori*. They are, themselves, political – subject to historical processes in which "contingent factors and unpredictable forces may carry more weight than the nicest and most convincing abstract speculation."[49] The subjects of justice and injustice change over time in ways that make "abstract speculation" a misuse of intellectual and political energies.[50] Instead, all worldly schemes to increase equality

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government and the principle of equilibrium of power. It is the highest achievement of democratic societies that they embody the principle of resistance to government within the principle of government itself. [see that book, A Revolution in Favor of Government] The citizen is thus armed with "constitutional" powers to resist the unjust exactions of government. He can do this without creating anarchy within the community, if government has been so conceived that criticism of the ruler becomes an instrument of better government and not a threat to government itself." Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man Volume II*, 268.

[48] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 120. This sense of justice recalls the Justinian legal code "the constant and unflagging will to give to each person what is due to him." Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics,* 73.

[49] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 175-6.

[50] "There are naturally no possibilities of arriving at explicit agreements in any society about the degree of inequality which is necessary for the proper performance of different functions or for the maintenance of social incentives, or for how much equality is necessary to meet the requirements of justice. But it is significant that any unregulated enterprise or relationship in human life will tend to produce more inequality than is morally justified or scarcely acceptable. This tendency is due to a simple fact. If there are no restraints upon human desires, any center of power in human society will be inclined to appropriate more privilege to itself than its social function requires." Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 235.

must reckon with the demands of total equality embodied in the principle of *agape* love.[51] There might be general features of justice, but their particular application will depend on specific conditions, values, and concerns.

Niebuhr also considers "punitive" or "remedial justice." He begins, again, with sociological observation. Modern advances in the administration of justice, he argues, have sought to reduce but failed to entirely eliminate the "element of vengeance" motivating the desire for punishment and remediation.[52] This "element of vindictive passion" is ineliminable. True forgiveness and contrition are "beyond the capacities of collective man," so unwilling are we to recognize our own shortcomings in the way that true forgiveness requires. But unlike Nietzschean skeptics, Niebuhr argues that corrective justice is not *only* vengeful. There is more than *ressentiment*. The very organization of a rights-based system depends on some notion of forgiveness that takes seriously the "basic right to life."[53] Corrective justice thus represents a balance – uneasy at best – between "primitive vengeance on the one hand" and the "ideal of forgiving love on the other."[54] It would be a mistake to think that rights-based schemes, no matter how thorough or well-

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[51] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 102.
[52] Ibid., 103.
[53] The "right" to have others consider one's unique needs and potentialities is recognized legally only in the most minimal terms and is morally recognized only in very highly developed communities...The basic rights to life and property in the early community, the legal minima of rights and obligations of more advanced communities, the moral rights and obligations recognized in these communities beyond those which are legally enforced, the further refinement of standards in the family beyond those recognized in the general community – all these stand in an ascending scale of moral possibilities in which each succeeding step is a closer approximation of the law of love." Ibid., 102-3.
[54] Ibid., 104.

designed, could eliminate "vindictive passion," but the cause is not completely hopeless.[55] We are on our way, even if we will never fully get vengeance out of justice.

While Niebuhr's discussion of vengeance is limited to punishment, there are reasons to think that he worries about it more generally. Recall that people are self-interested, self-absorbed, imaginative, defensive, and also, crucially, obscure to themselves. We are cauldrons of emotion and multiple motivations, a stew not easily transformed into constituent parts. Conflicts escalate quickly, and political subjects are morally sensitive. They may say justice and mean revenge. But mixed motives do not disqualify a claim for justice, for human beings cannot conceive of justice perfectly motivated.

In *Nature and Destiny Volume II*, he writes, "There are no forms of historical reality which do not contain [a] sinful admixture. There are no forms of remedial justice from which the egoistic element of vindictiveness has been completely purged."[56] The vengeful aspect of justice can – and should – be minimized, but it will never be

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[55] "Genuine forgiveness of the enemy requires a contrite recognition of the sinfulness of the self and of the mutual responsibility for sin of the accused. Such spiritual penetration is beyond the capacities of collective man. It is the achievement of only rare individuals. Yet the right to such understanding is involved in the most basic of human rights and follows logically if the basic right to life is rationally elaborated. Thus all standards of corrective justice are organically related to primitive vengeance on the one hand, and the ideal of forgiving love on the other. But it is certain that every achievement will remain in the realm of approximation. The ideal in its perfect form lies beyond the capacities of human nature." Ibid., 104.

[56] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man Volume II,* 89. Cf. Guy Elgat, *Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment: Revenge and Justice in "On the Genealogy of Morals"* (London: Routledge, 2017).

eliminated.[57] Instead it must be identified and recognized. Its lurking presence reminds us that there may always be something insufficient and incomplete about justice.

IV. The Insufficiency of Justice

Niebuhr and many other realists of the "first wave"[58] of international relations are known for advocating the "balance of power" as the *summum bonum* of politics.[59] This conception was meant to take seriously constraints imposed by the flaws of human nature,[60] the recognition that evil persists, and the acknowledgment that the chaotic international order will resist idealistic attempts at harmony and cooperation.[61] The

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[57] Shklar agrees: "It would be childish...to imagine that democratic attitudes and institutions constitute an adequate response to the sense of injustice. It is not even plausible...No one can eliminate conflict and dishonesty...the spontaneous reaction to injustice is not a call for legal procedures but for revenge. A sense of injustice not only makes us boil quietly, it also moves us to get even, for it does nothing to make us more rational." Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice,* 91.

[58] Nicolas Guilhot, "American Katechon: When Political Theology Became International Relations Theory," *Constellations*, Volume 17, Number 2, 2010; Nicolas Guilhot. *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nicolas Guilhot, ed. *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[59] This has some resonance with Judith Shklar's influential argument about the "liberalism of fear." Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear." In *Liberalism and the Moral Life,* edited by Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[60] "Any unregulated enterprise or relationship in human life will tend to produce more inequality than is morally justified or scarcely acceptable. This tendency is due to a simple fact. If there are no restraints upon human desires, any center of power in human society will be inclined to appropriate more privilege to itself than its social function requires." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," in Henry Boulding, *The Organizational Revolution* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 235.

[61] According to Lovin, Niebuhr became a prophet of "received public wisdom: Justice at home and peace abroad depend on maintaining a balance of power, rather than planning to triumph over our enemies. The strength of democracy lies in its capacity for self-criticism. The weakness of Communism is the ideological rigidity that places its leaders above judgment." Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 47

balance of power thesis has been seen to be definitive of "Cold War liberalism,"[62] midcentury anxiety about the bipolar international order, and domestic liberal pluralism.[63]

Niebuhr often sounds like this kind of realist. He writes that "[c]ommonwealths are not bound together by a common love, or collective interest, rather than by a sense of justice; and they could not maintain themselves without the imposition of power."[64] Justice does not do its work on its own – it takes power and coercion to put institutions, actors, and states in their place.[65] In *Interpretation*, he describes "the very essence of politics" as "the achievement of justice through equilibria of power."[66] "A balance of power" he continues "is not conflict; but a tension between opposing forces underlies it." Given what we have seen of Niebuhr's moral psychology and account of conflict, this balance is no small feat. It is also never a final achievement. That, for Niebuhr, is part of what makes justice-as-balance fundamentally insufficient: it is unstable, tense, and provisional. It also always leaves us wanting more.[67]

As we shall see, Niebuhr argues that even this "rough justice" must be motivated and enthralled by aspirations that approximate *agape*.[68] It is only in light of that "ultimate

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[62] Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom, On 'Cold War Liberalism,'" *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no. 1.
[63] Kenneth W. Thompson. *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics: An American Approach to Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).
[64] Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," 127.
[65] Stanley Hauerwas. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 140-1.
[66] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 170.
[67] "Every system of justice devised by courts and legislatures implicitly recognizes the possibility of a higher, more equal justice than the justice it has so far achieved. Without that awareness of limits and openness to judgment in our legal and political systems, justice becomes just another tool for advancing the interests of those in power." Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 28-29.
[68] "There is no point in preaching 'equal power' per se, because what this might mean and whether or not it is at all desirable depends completely on the situation in question.

perspective" that "relative justice" can be achieved and its possibilities and limitations can be observed.[69] Thus, justice is insufficient in two ways: first, justice alone cannot resolve injustice; second, justice requires motivations or aspirations more expansive than itself.

Among the curious features of Niebuhr's account of justice is his dissatisfaction with it. Many thinkers conceive of justice as a final end state. Niebuhr denies this view: true harmony will only be found in the City of God where justice is not even a relevant category.[70] But even the achievement of imperfect, provisional, relative justice requires approximating *agape* love of the world to come. He writes in *Moral Man* that "[a]ny justice which is only justice soon degenerates into something less than justice. It must be saved by something which is more than justice. The realistic wisdom of the statesman is reduced to foolishness if it is not under the influence of the foolishness of the moral seer."[71] We have seen Niebuhr argue that responsible political judgments informed by

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Few people would prefer a social formation in which teachers and students, surgeons and patients, people with and without drivers' licenses, have 'equal power' to one in which an appropriate inequality is institutionalized." Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics,* 93.

[69] Robin Lovin. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 208.

[70] "Love is best conceived as a utopian ideal that discloses what life will be like when God brings human history to a close by establishing God's kingdom." Gregory (2007), 180. "Every moral standard, rigorously analyzed, proves to be no permanently valid standard at all short of perfect and infinite love. The only adequate norm of human conduct is love of God and of man, through which all men are perfectly related to each other, because they are related in terms of perfect obedience and love to the center and source of their existence." Reinhold Niebuhr. *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), 16-17. In *Nature and Destiny* Niebuhr describes love as the "final form of righteousness." Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man Volume I,* 294.

[71] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 258.

"critical intelligence"[72] ought to balance "realistic wisdom" and "moral foolishness." This means something quite specific when justice is involved: justice cannot only be a technical, impersonal, or disenthralled rearrangement of power.

Though such rearrangements are nontrivial – if temporary – achievements, they fail to resolve the conflicts and tensions behind injustice or to realize the possibilities of justice on earth. Even if all we desire is durable, technical, and impersonal justice, we must go beyond what seems to be required to achieve it. Justice calls for expansive aspirations and measures. As we have seen, Niebuhr worries about the ways in which facially neutral and rational principles can be employed for partial ends. So, the application and design of "the nicest and most convincing abstract speculation"[73] cannot, on its own, realize even minimal justice. This leads Niebuhr to a subtle and vexing position that balances utopic aspiration and Thrasymachean skepticism:

> Love must strive for something purer than justice if it would attain justice. Egoistic impulses are so much more powerful than altruistic ones that if the latter are not given stronger than ordinary support, the justice which even good men design is partial to those who design it.[74]

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[72] "Critical intelligence is a prerequisite of justice. Short of the complete identification of life with life which the law of love demands, it is necessary to arbitrate and adjust between competing interests in terms of a critical scrutiny of all the interests involved." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 147.

[73] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 175-6. "There are naturally no possibilities of arriving at explicit agreements in any society about the degree of inequality which is necessary for the proper performance of different functions or for the maintenance of social incentives, or for how much equality is necessary to meet the requirements of justice. But it is significant that any unregulated enterprise or relationship in human life will tend to produce more inequality than is morally justified or scarcely acceptable. This tendency is due to a simple fact. If there are no restraints upon human desires, any center of power in human society will be inclined to appropriate more privilege to itself than its social function requires." Niebuhr, "Coercion, Self-Interest, and Love," 235.

[74] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 266.

Robin Lovin argues that Niebuhr's perspective on love and justice captures an important insight about the way in which distribution, punishment, and correction can "leave us dissatisfied with the interim resolutions of conflict" because we want "harmony with our neighbors" as well.[75] Pure distribution, punishment, and correction (even if supervised by legitimate systems of adjudication) can lead to settlements that sever relationships and produce resentment.[76]

Justice, for Niebuhr, must also "satisfy...subjective circumstances" – how we feel, not just what we have or do not have at the end of a process.[77] Justice must avoid stoking or sating the desire for vengeance and should instead inspire the capacity for healing and reconciliation. Stears claims that Niebuhrian justice "inheres in objective states of affairs and not in people's views about those affairs."[78] Stears is correct that justice indexes an "objective states of affairs": things, materially, have to change for such a change to count as justice. As we have seen, Niebuhr rejects the idea that the love ethic can simply be applied to resolve political conflicts, or that political conflicts can be solved by moral education. He argues that "the problem of politics and economics is the problem of justice," not psychological wellbeing, internal peace, or brotherly love.[79] But

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[75] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism,* 206.
[76] Niebuhr's imperfect test case for this thesis must have been the Treaty of Versailles, which he frequently cited as excessively punitive. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr,* 52.
[77] "To the objective circumstances of justice, which Rawls links to the conditions of scarcity that require us to be concerned about distribution in the first place, Niebuhr adds that the objective circumstances of justice must include the impossibility of a system of justice that fully satisfies the subjective circumstances of justice." Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism,* 207.
[78] The idea was thus not subject to the same doubts as the idea of the "common good" might be as it was not dependent on any assessment of citizens' capacities to overcome their own limitations" Stears, *Demanding Democracy,* 72-3.
[79] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 128.

Stears neglects the extent to which durable conditions that transform "objective states of affairs" also depend on addressing "subjective circumstances": how people feel, not just what they have or how they relate to one another.

Even achieving rough justice requires demanding more and doing more.[80] As Thompson writes, "Justice cannot exist without love's presence, as justice without love's pull upon it is mere order."[81] Not only does mere order disguise injustices but it quickly devolves, reverting to the kind of chaos and conflict that efforts seeking justice and harmony intend to address.[82] Basic justice always leaves something to be desired. There is always more work to do: "Human actions can, to a degree, corrupt even the highest structure and they can also partially redeem the worst structure...[T]he most adequate institution is still only a bare base upon which the higher experiences of love must be built."[83] Justice is an ongoing project; it is fragile, unfinished, always incomplete.[84]

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[80] This aligns Niebuhr, in part, with a tradition of thinking about justice that goes beyond the distribution of formal rights or resources to the symbolic work of representation, respect, and civic friendship, long associated with Iris Young's defense of "recognition." Though these theorists do not explicitly use the language of love, many channel communitarian or Aristotelian conceptions of care meant to supplement the state remedies viewed as insufficiently sensitive to the subjective needs of those on the wrong side of ascriptive hierarchy or structural economic deprivation. Iris Marion Young. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, eds. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003).

[81] Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts," 284.

[82] "Order precedes justice in the strategy of government; but...only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace. An unjust order quickly invites the resentment and rebellion which lead to its undoing." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 454.

[83] Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," 842-3.

[84] "Niebuhr did not believe that justice was actually attainable under liberal capitalism or under any other socioeconomic system. The struggle for justice was never finished, not because a balance of power was impossible to achieve but because sin corrupted every gain toward perfect justice. Every gain toward justice contained the seeds of injustice within itself and thus reflected the dialectical mixture of good and evil motives that fueled even the most well-meaning human act. It followed for Niebuhr that the common

V. The Rough Justice of Approximation

Niebuhr frequently uses the concept of "approximation" to describe the relationship between "relative" and "perfect" justice – between justice as it appears on earth and *agape* as the ultimate law of existence. He writes that "the principles of equal justice are thus *approximations* of the law of love in the kind of imperfect world which we know and not principles which belong to a world of transcendent perfection."[85] Crouter writes that Niebuhrian "[j]ustice is not love. Justice presupposes the conflict of life with life and seeks to mitigate it. Every relative justice therefore stands under the judgment of the law of love, but it is also an approximation of it."[86] But what does this mean?

When social scientists collect, organize, and interpret data to develop inferences and findings, they recognize that their grasp on the entire situation might be limited. They work with ideal types, measuring samples, extrapolating without merely re-describing or mapping the sum total events that compose social phenomena. Mill wrote that "an approximate generalization is, in social inquiries, for most practical purposes equivalent

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good was therefore to be sought not by appealing to good will or to moral ideals of fairness or justice, but primarily by retaining human egotism through a democratic balance-of-power politics." Dorrien, *Soul in Society,* 127. "For Niebuhr justice is not an absolute but only an approximation and expression of love in history; and, as an approximation of love, it is forever open to being drawn beyond any momentary formulation to new heights. Justice, then, has no absolute character or embodiment." Daniel Rice, "Kelsen and Niebuhr on Democracy," 142. "Every society needs working principles of justice, as criteria for its positive law and system of restraints....But every historical statement of them is subject to amendment. If it becomes fixed it will destroy some of the potentialities of a higher justice, which the mind of one generation is unable to anticipate in the life of subsequent eras." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 394.

[85] Neibuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 135 (emphasis added).

[86] Richard Crouter. *Reinhold Niebuhr: On Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52.

to an exact one."[87] For social scientists, approximation is basically as good as it gets. It is a depiction, open to revision, reinterpretation, and falsification – a best guess.

There are at least two aspects of Niebuhrian "approximation." Sometimes "approximation" is latent, as when we observe an unexpected family resemblance between the "relative" and the "perfect." "Approximation" can also be more active, as when we intentionally order social relations to depict "perfect" justice.[88] Niebuhr uses approximation both ways, and his conception is challenging because the thing being approximated can seem so unavailable to us. Even though it is the "ultimate" law of existence, *agape* lives in the *noumenal* realm beyond worldly comprehension and human action. It is worth reconstructing the "latent" and "active" aspects of approximation.

Niebuhr draws on evidence of "latent" approximation to defend his claim that the "law of love" is already present and operative in worldly justices. He writes that "all basic rights stand in an ascending scale of moral possibilities in which each succeeding step is a closer approximation of the law of love,"[89] and that in "even the most minimal social standards...every elaboration of minimal standards into higher standards makes the implicit relation more explicit...the moral codes of every advanced society demand more than mere prohibition of theft and murder...some obligation is felt, however dimly, to organize the common life so that the neighbor will have fair opportunities to maintain his life."[90] Rights, constraints, and prohibitions characteristic of any "basic" or "rough"

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[87] Peter Winch. *The Idea of Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1990), 68.
[88] "Justice is in part an embodiment of love wherever there are complex human relationships." Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts," 283.
[89] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 103.
[90] Ibid., 101.

justice nevertheless exist in some derivative relationship to an ideal that takes seriously the value of the other, promotes total harmony, reconciliation, and an ethic of mutuality and care. Elsewhere, Niebuhr provides a more sophisticated, if sometimes potted, sociology or history of the development of political institutions and aspirations.[91] Though how it came to be that minimal justices contain the seed of maximum justices matters less than the fact that this is already an observable feature of the institutional landscape.

"Approximation" can also be a more active process. This kind of approximation must be undertaken to prevent purely "political justice" from coming apart. As much as iterations of "basic" justice might already point to more expansive moral horizons, they might also fail to resolve any conflict absent social and subjective arrangement and remedy. It does not happen on its own, it has not happened yet, and "critical intelligence" is required to ensure that justice is as "imaginative" and "rational" as possible. Here, *agape* functions as an inexact regulative ideal or normative aspiration. Niebuhr is less careful than he might be about distinguishing what makes this kind of "approximation" different from (and superior to) attempts to simply "apply" the law of love to social conflict. As we have seen, that simple "application" is not possible in politics because of the "creaturely limitation of human imagination," especially in a society of strangers.[92]

In *Interpretation*, Niebuhr admits that some of his criticism of "social gospel" liberals had been unfair. Social gospel politics was not just applied theological ethics;

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[91] "Laws and systems of justice do, however, have a negative as well as a positive relation to mutual love and brotherhood. They contain both approximations of and contradictions to the spirit of brotherhood. This aspect of their character is derived from the sinful element in all social reality." Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man Volume II*, 251.

[92] Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics,* 143.

many agreed that Christian love could not be applied, untranslated, to sticky social conflicts. But he argues that the "law of love" had been interpreted in ways that obviated the need for power or coercion in seeking justice. The social gospel further construed human behavior in ways that led them to argue that Christianity was a "moral ideal, which men do not follow, but which they ought to [and that] the Church must continue to hope for something that has never happened."[93] Niebuhrian approximation accepts the loss between the perfect City of God and the fallenness characteristic of life in the City of Man. The ethics of perfection are not irrelevant to social conduct but they have to be applied to be realized – and that application will involve means and methods foreign to the City of God.

The question remains: how do you approximate an impossible normative standard? What counts as a better or worse worldly depiction of *agape* love? How do we know it when we see it? To answer these questions, it is worth returning to the commandment that justice approximates in the first place.

VI. What's Love Got to Do with It?

So far, we have discussed the latent and active forms of Niebuhrian "approximation." It is worth considering a third, more colloquial association of the concept. Approximation can also invoke its root word: "proximate." How close can we get to *agape*? This will depend, largely, on what we take *agape* to be. For that, we should look to *Interpretation* and related theological writings.

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[93] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 153.

In a late essay on "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," Niebuhr considers the normative pull of the "law of love," the commandment to draw upon God's love to show complete love to friends, neighbors, and enemies alike.[94] We have seen why Niebuhr thinks the pull of this law in history is limited by the fact of sin, but what exactly the law means – and what that love means – shapes his view of what worldly justice ought to approximate. Like most twentieth century Protestants, Niebuhr's view of love was influenced by Nygren's influential 1953 account, *Agape and Eros*.[95] Nygren distinguished between the desirous, acquisitive love (*eros*) from indiscriminate, unconditional love of the Christian God (*agape*). Erotic love depends on a particular attachment to an object because of its salutary qualities.[96] *Agape*, by contrast, depends on the love of an object because of its relationship to holy creation; it is indiscriminate, universal, and featureless. While erotic love identifies value in an object, *agape* creates that value.[97]

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[94] "You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete." Matthew 5:44-48.

[95] Anders Nygren. *Agape and Eros* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[96] For Niebuhr, *philia* – or mutual love – is too similar to *erotic* love to warrant further distinction. He writes that "mutual love…is also a form of love, for the life of the other is enhanced. Yet, on the other hand, such expressions of love fall short of love in its ultimate form. For they are mixed with a careful calculation of interest and advantages in which the self always claims an equal share. The final form of love is bereft of such calculation and meets the ends of the other without calculating comparative rights." Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," 837.

[97] Anders Nygren, "Agape and Eros," in Alan Soble, ed. *Eros, Agape and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 87.

Philosophers and theologians have long argued about the depth and limits of this distinction.[98] Niebuhr, like Nygren, described *agape* as "the final form of love." He describes it as "meet[ing] the needs of the other without calculating comparative rights. Sacrificial love...therefore transcends the limits of love. It is a form of love which cannot be embodied in any moral code. Nor can it be achieved by compulsion of a sense of obligation."[99] But Niebuhr challenges the distinction between *agape* and other loves. It "cannot be separated from the realm of natural [or worldly] love...by a neat line" because it "transcends the line of natural love."[100] Nygren, Niebuhr argues, made *agape* too unavailable. Niebuhr recognizes its distance from our world but also recognizes that it must be able to be invoked as an ideal in order to identify the insufficiencies of worldly love – mutuality, respect, and care for the other. "Without an element of heedless love, every form of mutual love would degenerate into a calculation of mutual advantages and every calculation of such advantages would finally generate resentment about an absence of perfect reciprocity."

Niebuhr argues that a "too absolute."[101] He fears that Nygren unwittingly reproduces Luther's politics of pure *modus vivendi*: settlement without peace, order without justice, worldly and supernal realms metaphysically divided.[102] Nygren leaves

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[98] Alan Soble, ed. *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
[99] Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," 837-8.
[100] Ibid., 838.
[101] Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man Volume II,* 84.
[102] Niebuhr often invokes the example of Luther. Here, he claims that in Luther's "doctrine of Two Realms," justice is consigned completely to the realm of law. There 'nothing is known of Christ,' even as in the realm of the kingdom of heaven 'nothing is known of law, conscience, or sword.' The law, in such a rigorous dualism, does not even contain within it the desire to do justice. It is no more than a coercive arrangement which prevents mutual harm. Love, on the other hand, is only *Agape* in its purest and most

"no place at all for discriminate judgments about justice...[wherein] all moral distinctions in history seem to become invalid."[103] Niebuhr conceives of *agape* love as different from the kinds of love related to objects through desire, but he also struggles to find ways in which that ideal can be approximated on earth, where discriminate judgments are not only inevitable but also necessary for the work of determining responsibility for particular wrongs.[104]

Nygren's distinction, too, makes the "separation of the realm of grace and the realm of nature...[too rigorous]" and by doing so reifies the sense in which we in the world might be stuck with *Eros*, which has "no goal beyond itself" and where the ultimate love of *agape* is too pure to be relevant to human life.[105] The issue, in a sense, is that the distinction does not make it possible to even approximate *agape* or to imagine that worldly justice might ever aim at ultimate love and that we might ever find true other-regarding, fellow-feeling on earth.[106]

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unadulterated form, a form in which it is known in human experience only in rare moments of evangelical fervor or crisis heroism." Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," 839; Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics,* 141. Niebuhr writes that Luther's "curiously perverse social morality...places a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic. He demands that the state maintain order without too scrupulous a regard for justice; yet he asks suffering and nonresistant love of the individual without allowing him to participate in the claims and counter-claims which constitute the stuff of social justice. The inevitable consequence of such an ethics is to encourage tyranny; for resistance to government is as important a principle of justice as maintenance of government." Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man Volume II,* 194-5.

[103] Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," 841.

[104] Biggar argues convincingly that Niebuhr overstates Luther's hard division between the "two realms," though he admits that for Luther, "the scope for an evangelical qualification of political life is quite restricted." Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics,* 142.

[105] Niebuhr, "Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism," 839.

[106] "There are no diagonal lines in Luther's thought which relate mercy to punitive justice. There is therefore nothing to inspire the kind of development of punitive justice

By contrast, Niebuhr allows that "the love which wills justice must not be excluded from the realm of *Agape*."[107] As we have seen, Niebuhr thinks approximation is possible in social life even if the untranslated application of "ultimate love" is not.[108] He ends the essay with a subtle and expansive statement of the theory of approximation that identifies multiple ways in which the "law of love" can be approximated on earth: "The final dyke against relativism is to be found, not in...alleged fixities, but in the law of love itself. This is the only final law, and every other law is an expression of the law of love in minimal or in proximate terms or in terms appropriate to given historical occasions."[109] Elsewhere he puts the point even more clearly. The concept of love as an "impossible possibility" comes into view at the beginning of *Interpretation:*

> [The] Kingdom of God is always a possibility in history, because its heights of pure love are organically related to the experience of love in all human life, but it is also an impossibility in history and always beyond historical achievement. Men living in nature and in the body will never be capable of the sublimation of egoism and the attainment of sacrificial passion, the complete disinterestedness which the ethic of Jesus demands.[110]

The impossible ideal becomes relevant because it finds expression in its worldly franchises, the forms of love and concern for the other observed in communities large and

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in the direction of imaginative justice which has in fact taken place in modern criminology and which proves that the 'two realms' have more commerce with each other than Luther supposes." Ibid., 841.

[107] Ibid., 842.

[108] For Niebuhr, this "ultimate love" comes from grace more than from law: "The commandment to love the neighbor as the self" he writes, "must finally culminate in the individual experience in which oneself seeks to penetrate deeply into the mystery of the other self and yet stand in reverence before a mystery which he has no right to penetrate...no sense of obligation can provide the imagination and forbearance by which this is accomplished." Ibid., 843.

[109] Ibid., 846.

[110] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 19.

small, relationships intimate and unfamiliar, connections rich and new.[111] Yet our access to the real article is limited by the kinds of creatures we are.[112] The demands of perfect love are too demanding given our self-interested, partial, passionate selves. But the unavailability of the ideal causes less pessimistic alarm than we might think.[113]

Although Niebuhr frequently calls upon Augustine, he also contests the Augustinian account of *agape* as well. Matthew 5:43 commands two loves, "the love of God and the love of the neighbor." But according to Niebuhr, Augustine sees love of the neighbor as only instrumentally valuable – a proxy for the "single love commandment which bids us flee all mortality…in favor of the immutable good." Augustine also obscures the role of sacrificial love and the "absurd principle of the cross, the insistence that the self must sacrifice itself for the other." Augustine instead emphasizes that "only God and not some mutable 'good' or person is worthy of our love." Niebuhrian *agape*, by contrast, recognizes the love of the neighbor as intrinsically valuable, sharing in the final end.[114]

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[111] There are some strange affinities between Niebuhr's position here and those taken by New Age psychologists like John Welwood. "Intimate, personal love," Welwood argues "is not just a pale reflection of absolute love, but a further expression of it." John Welwood. *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships: Healing the Wound of the Heart* (New York: Trumpeter, 2007), 153.

[112] "Laws and systems of justice do, however, have a negative as well as a positive relation to mutual love and brotherhood. They contain both approximations of and contradictions to the spirit of brotherhood. This aspect of their character is derived from the sinful element in all social reality." Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man Volume I,* 251.

[113] Niebuhr argues that Jesus was, in essence, the historical realization of *agape* love, while at the same time demonstrating the way in which that ideal is historically unavailable – or at least anti-political – for it ends, inevitably, in total self-abnegation and martyrdom. Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man Volume II,* 85. I am indebted to Joshua Cayetano for this insight.

[114] Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 136-7.

So far, we have seen the ways in which Niebuhr argues that worldly justice must be supported by forces greater than itself. The most controversial and vexing of these is enthusiasm. Shouldn't Niebuhr worry that "striving for something purer than justice" will activate self-righteous moral ambition? What makes moral passion more reliable than "abstract speculation"? What justifies any intervention into the "subjective circumstances" of justice? After all, as many commentators have noticed, Niebuhr harbored great anxiety about the dangers of enthusiasm and moral absolutism.[115] What prevents moral striving for the "love ethic" from becoming hazardous political passion? In the following section, I explore Niebuhr's "realistic" case for fanaticism. I will explain why Niebuhr accepts the costs of passionate engagement as necessary to transform relations of power.

VII. Fanaticism and Justice

Niebuhr is well known for counseling a tragic, limited, and "realistic" conception of politics that rejects simpleminded moralism. His anxieties about fanaticism go back to *Leaves*.[116] In *Children of Light* Niebuhr openly worries about the "fanaticism of moral

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[115] Emile Lester, "British Conservatism and American Liberalism in Mid-Twentieth Century: Burkean Themes in Niebuhr and Schlesinger." *Polity* 46, no. 2 (April 2014); Vigen Guroian. "The Conservatism of Reinhold Niebuhr: The Burkean Connection." *The Synthesis of Moral Vision and Political Thought* (Summer 1985).

[116] "If we must choose between types of fanaticism is there any particular reason why we should prefer the fanatics who destroy a vital culture in the name of freedom and reason to those who try to strangle a new culture at birth in the name of authority and dogma? The latter type of fanaticism is bound to end in futility. The growth of reason cannot be stopped by dogma. But the former type is dangerous because it easily enervates a rational culture with ennui and despair." Niebuhr, *Leaves,* 111.

idealists" unaware that their pride poses grave threats to democratic life.[117] We have seen the theological and epistemological positions that motivate this perspective on the politics of passion. Yet Niebuhr's account is more complicated. This is because of the way in which worldly justice, insufficient as it is, must be motivated by and aspire to more expansive, even excessive, moral demands – demands that require the clarity and commitment of a fanatic. Niebuhr does not deny the dangers associated with such fanaticism. They must be identified and understood, but they cannot be completely avoided if relations of power are to be transformed, and the principles of justice are to be realized.[118]

Niebuhr's account of justice has a practical edge: the contents of particular justice will be determined and unfold over time, and so he is alive to what it is that will make just action possible in the first place. This requires something more expansive than "political" or "rough" justice that speaks to purely "rational" considerations of what we are due. It must also speak to the expansive, sophisticated, moral ambitions of our self-interest: to do right and have right done by us. There are dangers associated with the attempt to activate our moral capacities (dangers identified as early as "Patriotism and Altruism"), but these are unavoidable. They can be recognized but not eliminated in any attempt to improve the world.

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[117] "Some of the greatest perils to democracy arise from the fanaticism of moral idealists who are not conscious of the corruption of self-interest in their professed ideals." Niebuhr, *Children of Light,* 437-8.

[118] Radical political often invoke *agape*-like norms. Russian Revolutionary Peter Kropotkin wrote, "It is not love for my neighbor—whom I often do not know at all—that induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me." Kristin Ross. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (New York: Verso, 2016), 29.

As we saw in our discussion of political psychology, Niebuhr takes the problem of social inertia seriously. He joined Progressive reformers and social scientists concerned with ways in which modern civic and political culture – the "public" in Dewey's terms – could be activated and engaged.[119] In *Moral Man*, especially, Niebuhr argues that people were "more inclined to inertia than to foolish adventure," as they were so involved in themselves, so absorbed in their own limited pursuits and partial perspectives.[120] He writes:

> The inertia of society is so stubborn that no one will move against it, if he cannot believe that it can be more easily overcome than is actually the case. And no one will suffer the perils and pains involved in the process of radical social change, if he cannot believe in the possibility of a purer and fairer society than will ever be established. These illusions are dangerous because they justify fanaticism; but their abandonment is perilous because it inclines them to inertia.[121]

This is a challenging thought worth parsing. Recall that Niebuhr thinks that all earthly justice will be insufficient; the fact that we need justice in the first place reflects a problem.[122] But here we see him argue that even such insufficient justice requires believing that perfect, pure, and fair justice is possible. That belief can "justify fanaticism," but, absent such expansive ambitions, efforts to seek justice and see it unfold will be forestalled by natural self-absorption and social inertia. In short, the process of

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[119] Marc Stears. *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State: Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[120] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 223.
[121] Ibid., 221.
[122] "Laws and systems of justice do, however, have a negative as well as a positive relation to mutual love and brotherhood. They contain both approximations of and contradictions to the spirit of brotherhood. This aspect of their character is derived from the sinful element in all social reality." Larry Rasmussen. *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 179.

seeking insufficient worldly justice requires the illusion that it's actually possible to get it. Niebuhr ends *Moral Man* by elaborating this position:

> We cannot build our individual ladders to heaven and leave the total human enterprise unredeemed of its excesses and corruptions. In the task of that redemption the most effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and "spiritual wickedness in high places." The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done.[123]

While *Moral Man* was, in part, intended to disillusion, unlike many other realists Niebuhr does not simply embrace a "real politics" shorn of ideals. Instead he argues that politics must be re-enthralled and re-enchanted – "purely political politics" just won't work. Because the content of worldly justice will unfold over time, through particular and specific social conflicts, it is vital that people be activated by aspirations they believe in to take up the struggle for justice. Niebuhr argues that this can only be done by "substituting some new illusions for the abandoned ones."[124] The "ultrarational" and spiritual elements that make political conflict more complicated are also necessary to motivate actions and to ensure that that action aims at – and approximates – greater justice, even if it falls far short of achieving it.[125]

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[123] Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 277.

[124] We have seen the way in which Christian myth plays that role for Niebuhr, though, structurally, this is not the only myth capable of motivating action.

[125] "Every genuine passion for social justice will always contain a religious element within it. Religion will always leaven the idea of justice with the ideal of love. It will prevent the idea of justice, which is a politico-ethical ideal, from becoming a purely political one, with the ethical element washed out. The ethical ideal which threatens to become too purely religious must save the ethical ideal which is in peril of becoming too

Elsewhere in *Moral Man*, Niebuhr worries that fanaticism can motivate "heroic action" but give little guidance for specific judgments in politics because the "fanatic" will be so frustrated by the "inertia of human nature," which "remains a nemesis to the absolute ideal." Thinking, perhaps, of revolutionary zeal, Niebuhr argues that this frustration can lead political absolutists to perpetrate "cruelties" in the name of advancing or hastening transformations because they are disappointed by the limited scale and slow pace of their political accomplishments.[126] Thus, the problem with the fanatic is not that what she wants is wrong or even that it is merely impossible. The problem is how that impossibility might be experienced psychologically, and what the consequences might be in action. Niebuhr argues that the fanatic keeps politics honest: she challenges the tendency to reduce political judgments to amoral technical questions that lead too quickly to the kind of accommodations and reconciliations that completely lose sight of moral demands.[127]

VIII. What Do We Want from Justice?

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political. Furthermore there must always be a religious element in the hope of a just society. Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. Truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realized by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted." Ibid., 80-1.

[126] Ibid., 199.

[127] "The temptation to inertia and opportunism which the rationalistic radical faces is no less perilous [than the perils of fanaticism] ...There is only one step from a rationally moderated idealism to opportunism, and only another step from opportunism to dishonest capitulation to the *status quo*. The absolutist and fanatic is no doubt dangerous; but he is also necessary. If he does not judge and criticize immediate achievements, which always involve compromise, in the light of his absolute ideal, the radical force in history, whether applied to personal or to social situations, finally sinks into the sands of complete relativism." Ibid., 222.

Our discussion of Niebuhrian justice has left its contents somewhat mysterious. Justice provides some grounding to the process of moral judgment – and wayfinding – in political life, but where does it point? Where will it direct us to go? To avoid? Unlike Augustine or Luther, Niebuhr claims a thinner and more porous line between the worldly and supernal realm. Even the most imperfect expressions of worldly love bear traces of *agape* love. But what do these approximations look like?

Biggar argues that while Niebuhrian love "leavens" political justice by insisting on the "loving appreciation of the transcendent worth of all life" and through the "spiritual disciplining of resentment," it also sells short the possibility of loving forgiveness in politics.[128] True forgiveness requires that "the evil in the other shall be borne without vindictiveness because the evil of the self is known."[129] We just are not made to be able to forgive in this way, however, and further, even if we were, such forgiveness would threaten justice, too quickly letting perpetrators of injustice off the hook. "[O]nly a religion full of romantic illusions," Niebuhr argues, "could seek to persuade the Negro to gain justice from the white man merely by forgiving him...Short of transmutation of the world into the Kingdom of God, men will always confront enemies..."[130] According to Biggar, Niebuhr overlooks processes of forgiveness that are compatible with justice-seeking efforts, processes that are not "unilateral," "unconditional" or unsolicited by the repentance of the other.[131]

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[128] Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics,* 143.
[129] Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics,* 137.
[130] Ibid., 140.
[131] Harries and Platten, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics,* 146.

The details of Biggar's alternative account are less important than his deeper point: that Niebuhr rejects Augustine and Luther's hard line-drawing exercises while preserving *agape* love as still too precious or unavailable to be *actually* realized in public life because of the limitations of human nature.[132] This is, indeed, a philosophically tortured position. But it makes sense given the way in which what counts as justice for Niebuhr depends on contingent events and circumstances, political contests, fortunes, and misfortunes.[133]

Lovin argues that the "relative" justices of this world take shape against a backdrop of conflict. He writes that "the demands for justice that call for attention do not arise because persons have measured their situations against a standard of justice and found them wanting." Instead, "the experience of local deprivations and exploitations becomes the standard of justice."[134] Just actions – and judgments – issue less from a "general principle" than the "wider extension of the local claim." It is a comparative process, the product of what Lovin calls the "dialectic of claim and counterclaim" into which political actors intervene. Lovin reads Niebuhr as having a "conventional" or practice-based conception of justice. Sites of conflict over distribution, punishment, and dues-paying help to determine the "prevailing standard of justice."[135] Lovin attributes this concern with the specificity of justice to Niebuhr's own political biography, where his

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[132] Love does not travel to large groups in part because of the "creaturely fact that 'moral attitudes always develop most sensitively in person-to-person relationships…[and the] creaturely limitations of human imagination…hinder[s] the outward expansion of sympathy' beyond the most proximate corner of our social world." Ibid., 143.
[133] Though Niebuhr often deployed Hobbes as a political foil, we can observe affinities with the Hobbesian account of justice as "conventional" or nominalist. Cf. Thomas Hobbes. *Man and Citizen* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 98.
[134] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism,* 210.
[135] Ibid., 211.

notions of fairness were not formed by extended philosophical deliberation but in the union halls, in the streets, and in the pews of Detroit in the 1920s.[136] For Lovin, the ultimate law does not fade from view, but remains the standard by which claims to justice and conventions of justice are judged.[137]

IX. What Kind of Theory of Justice Is This?

Niebuhr's theory of justice can leave much to be desired. He does not offer a systematic account – or even, necessarily, a decision procedure to help determine what specific justice or injustice looks like. He instead provides a theoretical impression, the beginnings of an account, an approach or "ethos."[138] Unlike some interpreters, however, I take Niebuhr as having developed something more than a "cautionary" or conservative account of justice. He does not just write about what justice is not, but also provides resources for imaging a more perfect worldly justice.[139]

As I have argued throughout, Niebuhr can most profitably be interpreted and understood as a theorist wrestling with the problem of "moral wayfinding" in politics. That task recognizes "the political" as a historical problem – or set of historical problems – determined in part by the constraints as well as the possibilities of a flawed and sophisticated human personality. Lovin writes that Niebuhr's circumspection can be explained by the fact that a robust definition of justice would have to "specify the entirety

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[136] Ibid., 209.
[137] "No formula settles the direction of our efforts in advance…We can only examine the claims as they are raised, and ask whether the situation that would ensue if the claims were met would be more, or less, like the human good that love persistently seeks." Ibid., 225.
[138] Joshua L. Cherniss, "A Tempered Liberalism: Political Ethics and Ethos in Reinhold Niebuhr's Thought," *The Review of Politics* 78, no. 1 (2016).
[139] Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice,* 99.

of the human good as the due to which an individual is entitled."[140] To define justice more specifically and to expand its commands and laws would be similar to asking a cartographer to draw a life-size map of the moral world. Not only would the task be physically impossible, but such a map would only be accurate at the moment of its creation.[141]

This account lends a frustrating vagueness to some notions we might prefer to be more refined, specific, and systematic. But it also has some affinities with contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Sen's *Idea of Justice* defends the notion that conceptions of justice need not be "theories" in a robust sense and can instead be less philosophically ambitious "ideas" that "clarify how we can proceed to address questions of enhancing justice and removing injustice" instead of resolving the content of "perfectly just arrangements" in order to assess the justice or injustice of a social arrangement.

Though he does not identify as a "political realist," Sen, like many theorists working under that title, writes against a tradition in Anglophone philosophy he calls "transcendental institutionalism," a position associated with Rawls, Rawlsians, and anti-Rawlsians who "concentrate [their] attention on what [they] identify as perfect justice, rather than on relative comparisons of justice and injustice." According to Sen, these

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[140] Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism,* 203.

[141] Niebuhr writes, "Rules of justice do not follow in a 'necessary manner' from some basic proposition of justice. They are the fruit of a rational survey of the whole field of human interests, of the structure of human life and of the causal sequences in human relations. They embody too many contingent elements and are subject to such inevitable distortion by interest and passion that they cannot be placed in the same category with the logical propositions of mathematic or the analytic propositions of science. They are the product of social wisdom and unwisdom." Reinhold Niebuhr. *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christianity and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 193.

thinkers "concentrate primarily on getting the institutions right" and are "not directly focused on the actual societies that would ultimately emerge."[142] Thinking about justice for Sen, by contrast, is a comparative endeavor, embedded in historical circumstances, political institutions, and policy choices concerned less with achieving perfect justice on earth and more with "removing manifest injustice from the world" as it is.[143] He calls this perspective "realization-focused comparison" and while it does not entirely match Niebuhr's perspective, we can observe some important parallels. Like Sen, Niebuhr denies *a priorism* in his theory of justice. Unlike Sen, however, Niebuhr operates with a sense of "perfect justice"[144] though it does not submit to *a priori* theoretical elaboration: it is not propositional, analytic, or systematic, but instead is an overriding, moral ideal that stands in some necessary tension with worldly approximations.[145]

The justice of this world will always feel incomplete. The process of reaching justice itself is fraught, even tragic. Opponents have it out in ways that leave them bruised. Conflicts are lamentable. *De jure* justice may be served, but there will always be

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[142] Amartya Sen. *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5-6, 27. For Geuss, Rawls' *Theory of Justice* represents "a particular style of theorizing about politics" that treats "justice" as a "freestanding social ideal." Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 70.

[143] Sen, *The Idea of Justice,* 7.

[144] Ibid., ix.

[145] "Certain 'principles' of justice, as distinguished from formulas or prescriptions...[operate] such as liberty, equality, and loyalty to covenants, but these principles will be recognized as no more than the law of love in its various facets." Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 134. "Justice was an application of the law of love to the sociopolitical sphere. It was regulated by such middle axioms as freedom, equality, and order (or balance of power), but the concrete meaning of justice in any given situation could not be taken directly from these principles. The meaning of justice could be determined only in the interaction of love and situation, through the mediation of the principles of freedom, equality and order." Dorrien, *Soul in Society,* 153.

"remainders," conflicts and cleavages unresolved by official compromise.[146] The striker, even after securing her contract, may continue to want something that even more fairness, equity, and power in the workplace cannot address. Restitution paid to the crime victim may make her financially comfortable, but pecuniary awards merely approximate loss: abuse cannot be undone and the dead cannot be raised. The fact that victims often do work on themselves to repair emotional damage sustained by injustice suggests the extent to which worldly political institutions are not organized to address these "remainders," to suture all wounds.

Theorists of comparative or imperfect justice, like Sen, argue that our conceptions of justice are always under construction. But Niebuhr captures the distance between what we can get and what might ultimately make us feel whole – between what we can achieve in this world and the ultimate reconciliation that would make such efforts unnecessary in the first place. That distance means that even the most comprehensive and ambitious programs will only ever be proximate to the ultimate ideal, even while that ideal helps to generate the aspiration to pursue justice on earth.

X. Democratic Loving Justice

Philosophers from Plato to Tocqueville have worried about the rough, mob justice they associate with democratic politics.[147] As we have seen, Niebuhr's democratic theory has institutional, dispositional, and practical aspects, all of which call upon virtues that

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[146] Bonnie Honig. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[147] Contemporary political theorists continue to examine the issue. Cf. Ian Shapiro. *Democratic Justice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

approximate *agape* love: humility, mercy, and contrition. But how does Niebuhr conceive of the relationship between justice and democracy?

Thompson offers a suggestive answer. He interprets Niebuhrian contrition – the "socially relevant counterpart of love" – to be the "'salt' which arrests the decay in the spirit of justice." He argues that contrition forms the "base of the foundation of democracy."[148] This claim is worth unpacking. On one hand, many institutional definitions of democracy depend on the idea that political competitors assent to rules governing the turnover of office, expressed in peaceful transitions of power.

But forgiveness exceeds that basic requirement. Contrition depends on an agent that has wronged or been wronged to engage in self-reflection, to become vulnerable to another, to admit their own faults, and accept responsibility. This is a high bar in politics. For Niebuhr, such aspirations will be frustrated by the limits of human behavior, perspective, and imagination.[149] But that bar can be approximated by a civic culture of respect and mutuality which prevents the devolution of political competition into riotous rivalry and conflict. In that way, a spirit of *agape* love can be seen to underwrite democratic politics. The virtue of democratic humility makes such contrition possible, but does it also make justice possible? Do all good things go together? Do all decent forms of political life derive from *agape* love?

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[148] Thompson, "The Basic Doctrines and Concepts," 280.

[149] "The limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistent of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end…the relations between groups must…always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 4-6.

Agape love may be consistent with the organization of democratic life, but how democratic can the discriminations of worldly justice actually be? Don't people get justice wrong? Isn't society often driven by passion and partiality in ways that push against the love ethic? Moral and political conventions can be normatively unreliable. Majorities can be tyrannical. But what else do we have? What other tools are there at our disposal to repair the damage that we cause?

Worldly justice yearns for that which may only be found in the City of God. Because we are the ones pursuing justice, it will always have a Janus-faced character, just as our constitutions are Janus-faced, balancing moral ambition and self-absorption. But there are ways to mitigate our worst tendencies as individuals and in social groups. Democracy may not always lead us to justice, but justice pursued in a spirit of democratic humility can minimize "remainders." Democratic processes of reconciliation can help to treat the bruises sustained during conflict.

While he sought to distinguish himself from Dewey and the liberals who endorsed dialogue, consensus, and deliberation, Niebuhr ends up essentially agreeing with them. Processes of reconciliation, undertaken in ways intended to make common life and tolerable peace possible. But they are no panacea and there is no way to tolerable peace without potentially intolerable conflict. Yet justice must address subjective pains, loss and grief, not just the technical or tangible reorganization of institutions or redistribution of resources.

None of this will be easy. Nothing can be guaranteed. We should look to justice as an approximation of *agape* when balancing conflicting priorities that do not always go neatly together: self-government and mutuality; participation and fairness; competition

and forgiveness. Niebuhr offers language to understand why they are so vexing and permanent. But his morally inclined political realism – what I have called "moral wayfinding" – can also provide some direction about how to work together to leave the world a more loving and peaceful place.[150]

[150] "To the sensitive spirit, society must always remain something of a jungle, which indeed it is, something of the world of nature, which might be brought a little nearer to the Kingdom of God, if only the sensitive spirit could learn how to use the forces of nature to defeat nature, how to use force in order to establish justice." Niebuhr, *Moral Man,* 81.

Conclusion:
The Niebuhrian Alternative

Depending on whom you ask, the problem with "our politics" is that is has never been less political – or more political. Some worry about the ascendance of tendencies to insulate public decisions from conflict, to replace politics with economic or technological expertise.[1] Others worry that tribal, partisan competition has fatally diminished the common ground necessary for effective policy solutions to social problems.[2] While these twin crises have been the subject of important empirical examination, they have also become fodder for theoretical reflection, for they seem to challenge predominant accounts of how politics is and should be.[3]

Enter political realists: they claim that the normal science of Anglophone political philosophy offers an inadequate understanding of the political as it exists in the world. Their concerns are often not normative, as traditionally understood. Most political realists do not seek to understand widely recognized harms like increasing economic inequality

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[1] Wendy Brown. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2015); Bonnie Honig. *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Sheldon Wolin. *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, edited by Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Jürgen Habermas. *The Rise of Technocracy* (New York: Polity, 2015); Patrick Deneen. *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[2] Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Stephen Skowronek and Karen Orren. *The Policy State: An American Predicament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Lilliana Mason. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

[3] These analyses are not necessary incompatible, but different normative commitments motivate concern with either depoliticization or excessive politicization.

or the persistence of ascriptive hierarchy.[4] Instead, they see something wrong with the way that mainline political theory construes the practice of politics. In contrast, they want to reorient the research agenda of political theory to attend more to the kinds of phenomena observed in "real politics."[5]

As we have seen, political realists often position themselves explicitly against an approach to politics deemed overly "moral." But that does not mean they abjure prescription. Indeed, the fact that realists take political action to be a serious subject of theoretical reflection can lead them to embrace the practical implications of their accounts. "Left" realists endorse unmasking or honesty as ethical demands on the political, while "conservative" realists prefer a more action – or inaction – oriented ethic of prudence.[6] Neither honesty nor prudence gives much direction, however. Honesty may help political actors approach the political scrum with a clearer vision, but it is not always clear what course of action such clarity recommends. The political world may be toxic and bruising, but prudence is a somewhat free-floating when not attached to a particular end. But neither an ethics of transparency nor an ethics of prudence say anything about what the work of political should actually look like. Both are unsatisfying and vague.

Niebuhr offers an alternative answer to the question of what to do with a perspective on politics that takes its hazards seriously. Niebuhr demonstrates that realism

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[4] Matt Sleat, ed. *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
[5] Alice Baderin. "Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (2014).
[6] Raymond Geuss. *Philosophy and Real Politics.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; William A Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010); Marc Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion," *British Journal of Political Studies* 37, no. 3 (July 2007).

is not incompatible with repair. He does not develop a specific or precise decision-procedure but instead a way of navigating political life that makes moral action in "real politics" conceivable. Moral wayfinding answers a question: What can shore up prescriptive framework for political action and ends? Further, moral wayfinding matches description with prescription, diagnosis with action, and analysis with intervention.

Having come to the end of our story, it may seem as though Niebuhr's normative warrant comes from God – that, in short, religion alone can save political realism from despair or moral cynicism. Indeed, the moral invocations most associated with Niebuhr often make explicit reference to grace and faith.[7] But while this project has sought to recover Niebuhrian political thought as a cogent and compelling contribution to contemporary political theory, I will, for now, leave unresolved the extent to which his political realism derives its normative inclinations from extra-rational commitments.[8]

Niebuhr's appeal to a bipartisan elite has been a liability for his academic reputation. The suspicion about Niebuhr comes from his own practical political activities and proximity to political power, as well as the sense that he offers something like "chicken soup for the compromised soul" – flattering the powerful for their own

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[7] "God, give us grace / To accept with serenity / The things that cannot be changed, / Courage to change the things / That should be changed, / And the wisdom to distinguish / The one from the other." Elisabeth Sifton. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: Norton, 2003); "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness." Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63.

[8] In the introduction I demonstrated how and why it might be profitable to read Niebuhr despite his dependence upon religious concepts.

anguished, dirty consciences. While this is not the Niebuhr that has emerged from our study, it is worth saying something more explicit about his appeal to practitioners.

The Niebuhr Archives at the Library of Congress feature dozens of letters to and from prominent intellectuals, policymakers, and foreign policy elites – McGeorge Bundy, John Foster Dulles, Hubert Humphrey, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the Roosevelts, and Hans Morgenthau. But there are a few intriguing exchanges between Niebuhr's widow, Ursula, and the dean of American labor and community organizing, Saul Alinsky. In the early 1970s, she wrote to Alinsky that Reinhold "had admired you from afar, so we might regard you two as mutual friends" even though their personal contact was limited. Alinsky himself recounted that Niebuhr had asked him to sign his own book, *Rules for Radicals*. "I can't tell you what a tremendous influence he had in shaping a lot of my thinking," Alinsky wrote.[9] The relationship between Niebuhr and organizers like Alinsky deserves more examination. But I raise the connection in order to expand our sense of what political practitioners in Washington or the Back of the Yards, Chicago, might extract from Niebuhr.

Niebuhrian realism appeals to political practitioners not because of its claims that politics is thoroughly immoral but that politics is, instead, inexorably moral – saturated with multiple human motivations and self-righteousness. The fact of moral ambition can be seen as both possibility and hazard: we want to believe that we are doing the right things for the right reasons. It is not that everyone's stated beliefs are deep and true. Self-deception abounds. Instead, Niebuhr attends to an expansive conception of self-interest

[9] Correspondence between Saul Alinsky and Ursula Niebuhr. Box 46, Folder 1, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress.

that allows him to move beyond a paternalist language of false consciousness and take seriously the possibility that we might mean what we think and that, further, our moral striving and sincerely held beliefs might generate the dilemmas, conflicts, and tragedies that seem to perpetually befall our collective efforts.

I have largely refrained from asserting a strong relationship between Reinhold the political actor and Niebuhr the political thinker. Unlike other twentieth century intellectuals and activists, there are somewhat clear distinctions between Niebuhr's pamphlets and his philosophical works – between his "thought" and his "views." But what does a Niebuhrian politician or statesperson look like?[10] What are the implications of this perspective for actually existing politics?

First, a rejection of presentism. This is not to say that political life adheres to deterministic or predictable logic. Instead, Niebuhr's theological anthropology suggests the permanent or stubborn character of many political problems. There are new crises shaped by historical circumstance and the free exercise of virtues and vices, but there are some characteristic ways in which politics comes into being, when political actors intervene. The Niebuhrian perspective aspires to consider microscopic human activities without losing sight of a more ultimate, telescopic perspective.

Second, the perennial skepticism of self and other. Even the purest motives are mixed, and even the most salutary efforts to reduce injustice are pregnant with harm. This is not just the case with actors in power, though power exaggerates such tendencies. It is

[10] By this I do not mean an elected official or diplomat. As we have seen, Niebuhr conceives of political power as more evenly dispersed and non-elite in a democratic polity. Political leadership merely connotes responsibility for a corner of the world – to speak for and be responsible to more than oneself.

also a condition or state of being human. These characteristics of Niebuhrian statesmanship do not lead to quietism. Judgments should not be relinquished and action should not be minimized. Instead subjects should subject themselves and others to constant scrutiny, to identify, to understand, and suss out the ineliminable egoism and moral ambition that suffuses public life.

For those anxious about depoliticization, Niebuhr can seem to offer few resources. Politics is not, mainly, a venue for the cultivation of human excellence. It is, instead, born out of pride, disagreement, and conflict. This lends politics a lamentable, even tragic character: it would be better if we didn't need to have it at all. But that is not an option. There is no way out of politics in this world and, further, efforts to neuter political conflicts may only exaggerate them. Many realists readily admit that "you can't get the politics out of politics." But Niebuhr contributes a different perspective: while politics may be always and forever profoundly political, that does not condemn it to be always and forever immoral.

Those anxious about excessive politicization may be tempted to recover Niebuhr as a consensus theorist.[11] He has come to stand in for that brief political moment in American history characterized by boundaries and bannisters, putative harmony and mutual understanding. There are reasons to cast some doubt on the attractiveness of the midcentury compromise, not least of which were its dependence on excluding race and identity as subjects of public contestation.[12] But as we have seen, Niebuhr is far from the sanguine pluralist he is often made out to be: democratic politics is a full contact sport,

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[11] Cf. the figures associated with "recovery" documented in the Introduction.
[12] Ira Katznelson. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liverlight, 2014).

reined in less by virtuous institutions than by political attitudes that call on us to treat fellow citizens in ways that will make tolerable peace possible. Indeed, while he would not be scandalized by partisan polarization, he would also counsel ways in which contemporary political divisions could be overcome – not through the development of third-way or bipartisan reconciliation around sacred middle ground, but by the clarifying contests of democratic politics.

I have used the term "moral wayfinding" to describe Niebuhrian political realism. "Wayfinding" offers a descriptive and prescriptive account of navigating public life that alerts political subjects to the hazards and attractions of collective life. Awareness, like honesty, is insufficient. Subjects must also be prepared, disposed to act in ways that can mitigate the gravest moral harms. He does not merely counsel political efficacy or *modus vivendi*. Political actors can leave the world more peaceful and just than they found it, without ever imagining that perfect peace and perfect justice will be possible. By unmasking and criticizing illusions of moral perfectibility, Niebuhr does not seek to de-moralize politics. Instead he hopes to make effective moral action and aspiration more possible. He never left the Social Gospel tradition: he only sought to make it more effective.

Some philosophers develop systematic theories of the institutions of justice. Others develop accounts of corrective moral attitudes. While Niebuhr does some version of both, he is especially interested in the habits that make it possible to approach a disillusioned world without giving up on reparative action. This is an unusual pose for a realist. Machiavelli developed *virtù* as an account of self-determination and political agency in an unstable world, but this is no one's idea of an ethics of sustainable

coexistence. Inasmuch as the Prince treats others with respect and dignity he does so as a means of preserving sovereignty and control.[13] Most realists give up an intelligibly moral conception of virtue for an ethics of action geared toward survival – minimizing the damage of politics and maximizing the ends which political agents seek.

It can seem as though the Niebuhrian answer to the problems of politics is essentially to "throw the bums out" – to replace morally imperfect political actors with better composed, more virtuous ones. But this is not the story, or at least not the whole story. Moral wayfinding has educative properties: while political subjects can learn to navigate the hazards of this world more or less effectively, the dangers that populate public life cannot be eliminated. The roaring tides of sin cannot be dammed: even virtuous acts are pregnant with potentially vicious consequences. Democratic action offers the most reliable way to address imbalances of power, injustice, and domination, but it does not rely on the perfectly constituted soul or morally heroic leader. Instead democratic action organizes power against power in ways that prevent perpetually riotous rivalry.

Niebuhrian moral wayfinding does not only call upon realist watchwords like "vigilance" and "skepticism" but also humility and contrition. Although it is less normatively demanding than "ethics first" political philosophy, moral wayfinding is also a necessarily collective project, for individuals or individual acts alone are insufficient to realize justice, the very content of which cannot be fully determined ahead of time. All worldly justice will have stake in *agape*, but its specific contours come into being

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[13] Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

through confrontation and conflict in history, which expands or contracts our sense of the appropriate subjects of politics in the first place. There will always be injustices in the world to right, to meliorate. This process will be ongoing. But that fact need not cause undue distress so long as political actors have the right expectations and the right disposition to judge and act together in an imperfect world.

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