IN HIS IMAGE:
GOD AND MAN IN THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

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By

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ABSTRACT

Political theories inescapably present anthropological questions; there is no such thing as a political theory without an anthropology. Political action requires political actors, and the accounts offered to describe, explain or justify such action themselves incorporate some understanding of the nature of those actors. Every political or moral theory therefore necessarily incorporates an anthropology, whether that anthropology is fully theorized or, as is often the case, merely presupposed.

This dissertation seeks to penetrate the anthropological question in political theory through an investigation of Reinhold Niebuhr’s incisive critique of what he determines to be the prevailing philosophical anthropologies undergirding modern political theory as well as a consideration of Niebuhr’s own theologically grounded account. It evaluates the merits of both his critique and his proposed alternative as well as their consequences for politics, and concludes that if we find Niebuhr’s realist political theory compelling and persuasive, we must take seriously its theological and anthropological foundations.
For Melanie,

With love and gratitude.
The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of men. And so it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The principle of comprehension by which modern culture seeks to understand our present failure belongs to the misunderstanding about man’s life and history which contributed to that failure. The spiritual confusions arising from this misunderstanding constitute the cultural crisis of our age, beyond and above the political crisis in which our civilization is involved.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

The present investigation is born of my deep dissatisfaction with what I believe to be our utterly inadequate apprehension of the current moment. That is to say that I am convinced we do not quite understand the times in which we live. And while political theorists—at least those acquainted in some depth with the history of the Western political tradition—occupy a unique vantage from which to diagnose and

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2 See, e.g. Jon Meacham, “From Gaza to Ukraine, the Effects of World War I Persist,” *Time Magazine*, July 24, 2014 (“The spectrum of political conversation in our time is, to borrow a phrase from Abraham Lincoln, inadequate to the stormy present.”); see also Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order,” in *Christian Realism and Political Problems: Essays on Political, Social, Ethical, and Theological Themes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 117 (“There is so little health in the whole of our modern civilization that one cannot find the island of order from which to proceed against disorder.”).
explain our condition we, too, seem largely incompetent to the diagnostic task, much less are we able to offer wise counsel regarding the future.\(^3\)

This general failure to apprehend the current moment, however, points beyond itself to a more fundamental failure of understanding, namely that we do not understand ourselves.\(^5\) And this misunderstanding, I contend, persists because the anthropological framework at the very heart of Western modernity fails to comprehend man.\(^6\) If I am right that this is the case, then the first task of the political theorist is not to address the question “what should we do?” or even the question “from whence have we come?” but rather the more basic question of “who are we?” Each of these questions, of course, is related to the others; if our understanding of man errs, that error undoubtedly infects our expectations of politics; similarly, if we misunderstand our history, that may likewise

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\(^3\) See, e.g., John Dunn’s scathing indictment of the Rawlsian approach to political thought: “At present there is every reason to believe the bearers of official, amateur and professional social theory to be equally feckless in their grasp of the prospective consequences of enacting their own presumptions and equally regrettable contributors, accordingly, by their agency to the impairment and imperiling of collective human life. The essence of my complaint about contemporary academic consciousness is its systematic unsuitability for defining this predicament, let alone for contributing to its alleviation.” John Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 8.

\(^4\) I attribute this circumstance, at least in part, to what Joshua Mitchell has termed the desire for parsimony; despite the inevitable complexities confronting the student of the world of thought, simple and clear explanations perdure. We seek theoretical or ideological consistency at the expense of truth. See Joshua Mitchell, *Tocqueville in Arabia: Dilemmas in a Democratic Age*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013) 163 (“Aside from imagining his own death, nothing more frightens democratic man than that his world, or parts of it, cannot be understood by extending to new provinces what he already knows with assurance. Parsimony and the belief in the unity of all knowledge guide his efforts.”).


\(^6\) I recognize that the use of the term “man” as Niebuhr does—an inclusive term meaning “all human persons”—may be jarring to the twenty-first century reader. I do so primarily for ease of reference and consistency with Niebuhr’s own usage, but also because “the term ‘human being’ is not quite the equivalent, since by its invocation one kind of being may be distinguished from another. In the Book of Genesis something like this occurs, to be sure; but the more proper delineation pertains to creatures, not beings. Adam—the biblical correspondent of what we today awkwardly call ‘human beings’—is the last of God’s creations. Adam is, therefore, a creature, made (not begotten) ex nihilo. Adam is not a “being” of one sort or another. Man is a creature, with all that entails about the need to understand what is due to his Creator.” Joshua Mitchell, “Religion Is Not a Preference,” *The Journal of Politics*, 69:2 (May, 2007) 352 n.1. For additional reflection on this matter, see Mitchell, *Tocqueville in Arabia*, xi.
have something to do with our misunderstanding of man. Identity and origins are linked.  

But one must, nonetheless, start somewhere, and I believe any serious theorist must first address this most fundamental question—the question of man—before turning to the equally complicated, yet second-order problem of politics.  

It is this task, approached in this manner, which is the subject of this inquiry into the work of the mid-century American theologian and political philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr, and more specifically into his nuanced account of human nature and its relation to politics. My choice of Niebuhr is motivated by two relevant considerations: First, and perhaps more prosaically, an undertaking of this magnitude requires the student to possess a certain affinity with his subject, and suffice it to say that I find Niebuhr’s insights into the central question of Western political thought absorbing and compelling.  

Second, while the project primarily seeks to elucidate Niebuhr’s complex

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7 As Joshua Mitchell observes, “Identity and origin tend inexorably to be linked. This is no less true of persons than of a people. For both, ‘who’ is often considered inseparable from ‘whence.’ Origin—the founding, broadly conceived—either constitutes identity (the ontological claim) or should constitute it (the normative claim) long after it has receded into memory. Joshua Mitchell, Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History and Identity in Early Modern Thought (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

8 John Calvin famously opens his Institutes of the Christian Religion with the declaration that “[n]early all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves,” which implies the further question of whether man can be understood in the absence of God, a question I intend to address in due course. See Section IV, infra. For the moment, suffice it to say that it is not at all self-evident that man can be so understood—something even Plato and Aristotle seem to have recognized. See, e.g., Plato, The Republic, tr. Richard W. Sterling and William Scott (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985) Bk. IX, 588d-589d (“fair and honorable are those things that subject the brutish part of our nature to the human part or rather, perhaps, to the divine”); and Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Bk. X, 1178b21-1179a32 (“the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness . . . [the wise man], therefore, is the dearest to the gods. And he who is that will presumably be also the happiest; so that in this way too the wise man will more than any other be happy.”).


10 Indeed, Niebuhr viewed modernity as captive to its own, perhaps unrecognized, religious pretensions. “We are thus living in a period in which either the optimism of yesterday has given way to despair, or in
thought in the two discrete areas of anthropology and politics, in the course of treating those subjects I engage with the underlying problems of Western modernity itself, given that I see those problems as intimately bound up with the very narratives of human innocence, social “progress” and quasi-utopian politics that Niebuhr so ably dissects—the very narratives that collectively fail to account for the human errancy Niebuhr seeks to explain.\textsuperscript{11} To engage with Niebuhr is therefore at least indirectly to engage with his penetrative assessment of modern thought\textsuperscript{12}—an assessment that discloses the inconsistency, paradox and pretension at the heart of its self-description.\textsuperscript{13} Importantly, however, if we judge Niebuhr a critic of modernity, he is an empathetic one, and his forceful critique is tempered by a qualified acknowledgment of its achievements.\textsuperscript{14} This

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\textsuperscript{11} Charles Mathewes gestures in this direction with his observation that “the whole intellectual history of modernity can be written as the story of our growing incomprehension of evil, of our inability adequately to understand both the evils we mean to oppose. And those in which we find ourselves implicated. Most philosophy, ethics and even theology proceed magnificently, as if at the center of all of our lives there did not squat this ugly, croaking toad. We have largely foregone attempting to comprehend evil, and choose instead to try to ignore or dismiss it through some form of ironic alienation, muscular moralism, or (if you can imagine it) some combination of the two. This problem cripples our thinking about how to respond to evil and leaves us trapped in a stuttering inarticulateness when faced with its challenges.” Charles T. Mathewes, \textit{Evil and the Augustinian Tradition} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{12} As a matter of definitional clarification I should note that in referencing “modernity” or “modern thought” I concur with Niebuhr’s assessment that “[t]he history of modern culture really begins with the destruction of [the Thomistic synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought], foreshadowed in nominalism, and completed in the Renaissance and Reformation.” Reinhold Niebuhr, \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 5. In other words, the Renaissance and Reformation mark the dawn of modernity. \textit{See also ibid.}, vol. 1, 148 (observing that “the modern period begins with the destruction of the [e medieval] synthesis” of “Biblical and classical Greek interpretations of human nature.”). For a similar view, see Michael Allen Gillespie, \textit{The Theological Origins of Modernity} (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{13} As Richard Crouter notes, “From the outset we have been struck by Niebuhr’s interest “in the defense and justification of the Christian faith in a secular age.” Taking on this task placed him directly amid the tensions of modernity.” Richard Crouter, \textit{Reinhold Niebuhr: On Politics, Religion and Christian Faith} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 116.

\textsuperscript{14} Thus Niebuhr can celebrate the “religious profundity” of the contributions of the Reformation and Renaissance to the “modern sense of individuality” while simultaneously lamenting the overdevelopment of that sense with the concept of the “autonomous individual who really ushers in modern civilization [but] who is annihilated in the final stages of that civilization.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 1, 59.
sets him apart from many conventional critics of modernity who tend to oppose modernity in toto, advocating instead either a return to the classical or medieval periods.¹⁵ Over and against such simplistic assessments, in true Augustinian fashion Niebuhr insists that the idealization of any given epoch marks a failure to understand the ambiguity and partiality of all historical moments, and that it is the fortuitous—if perhaps accidental—wisdom of modernity that it establishes conditions of thought through which one may recognize the presence of ambiguity and paradox at the heart of the world of time. In short, Niebuhr supplies us a vantage from which we may critique modernity

¹⁵ I have in mind here figures as Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and Alasdair MacIntyre, each of whom identifies a particular point of rupture at the root of modernity to which all its various ills can be traced. For Strauss, Niccolo Machiavelli’s The Prince marks the break between ancient and modern, inaugurating the first “wave” of modernity that culminates in the third-wave nihilism of Nietzsche and Heidegger. See Leo Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” in Six Essays in Political Philosophy: An Introduction to Leo Strauss, ed. Hilail Gilden (Indianapolis: Bobbes-Merril, 1975), 81-98. For Voegelin, the Trinitarian eschatology of Joachim of Flora, which divides history into the ages of Father, Son and Holy Spirit marks the West’s departure—one that gives rise to a Gnosticism that culminates in twentieth century totalitarianism. See Eric Voegelin, The New Science of Politics: An Introduction (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 110-113. In After Virtue, MacIntyre marks the abandonment of Aristotelian teleology as the point of departure (although there is a case to be made that the Lutheran Reformation plays a prominent role for MacIntyre as well). See Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); see also Alasdair MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, 2d. ed.) (particularly Chapter 10, “Luther, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Spinoza”). Notably, Niebuhr recognizes both the contributions of Machiavelli and Joachim of Flores without assigning them responsibility for cultural decline. See Reinhold Niebuhr, Man’s Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man’s Personal and Social Existence (New York: Charles Scribnér’s Sons, 1965) 53-54 (“Machiavelli’s The Prince projected a realistic reaction against all previous idealism . . . Inevitably Machiavelli became the whipping boy of all defenders of the medieval political system. He was denounced as a cynic, and did indeed betray cynical touches in his ambivalent advice to the ruler to seek the appearance of generosity more assiduously than its reality . . . At any rate, the line between cynicism and realism is not too sharply defined when the realist seeks to unmask the pretensions of the idealist in the power struggles of politics.”); Niebuhr, Faith and History, 4 (“Joachim of Flores had given the first intimation of [a new faith which had been developing since the Renaissance] when he transmuted Christian eschatology into the hope of a transfigured world, of a future age of the Holy Spirit, in which the antinomies and ambiguities of man’s historic existence would be overcome in history itself.”).

¹⁶ As E.J. Dionne has observed, Niebuhr “taught liberals about St. Augustine and original sin . . . Niebuhr imbued American liberalism with realism—about the world in general and human nature in particular.” E.J. Dionne, Jr., Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith & Politics After the Religious Right (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 31. This “recovery of the ideas of St. Augustine and the importance of original sin was a reaction against what he saw as a potentially dangerous naiveté in the Social Gospel movement that arose in tandem with the Progressive era.
while yet acknowledging that it possesses of qualities worthy of defense. It is my view that we should do both.

I. Why Niebuhr Matters Now

Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the most influential and celebrated American public intellectuals of the last century. During a career that stretched from World War I to the Vietnam War, he authored numerous books, sermons, and articles both journalistic and scholarly. His thought ran the gamut from pithy opinion editorials on current events\textsuperscript{17} to brilliant theological meditations offered in weekly sermons treating topics such as “The Tower of Babel”\textsuperscript{18} and “The Wheat and the Tares”\textsuperscript{19} to the scholarly political theology of his Gifford lectures, delivered in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1939 and later published in two volumes as \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}.\textsuperscript{20} He is even credited with writing the famous \textit{Serenity Prayer}.\textsuperscript{21} From 1928 to 1960 he taught philosophy of religion and applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he famously captivated his classrooms. In 1948 he graced the cover of \textit{Time Magazine’s} 25\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary issue over the caption “Man’s story is not a success story.”\textsuperscript{22} In 1962 University of Chicago political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau, a founder of 20\textsuperscript{th} century political realism and one of Niebuhr’s many intellectual admirers,

\textsuperscript{17} Many of these essays and opinion editorials are collected in Reinhold Niebuhr, \textit{Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr}, ed. D. B. Robertson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957).


\textsuperscript{21} See Fred R. Shapiro, “Who Wrote the Serenity Prayer?”, \textit{The Chronicle Review}, April 28, 2014. In its most well-know iteration, the prayer reads: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Time Magazine}, March 8, 1948, Vol. LI, No. 10.
described him as “the greatest living political philosopher in America,” 23 and upon his death in 1971, Time eulogized him as “the greatest Protestant theologian in America since Jonathan Edwards” 24 —no small compliment given the prodigious intellectual output of that renowned eighteenth-century mind. More recently, the Modern Library ranked The Nature and Destiny of Man as the eighteenth most important nonfiction work of the 20th century, 25 well ahead of such better-known titles as John Rawls’ A Theory of Justice, 26 W. E. B. DuBois’ The Souls of Black Folk 27 and Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. 28

Although Niebuhr fell out of intellectual fashion by the late 1960’s, 29 he has within the last decade enjoyed a renaissance of sorts. 30 Several of his prominent works,  

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29 Much of this appears to have to do with the collapse of what Ross Douthat has termed the “Christian convergence” of the midcentury. Ross Douthat, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics (New York: Free Press, 2012), 25. The impact of the Vietnam War and the rise of the New Left, signal events whose destabilizing coalescence effectively shattered what some have termed the “consensus culture” of the early Cold War years surely played key roles in this collapse as well. See Steven P. Miller, The Age of Evangelicalism: America’s Born Again Years (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11. Yet despite this cultural shift, as Robin Lovin observes, “Niebuhr’s ways of thinking still seem illuminating to many people, perhaps even more today than in the years just after his death in 1971. But something has changed, too. The world to which he spoke is not our world, and how we understand Christian realism depends in large part on where we think the transition lies and what, exactly, we think has ended. Robin W. Lovin, Christian Realism and the New Realities (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21.
30 Kevin Carnahan attributes this to the impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which prompted “references to Reinhold Niebuhr” to “gr[o]w exponentially in the early 21st century.” Kevin M. Carnahan, “Recent Work on Reinhold Niebuhr, Religion Compass 5/8 (2011); 365. “During good times, humans like to forget about the illusive nature of their security, virtue and plans. It is when the plans of humans inevitably take a tragic-ironic turn that people rediscover the wisdom of realism.” Ibid. To the extent that this is the case—that “the majority of interest in Niebuhr’s politics has shifted to his teachings on foreign policy—I would contend that an emphasis on Niebuhr’s foreign policy risks obscuring the depth of his thought, of which foreign policy realism is but one tributary of a much richer source. As Carnahan notes, “the positions articulated sometimes fall short of the full subtlety and complexity embodied in Niebuhr’s thought across the whole of his life.” Carnahan, “Recent Work on Reinhold Niebuhr,” 370.
including *The Irony of American History*,

*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and *Moral Man, Immoral Society* have been reissued, new volumes with titles like *Why Niebuhr Matters* and *Why Niebuhr Now?* purport to explain Niebuhr’s relevance for our time, and reflections on Niebuhr recur in the prominent journals of the educated class. Both advocates and opponents of the now decade-plus-long American involvement in the Middle East have claimed the “Niebuhrian” mantle in print, and both political conservatives and political liberals have claimed him as their own. He has been criticized for his excessive realism as well as his excessive optimism. Perhaps most famously, in 2007 then-Senator Barack Obama identified Niebuhr as a “favorite philosopher,” which itself led to various public fora on Niebuhr’s importance and

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37 See, e.g., Rice, Daniel, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); See also Robert McAfee Brown, “Reinhold Niebuhr: His Theology in the 1980’s,” *The Christian Century*, 103 22 January, pp.66-68; Brown, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, xxii-xxii (“It remains curious (and painful) to those who knew Niebuhr and whose thought was shaped by his that many in the new generation . . . use him to support extreme conservative positions he would have almost certainly opposed.”).
39 Patrick Deneen, for example, contends that Niebuhr’s “insistence on humility . . . was curiously made in the service not only of a chastened sense of political possibility but also arguably and ultimately in support of a vision of democracy as fully utopian as that advanced by the progressive opponents he otherwise excoriated.” Patrick Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 247.
even an entire 2010 volume of essays dedicated to assisting President Obama in
governing from a “Niebuhrian” perspective.”42 In short, there is a broad, public
consensus that Niebuhr now matters. Yet despite this recent attention it is not at all clear
that these new “Niebuhrians” do justice to the subtlety of Niebuhr’s thought. It is, after
all, the unfortunate habit of political journals and public intellectuals to conscript ideas
and thinkers for their own purposes, the result being that in such hands the thinker and his
ideas, now reinterpreted, bears little resemblance to the original man, the complexity of
his thought flattened out in the service of “current events.”43 Indeed, to hold Niebuhr out
as a political revolutionary44 or a neoconservative, a hawk45 or a noninterventionist46 is to
mistake the part for the whole and fail to grasp the theoretical depth and profound
richness of his thought.47 48

Obama’s tone changed. ‘I love him. He’s one of my favorite philosophers.’ So I asked, ‘What do you take
away from him? ‘I take away,’ Obama answered in a rush of words, ‘the compelling idea that there’s
serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can
eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the
sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter
realism.”

41 “Obama’s Theologian: David Brooks and E.J. Dionne on Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Present,”
42 Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God & Power, ed. Richard Harries & Stephen Platten
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
43 Mac McCorkle captures this problem in his wry comment regarding “public intellectuals who desire to
reconstruct a ‘usable’ Niebuhrian legacy for our times,” in the pursuit of which they “claim a more or less
perfect Niebuhr from one stage of his intellectual career.” Mac McCorkle, “On Recent Political Uses of
Reinhold Niebuhr,” Ibid. at 20.
44 Cornell West, Introduction, in Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics
45 Stanley Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand
47 As E.J. Dionne has observed, “[a]ttempting to capture Niebuhr for any partisan agenda . . . would be a
great disservice both to Niebuhr and to what he can help us do today . . . Niebuhr is the person we turn to
for balance. We turn to him when things get out of hand. He is a critic of the left’s utopianism and he’s a
critic of the right’s tendency to deify our own country. His critique of original sin I think applies neatly at
different times to both the right and the left in our politics.” E.J. Dionne, “Obama’s Favorite Theologian? A
http://www.pewforum.org/2009/05/04/obamas-favorite-theologian-a-short-course-on-reinhold-niebuhr/
Of course, Niebuhr did write countless essays and columns treating the major issues of his day, and most who take the time to peruse those writings would find positions with which they would concur as well as those they would reject. After all this is a man who in the course of his long career ran for office as a Socialist in the 1930’s, only to later become a dogged anticommunist cold-war liberal. Yet while his popular essays undoubtedly contributed to his standing as a leading public intellectual of his time, Niebuhr’s political positions on the particular issues of the day emerged out of his deeper and more penetrating analysis of the human condition in its confrontation with modernity. For this reason, such neat categorization of Niebuhr into left- or right-wing thought simply will not do.

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48 Robin Lovin gestures in this direction when he observes that our estimation of Niebuhr’s significance depends in part upon our evaluation of what features mark the present moment: “If what ended was the Cold War, we may need to rethink the meaning of security in a world that is now dangerous in different ways from the dangers Niebuhr knew. If what ended was the conflict between freedom and totalitarianism, we will have to learn what freedom means in a world where we cannot easily define it by pointing to places where it is absent. If what ended was the era we have lived in since the Reformation and the rise of the modern state, we will have to ask what it means to be realistic when the most familiar social and political realities have disappeared or taken different forms.” Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21. When I suggest that we fundamentally misunderstand the present moment, I intend to point to what I consider relatively superficial emphases, i.e., the “end of the Cold War” or the “end of the conflict between freedom and totalitarianism,” *see, e.g.* Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989). What confronts us now, I want to suggest, is nothing less than a transition away from a 500-year epoch inaugurated by the Reformation and the emergence of the nation-state. We confront a moment qualitatively distinct from the past 500 years of Western political and cultural life. Not only must we first recognize the significance of this transition, but if we are adequately perspicuous so to do, we then face the further challenge of identifying resources adequate to the task of understanding and addressing this civilizational shift.

One thinks of the appeals to various “geo-political Tocquevilles,” the “Cold War” Tocqueville, the post-1989 “Social Capital” Tocqueville, etc., each of which misses the fundamentally prophetic nature of Tocqueville’s project: Tocqueville was not simply offering political counsel for a given problem; rather he envisioned a coming civilizational shift emerging over the span of two millennia. Treating him as a mere advocate of strong Cold War foreign policy or of recreational bowling leagues, *see, e.g.* Robert B. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), misunderstands his broader insights in a similar way to how Niebuhrians appeal to Niebuhr for relatively small-scale political debates.

49 Upon closer scrutiny, Niebuhr’s positions prove less inconsistent than they might first appear and are, I would argue, a product of the need to respond to distinct historical and political moments. 

50 In this I side with Robert McAfee Brown, who observed that “we must be careful not to assume that a particular analysis, eminently valid for the time in which it was written, is necessarily valid for another time. But with that caveat, it is worth noting that the amount of Niebuhr’s thought that transfers to one age
Further complicating matters is the fact that Niebuhr approaches political
philosophy from an unapologetically and self-consciously theological perspective that is
no longer commonplace in the academic or intellectual worlds. He contends that
modernity can only be understood as a curious admixture of classical and Christian
thought, leavened by modern innovations, yet he stands virtually alone among
significant orthodox Christian political thinkers in taking modernity seriously on its own
terms rather than yielding to the dual temptations of revolution or reenchantment. In
terms of anthropology Niebuhr rejects both the conservative temptation to over-determine
the natural limitations on man and the progressive temptation to unfetter him from any
natural constraints whatsoever; in terms of politics he eschews both the conservative
temptation to reconstruct or recover Christendom and the progressive temptation to

51 In this vein Niebuhr once commented that “[o]ur problem, both in foreign policy and in other affairs, is
how to generate the wisdom of true conservatism without losing the humane virtues which the liberal
movement developed.” Niebuhr, “Conservatism and Liberalism,” in *Christian Realism and Political
Problems: Essays on Political, Social, Ethical, and Theological Themes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s
Sons, 1953), 67. But “perhaps it is as useless to define the ideal conservatism as to restore exact meaning to
the word liberal . . . we will be the more successful if we are not too anxious about the exact political
source of [] wisdom, whether from the traditional right or the traditional left.” *Ibid.*, 72-73.
52 “The modern view of man is informed partly by classical, partly by Christian, and partly by distinctively
53 Mitchell, *Tocqueville in Arabia*, 41 (referring to the tendency of moderns to respond to their “delinked"
condition “by forming two parties, united by their fear and disgust of this new enemy, opposed by their
assessment of how it might be destroyed. One party, the party of re-enchantment, sought to re-create an
imagined past that never really existed; the other party, the party of revolution, sought to hasten the advent
of a future in which all the heteronomies of the present moment have been overcome, and all lingering
memories of the past obliterated.”).
54 In referring to “Christendom,” I have in mind a particular conception of the relationship between the
Church and the world, one that I view as the antithesis of the Augustinian “two cities” approach.
Historically speaking, “Christendom” refers to the period in Western European history when the Church
and state were seen as equal partners in a unified civilization; conceptually speaking, “Christendom” refers
to the notion that the Church is to convert the world and that no division of Church and state is necessary or
desirable. With that said, despite his skepticism of Christendom, I intend to argue that Niebuhr very much
saw himself working within the tradition of Christian orthodoxy, broadly speaking (although he would have
preferred the term “biblical-prophetic to “neo-orthodoxy” given his rather significant disagreements with
that foremost of the neo-orthodox, Karl Barth, of whose theology Niebuhr wrote that it “outlines the final
pinnacle of the Christian faith and hope with fidelity to the Scriptures,” but nonetheless “requires
correction, because it has obscured the foothills where human life must be lived” and does not sufficiently
immanentize the eschaton.\textsuperscript{55} Niebuhr’s understanding of human nature emerges directly out of his Christian orthodoxy—or what he termed “prophetic Christianity,” and he cannot be understood without an understanding of and appreciation for the theological ground from which he sets forth.\textsuperscript{56} In political terms, this amounts to a repudiation of both the liberal mythology of moral progress which, stripped of its origins in Christian eschatological thought, reveals dangerously utopian moral perfectionism, and the conservative mythology of an objective truth about the political and moral world articulated in the “natural law” men have ascertained through reason.\textsuperscript{57} Rather than throwing in with either the idealists or the realists, Niebuhr seeks to hold together, in a dynamic tension, the sobering insights of realism with a serious appreciation of the

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\textsuperscript{55} Voegelin, \textit{The New Science of Politics}, 120. (“The problem of an \textit{eidos} in history, hence, arises only when Christian transcendental fulfillment becomes immanentized. Such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy. Things are not things, nor do they have essences, by arbitrary declaration. The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no \textit{eidos}, because the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion; and this illusionary \textit{eidos} is created by treating a symbol of faith as if it were a proposition concerning an object of immanent experience.”).

\textsuperscript{56} See Douthat, \textit{Bad Religion} at 10 for a discussion of Christian orthodoxy’s “commitment to mystery and paradox . . . [to] forge[] a faith whose doctrines speak to the intuition, nearly universal among all human beings, that the true nature of the world will always remain just beyond our grasp.” 10-11.

\textsuperscript{57} Niebuhr drew an important distinction between what he termed “culture” religion and “biblical” religion. The one seeks to establish a theologically grounded totality in the world of time; the other recognizes that any such totality is itself a Tower of Babel. See Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Tower of Babel,” in \textit{Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937) (“The Tower of Babel myth is one of the first, as it is one of the most vivid, expressions of the quality of biblical religion. The characteristic distinction of biblical religion, in contrast to culture religions, is that the latter seek to achieve the eternal and divine by some discipline of the mind or heart, whether mystical or rational, while the former believes that a gulf remains fixed between the Creator and the creature which even revelation does not fully comprehend. Every revelation of the divine is relativized by the finite mind which comprehends it.”). See also “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” in \textit{Christian Realism and Political Problems}, 181 (“In contrast to th[e] logic of culture religions the emphases in the Christian faith upon the unique, the contradictory, the paradoxical, and the unresolved mystery is striking . . . a realm of freedom and mystery is indicated beyond the capacity of reason to comprehend. This is where reason starts and ends. The final irrationality of the given-ness of things is frankly accepted.”)
necessity for an idealism of possibility—albeit a chastened one. Thus, even as he endorses “[a] realist conception of human nature,” he insists that such realism “should be made the servant of an ethic of progressive justice and should not be made into a bastion of conservatism, particularly a conservatism which defends unjust privileges.”

What emerges, I argue, is not an ideological or programmatic politics of left or right that counsels specific left- or right-wing policy positions, but rather a theological—even spiritual—orientation towards the great questions of political and moral life. Niebuhr’s is a stance grounded in the wisdom and humility that is the deposit of orthodox faith. It places hope outside the world of time, recognizing the partiality and incompleteness of any given political or social arrangement, and in faith looking to God to complete and fulfill what human agency cannot. This dissertation’s fundamental aim, then, is to recover, articulate and elaborate this Niebuhrian posture, to develop an account of the Niebuhrian disposition as applied to questions of anthropology and politics and to make the case that to take Niebuhr’s political theory seriously one must wrestle with his theology. It seeks to serve as a corrective to so much of the misguided use of Niebuhr’s thought and resolve the as-yet-unanswered question of “why Niebuhr matters.”

59 “Ideas Man,” The Economist, July 21, 2011 (“The book’s weakness is that it spends little time answering the question its title poses. Why Niebuhr Now? Mr. Diggins is more concerned with pointing out misuses of Niebuhr’s thought and the moral deficiencies of recent American foreign-policy decisions than with examining the man’s contemporary relevance.”).
60 Unlike our current “Niebuhrians,” Niebuhr’s contemporary and close friend Abraham Joshua Heschel recognized “the meaning of Reinhold Niebuhr to our generation. He reminds us who we are.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, “A Hebrew Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, 468 (emphasis added).
II. Plan of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into three major substantive chapters. Chapter 2 offers an exegesis of Niebuhr’s complex genealogy of modern anthropology’s attempted integration of the contradictory concepts and categories of thought derived from classicism and Christian theology—which effectively amounts to Niebuhr’s critique of modernity’s shortcomings in understanding human nature. It unpacks the complicated relationship between various positions regarding reason, nature and vitality in modern thought and raises the problems associated with certain assumptions regarding the locus of evil and the nature of individuality. Set against that backdrop Chapter 3 turns to Niebuhr’s own account, in which he responds to the shortcomings of modern anthropology by developing a theory of human freedom and adopting what Niebuhr himself recognized to be the most controversial element of his theory of human nature, his account of original sin.61 The chapter endeavors to relate this foundational human errancy to the larger claim that some conception of sin is required if modernity is to adequately account for evil.62 It also addresses Niebuhr’s contention that human freedom

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61 Late in his life, Niebuhr acknowledged the complications arising out of his use of the term: “I made a rather unpardonable pedagogical error in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which I hope I have corrected in the present volume. My theological preoccupation prompted me to define the persistence and universality of man’s self-regard as ‘original sin.’ This was historically and symbolically correct. But my pedagogical error consisted in seeking to challenge modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture . . . The reaction to my ‘realism’ taught me much about the use of traditional symbols. The remnants of social optimism pictured me as a regressive religious authoritarian, caught in the toils of an ancient legend. But it was even more important that the ‘realists,’ including many, if not most, political philosophers who were in substantial agreement with the positions taken in my Gifford Lectures, were careful to state that their agreement did not extend to my ‘theological presuppositions.’” Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities*, 24. Recognizing the cool reception to his incorporation of “original sin” did not, however, alter his insistence that “I still think the ‘London Times Literary Supplement’ was substantially correct when it wrote some years ago: ‘The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.’” *Ibid.*

62 See Heschel, “A Hebrew Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 471 (“The absence of the awareness of the mystery of evil is a tragic blindness of modern man. In his vocabulary the word is missing. But without an awareness of sin, without the fear of evil, there can be no repentance.”).
is directly implicated in the problem of evil and therefore our assessment of freedom ought to be far more complex than the unqualified approbation it typically receives.  

Finally, having fully elaborated Niebuhr’s anthropology over the previous two chapters, Chapter 4 explains, in the light of that account, Niebuhr’s understanding of political life. It focuses first on the question of whether Niebuhr may be “secularized” at all given the theological claims upon which his political counsel depends before turning to (1) the “realist” grounds for his innovative division of ethics from politics, (emphasizing his account of the relationship between love and justice); (2) his complicated understanding of history as bound up with the dialectical relationship between time and eternity, from which follows his warning against the temptation to utopian political aspirations; and (3) his counterintuitive, “realist” defense of democratic politics and its consequences for human identity and equality.

As with Niebuhr’s thought, each chapter builds upon those previous. Niebuhr’s understanding of man and his account of sin serve as a corrective to the inadequacies of modern anthropology, and his account of politics—particularly to the extent that he severs politics from ethics, critiques utopian politics and defends democracy on “realist” grounds—itself depends on his understanding of human nature, freedom, sin and the problem of evil. To be sure, these subjects are not so discrete in Niebuhr’s work as I treat them here—he is not a systematic thinker, after all—and overlap of subject matter is all but inevitable. But given that one primary goal of the project is to work out Niebuhr’s approach in a more systematic way, by dividing his thought as I do I attempt to develop a somewhat more structured framework for understanding him. This is not a work of mere

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63 Mathewes recognizes this fact when he observes that “[w]e moderns have a hard time understanding and responding to evil’s challenges because we do not believe in sin.” Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 24.
exegesis or interpretation; rather it gestures in the direction of a more concrete claim: specifically, that if one finds Niebuhr’s political theory compelling, as so many do, one must grapple with the theological foundation upon which Niebuhr’s political insights depend. In short, Niebuhr cannot be secularized.

I should also note that, as I have already mentioned that I view Niebuhr as a guide to modernity, I attempt to situate his thought within the larger sweep of the history of Western political thought. Thus the dissertation at least indirectly touches on Niebuhr’s affinity or disagreement with a number of significant thinkers who influenced Niebuhr or who served as intellectual foils for his position. Those influential on Niebuhr’s own position I would identify as, broadly speaking, located within the Augustinian tradition. They include the Hebrew prophets, Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and William James. Those he often challenges, in one manner or another, include various classical thinkers such as Aristotle,

64 Niebuhr specifically commended an Augustinian recovery as vital to resolving the social and political problems of the modern West: “Augustine, whatever may be the defects of his approach to political reality, and whatever may be the dangers of a too slavish devotion to his insights, nevertheless proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker. A generation which finds its communities imperiled and in decay from the smallest and most primordial community, the family, to the largest and most recent, the potential world community, might well take counsel of Augustine in solving its perplexities.” Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” in Christian Realism and Political Problems, 146. For a discussion of Niebuhr’s criticism of Augustine as “excessive,” see Deneen, Democratic Faith, 257-58. For a discussion of Niebuhr’s recovery of Augustinian thought as “reconstructed Augustinianism,” see Carnahan, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey at 44-48.

65 Niebuhr once commented that part of his project was intended to “expound Pascal’s thesis that the ‘philosophers’ either tell man about his ‘dignity’ and tempt him to pride, or they see his ‘misery’ and drive him to despair. Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, 517.

66 Niebuhr notes this list, in part, in “Coherence, Incoherence and Christian Faith” as a “tradition . . . which glories in the contradiction between the foolishness of God and the wisdom of men.” “Coherence, Incoherence and Christian Faith,” in Christian Realism and Political Problems, 187. See also Robert McAfee Brown, “Introduction,” in The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), xv (citing Niebuhr’s resources as, inter alia, “the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and Paul, Augustine, the Protestant Reformers and Kierkegaard”). Elsewhere he notes its tendency to corrupt Protestantism as well. Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, 520 (“Thus Protestantism has been affected by various philosophies, Kantian, Hegelian or Marxist . . . in such a way that the truth of the Gospel has been greatly imperiled.”).
the Stoics, and Democritus, as well as later medieval and modern thinkers including Thomas Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel. I do not attempt any broad synthesis of these countervailing thinkers, as Niebuhr himself has already done so, but I do note Niebuhr’s points of disagreement with them in the course of the project.

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67 See Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 114-15 (critiquing the “synthesis between Biblical-dramatic and Greek ontological modes of apprehending reality . . . in the though of Thomas Aquinas” because Aquinas “substitutes rational ontology for the Biblical dramatic apprehension of the meaning of history.”).

68 See, e.g., Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 29 (noting that Kant, erroneously “regarded [reason] as the root of virtue.”).

69 Niebuhr identifies this tradition as well, noting that its central features are that “[t]he natural dictates of reason must certainly be true.” *Ibid*. There is also the complicated romantic tradition featuring thinkers such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, of which there is more to be said.
Chapter 2

MODERN ANTHROPOLOGY

If man were wholly ignorant of himself he would have no poetry in him, for one cannot describe what one does not conceive. If he saw himself clearly, his imagination would remain idle and would add nothing to the picture. But the nature of man is sufficiently revealed for him to know something of himself and sufficiently veiled to leave much in impenetrable darkness, a darkness in which he ever gropes, forever in vain, trying to understand himself.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

AN, NIEBUHR AFFIRMS, “has always been his most vexing problem.”

Before we may consider the political question “what should we do?” or the historical question “from whence have we come?” Niebuhr would have us begin with a more basic question: “Who are we?” We quickly discover, however, that this is no easy

\[\text{[Footnotes]}\]

71 “Man has always been his most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? Every affirmation which he may make about his stature, virtue or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analyzed. The analysis reveals some presupposition or implication which seems to deny what the proposition intended to affirm.” Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), vol. 1, 1. As Pascal observed, “[w]ho would not think, seeing us compose everything of mind and body, that this mixture would be quite intelligible to us? Yet it is what we understand the least. Man is to himself the most prodigious object of nature, for he cannot conceive what body is, still less what mind is, and least of all how a body can be united to a mind. This is the culmination of his difficulties, and yet it is his very being. The way the spirit is united to the body cannot be understood by man, and yet it is man.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005), 63.
task; inquiry into our own nature perplexes us because the various claims we essay regarding our reason, our virtue and our significance inevitably plunge us into contradiction when confronted with the known facts of existence. Assertions regarding the perspicuity of human rationality confront the reality of subterranean vitalities inaccessible to mind. Insistence on human virtue runs aground upon the “admitted evils of human history” for which man must bear some responsibility, and claims of human significance or uniqueness confront the reality of our biological “kinship with the brutes,” not to mention the stark and painfully obvious truth that man is “only a little animal living a precarious existence on a second-rate planet, attached to a second-rate sun.” And yet, Niebuhr avers, we nonetheless remain convinced of our essential rationality, significance and virtue in defiance of the empirical evidence. Why this is so, and what is to be done about it constitutes a significant portion of Niebuhr’s project. To be sure, Niebuhr does not merely offer a dose of raw pessimism—his point is not simply the contrarian one that man is irrational, unvirtuous and insignificant; rather, his claim is that our commonly held self-understanding—one which reflexively and rather unreflectively elevates those qualities—is astoundingly optimistic, even naïve. We

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73 “So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we have to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law ‘Each is furthest from himself’ applies to all eternity—we are not ‘men of knowledge’ with respect to ourselves.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), Preface, § 1, 451; Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 92 (“We approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations. We picture it as being open at its end to somatic influences, and as there taking up into itself instinctual needs which find their psychical expression in it, but we cannot say in what substratum. It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance the pleasure principle. The logical laws of thought do not apply in the id. . . “).
74 Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 2.
modern “children of light,” he contends, *actually believe* that our reason and capacity for moral virtue ground the distinctiveness of human being and establish our significance when the obvious, empirical truth is far more complex.

Niebuhr’s task, or at least the first step in his task, is to explore the philosophical ground upon which we maintain such unwarranted optimism. And while theoretical in nature, the consequences of this investigation could not be more significant; our childlike naïveté regarding human nature portends disastrous consequences both in the case of the individual and with respect to our political societies and their projects. The broader implication of Niebuhr’s oeuvre is that the dominant modern self-understanding which views man as essentially rational and morally perfectible blinds us to the truth of the human condition—leaving us both doomed to perpetual disappointment and frustration when political reality inevitably fails to accord with lofty expectation, as well as vulnerable to external enemies—the so-called “children of darkness” who are not so naïve regarding the fundamentals of human being. Lacking an adequate understanding of the limits of reason and the power of self-interest, we are left personally vulnerable to

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77 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xii (“The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies both from gauging the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to injustice and oppression.”)


79 It should be noted that Niebuhr’s use of the term “self-interest” tends to collapse multiple and potentially distinct philosophical understandings of the term. For example, while Madison tends to associate “self-interest” with pride. *See, e.g.* Federalist 66, in *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2001), 347. Tocqueville complicates matters by distinguishing between an unenlightened self-interest that seeks the benefit of the self to the exclusion of others, directed by brute instinct, and “self-interest rightly understood,” which assumes that “it is to the individual advantage for each to work for the good of all.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 525, 546. Further, economists tend to empty the term of moral content, simply using it to refer to “economic rationality.” Niebuhr’s use of the term, unfortunately, is less fine-grained than these, and therefore at times he can tend to blur distinguishable concepts together.
despair at our apparent powerlessness and insignificance and politically vulnerable to
darker, more anarchic forces which threaten the future of our democratic polities.\textsuperscript{80}

The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent
and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the
wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must
know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral
justification. 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.\textsuperscript{81}

An accurate assessment of human nature matters because the stability of our culture and
the competence of our politics depends upon it. If we are to develop a more adequate,
insightful self-understanding, then—one upon which we may more solidly ground and
preserve democratic politics—we must both confront the darker angels of human nature
and learn from them.\textsuperscript{82} And this will require a sober-minded acknowledgment of the
limitations we encounter and their consequences for us individually and collectively.
Although we may not wish ourselves children of darkness, we must nonetheless
recognize the darkness within and understand its consequences for the world without.

In this chapter, I am concerned primarily with Niebuhr’s assessment of what he
considers to be the prevailing—and erroneous—modern account of human nature; I will
turn to the political consequences of his anthropology in later chapters. Niebuhr’s central
contention regarding human nature is that the West confronts a basic tension between two
largely antagonistic positions: the predominant modern, liberal account grounded in an
unmerited optimism regarding the human condition (which Niebuhr attributes to the

\textsuperscript{80} “The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies both from
gauging the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to
injustice and oppression. When this optimism is not qualified to accord with the real and complex facts of
human nature and history, there is always a danger that sentimentalism will give way to despair and that a
too consistent optimism will alternate with a too consistent pessimism.” Niebuhr, \textit{Children of Light}, xii.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid.}, 40-41.

\textsuperscript{82} “Clearly it has become necessary for the children of light to borrow some of the wisdom of the children
of darkness; and yet be careful not to borrow too much.” \textit{Ibid.}, 176.
Renaissance and its purported recovery of classical thought) and an alternative chastened, Christian account grounded in recognition of human limitation and theological-eschatological hope (which Niebuhr attributes to the Christianity as mediated through the Reformation—once that account is shorn of what Niebuhr views as excessive Reformational pessimism). I shall attempt to develop each of these in turn in order to clarify and illuminate the choice presented. In this chapter I will explicate Niebuhr’s genealogical account of modern, liberal doctrines of man, which owes intellectual debt to classical antiquity, certain elements of Christianity as mediated through the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, particularly in its German and French manifestations. This will require me to engage with several prominent modern thinkers and traditions, given the ways in which Niebuhr sees the modern view as heir to multiple, and at times conflicting, traditions.

In Chapter 3, I will then turn to an investigation of, and elaboration upon, Niebuhr’s development of the Christian alternative, which I argue merges elements of orthodox Christianity with a line of thought best described as Reformational and existential. Niebuhr understands this tradition largely from a Protestant vantage, for reasons that should become clearer as the chapter unfolds and the thought is developed.83 But presently, I consider Niebuhr’s account of the modern doctrine of man.

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83 According to Niebuhr, a modern Christian understanding is fundamentally Augustinian in origin, further developed through the Reformational writings of Luther and Calvin, the Christian existentialism of Pascal and Kierkegaard, and perhaps surprisingly, the thought of Nietzsche
I. Traditional Sources of Modern Doctrines of Man

The genealogical account Niebuhr offers begins with his exposition of the two predominant traditional, or pre-modern, sources of our self-understanding—what he identifies as the “classical” and the “Christian” views.

Fully to appreciate the modern conflicts in regard to human nature, it is necessary to place the characteristically modern doctrines of man in their historic relation to the traditional views of human nature which have informed western culture. All modern views of human nature are adaptations, transformations and varying compounds of primarily two distinctive views of man: (a) the view of classical antiquity, that is of the Græco-Roman world, and (b) the Biblical view.\(^{84}\)

Importantly, these two views, classical and Christian, hold “little in common,”\(^{85}\) and “modern culture has thus been a battleground of two opposing views of human nature,” forcing a “conflict that could not be resolved.”\(^{86}\) Unlike many historians of political thought who may understand these two views as potentially commensurable,\(^{87}\) for Niebuhr they are fundamentally antagonistic and inconsistent; he sees very little common ground between classical antiquity and Christianity.\(^{88}\) Indeed, one of the principle reasons for modern confusion regarding human nature arises precisely from the deep tension between these two primary intellectual and cultural sources upon which we draw.\(^{89}\) This

\(^{84}\) Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 5 (emphasis added).

\(^{85}\) Niebuhr is careful to note that “while these two views are distinct and partly incompatible, they were actually merged in the thought of medieval Catholicism.” This merger, of course, represents a historical epoch to which at least one prominent critic of modernity seeks our return. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

\(^{86}\) Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 5.

\(^{87}\) See, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 188, discussing the Thomistic synthesis of Aristotelian and biblical (specifically Augustinian) thought: (“We have, therefore, a theological framework within which is presented a fundamentally Aristotelian account of the genesis of action, into which are integrated both an Augustinian conception of the will and such later concepts as those of *intentio* and *synderesis* and *conscientia*”).

\(^{88}\) Niebuhr, referring to the classical and Biblical anthropologies, observes, “[t]here is, in fact, little that is common between them.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 5.

\(^{89}\) In this Niebuhr undoubtedly follows in the trajectory laid out by Charles Norris Cochrane in his masterful *Christianity and Classical Culture*, which depicts the first four centuries of the Common Era as a cultural clash between the norms and values of classical antiquity, as expressed through Rome, and those of the new and rapidly spreading Christian faith, expressed through the life of the early church. See Charles
position places Niebuhr squarely within the Protestant political and theological tradition, in that the Roman Catholic tradition tends to see classical thought and Christianity as more complementary than contradictory, with perhaps the highest expression of this complementarity to be found in St. Thomas Aquinas’ “medieval synthesis” of the High Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{90} With Luther and other Reformational thinkers, however, Niebuhr rejects this view, for reasons that will be developed herein.\textsuperscript{91}

Before diving into Niebuhr’s account of these various intellectual-historical moments, however, a preliminary caveat is in order. It should almost go without saying that any historian of political thought seeking to render in general terms the complexities of thought associated with any era, particularly one as intellectually fruitful and creative as classical antiquity, almost inevitably opens himself to criticism on the ground that he has oversimplified important matters or collapsed significant distinctions and therefore committed a cardinal error of scholarship. One might observe nearly as much regarding the differences between Plato and Aristotle, for example, as can be said regarding their similarities.\textsuperscript{92} In attempting to summarize such an age, therefore, Niebuhr leaves himself open to legitimate scholarly criticism regarding whether he has adequately rendered one or another element of Platonic, Aristotelian or Stoic thought. However, it is also the case

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\textsuperscript{90} Niebuhr recognizes that “while these two views [the classical and the Christian] are distinct and partly incompatible, they were actually merged in the thought of medieval Catholicism (The perfect expression of this union is to be found in the Thomistic synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought.) The history of modern culture really begins with the destruction of this synthesis, foreshadowed in nominalism, and completed in the Renaissance and Reformation.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 5. For a similar view, but an entirely distinct assessment of the consequences of the collapse of the Aristotelian-Thomistic synthesis, \textit{see} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue, ibid. n. 12, supra.}

\textsuperscript{91} Luther totally rejected the synthesis: “Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light.” Martin Luther, \textit{The Disputation Against Scholastic Theology}, trans. H. J. Grimm, in \textit{Luther’s Works}, vol. 31 (Philadelphia, 1957), proposition 50.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{See, e.g.} Arthur Herman, \textit{The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization} (New York: Random House, 2013) (arguing that the intellectual and philosophical rivalry between Plato and Aristotle laid the foundations of and shaped western culture).
that Niebuhr remains less concerned with a detailed exegesis of the finer points of any particular thinker than he is in identifying in broad adumbration how those thinkers and their ideas have influenced their intellectual descendants and contributed to modern understandings regarding the question man poses to himself regarding himself. This is a consistent feature of Niebuhr’s thought: He is always less interested in the elements of any philosophical system than he is in the anthropological, metaphysical and theological presuppositions—often left largely unstated and undeveloped—upon which that system is constructed. It is in that spirit—that is, with an eye towards the claims regarding human nature—that I intend to engage with Niebuhr if I am to apprehend the valence of his thought, and I shall accordingly proceed on that basis in developing and assessing his argument.

93 With Nietzsche, Niebuhr might even argue that such scholarly obsession over minutiae indicates a mind which may be counted among the ‘slaves of the democratic taste and its ‘modern ideas’; they are all human beings without solitude, without their own solitude, clumsy good fellows whom one should not deny either courage or respectably decency—only they are unfree and ridiculously superficial.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Spirit, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), Part I, §44, 244. In this sense, Niebuhr might be said to be offering a “commentary” on classical thought in an effort to understand modern man’s own self-interpretation. (For the distinction between “commentary” and “interpretation,” see Joshua Mitchell, Plato’s Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), ix-x.

94 As Langdon Gilkey, one of Niebuhr’s students observes, “[t]o most readers, however, what is probably most noticeable are [Niebuhr’s] sharp criticisms of the great figures of Western philosophical history. Pushing aside as fundamentally irrelevant their metaphysical speculations and epistemological inquiries—all that has made them famous—Niebuhr in each case went straight for their doctrine of ‘human nature,’ their views of desire and conscience, or reason and will, of evil and the meaning of history. He praised and criticized them solely with regard to these issues, that is, his own theological questions. Niebuhr was convinced that at the heart of any philosophy, however explicitly it might be based on scientific inquiry or rational speculation, lay 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. For him, in other words, each philosophy has as its ‘hidden’ foundation a particular ‘faith’ in life’s meaning, and hence its explicit philosophical reflections in fact manifest a religious substance and a religious criterion. In that sense for him every philosophy is comparable to any example of theology.” Langdon Gilkey, On Niebuhr: A Theological Study (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 21.
A. Prolegomena – Two Methodological Complications to the “Study of Man”

Before plunging into the substance of Niebuhr’s anthropology, however, I must address two ancillary matters at the outset. First is the fact that mainstream contemporary political theory tends to elide anthropological questions, focusing its analytical gaze instead upon investigating and evaluating the characteristics of governmental institutions, the grounds for and nature of political authority, the presence or absence of justice in political arrangements, the adequacy of various legal regimes and other similarly important, yet secondary, questions. I suspect that the principal explanation for this general lack of focus on the anthropological question has largely to do with academic fashion, specifically the fact that the expressed intent to focus on anthropology—or more colloquially, “human nature”—itself marks out controversial territory in the field. After all, to speak of “human nature” (note the scare quotes) invites the accusation that one flirts with the error of “essentialism,” that “cardinal sin of the present moment.” The current vogue, at least in the academic world, rejects theories that attribute a moral dimension to the conditions of the natural world, in part because many associate such theories with outdated and largely discredited teleological metaphysical systems which imagine a static, rather than dynamic, natural world, and in part because of the ways that the purported moral authority of “nature” has been deployed to impose particular social, ethical or political ideologies.

One can observe the first critique in the wholesale rejection of Aristotelian teleology\(^9\) upon the collapse of Aristotelian metaphysics, and the second with the thought of Nietzsche. Once the static world imagined by Aristotle gives way to the dynamic, fluid and unstable world of modern science, the moral dimensions of nature recognized by Aristotle fall away as well.\(^10\) Nietzsche, by contrast, strenuously avoids the kind of essentialism\(^10\) that typifies various alternative philosophical accounts of “human nature.”\(^10\) This aversion to the language of “human nature” is due in no small part to Nietzsche’s epistemological skepticism regarding the possibility of an “essential man,”\(^10\) and much of his genealogical task endeavors to show how essentialist philosophical anthropologies emerge from the outworkings of power’s imposition at a

\(^{99}\) A related, and interesting, question concerns whether Augustine also repudiated teleology more than a millennium earlier, at least to the extent that Augustine’s theology recognized the noetic effects of sin as occluding the human ability either to identify or to achieve human telos within history.

\(^{100}\) This had significant consequences for modernity’s reaction to dogmatic religion. As Niebuhr explains, “[t]he compound of Biblical religion with Aristotelianism was particularly unfortunate because it accentuated the idea of a world of fixed and eternal essences in which deductive rational processes could explore the unknown on the basis of the known. Modern empirical science, beginning with Francis Bacon, was forced to insist on the right and the necessity of empirically examining ‘causes’ and tracing the actual course of events in nature and in history. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, 117.

\(^{101}\) As Richard Schacht explains, “Nietzsche does indeed reject the idea of an immutable, ahistorical human essence . . . but that, for him, is by no means the end of the matter.” “Nietzsche and Philosophical Anthropology,” in A Companion to Nietzsche, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2006), 116.

\(^{102}\) Thomas Heilke, Nietzsche’s Tragic Regime (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 101 (noting the “unavailability of a final and systematic philosophical anthropology in Nietzsche’s writings.”). As Richard Schacht explains, “[t]he enterprise of a Nietzschean naturalistic philosophical anthropology, like Nietzsche’s kind of philosophy more generally, does not stand or fall with each and every substantive position he takes. A fundamental feature of it its non-dogmatic, always only provisional, and ever experimental character, and its commitment to remain forever open to good reasons to reconsider any hypothesis ventured, interpretation advanced, and assessment proposed.” Schacht, “Nietzsche and Philosophical Anthropology,”121.

\(^{103}\) For Nietzsche, philosophers all suffer from the error of assuming man’s eternal constancy: “Family failing of philosophers. —All philosophers have the common failing of starting out from man as he is now and thinking they can reach their goal through an analysis of him. They involuntarily think of ‘man’ as an aeterna veritas, as something that remains constant in the midst of all flux, as a sure measure of things. Everything the philosopher has declared about man is, however, at bottom no more than a testimony as to the man of a very limited period of time. Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) Book I, § 2, 12.
given historical moment rather than from any universal, unchanging and timeless
constants of human nature.\textsuperscript{104} \textsuperscript{105}

Yet despite these well-taken criticisms I want to insist, with Niebuhr and perhaps
against the weight of current academic fashion, that there is no such thing as a political
theory without an anthropology.\textsuperscript{106} Political action requires political actors, and the
accounts offered to describe, explain or justify such actions themselves incorporate some
understanding of the nature of the actors. Every political or moral theory therefore
necessarily incorporates an anthropology, whether that anthropology is fully theorized or

\textsuperscript{104} This may be one reason among many why the Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre poses the choice
of “Aristotle or Nietzsche” in After Virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory
(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). For Niebuhr, MacIntyre’s proposal would represent
a false dichotomy. To be sure, he would understand Nietzsche as poised against Aristotle, but in a broader
sense, he would likely hold that, contrary to MacIntyre, Nietzschean thought represents not the alternative
to Aristotle, but rather the inevitable, logical endpoint of Aristotelian thought. For Niebuhr, the choice is
not between Aristotle and Nietzsche, between universal truths accessible through reason and nihilism;
rather, the choice is between an Augustinian posture of faith in God or a rationalistic “faith” in human
reason that cannot but reach its terminus in the non-rationality of Nietzsche.

\textsuperscript{105} Ironically, Niebuhr largely agrees with this critique. See, \textit{e.g.}, Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, 220-21, in
which Niebuhr critiques natural law theory because it “confuses ultimate religious perspectives and relative
historical ones” and “constantly insinuates religious absolutes into highly contingent and historical moral
judgments.” Notwithstanding what he himself acknowledged to be a “polemic,” Niebuhr challenged only
“too detailed and too inflexible ‘rules’ of conduct,” not what he considered “certain abiding principles of
justice.” Reinhold Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism” in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious,
Social, and Political Thought, Charles W. Kegley, ed., 516. This, Niebuhr wrote, is “the most perennial sin
of religion: the sin of using the transcendent reference to absolutize rather than to criticize the partial
Niebuhr, 6.

\textsuperscript{106} As Niebuhr’s student, Langdon Gilkey, wrote: “To most readers, however, what is probably most
noticeable are his sharp criticisms of the great figures of Western philosophical history. Pushing aside as
fundamentally irrelevant their metaphysical speculations and epistemological inquiries—all that has made
them famous—Niebuhr in each case went straight for their doctrine of human nature,” their views of desire
and conscience, or reason and will, of evil and the meaning of history. He praised and criticized them solely
with regard to these issues, that is, his own theological questions. Niebuhr was convinced that at the heart
of any philosophy, however explicitly it might be based on scientific inquiry or rational speculation, lay 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. For him, in other words, each philosophy has as its ‘hidden’ foundation a
particular ‘faith’ in life’s meaning, and hence its explicit philosophical reflections in fact manifest a
religious substance and a religious criterion. In that sense for him every philosophy is comparable to any
example of theology.” Langdon Gilkey, On Niebuhr: A Theological Study (Chicago and London: The
merely presupposed. As Walker Percy once observed, “[e]veryone has an anthropology. There is no not having one. If a man says he does not, all he is saying is that his anthropology is implicit, a set of assumptions which he has not thought to call into question.” Indeed, an implicit, incompletely theorized, or even consciously disavowed anthropology leaves a given political theory dangerously ignorant of its own presuppositions and thus ill equipped to the skeptical interrogation of its own foundations. And if the underlying anthropology of a given political theory is demonstrably false, incomplete, or otherwise unconvincing, it raises questions about the viability of the theoretical apparatus erected thereupon. So if we seek to inform and illumine our thoughts about current political possibilities and realities, we must confront and engage with the more laborious and uncertain task of uncovering and interrogating the underlying anthropological assumptions contained within any account of politics. In short, if we are to have any realistic expectation to say what we ought do or what actions

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108 Walker Percy, Signposts in a Strange Land (New York: Picador, 2000), 228. He continues, “One might even speak of a consensus anthropology which is implicit in the culture itself, part of the air we breathe. There is such a thing, and it is something of a mishmash and does not necessarily make sense. It might be called the Western democratic-technological humanist view of man as higher organism invested in certain traditional trappings of a more or less nominal Judeo-Christianity. One still hears, and no one makes much objection to it, that ‘man is made in the image of God.’ Even more often, one hears such expressions as the freedom and sacredness of the individual.” This anthropology is familiar enough. It is in fact the standard intellectual baggage of most of us. Most of the time, it doesn’t matter that this anthropology is a mishmash, disjecta membra.” Ibid.

109 This has been one of the principal criticisms leveled against John Rawls, perhaps the most influential contemporary political theorist. It can also be deployed against scientism or naturalism, which is “blind to some obvious, not to say obtrusive facts about the dimensions of selfhood and of history. Its prescriptions of inquiry contain some hidden ideological dogmas which blind the culture to those facts which are incompatible with its dogmas.” Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, 125.
we should take, whether individually or collectively, we must have some grasp of who we are—who it is that acts out our elaborate political dramas.

The second matter that requires some clarification has to do with the term “anthropology,” which I have perhaps unjustifiably treated as interchangeable with the term “human nature” and which is, itself, problematic. Of course, the selection and use of philosophical terminology inevitably implies an accession to certain ontological presuppositions bound up with that terminology. In the case of the term “anthropology,” one might surmise that it assumes an understanding of man as an analytical monad, and indeed the term “philosophical anthropology” supposes a certain independence or autonomy of the human subject as object of his own inquiry. This is quite obviously a highly contestable assumption, for part of the problem we confront is the very question of whether “man” may be properly understood on his own terms or whether he is derived, constituted, or as Kierkegaard famously insisted, a “relation.”110 In other words, one must not approach anthropology in such a way as to already predetermine an answer to a central feature of the question. If “anthropology” is taken to mean “the investigation of man qua man without reference to God,” then Niebuhr, and by extension Christian political thought more broadly cannot be understood even to have an anthropology. However, for the purposes of this project, I do not define the term so narrowly; after all, Niebuhr himself referred to a “Christian anthropology” on more than one occasion.111

110 See Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, 13 (“Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self.”).

111 While Niebuhr himself used the term “anthropology” to refer both to “modern,” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, 23, and “Christian” Ibid., 18, 299, accounts of man, Niebuhr hardly understood this to require the disassociation of man from God; after all, man’s dependence upon God and his subjection to evil constitutes as central feature of Niebuhr’s understanding of man. (“[T]he Christian view of human nature is involved in the paradox of claiming a higher stature for man and of taking a more serious view of his evil than other anthropology.” Ibid., 18.
“anthropology,” then, I intend to refer to “the study of man” in the broadest sense. That is to say that I aim to embrace both what might technically be termed “philosophical” anthropology—the study of man as he relates to himself and to others, as well as “theological” anthropology—the study of man as he relates to God. Which brings me back to the traditional term for the same concept, that now-disfavored appellation adopted by Niebuhr: human nature.

B. Philosophical Anthropology: The Ethical Optimism of Classical Antiquity

Niebuhr attributes classical doctrines of human nature primarily to the thought of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. While acknowledging differences and nuances that distinguish Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic thought, Niebuhr considers the three central features of each—and therefore the central features of classical thought—as the understanding of man “from the standpoint of the uniqueness of his rational faculties,” a “common dualism” and an “optimistic . . . confidence in the virtue of the rational man.” In other words, for Niebuhr, classical man is characterized by (1) his capacity for reason—what the Greeks termed “νοῦς”; (2) a rather stark mind-body dualism; and (3) an optimistic view of the possibility of human moral virtue.

112 In this vein, Patrick Deneen offers perhaps the most accurate description of Niebuhr’s anthropology as a “biblical anthropology that insisted upon the ineradicability of human self-interest and sinfulness.” Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 249 (emphasis added).


114 Niebuhr notes that “Νοῦς may be translated as ‘spirit’ but the primary emphasis lies upon the capacity for thought and reason.” Ibid., vol. 1, 6.

115 Both of these elements cause classical culture to misunderstand the self. “[T]he same Greek component in our culture which is responsible for laying the foundations of all our philosophy and sciences and is celebrated by every intelligent person as the fountain and source of what is ‘enlightened’ in our history is also responsible for all our most serious misunderstandings about man and his history.” Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 87.
As to reason, for Aristotle, νοῦς “is the vehicle of purely intellectual activity and is a universal and immortal principle which enters man from without.”\footnote{Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 6.} Importantly, Aristotelian νοῦς lacks self-consciousness—it can make only external things, not the self, the object of its own reflection. In this sense one might aver that the Greeks lacked “subjectivity.”\footnote{Ibid., 6.} For Plato, νοῦς or λογιστικόν is “the highest element in the soul, the other two being the spirited element (θυμοειδές) and the appetitive element (ἐπιθυμητικόν).”\footnote{Ibid., 7.} For both Plato and Aristotle, reason is in some sense divine. For the Stoics, though reason is “more immanent in both the world process and in the soul and body of man than in Platonism . . . man is essentially reason,” and it is human reason that supplies the instrument by which man obtains knowledge.\footnote{Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, 90.} On this basis, Niebuhr considers the Stoics, despite their acknowledged differences with Plato and Aristotle, as part of this main body of classical thought on man.

Dualism then moves to divide this reason, or mind, from body, “identifying the body with evil and [] assuming the essential goodness of mind or spirit.”\footnote{Ibid., 7.} This has consequences not only for the classical view of the body, but more generally for the classical view of the physical world, the world of coming into being and passing away.\footnote{Aristotle, On Generation and Corruption in The Complete Works of Aristotle, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).} It heightens reason’s importance and centrality, for it is the life of reason which offers man the possibility of elevation beyond the world of coming-into-being and passing away.

\footnote{Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 6.}{\footnote{Ibid.}{\footnote{Ibid., 7.} This belief “rests upon a very dubious distinction between an immortal ‘mind’ and a mortal body [that] is key to the Greek understanding of the self.” Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, 90.}}
that is the world of nature and history.\textsuperscript{122} Finally, the emphasis on reason, when integrated with this dualistic view, brings forth the third feature of classical thought—a kind of optimism regarding the possibility of human virtue. Because the locus of evil is the body, and not the mind, reason, by virtue of its role as the agent of the mind, may when properly oriented towards the good, allow classical man to achieve virtue. Put differently, because both Plato and Aristotle expect that a man who possesses knowledge of the good also possesses the capacity to act in conformity with that knowledge when properly habituated, classical thought “finds no defect in the centre of human personality.”\textsuperscript{123} The moral problem for classical man is a noetic one—a feature that will later become critical when classical anthropology confronts Christianity.\textsuperscript{124}

\textbf{C. Minor Notes Destined to Become Major: Greek Tragedy and Naturalism}

Two additional features of Greek thought merit some mention, primarily, although not solely, because of the influence Niebuhr attributes to them in the modern world. The first is Greek tragedy, which Niebuhr considers a counterbalance to the Platonic-Aristotelian emphasis on reason due to tragedy’s “vitalistic” qualities and its debt to “Dionysian religion.”\textsuperscript{125} In this he is undoubtedly influenced by Nietzsche, whose

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Niebuhr, \textit{Faith and History}, 157-58 n. 8 (“Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics felt that the meaning of life was fulfilled in the life of reason, above the change and decay of nature and history.”).
\item \textsuperscript{123} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 9. \textit{See also} Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin}, tr. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 19 (“As all ancient knowledge and speculation was based on the presupposition that thought has reality, so all ancient ethics was based on the presupposition that virtue can be realized. Sin’s skepticism is altogether foreign to paganism.”).
\item \textsuperscript{124} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{125} Here Niebuhr undoubtedly is influenced by Nietzsche’s \textit{Birth of Tragedy}. \textit{See} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 8 n.5. \textit{See also} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in \textit{Basic Writings of Nietzsche} ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992).
\end{itemize}
Birth of Tragedy contends that it is “vitality”\textsuperscript{126} and not reason which grounds the Greek tradition, and that Platonic thought marks a radical departure from this view. According to Nietzsche, despite the veneer of rationality introduced by Socrates, the truth of Greek culture rests with its recognition of the subterranean forces of chaos. Tragedy, then resists the claims of reason to illumination. For the world of the tragic, while lack of knowledge may present a problem, education—or further knowledge—cannot offer a solution, because the truth about existence moves in a different valence than that of reason. Man is ultimately the plaything of the gods.\textsuperscript{127}

The other strand of Greek thought which bears some relevance to Niebuhr’s story is the naturalistic tradition of Democritus and Epicurus, both of whom “interpreted man, in accordance with their naturalism and materialism, not as standing outside of nature by the quality of his unique reason, but as wholly a part of nature.”\textsuperscript{128} Importantly, though naturalistic, and to that extent rejecting the dualism of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics—Greek materialism does not dispense with reason, but rather locates it within nature as a kind of mechanism.

Notwithstanding these two minor notes in classical culture, for Niebuhr the centrality of reason, body-mind dualism and confidence in the possibility of human virtue constitute the foundational, distinctive elements of classical anthropology and lay the groundwork for the classical approach to the moral problem of errancy. By neatly dividing body from mind, and then locating evil in the body and its needs and

\textsuperscript{126} There is much more to say regarding Niebuhr’s adoption of Nietzsche’s use of the term “vitality.” \textit{See} §II.B.3, \textit{infra.}

\textsuperscript{127} Much more could be said regarding the Shakespearean recovery of classical tragedy and his recapitulation of this theme. \textit{See, e.g.} William Shakespeare, \textit{King Lear}, Act 4, scene 1, 32-37 (“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.”).

\textsuperscript{128} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 9.
requirements, the problem of errancy for classical man becomes a noetic one—a problem of knowledge. For the Greek, man must know the good in order to do the good, but there is no issue with his capacity to be good provided he has been properly educated and habituated.  Anthis for this reason the philosophical enterprise becomes central to the ethical task. For Plato, the practice of philosophy educates the soul to the good.  For Aristotle, philosophy reveals the nature of the good, permitting a man to become virtuous by practicing virtue. Neither contemplates the possibility that a man might know the good, and even wish to do good, yet lack the ability to do that which he wills. They know little of the Apostle Paul’s lament that “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out . . . I do not

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129 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Bk. II, Ch. 1 (“Excellence, than, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word for ‘habit’. From this it is plain that none of the moral excellences arise in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature”).

130 Plato, *Republic*, tr. Richard W. Sterting William C. Scott (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1985), Book VII, 519c, 213 (“So our duty as founders is to compel the best natures to achieve the sovereign knowledge we described awhile ago, to scale the heights in order to reach the vision of the good.”).


132 Here it is worth making an important distinction between Aristotelian and Christian thought. For it is surely the case that Aristotle accounts for lack of self-restraint in his discussion of ἀκρασία, or incontinence, in the Nicomachean ethics. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Bk. VII. But for Aristotle, the incontinent man either allows his passions to overwhelm his deliberation, or he fails to deliberate. In either case, the problem is a noetic one. In neither instance does a man wish to do good but lack the ability; rather he either lacks knowledge of what is good or chooses to allow his passions to overwhelm his reason concerning the good action. *Ibid*, Bk. VII, Ch. 8 (“Of incontinence one kind is imputotusiu, another weakness. For some men after deliberating fail, owing to their passion, to stand by the conclusions of their deliberation, others because they have not deliberated are led by their passion; since some men (just as people who first tickle others are not tickled themselves), if they have first perceived and seen what is coming and have first roused themselves and their calculative faculty, are not defeated by their passion, whether it be pleasant or painful.”). For Augustine, by contrast, the problem of incontinence was not noetic but volitional. Knowledge is not the point, because man’s will is not free. See Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIV, Ch. 11, 569 (“The choice of the will, then, is genuinely free only when it is not subservient to faults and sins. God gave it that true freedom, and now that it has been lost, through its own fault, it can be restored only by him who had the power to give it at the beginning.”).
do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." Such a claim truly is “foolishness” to the Greeks, and indeed, it this Christian view of man which directly challenges that of the classical world.

D. Theological Anthropology: God and Man in the Christian View

Any discussion of Christian anthropology must begin with its “ultimate presupposition[] of . . . faith in God as Creator of the world.” From the outset, Christianity thus does not begin with philosophical categories but rather with the theological affirmation of the Person of God. In this sense, Christian anthropology may rightly be termed a “theological” and not a “philosophical” anthropology. For Christianity, God supervenes over all that exists, transcending all human categories and antinomies—including those between mind and matter, vitality and form. He is the “source of all existence.” The entirety of Christian thought moves outward from this central affirmation. To aid in distinguishing Christian from classical thought, Niebuhr focuses on three central elements of the Christian doctrine of man that follow from that recognition, each of which poses direct a challenge to the central features of classical antiquity that we have previously discussed.

First, Christianity rejects dualism in favor of “an appreciation of the unity of body and soul in human personality.” For Christians, man is a synthesis. This biblical

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133 Romans 7:15-19 (ESV).
134 1 Cor. 1:23 (ESV).
136 The political significance of this cannot be overstated. God is the “source of authority from the standpoint of which the individual may defy the authorities of this world. (‘We must obey God rather than man.’)” See Niebuhr, “Democracy, Secularism and Christianity,” in Christian Realism and Political Problems, 101.
137 Ibid.
“monism” derives not from a failure to distinguish body from soul, physical from spiritual, but rather from a faithful affirmation of “the Biblical view of God as the Creator and of the Biblical faith in the goodness of creation.”\textsuperscript{140} God created the world, and even though the world is not God, it is nonetheless good.\textsuperscript{141} It follows that from a Christian perspective it is both incoherent and simplistic—indeed naïve—to assign “good” to the spiritual or rational world and “evil” to the physical world, as does classical thought.\textsuperscript{142}

Errancy must reside elsewhere. For this reason Christianity refuses to denigrate the body, notwithstanding some admittedly ascetic tendencies within the tradition, and again with some exceptions in certain mystical strains of Christian faith, Christianity largely avoids

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\bibitem{140} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 13. Niebuhr will go on to show how dualistic theories pit idealism and romanticism against one another. Both divide body from soul, nature from spirit; for the idealist “the mind [i]s essentially good or essentially eternal and the body [i]s essentially evil”; while the romantic errs in “seeking for the good in man-as-nature and for evil in man-as-spirit or reason.” \textit{Ibid}.

\bibitem{141} Gen. 1:31 (“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”) (English Standard Version). The doctrine of \textit{creation ex nihilo}—notion that the world is not God but was created by Him—bears some relevance to the question of dualism and the goodness of creation. \textit{See} Augustine, \textit{The Confessions of Saint Augustine}, tr. Rex Warner (New York: Signet Classics, 2009) Bk. XII, ch.7, 284-85 (“You \textit{created heaven and earth}, but you did not create them out of yourself. If you had, they would be equal to your only-begotten Son and therefore to yourself too, and it could not possibly be right that something not proceeding from you should be equal to you. And there was nothing else in existence besides you from which you might create them, God, Three in One and One in Three, and therefore you created heaven and earth out of nothing . . . You were and nothing else was and of nothing you made heaven . . . and earth.”); \textit{see also} John Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis}, tr. John King (Christian Classics Ethereal Library; 1.1 ed., 2009) (“[T]he world was made out of nothing. Hence the folly of those is refuted who imagine that unformed matter existed from eternity; and who gather nothing else from the narration of Moses than that the world was furnished with new ornaments, and received a form of which it was before destitute.”).

\bibitem{142} It should be clarified that Niebuhr acknowledged the existence of a “subordinate” dualism that “has always persisted in Christian thought and [] was partially nourished by Pauline concepts of the flesh warring against the spirit.” Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in \textit{Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought}, 526. However, “the best Biblical scholarship seems agreed that Paul means by ‘carnally minded’ the self seeking itself. The two great Pauline theologians of Christian history, Augustine and Luther, certainly never interpreted the Pauline concepts in terms of Platonic dualism, whether they defined sin as \textit{amor sui} or \textit{concupiscientia}, as self-love or as lust. Even lust, according to Luther, is not simply physical passion but self-regard.” \textit{Ibid}., 526-27.
\end{thebibliography}
the counsel of escape from the world of finitude, for it is not finitude but sin that is the central problem for the Christian.\textsuperscript{143}

Second, Christianity grounds man’s significance neither upon the uniqueness of his capacity for reason nor his relation to the natural world, but rather upon his status as bearer of God’s image. Indeed, for Christianity, the only way man can truly understand himself is if he begins “with a faith that he is understood from beyond himself, that he is known and loved of God and must find himself in terms of obedience to the divine will.”\textsuperscript{144} Christianity thus understands man “primarily from the standpoint of God.” Man, as Kierkegaard observed, is a relation—and when oriented properly, he is in right relation both to God and to his fellows.\textsuperscript{145} An important consequence of the doctrine of man as God’s image-bearer is that to the extent man can, through revelation, understand God as “will and personality,” it follows that man, as God’s image-bearer, must also be understood as possessed of will and personality. This belief that man is created in the “image of God”\textsuperscript{146} implies a high stature for man and leads to two significant further consequences, each of which distinguishes Christian anthropology from classical thought.

First, rather than reason or \textit{νοῦς}, for Christianity at the center of human being lies the \textit{will}. In some sense one might say that just as God may be characterized as divine will

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\bibitem{NiebuhrNatureDestiny1941} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 147 (“The issue of Biblical religion is not primarily the problem of how finite man can know God but how sinful man is to be reconciled to God and how history is to overcome the tragic consequences of its ‘false eternals,’ its proud and premature efforts to escape finiteness.”).
\bibitem{NiebuhrNatureDestiny1941} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 15.
\bibitem{KierkegaardSicknessUntoDeath1883} “God . . . constituted man as a relation.” Kierkegaard, \textit{Sickness Unto Death}, 16.
\bibitem{Gen127} Gen. 1:27 (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”) (English Standard Version). For a critique of this view, see George Kateb, \textit{Human Dignity} (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2011), 25 (“I do not assume that there is a religious answer to the worth of humanity. It would be flattering to think, for example, that only human beings are in the image or likeness of the divinity and that therefore we have the dignity of kinship with some entity immeasurably greater than us but nevertheless not utterly removed from us in its nature, not ‘wholly other.’ If we could first believe in the more-than-human entity of monotheism, there would then be no problem about the nature of and reason for imputing dignity to every individual and to the species . . . But we should try to do without such props; they can always give way to enlightenment.”).
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and personality, His image-bearer must be so understood. In this sense the very consciousness of having a “self” emerges out of Christianity, and indeed only could emerge out of Christianity.\textsuperscript{147} Second, the notion of personality offers a ground for \textit{individuality}—one that is not present in classical thought (and that will later figure in Niebuhr’s account of the Renaissance).\textsuperscript{148} This individuality “makes it wrong to fit [man] into any political program as a mere instrument.”\textsuperscript{149}

Finally, at the very same instance that Christianity elevates man’s stature\textsuperscript{150} as God’s image-bearer, its “low estimate of human virtue”—its account of man’s \textit{sin}—casts him down.\textsuperscript{151} Here is the Christian conception of the problem of errancy. Christianity locates evil at the “very centre of human personality.”\textsuperscript{152} The very same quality that marks man as created in the image of God—the centrality of his will and uniqueness of

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\item[147] Only Christianity (or Judaism as expressed through Christianity) could make man “an interesting animal . . . only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire depth and become evil—and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts.” Nietzsche, \textit{Genealogy of Morals}, First Essay, § 6, 469. In other words, the self which can make itself an object of its own reflection \textit{can only emerge out of Christianity}, which “deepened, sharpened and internalized” man. \textit{Ibid.}, 468.
\item[148] There is of course, much more to be said about the significance of “personhood” for Christian thought. “Ostensibly Renaissance thought is a revival of classicism, the authority of which is either set against the authority of Christianity or used to modify the latter. Yet classic thought has no such passion for the individual as the Renaissance betrays. The fact is that the Renaissance uses an idea which could have grown only upon the soil of Christianity. It transplants this idea to the soil of classic rationalism to produce a new concept of individual autonomy, which is known in neither classicism nor Christianity.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 61.
\item[150] “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou has put all things under his feet.” Ps. 8:5.\textsuperscript{Cf. Hebrews 2:7} “Thou madest him lower than the angels for a short time; You crowned him with glory and honor.”
\item[151] Here it simply must be said that Niebuhr is located squarely within the Augustinian political and theological tradition, which “entails that evil’s real roots lie in ourselves [and] goes on the offensive against evil simultaneously conceptually, metaphysically and psychologically: it takes our excuses away from us, one by one, until we see that the problem is us, and not some external reality that victimizes us.” Charles Mathewes, \textit{Evil and the Augustinian Tradition}, 75. For the clearest statement of Niebuhr’s reading of Augustine, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism” in \textit{The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses}, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 123-141. \textit{See also} Eric Gregory, \textit{Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 82-95.
\item[152] \textit{Ibid.}, 16.
\end{footnotes}
his personality—also marks him as a sinner. There is no dualistic division such that the good in man can be distilled out from the evil or “the essential man can be extricated from the nonessential. Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence, [which] is free self-determination.” The self is divided within itself. A pervasive errancy, then, is the third distinctive feature of Christian thought. In this light we can begin to see why Christianity—and Niebuhr in particular—views the classical account of virtue as so hopelessly naïve. Classical thought views the problem of errancy far too simplistically in that it attributes evil to natural finitude and good to the field of mind and reason. It utterly fails to acknowledge, or even take cognizance of, the ways in which the self can manipulate reason in the service of its own, errant ends. For the Christian, rather than offering a pathway to virtue, reason is itself implicated in the problem of errancy. And it is also here that Niebuhr draws an important link between errancy and human freedom—which Niebuhr characterizes as “indeterminate” precisely due to man’s capacity to exercise his freedom in both creative and destructive ways. The Edenic myth offers a means of grasping this problem. Man is free to obey or disobey God—to trust Him or doubt Him, and the freedom of this choice is not without consequence, for

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153 Nothing is more precarious today than the mention of the word “sin” among Christians, as well as among non-Christians, for in everyone there is a tremendous resistance to it. It is a word that has fallen into disrepute. To some of us it sounds almost ridiculous and is apt to provoke laughter rather than serious consideration. To others, who take it more seriously, it implies an attack on their human dignity. And again, to others - those who have suffered from it - it means the threatening countenance of the disciplinarian, who forbids them to do what they would like and demands of them what they hate. Therefore, even Christian teachers shy away from the use of the word sin. We know how many distorted images it can produce. We try to avoid it, or to substitute another word for it. But it has a strange quality. It always returns. We cannot escape it. It is as insistent as it is ugly. And so it would be more honest - and this I say to myself - to face it and ask what it really is.” Paul Tillich, “The Good That I Will, I Do Not,” The Eternal Now.

154 As Charles Mathewes observes, he is “free enough to violate [his] nature, and yet natural enough never to escape the consequences of that violation.” Mathewes, Evil and the Augustinian Tradition, 107.

155 “[B]oth the human and the divine person possess a freedom over and above the processes and structures [of nature].” Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, 524.

156 See Gen. 2:5 - 3:24.
good or evil. Freedom, then, is a necessary element of human personality. It is both pregnant with the possibility of high achievement and yet capable of supporting the turn to evil. It should be noted that this paradoxical notion of freedom, which Niebuhr views as central to his account of human personality and agency—as well as political possibility—challenges the modern notion of the autonomous, free individual in its relation to the doctrine of original sin.¹⁵⁷

Thus when the Christian view is laid alongside the classical view, the tensions may be clearly seen. On the classical view, man is characterized by his reason, while Christianity is concerned with the self, both the self in its relation to God, and the self as reflecting, possessing and expressing the divine characteristics of free will and personality. On the classical view, man possesses body and spirit, and the two are severable, with evil located in the physical world (and the body) and the good located in the world of spirit (and the mind). Escape from the body, therefore, becomes a recurrent theme in classical thought.¹⁵⁸ Christianity, by contrast, views man as a unity, albeit one riven at its core by a paradoxical errancy in which reason itself is implicated and for which divine grace is the only proper remedy; finally, classical antiquity possesses optimistic confidence regarding the possibility of and the human capacity for virtue, provided reason operates to illuminate the good and the virtuous and the noble man practices virtue; for Christianity, there is no such confidence, because man’s capacity for reason itself suffers from the same errancy as does the rest of the self. In other words, sin—and in this case its noetic effects—prevents Christianity from harboring the same

¹⁵⁷ See Section IV.B, infra.
optimistic assessment of the possibility of virtue. In the face of sin Christianity posits not habituation to virtue or knowledge of the good, but acceptance of God’s grace.

Thus because Christianity begins with God, it resists the dualism of classical thought, instead holding a simultaneously elevated and deprecated view of man as both the image-bearer of God and a fallen sinner.\textsuperscript{159} By locating the center of human being in the will—the \textit{self}\textsuperscript{160}—and not the mind, Christianity characterizes the problem of errancy as \textit{volitional} rather than \textit{noetic}.\textsuperscript{161} This distinction has significant consequences both for modernity’s inability to account for evil and for the biblical account’s capacity to do so.\textsuperscript{162} Finally, by recognizing human incapacity and division in the face of the demands of virtue, Christianity rejects what it considers a naïve Greek optimism in the possibility of human virtue.

\section*{II. Modern Doctrines of Man}

Set against the backdrop of and informed by these two moments of traditional Western civilization, we can begin to develop a sketch of Niebuhr’s genealogy of modern doctrines of man. Modernity, for Niebuhr, marks a profound shift in anthropological thinking in which attempts to combine the philosophical insights of the classical and the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{159} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{160} This is crucial to Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin: “I have never maintained that the corruption of sin is in ‘reason.’ I have asserted that it is in the self and that a self-centered self is able to use reason for its own ends; which is why there is no protection in reason as such against sin. . . . The fundamental Biblical, and I think true, proposition about man’s evil is that its root is in the self and not in the mind or in the body. When Augustine places it in the self’s will, he insists also that the self expresses itself in its will.” Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” in \textit{Reinhold Niebuhr; His Religious, Social, and Political Thought}, 523.
\item \textsuperscript{161} Here Niebuhr owes one of his many debts to Augustine, according to whom, “the self is an integral unity of mind and body. It is something more than mind and is able to use mind for its purposes. The self has, in fact, a mysterious identity and integrity transcending its functions of mind, memory and will.” Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” in \textit{Christian Realism and Political Problems}, 121. “It is the self which is evil in the manifestation of its will.” \textit{Ibid.}, 123.
\item \textsuperscript{162} See, Section IV.B.3, \textit{infra}.
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theological insights of Christian view cease as the implications of each position are developed in finer grain. Relatedly, I should note at the outset that addressing the term “modernity,” I do not intend a lengthy excursus into its meaning—that is its own involved and heatedly debated question, and other worthy studies have developed this matter in depth.163 Defending a particular definition of or account of modernity as “the” account is not the focus of my investigation here; rather, as my purposes center on the anthropological question, I intend to develop Niebuhr’s account of modern thought with respect to human nature as a means of clarifying the contemporary problem as he sees it. Whether Niebuhr’s assessment of modernity itself is “true” is of less importance to me than whether his account of the predominant anthropological presuppositions of modern times resonates. This requires consideration of both Niebuhr’s historical account—the moment, if you will, which he identifies as marking the shift from traditional moderns to modern, as well as his substantive account—that is to say his phenomenology of modern anthropology. Identity and origin, after all, are linked;164 the substantive account emerges out of the genealogical account.165

A. The Genealogy of Modern Anthropology: The Collapse of the Synthesis

Recall that Niebuhr considers the “Thomistic synthesis” of Aristotelian and Augustinian thought achieved during the High Middle Ages to mark the apex of the effort

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163 See, e.g., Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, R. J. Rengger, Political Theory, Modernity and Postmodernity.

164 “Identity and origin tend inexorably to be linked. This is no less true of persons than of a people. For both, ‘who’ is often considered inseparable from ‘whence.’ Origin—the founding, broadly conceived—either constitutes identity (the ontological claim) or should constitute it (the normative claim) long after it has receded into memory. Joshua Mitchell, Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History and Identity in Early Modern Thought (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

165 In this, as in many other ways, Niebuhr demonstrates his affinity with Nietzsche.
to integrate the two traditional modes of understanding.\textsuperscript{166} Despite his conclusion that such a synthesis could not perdure given the fundamental contradictions that he maintains exist between classical and Christian thought, Niebuhr nonetheless recognizes—and even admires—the intellectual magnitude and temporal durability of the medieval achievement. But it is the breakdown and distillation of this synthesis into its constituent parts that interests Niebuhr, and in his view, that marks the dawn of modernity.\textsuperscript{167} Here the two moments of the classical man-as-reason and the Christian self divided reemerge from the uneasy amalgamation of several medieval centuries and assume largely independent trajectories represented by those twin movements of Renaissance and Reformation, each of which, for Niebuhr, marked the transition from the Late Middle Ages to early modernity.\textsuperscript{168}

In the broadest sense, Niebuhr sees these two movements typologically; the Renaissance, for Niebuhr, represents an effort to recover classical thought,\textsuperscript{169} while the Reformation marks a return to orthodox Biblical Christianity. Various dichotomies could serve a similar function; reason set against revelation; science juxtaposed to myth; nature as opposed to grace, and to that extent, Niebuhr betrays his fundamental affinity with

\textsuperscript{166}“In Thomas Aquinas intellectualistic and Biblical conceptions of the ‘image of God’ are compounded, with the Aristotelian elements achieving predominance.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 153 n.4.

\textsuperscript{167}For another, similar contention—although one with a very different prescription for contemporary times, see Michael Allen Gillespie, \textit{The Theological Origins of Modernity} (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) (arguing that contemporary debates trace their sources to late medieval theological disputes between scholastics and nominalists, and defending a return to the ethic of the Renaissance best exemplified by Erasmus over and against the Lutheran Reformation).

\textsuperscript{168}Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 5.

\textsuperscript{169}An effort that Niebuhr considers doomed to futility given the prior intervention of Christianity. The “classicism” so recovered could not help but be influenced by Christianity, resulting in the odd amalgam of the two in Renaissance thought. As Niebuhr explains, “Ostensibly Renaissance thought is a revival of classicism, the authority of which is either set against the authority of Christianity or used to modify the latter. Yet classic thought has no such passion for the individual as the Renaissance betrayed. \textit{The fact is that the Renaissance uses an idea which could have grown only on the soil of Christianity.} It transplants this idea to the soil of classic rationalism to produce a new concept of individual autonomy, which is known in neither classicism nor Christianity.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 61.
Luther in terms of the categories he chooses to frame his narrative. Further, he views the
culture of modernity as an irresolvable contest between these antithetical classical and
Christian anthropologies, as mediated through Renaissance and Reformational thought
respectively. Lacking a resolution or synthesis of the two that might resemble the
medieval account of Aquinas, this conflict between traditional accounts at modernity’s
dawn eventuates in the “more or less complete triumph” of what Niebuhr terms the
“modernized classical view of man,”170 which is essentially the
Renaissance/Enlightenment view. It is classical because it depends upon the initial claims
Niebuhr links to the anthropology of antiquity, namely the centrality of human reason,
the embrace of dualistic ontologies, and the endorsement of contradictory solutions for
the problem of errancy that unite only in their optimistic appraisal of human virtue. It is
modern because the classical position draws, albeit unreflectively so, on Christianity, yet
rejects the theological centrality of God, leaving man to his own devices. In other words,
it is “immanent” and not “transcendent.” The result is this “modernized classical view”
which evinces both a consistent thread of optimistic confidence in human rational
capacity and a simultaneous confusion and contradiction regarding the nature and origin
of that capacity—not to mention an inability to offer an account of human significance or
an adequate response to the problem of evil. Committed to an epistemology that prizes
rational consistency, modern man lacks the resources to understand himself within the
terms of the presuppositions upon which he grounds his efforts at comprehension.171 The

171 “Modern culture has thus been a battleground of two opposing views of human nature. This conflict
could not be resolved. It ended in the more or less complete triumph of the modernized classical view of
man, a triumph which in the latter day is imperiled not by any external foe but by confusion within its own
story of modern thought, then, is the story of the triumph of confusion.¹⁷² Put in the starkest terms, it is the attempt to offer an account of human being grounded in reason rather than faith.

**B. Dualism: Reason and Nature**

As Christianity united what classicism separated, joining nature and spirit and unifying body and soul, so modern thought divides them once again. As Niebuhr explains, “[t]he history of modern culture is . . . the story of a running debate between those who interpret man as reason and those who seek to explain him in terms of his relation to nature.”¹⁷³ Further complicating the initially simple binary Niebuhr presents, however, is his subsequent identification of a third category of thought, the “romantic protest,” which by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century leveled a direct challenge to rationalism in toto.¹⁷⁴ While Niebuhr’s explanation of the relationship between these three modern antagonists, so-called “idealistic rationalists,” “naturalistic rationalists,” and “romantics” is at times less than clear, his identification of the categories themselves nonetheless provides a useful illumination of how classical categories of thought regarding reason and nature recur, develop and are further differentiated in the conflicting modern accounts of human nature.

¹⁷² Perhaps the finest exemplars of this modern view in Niebuhr’s time were the liberal Protestants of the mainline churches (who came in for significant criticism from Niebuhr on precisely that basis); however it is hardly a stretch to see the same ideological commitments in widespread vogue today, albeit largely stripped of the vestiges of religious dogma. For a fascinating thesis regarding this development, see Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Image, 2014), 13 (“An enormous number—an entire social class—of American Protestants . . . simply stopped being Christian believers in any meaningful way, even while they kept the assurance of their Protestant parents that they represented the center of American culture. This is where the Mainline went . . . educated with a postgraduate degree, churchless, successful (if somewhat fragilely) in [their] finances, and utterly confident about the essential moral rightness of [their] social and political opinions.”).


1. Idealistic Rationalism: Reason Divinized

Niebuhr’s story of modern doctrines of man begins with the Italian Renaissance, whose idealistic thinkers self-consciously sought to retrieve classical thought in an effort to develop an alternative to the Christian account of man-as-creature and man-as-sinner. For thinkers such as Giordano Bruno and Pico della Mirandola, these allegedly pessimistic medieval doctrines operated to foreclose the possibilities otherwise available if confidence in human possibility were unchained; accordingly they forcefully rejected doctrines of original sin and the unfree will in the name of human potential. Importantly, this repudiation sought to establish the spiritual autonomy of man; after all, the freedom of the will was a central theme of the Renaissance\(^\text{175}\)—one that would eventually trigger the Lutheran Reformation’s reassertion of the will’s bondage.\(^\text{176}\) Thus even at the outset the Renaissance was evidently more than a recovery of classical thought; it perhaps inescapably partakes of Christian categories in the course of this recovery. In other words, as Niebuhr observes, while

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\text{[o]stensibly Renaissance thought is a revival of classicism, the authority of which is either set against the authority of Christianity or is used to modify the latter . . . [t]he fact is that the Renaissance uses an idea [the significance of the individual] which could have grown only on the soil of Christianity.}\(^\text{177}\)
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Perhaps the quintessential example of what might be termed a neo-Platonic deification of the unbounded, autonomous individual is found in the Italian scholar Pico della Mirandola’s 1486 “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” which recasts the Edenic account from the Biblical story of inevitable Fall to a pseudo-Promethean exhortation of limitless

\(^{175}\) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 64 (“The freedom of the will was a problem of primary interest to the thinkers of the Italian Renaissance.”).

\(^{176}\) For a fascinating discussion of these early modern debates over the will, see, Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 128ff.

human potential. In Pico’s version of the tale, God exhorts Adam to exercise his reason in the service of self-divination:

> Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine.

Pico provides a paradigmatic example of what Niebuhr terms “idealistic rationalism,” the view that man is defined by his reason, and that reason itself is, in some sense, divine. The idealistic rationalist’s error, as Niebuhr puts it, is the “identification of spirit too simply with reason and reason too simply with God.” Much like the Greeks, the modern idealistic rationalist understands man from the standpoint of his reason, but fails to see the possibility of errancy inherent in his exercise of the rational faculty. Put differently, because the idealist understands reason as an expression of—or identifies it with—divinity, the possibility that men may employ reason in the service of their own self-interest is left unrecognized (a failure of perspicuity upon which Marx would later pounce). In theological terms, he fails to appreciate the noetic effects of the Fall.

Niebuhr draws a virtually straight theoretical line between the Platonic-Aristotelian-Stoic emphasis on man-as-reason, the idealistic rationalism of Pico and the Italian Renaissance and the idealism of the German Enlightenment as expressed by Kant, and particularly by Hegel. In the case of Kant, the natural heteronomies of nature and tradition must give way to the autonomy of reason as man achieves his enlightened

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“release from his self-incurred tutelage.”

Hegelian idealism, in contrast with Kant, seeks to subordinate nature to reason. For Hegel, “reason transmutes and tames all the vitalities of human existence.” Reason and spirit are undifferentiated.

2. Naturalistic Rationalism: Mechanistic Reason

Idealistic naturalism, of course, is not the end of the story. Despite Hegel’s fondest wish, the movement of world history did not culminate in the Prussian state. The story of modernity is a story of flux and shifting intellectual sands. The early dominance of idealistic rationalism which perhaps reached its logical terminus in Hegel’s work shifted as Italian Renaissance thought slowly gave way to English and French naturalism by the eighteenth century. While Renaissance idealism sought to recover classical anthropology in protest against Christian notions of man’s creatureliness and sin and in favor of his stature, this move was itself transfigured as the previously “minor note” of classical thought—the naturalism of Democritus and Epicurus took on major import in challenge to the notion of man’s status as God’s image-bearer in the first place.

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182 Related to this is the question of the remainder. For Kant, reason’s perspicuity cannot go all the way down; while it can apprehend phenomena, the noumenal world remains inaccessible. For Hegel, however, Reason (or Spirit) subsumes all within itself. See G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p 808, 902 (“This Becoming presents a slow moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of substance. . . . In the immediacy of new existence the Spirit has to start afresh to bring itself to maturity as if, for it, all that preceded were lost and it had learned nothing from the experience of earlier Spirits, But recollection, the inwardizing, of that experience, has preserved it and is the inner, and in fact the higher form of the substance.” In other words, as Joshua Mitchell points out, “For Hegel, all residual historical antecedents are incorporated into the current incarnation of Spirit. Nothing is lost or left incomplete. Mitchell, Plato’s Fable, 5 n.12.

183 Ibid.

184 Ibid., 20. Interestingly, Descartes, for Niebuhr, becomes the avatar of modernity in that he “manages to conceive of man purely in terms of thought, nature in terms of mechanics and to find no organic unity between the two, thus bearing within himself both the contradictions and the extravagances of modernity.” Ibid.
naturalism emerged more from the English and French Renaissance than the Italian. Figures such as Francis Bacon (through his empiricism, focus on nature and development of the scientific method)\footnote{See, \textit{e.g.} Francis Bacon, \textit{The Advancement of Learning} (New York: The Modern Library, 2001).} and Michel de Montaigne (in his attempt to “understand man in the variety of his natural differentiations”\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 19.}) drew on classical Democritan notions in an attempt to understand man more or less “scientifically” in relation to nature.

For Niebuhr, this marks the logical consequence of the abandonment of the theological understanding man as necessarily dependent upon, and in need of, relation to God. Remove God from the center in order to celebrate man’s significance and it quickly becomes evident that man perhaps is not so significant as was thought in the first place, but rather one piece of a larger, regular mechanism. Put in theological terms, once modern thought abandons the understanding of man as in fundamental relation to God—which occurs in the Renaissance, it is left with nature alone. This becomes a development of considerable importance in determining the nature of the confusion modern thought confronts. Not coincidentally, it also emerges in tandem with the emergence of “bourgeois man.”\footnote{Ibid., vol. 1, 20}\footnote{Ibid.}

The middle class world begins with a tremendous sense of the power of the human mind over nature. But having destroyed the ultimate reference by which medieval man transcended nature spiritually, even while acknowledging his dependence practically, the bourgeois and technical world ends by seeking asylum in nature’s dependabilities and serenities.\footnote{Ibid.}

In other words, we confront what Niebuhr terms “naturalistic rationalism,” the belief that the real truth about human beings lies not in a spiritual reason, but in his embeddedness in a nature governed by regular, rational laws. However, man is a spiritual creature, and neither an enervated “divine” reason nor a mechanistic understanding of nature suffices;
this, Niebuhr contends, leads to the third moment of modern anthropology, the romantic protest, which challenges both idealistic and naturalistic rationalists.

3. The Romantic Protest: In Defense of the Remainder

Romantic naturalists resisted the location of human essence in either “reason” or a “mechanical nature,” instead arguing in favor of what Niebuhr terms “nature as vitality” as the ground of human being. By the “vitality of nature,” Niebuhr means to refer to natural “impulses and drives” rather than reason or the mechanical or formal limitations of the natural world.\(^{189}\) Here one can locate figures such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, and perhaps to a lesser extent even Marx and Freud. Unlike idealism and naturalism, romanticism, Niebuhr contends, is only “partly foreshadowed in either classical or Christian thought,” with its most obvious forbear located in Greek tragedy.\(^ {190}\) Out of the vitality of nature emerges human creativity as well as human destructiveness.\(^ {191}\)

As a historical matter, Hegel looms large in Niebuhr’s conception of the romantic protest, as he understands that protest to be lodged squarely against the claimed comprehensiveness of the Hegelian system. He approvingly quotes Kierkegaard’s sardonic assessment of Hegel’s claimed systemic totality: “In the words of Kierkegaard’s criticism of the idealistic passion for a universal system: ‘Before the system completes itself, every scrap of existence must have been swallowed up in the eternal; there must not be the slightest remainder; not even so much as a bit of dingle-dangle represented by

\(^{189}\) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 27.

\(^{190}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{191}\) In its recognition of the common source of creation and destruction, romantic thought evinces a further affinity with Christianity.
the Herr Professor who wrote the system.”

The thought of Nietzsche offers perhaps the paradigmatic example of the romantic conception—at least insofar as Niebuhr is concerned; whether he errs in characterizing romanticism largely in Nietzschean terms and categories (such as vitality” and “the Dionysian”) is another question.

For Niebuhr, romanticism mixes a rather odd compound of “Rousseauistic primitivism and Christian pietism.” Although it seeks wisdom and insight from nature and not from mind, that nature is never understood mechanistically; rather, it understands the body and the physical in terms of feeling, imagination and will. It constitutes an effort to retain spirit without the traditional understandings of spirit—either the theological terms of Christianity or the philosophical terms of idealistic thought. Niebuhr’s critique of Nietzsche wisely centers in part on this problem; Nietzsche insists on the supremacy of the body in an insistent rejection of the mind-body dualism, which he considers the effluent of Plato’s large shadow run through the filter of a decadent Christianity—and yet his own account of the natural man pulses with spiritual energy. The problem for romantics is that their proper and appropriate skepticism of the arrogance of idealism leads them to reject reason altogether, thus opening the door to unchecked impulse—unchecked vitality as it were. In Freudian terms, romanticism rejects the superego, which eventually liberates the id. While Nietzsche might celebrate

192 Ibid., vol. 1, 81, quoting Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments in Anthology of Modern Philosophy, tr. David E. Swenson, 649. For the full quotation, see Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, tr. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) (“Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself. No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny little dingle-dangle as the Herr Professor who is writing the system.”).

193 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, 82.

194 Ibid.

195 “But the fight against Plato, or to speak more clearly and for ‘the people,’ the fight against the Christian-ecclesiastical pressure of millennia—for Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’—has created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit the like of which had never yet existed on earth.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), Preface, 193.
such a liberation, Niebuhr assessed it in the light of the brutality and destructiveness of modern nationalism.


Thus, Niebuhr concludes, modern thought embraces (1) idealistic rationalists who contend that man should be understood from the perspective of a semi-divine reason; (2) naturalistic rationalists who understand man from the perspective of nature governed by rational laws, and (3) romantics who like the naturalistic rationalists understand man from the perspective of nature, yet nonetheless protest against naturalistic rationalism’s mechanical view of nature in favor of a more vitalistic conception. Each view shares some affinity and some discontinuities with the others. None predominates, and the result is a general agreement on the movement away from a Christian, or theological, conception of human nature, but divergence on the other particulars. The result is that because each of these views adopts, whether reflectively or unreflectively, some elements of classical or Christian thought and self-consciously resists others,

Modern man . . . cannot determine whether he shall understand himself primarily from the standpoint of the uniqueness of his reason or from the standpoint of his affinity with nature; and if the latter whether it is the harmless order and peace of nature or her vitality which is the real clue to his essence. Thus some of the certainties of modern man are in contradiction with one another; and it may be questioned whether the conflict can be resolved within terms of the presuppositions with which modern culture approaches the issue.196

Put simply, if Niebuhr is correct then modernity’s own self-understanding not only precludes perspicuity of thought regarding human nature, but in fact is the primary contributor to our perplexity. We cannot see past the presuppositions that condition our self-understanding.

C. The Problem of Individuality

The second area I have already highlighted addresses the question of human significance; more specifically, for Niebuhr, it is the question of individuality. Upon what grounds may we affirm the stature of the individual human being? Put in theological terms, can we affirm anything distinct about *personality*? For Niebuhr, the emphasis on individuality represents one of the first fruits of Renaissance optimism about the possibilities for ascent in man’s emancipation (a confidence echoed in Kant’s view of Enlightenment). It also demonstrates the theoretical difficulty presented for those who would attempt to move beyond Christian faith and its theological affirmations to a rational ground for anthropological claims. As Niebuhr observes, though Renaissance thinkers self-consciously appealed to classical idealism regarding human potential as a way to repudiate the Christian doctrines of man as a limited and sinful creature in favor of an optimistic and expansive view of human capacity, the Renaissance notion of the individual “is a flower which could have grown only on Christian soil.”197 This is so, Niebuhr argues, because classical antiquity lacks an adequate basis upon which to ground individuality.

Individuality—the notion of an independent subject, a reflective self with both will and personality—emerges from the Christian affirmation that man is created “in the image of God,” that he *participates* in the attributes of the Creator and is therefore possessed of a unique stature and worth because of that participation and because of his relation to God. What Niebuhr argues, however, is that this same flower of individuality which could have *grown* only on Christian soil also can only *persist* on Christian soil. With the loss of the Christian conception of human nature, Niebuhr contends,

197 Ibid.
individuality lacks any metaphysical ground and ultimately collapses. This is the case for both the idealist and the naturalist. From the idealistic perspective, the individual is lost in notions of “universal mind” wherein the sheer contingency of individuality fails to conform to the strictures of rational thought. In classical thought, this eventuates in a kind of mysticism grounded in dualism, wherein the body (and particularity) falls away as the soul is united with an undifferentiated divine reason. Viewed from the Christian vantage, this represents a divinity without the personhood characteristic of God. Put in Kantian terms, in the movement from heteronomy to autonomy, the contingencies of particularity associated with the individual must fall away. In Hegel, particulars are synthesized under universals. Idealism leaves no remainder.

From the naturalistic perspective, individuality, which presupposes at least some minimal spiritual dimension, collapses because man is but matter—consciousness is effectively denied. This is man as machine—or in biological terms, man as species. Thus individuality is either submerged into rational universals—as in the thought of Hegel, or submerged into natural processes—as in the Darwinist model, wherein the species takes center stage rather than the individual. In each case the particularity of the individual dissolves or is subsumed into some larger universal. Romanticism, too,

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198 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, tr. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) (“Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself. No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny little dingle-dangle as the Herr Professor who is writing the system.”).

199 One can see this in much of the current trends in offering neuroscientific explanations for consciousness. But see Thomas Nagel, *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18, for the counter-argument from a philosopher of mind (“[I]t is important both for science itself and for philosophy to ask how much of what there is the physical sciences can render intelligible—how much of the world’s intelligibility consists in its subsumability under universal, mathematically formulable laws governing the spatiotemporal order. If there are limits to the reach of science in this form, are there other forms of understanding that can render intelligible what physical science does not explain?”).

200 Thus the naturalists, “by regarding causality as the principle of meaning, can find no place for human freedom and are forced to reduce man to the level of nature.” The rationalists “make nous into the ultimate
meets a similar fate, for although it begins as a self-conscious effort to retain the primacy of the individual in the face of the collapse of individuality in idealistic and materialistic rationalism, it too, ultimately loses the individual, who merges into the collective—usually either the race\textsuperscript{201} or the nation.\textsuperscript{202} In short, “[t]he idea of individuality which is the most unique emphasis of modern culture, is thus a tragically abortive concept, which cannot be maintained as either fact or as idea within the limits of the cultural presuppositions of modernity.”\textsuperscript{203} If we are to retain any notion of the significance—and the \textit{stature}—of the individual, which is the central ground upon which much of modern principle of meaning, and are thereby tempted to divide man into an essentially good reason, which participates in or is identified with the divine, and an essentially evil physical life.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 134.

\textsuperscript{201} Romanticism “either defies every principle of form and order (as in Nietzschenism) or it emphasizes primitive and inadequate natural forms of unity (\textit{Blut und Boden}).” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 50.

\textsuperscript{202} Rousseau’s account of the general will offers a paradigmatic example of romanticism’s loss of the individual in the unity of the nation: “Indeed each individual may, as a man, have a particular will contrary or different from the general will he has as a Citizen. His particular interest may speak to him quite differently from the common interest; his absolute and naturally independent existence may lead him to look upon what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which will harm others less than its payment burdens him and, by considering the moral person that constitutes the State as a being of reason because it is not a man, he would enjoy the rights of a citizen without being willing to fulfill the duties of a subject; an injustice, the progress of which would cause the ruin of the body politic. Hence for the social compact not to be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the following engagement which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body: which means nothing other than that he shall be forced to be free.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract,” in \textit{The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings}, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 52-53.

\textsuperscript{203} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 91-92. There is something more to be said here regarding Darwinian science, which loses sight of the rather obvious fact of human uniqueness. “[I]t is an accepted fact and truth that man is related to the natural order and is therefore in a sense an animal. But it is also true that Darwinian conclusions did materially influence the modern estimate of man’s nature so that it seemed impossible to conceive of man as a unique creature.” Niebuhr, \textit{The Self and the Dramas of History}, 124. “In other words, a justified empiricism in regard to the natural order may become so dominated by ontological (in this case, naturalistic) presuppositions that it becomes impossible to be genuinely empirical about facts of a different order which do not fit into the ontological presuppositions.” \textit{Ibid.}, 125. \textit{See also} Ronald Dworkin, \textit{Religion Without God} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 12 (“[S]cience and mathematics are, in the same way, matters of faith as well. In each domain we accept felt, inescapable conviction rather than the benediction of some independent means of verification as the final arbiter of what we are entitled responsibly to believe.”).
human rights doctrine is predicated,\textsuperscript{204} Niebuhr would have us consider again the theological grounds necessary to anchor such claims.

\textbf{D. The Problem of Errancy}

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, modern thought wrestles with the problem of errancy—the problem of evil. This, Niebuhr holds, is attributable to the rejection of the Christian conception of original sin—a rejection rooted in Renaissance idealism and therefore located at the birth of modernity.\textsuperscript{205} Christianity insists that sin resides at the very center of human personality, in the will. Crucially, this locates evil within the human heart and not merely in either the mind or the body.\textsuperscript{206} By contrast rationalists—whether idealistic or naturalistic—assign evil to the realm of natural necessity and physical impulse, and therefore hold that evil may be overcome through increasing education. For naturalists, particularly romantic naturalists, it is the elaboration of rationality and extension of human power over nature that constitutes the problem—the solution for which is a return to the “harmony, serenity and harmless unity of nature.”\textsuperscript{207} In the political context, a view inflected with this romantic notion will assign errancy to social structures that moved man away from his natural state. Owing a debt to Rousseau, this view is forever reforming elements of the political society in the hopes of resolving a

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\item \textsuperscript{204} For the quintessential example of this, see the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, discussed in Mary Ann Glendon, \textit{A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights} (New York: Random House, 2001).
\item \textsuperscript{205} Niebuhr offers an interesting aside regarding the plausibility of the Christian gospel in which he notes that modern disbelief in sin “has seemed to make the Christian gospel simply irrelevant to modern man, a fact which is of much more importance than any conviction about its incredibility.” \textit{Ibid.}, 23. In other words, the gospel provides an answer to a question modernity is not asking.
\item \textsuperscript{206} Of course this view has not completely disappeared. A strong countervailing tradition continues to insist on precisely this claim. \textit{See, e.g.} Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, \textit{The Gulag Archipelago}, Ch. IV, “The Ascent.” (“Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.”).
\item \textsuperscript{207} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 24. For a classic example of this see Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s \textit{First and Second Discourses}, in \textit{The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings}, tr. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
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problem that, contrary to the presuppositions of the romantic view, cannot be resolved through mere structural reform, beneficial as it may be.

In addition, the rather striking contradiction embodied in the two approaches of the rationalist and the naturalist point up the incoherence and ultimate failure of each perspective. These two approaches, though they concur in their dualist anthropologies, diametrically oppose one another in terms of their diagnosis of the problem of evil and their proposals for its amelioration. For the rationalist, man must “rise from the chaos of nature to the harmony of mind” while the naturalist requires him “to descend from the chaos of spirit to the harmony of nature in order to be saved.”\(^{208}\) The very fact, Niebuhr argues, “that the strategies of redemption are in such complete contradiction to each other proves how far modern man is from solving the problem of evil.”\(^{209}\) This is a chaos that has continued to heighten in the late modern age.

**III. Conclusion**

To summarize Niebuhr’s genealogy of modern anthropology, modern man confronts three basic problems occluding his self-understanding, none of which are readily apparent to him: (1) as a consequence of conflicting dualisms, he is confused about what makes him distinctive—reason, ordered nature or “vitalistic” nature; this confusion pits rational idealists against rationalist naturalists and both of them against romantics in a cacophonous muddle; (2) in rejecting the biblical conception of man as God’s image-bearer, he lacks the basis for any theoretical defense of the modern conception of the individual; and (3) the deep inconsistencies and contradictions in the


\(^{209}\) Ibid.
contending modern anthropological accounts render him incapable of adequately comprehending, much less responding to, the problem of errancy.

From this we may draw some broader conclusions regarding the modern conception of human nature as Niebuhr depicts it. First, and most importantly, it is the case that modern man apprehends himself within what Charles Taylor has referred to as the “Immanent Frame”—an “order that can be envisaged without reference to God.” In other words, the modern view of human nature is closed to the transcendent. Whether his appeal is to reason or to nature, the principle of self-knowledge resides within man himself. Man is, indeed, “the measure of all things.” This view embraces not only an epistemological skepticism regarding the possibility of knowing or apprehending the transcendent, but also an ontological skepticism regarding the very existence of the transcendent in the first place. The world constitutes a totality, one that is objective, complete, and closed to transcendence. All knowledge of human being arrives either through the human exercise of reason or man’s acquiescence to the reality of his status as mere creature. The implication of Niebuhr’s critique of this closed system of modern philosophical anthropology is that the attenuated contemporary understanding of human nature upon which modern politics increasingly depends cannot offer man an adequate explanation of himself to himself. At its root it mistakes the part for the whole, and in a

210 “So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call ‘the immanent frame.’ There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted to a ‘supernatural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one. Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 542.
211 Ibid., 543.
212 Plato, Theaetetus, tr. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing: 2004), 29 (“It’s surely no lowly statement you are running the risk of making about knowledge, but what Protagoras also used to say. But he said these same things in a somewhat different way, for he says somewhere that a human being is ‘the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.’”).
desperate effort to achieve rational consistency and coherence, modern thought sacrifices
descriptive adequacy and comprehensiveness.
Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

—John Calvin

The Ordering Principle for the entirety of Niebuhr’s account of human nature, then, is his claim that the modern effort to understand man without reference to God has failed. One who would construct an anthropology without theology embarks on a doomed voyage; rejection of God entails certain confusion. This, Niebuhr contends, is because the very principle man requires to “comprehend himself in his full stature of freedom” lies “beyond his comprehension.” In other words, human reason, itself an element of the human condition and the created order, cannot step outside of that order and apprehend that which is necessary to offer a full account of the human condition. It is simply inadequate to the task. There is no Archimedean point.

214 This would be a logical consequence of the Christian view, see supra, Ch. 2, §I.D.
I. Immanence and Transcendence

Instead, as we have seen in Chapter 2, a variety of reductive theories predominate, each of which emphasizes one or more features of human being to the exclusion of the others, and none of which adequately takes the full measure of human nature.\footnote{\textsuperscript{216} “Man is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can understand, express and find itself. One might define this total environment most succinctly as one which includes both eternity and time.” \textit{Ibid.}, vol. 1, 124.}

According to Niebuhr, it is only when we ground our anthropological account in the “total environment” in which we live, an environment that comprises “both eternity and time,” that we can understand ourselves.\footnote{\textsuperscript{217} By “eternity,” Niebuhr means not merely an “infinity of time,” but rather “the changeless source of man’s changing being.” \textit{Ibid.} For an outstanding explication of this understanding of God, see David Bentley Hart’s \textit{The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness and Bliss} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).} Here we find Niebuhr in strong affinity with Calvin, who holds that “man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinizing himself.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{218} Cf. Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, vol. I, Book One, ch. 3, 39 (“Yet however the knowledge of God and of ourselves may be mutually connected, the order of right teaching requires that we discuss the former first, then proceed afterward to treat the latter.”).}

Self-knowledge, then, requires a transcendent perspective, yet only God can both “transcend” the world while still intimately related to it.\footnote{\textsuperscript{219} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 126.} In short, Niebuhr holds, without the religious revelation of God’s nature and character, man’s self-understanding is at best incomplete, because without the Divine perspective and presence he cannot appreciate the full dimension of what it means to be human. “Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full stature and freedom and of the evil in him.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{220} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. 1, 131. \textit{See also} Calvin, \textit{Institutes} vol. I, Book One, ch. 1, \textit{supra}. n. 1. Here Niebuhr undoubtedly draws on the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote an entire book on man’s confrontation} It takes Divinity to reveal the full dimensions of humanity.
We can therefore infer that the inadequate anthropologies Niebuhr critiques—those we discussed in Chapter 2—fail in large part because they operate from the limited perspective of immanence.\(^{221}\) They presuppose the illuminating capacity of human reason, which blinds them to its limitations.\(^{222}\) By contrast, Niebuhr’s Christian anthropology recognizes and acknowledges the limitations of reason, an acknowledgement that points towards the further presupposition of transcendence.\(^{223}\) By “transcendence” Niebuhr means to refer to the “divine, the God ‘beyond’ all we know and experience in ordinary life around us.”\(^{224}\) And just as man understands himself by first looking at God, when he apprehends, in faith, God’s transcendence it also points to a limited human faculty; man, too, possesses a capacity for self-transcendence—albeit one far more limited and dependent than that of God. This human self-transcendence manifests itself in man’s experience of the relationship between time and eternity, both through the faculty of memory as well as the more general human ability to step outside of time in self-conscious reflection. Indeed, of all the created order, only humans possess self-transcendence, in that only man among all creatures possess the ability to make himself the object of his own reflection. Just as the divine capacity for transcendence implies this more limited human capacity, so does the human capacity to remember the

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\(^{221}\) See the discussion of Charles Taylor’s “immanent frame” at the close of Chapter 2.


\(^{224}\) Ibid.
past, step outside the present and anticipate the future disclose—or at the very least point to—the existence of the God who grounds human being.\textsuperscript{225}

Modern efforts to comprehend man—and for that matter, existence—have failed, then, because they seek understanding in terms of immanent experience; the spiritual or transcendent dimension is either deemed impenetrable and unknowable (what we might term a “weak” immanence) or denied altogether (a “strong” immanence”). From Niebuhr’s perspective, then, the inwardness of Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} draws us far closer to the truth than does the entirety of modern philosophical reflection upon the self. For this reason, Niebuhr insists, the Christian faith warrants further attention as a means of revealing the truth of existence to human beings otherwise trapped in the finitude of reason—the finitude of immanence. Itself an element of the human condition and the created order, reason cannot step outside of creation and grasp that which is necessary to comprehend the human condition. Reason cannot “go all the way down,” contrary to the extravagant Enlightenment claims made upon its behalf. Lacking an adequate explanatory framework, man is left in perplexity before his existence.

Seen from the theological vantage, then, the genealogy of modern anthropology Niebuhr offers, and which we developed in Chapter 2, moves inexorably towards the conclusion that the very modern philosophical anthropologies which sought to elevate man by liberating him from dependence upon and accountability to God have failed, instead diminishing human stature and engendering doubt regarding human freedom. Though modern man seeks to advance claims about human being, specifically affirmations of human rationality, stature and freedom, having dispensed with Christian

\footnote{225 For Niebuhr, “[f]aith concludes that the same ‘Thou’ who confronts us in our personal experience is also the source and Creator of the whole world.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 131-32. \textit{See also} Paul Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 64.}
philosophical and theological presuppositions he lacks an adequate basis upon which to do so, leaving him in a bitterly fruitless "search for meaning."\textsuperscript{226}

\section*{II. Christianity Part One: The Unity of the Self and the Image of God}

In analyzing the failure of modern anthropologies, we have seen that Niebuhr focuses on three central errors. First, the dualistic frame inherited from classical thought leads to reductive accounts. Modern thought understands man either as "essentially reason," in which case it cannot account for "non-rational vitalities," or as "essentially vitality," in which case it fails to recognize "the extent of [man’s] rational freedom."\textsuperscript{227} The internal consistency of each opposing position precludes a full appreciation of the complexity of human being implied by the existence of the other—a fact evident in "the perennial debate between rationalists and romanticists, the one depreciating and the other glorifying the power of subrational vitalities."\textsuperscript{228} Second, modern culture lacks any basis upon which to ground and defend human individuality and stature despite the centrality of the individual to the liberalism that many recognize as one of the central achievements of modernity. Appeals to nature, history, reason or social structure cannot support the more robust claims we seek to make, leaving us with a distressingly thin account of human individuality and little basis for the insistence on the stature and worth of the

\textsuperscript{226} Viktor Frankl, \textit{Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy} (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1984). Importantly, a Christian would never \textit{search for meaning}; after all, the very notion of a search for meaning presupposes an anthropocentric universe in which meaning is not \textit{given by God} but is rather either a construction or an achievement. Christianity rejects such an understanding. \textit{Meaning is because God is.}

\textsuperscript{227} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 123.

\textsuperscript{228} This is borne out philosophically in the battle between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment, and politically in the tension between those who would defend the “rule of law” and those who advance claims grounded in identity politics. \textit{See Chapter 4, infra.}
individual. Finally, modern naïveté regarding human virtue leaves us mute before human evil, a lack Niebuhr will attribute to modern culture’s misunderstanding of the full nature and consequences of human freedom. In theological terms, we don’t understand sin. We moderns have inherited the naïveté of classical thought without its concomitant sense of the tragic.

Taken together, these three deficiencies point to the larger and more fundamental problem to which we have already alluded: modern thought “lack[s] a principle of interpretation which can do justice to both the height of human self-transcendence and the organic unity between the spirit of man and his physical life.” In developing a secular, solely philosophical anthropology, we have disarmed ourselves of the capacity to penetrate the inner mysteries of the complicated amalgam of dignity and errancy, freedom and bondage at the core of our being. “Man is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can

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229 We might say that Niebuhr anticipated the claims of later antifoundationalists.
230 For a critique of this view, see George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2011), 25 (“I do not assume that there is a religious answer to the worth of humanity. It would be flattering to think, for example, that only human beings are in the image or likeness of the divinity and that therefore we have the dignity of kinship with some entity immeasurably greater than us but nevertheless not utterly removed from us in its nature, not ‘wholly other.’ If we could first believe in the more-than-human entity of monotheism, there would then be no problem about the nature of and reason for imputing dignity to every individual and to the species . . . But we should try to do without such props; they can always give way to enlightenment.”). The problem is that Kateb fails to offer an adequate alternative, a fact that reinforces Niebuhr’s point.
231 Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 9 (“It must be observed that while the classical view of human virtue is optimistic when compared with the Christian view (for it finds no defect in the center of human personality) and while it has perfect confidence in the virtue of the rational man, it does not share the confidence of the moderns in the ability of all men to be either virtuous or happy. Thus an air of melancholy hangs over Greek life which stands in sharpest contrast to the all-pervasive optimism of the now-dying bourgeois culture, despite the assumption of the latter that it had merely restored the classical world view and the Greek world view of man.”). This is a point Nietzsche raises in a parallel, if alternative framing of the question in his *Birth of Tragedy*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992).
understand, express and find itself.”\(^\text{233}\) The solution, for Niebuhr, is faith. Faith in God establishes a ground from which man may approach and confront the limits of human reason without collapsing into either solipsism or fatalism.

**A. Niebuhr's Dialectical Method**

Before developing Niebuhr’s anthropological account it is worth saying something about his methodology. I believe it to be difficult, if not impossible, to understand Niebuhr absent the basic insight that he thinks in fundamentally dialectical terms.\(^\text{234}\) He is at home with, and even seeks out, ambiguity and paradox. This by itself places him at odds with the prevailing mood of the modern world and its emphasis on rational consistency.\(^\text{235}\) As a result, some of Niebuhr’s critics have a tendency to unfairly and erroneously conclude that he simply takes both sides of an issue and then hides


\(^{234}\) Although it is perhaps beyond the scope of this manuscript, it is worth noting (1) that Niebuhr’s dialectical approach should be distinguished from that of Hegel and Marx, at least to the extent that both Hegel and Marx expect temporal resolution, or “synthesis” of the thesis and antithesis, whereas Niebuhr looks to God, rather than a divinized *Geist* or an eschatological materialism to resolve the paradoxes we encounter; and (2) that one can make a sound case that dialectical thought inheres in Christianity itself, not least in the relation of promise to fulfillment, Old Testament to New, Law to Grace. See Augustine’s *City of God*: Bk. I ch. 1 “here my dear Marsillinus is the fulfillment of my promise....” See also *City of God*, Bk. IV, Ch. 33, p. 177: “This is the sacrament, the hidden meaning of the Old Testament, where the New Testament lay concealed.” See also *City of God*, Bk. VII, Ch. 32, p. 293: “We believe that they have been fulfilled; we observe that they are being fulfilled; we are convinced that they will go on being fulfilled.” For an excellent meditation on the relationship of dialecticism to Reformational and early modern thought, see Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone*, arguing that “historical dialectic begins with biblical interpretation; that this kind of thinking is at the heart of the political thought of Luther, Hobbes, and Locke.” ix. Related to these two observations is the larger point that the very notion of the kind of historical movement implied in dialectical thought itself depends upon the linear view of history inaugurated by Hebraic and Christian theology. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

\(^{235}\) Almost two centuries ago Alexis de Tocqueville identified this same modern desire for simplicity and clarity in spheres where such clarity and simplicity remain unavailable. See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, part 1, ch. 1, 430 (“This American way of relying on themselves alone to control their judgment leads to other mental habits. *Seeing that they are successful in resolving unaided all the little difficulties they encounter in practical affairs, they are easily led to the conclusion that everything in the world can be explained and that nothing passes beyond the limits of intelligence. Thus they are ready to deny anything which they cannot understand. Hence they have little faith in anything extraordinary and an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural.*)” (emphasis added).
behind vague words like “mystery” and “paradox,” while others find him infuriatingly difficult to pin down to one position, and still others simply disregard one or another element of his thought (I suspect that it is the failure to adequately account for Niebuhr’s dialecticism that leads so many “Niebuhrians,” such as those referenced in Chapter 1, to claim him almost unqualifiedly for this or that ideological policy position of left or right).

But such a critique misunderstands Niebuhr’s project, and further misunderstands his criticism of modern thought more generally—in part because it commits the very error to which he objects—that of emphasizing rational consistency over empirical or descriptive adequacy. As we have seen in the last chapter, Niebuhr understands modern thought largely in terms of sets of paired and competing opposites. Thus is nature set off against history (manifested in the debates between adherents of natural law and those often accused of relativism), sober-minded realism pitted against dewy idealism (as in international law theory), and reason against vitality and the passions (as with Enlightenment and the romantic protest). The result is a cacophony of competing claims regarding human nature. And indeed, Niebuhr’s entire project may be understood as an endeavor to propose a third approach that moves beyond these paired opposites while incorporating the insights of each.\textsuperscript{237} In other words, Niebuhr asks: what about a third approach which might grant not only the forcefulness of the Aristotelian concept of natural reason, but also of Nietzsche’s critique of the limits of that reason, viewing them as not entirely uncomplimentary and—this is crucial—partial insights into the truth of


\textsuperscript{237} In other words, Niebuhr might respond to Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous question “Aristotle or Nietzsche” by asking “what about Augustine?” \textit{See} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
things? Indeed, if one is to understand Niebuhr, one must appreciate his dialecticism, and my contention here, therefore, is that both Niebuhr’s understanding of man and his account of ethics and politics must be—and indeed only can be—understood from this vantage point.

Another way to explain it might be to say that Niebuhr is the enemy of the very simplicity moderns crave,\textsuperscript{238} and to the extent that any philosophical system purports to explain the whole, Niebuhr is likely to refute it by citing the plausible insights of its critics. Thus he pits man’s determined nature as imagined by naturalism against man’s “indeterminate freedom” as understood by idealism. Likewise the ethics of moral codes and natural law face the challenge of Niebuhr’s Marxist critique of the phenomenology of moralism and his recognition of the insights of historical consciousness—at least to a point. Reason, that rigid god of the rationalists, confronts the passions of romantic thought, yet those very passions face the chastening of reason’s strict lash.

As a consequence, Niebuhr’s dialecticism leads to the oft-frustrating result that no philosophical system remains standing unaltered or unchallenged.\textsuperscript{239} And here one encounters what so many find maddening about Niebuhr. His dialectical approach to thought “opts for a both/and rather than an exclusive either/or appraisal of alternative

\textsuperscript{238} Cf. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 451, wherein Tocqueville assesses the modern craving for simplicity and unity. “As conditions become more equal, each individual becomes more like his fellows, weaker, and smaller, and the habit grows of ceasing to think about the citizens and considering only the people. Individuals are forgotten, and the species alone counts. At such times the human mind seeks to embrace a multitude of different objects at once, and it constantly strives to link up a variety of consequences with a single cause. The concept of unity becomes an obsession. Man looks for it everywhere, and when he thinks he has found it, he gladly reposes in that belief.” (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{239} See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 22. (“[T]he concept of totality . . . dominates Western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to bring forth its objective meaning”).]
doctrines.”²⁴⁰ For Niebuhr, any system of thought must be measured at the bar of human experience, which reveals a more complex reality than any system may comprehend within its totalizing frame. Experience reveals to us that we possess both rational minds and passionate hearts. With Pascal, it acknowledges that “the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing,”²⁴¹ even as it acknowledges the very real value of rational investigation.²⁴² Viewed through Niebuhr’s dialectical lens, each distinct philosophical system’s partial insights, when “taken together are more in harmony with the facts of experience”²⁴³ than they would be without the counterbalance of their ideological opponents. It is this dialectical pattern that establishes the methodological basis for Niebuhr’s reflections on human nature, ethics and politics. In each case, Niebuhr attempts to penetrate to the truth of the whole by investigating the various fragmentary accounts available to thought. The picture that emerges is never as neat and clean as many (or most) thinkers would wish, but it does resonate with and capture the tensions that human beings actually experience in working out their own understanding of these questions. In other words, Niebuhr’s dialecticism is, in a very basic sense, the ground of his realism, and his critique of dualism and simultaneous claim of a more complicated synthesis in human being can only be understood in this dialectical frame; to do otherwise would be to impose exactly the kind of philosophical systematic upon Niebuhr to which he so strongly objects and to resist his claim that experience itself will never be parsimonious.

²⁴¹ Blaise Pascal, Pensées (London: Penguin Group, 1995), 127 (“The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways . . . It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason.”).
²⁴² Here Niebuhr draws upon the resources of a more existentialist mode of thought than one might ordinarily associate with orthodox Christianity.
A further comment is merited here: the reader may accept the foregoing, and then query how this Niebuhrian posture differs from prudence or pragmatism. Given Niebuhr’s acknowledged intellectual debt to William James and yet his simultaneous criticism of John Dewey, it is a question worth raising. Put in more polemical terms, we might ask whether Niebuhr is simply offering an unduly complicated account of what boils down to pragmatism. The answer rests largely upon the ground which the Niebuhrian account depends. Unlike the classical prudence of Aristotle or the modern pragmatism of James, each of which might fall more broadly under the philosophical umbrella of “realism”—and both of which presuppose an immanent perspective, Niebuhr’s theological frame prevents him from adopting such a view. For while Niebuhr maintains a deep affinity with realism and the rejection of sentimentality or undue optimism—particularly when it comes to the sphere of politics, it is hardly the case that he does so in terms of either prudence or pragmatism. His resistance is theological in nature. If prudence finds its ground in the secular tradition of Athens, and pragmatism represents a kind of secularized Protestantism, Niebuhr’s dialecticism, by contrast, finds its root in the theological tradition of Jerusalem—namely the prophetic tradition which recognizes and acknowledges the reality of the human condition even as it demands of God, and even expects of Him, that the reality of human condition as expressed in pragmatism or prudence is not the final word.

B. Contra Dualism: Man as Synthesis

As we have previously seen, Niebuhr’s first objection to modern anthropology lies in its tendency, attributable to its appropriation of classical thought and categories, to offer dualistic accounts of human being, e.g., body-versus-mind, nature-versus-freedom,
and reason-versus-vitality.\textsuperscript{244} It should be noted that there is a risk to framing the question of man’s significance in the dualistic terms we inherit from classical thought. Though we take the notion of body and soul for granted, the assumption of such a structure predisposes our inquiry in a way that may obscure, rather than clarify, certain elements of human being. Niebuhr contends that in the name of rational consistency these accounts tend to identify one facet of human being as central, forcing a marginalization of others. So idealists identify human being with the soaring freedom of the rational mind while largely disregarding the natural limitations of human physicality, and materialists emphasize the physical nature of the body yet offer impossibly reductive accounts of mind and freedom.\textsuperscript{245}

Niebuhr’s response is to resist the bipolarity of these pairs and instead seek to integrate them into a unified account of human nature—here we see his dialecticism in action. For Niebuhr, the Christian account understands man as a \textit{unity}—a \textit{synthesis} of nature and freedom.\textsuperscript{246} Rather than siding with idealists against naturalists or rationalists against romantics, Niebuhr acknowledges the forcefulness of each view but insists that each offers only a partial and incomplete picture of the dynamic complexity of human being. He thus endeavors to integrate these multifarious aspects of Western thought.

\textsuperscript{244} See Ch. 2, §II.B., \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{245} For a fine critique of the limitations of naturalism see Thomas Nagel, \textit{Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{246} In this “biblical view” Niebuhr undoubtedly is the heir of Kierkegaard, who opens \textit{The Sickness Unto Death} with “A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. \textit{A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. In short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two.}” Kierkegaard, \textit{Sickness Unto Death}, 13.

Blaise Pascal, \textit{Pensées}, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005), 63 (“The way the spirit is united to the body cannot be understood by man, and yet it is man.”).
regarding the human condition under the larger rubric of a “Biblical view of man” that 
appreciates “the unity of body and soul in human personality which idealists and 
naturalists have sought in vain.” Recall that part of the problem with the various 
dualisms involving reason and nature emerges when the insights of a given position 
harden into “simple certainties” that require disavowal of the alternative perspective. It is 
these “simple certainties” which cause our self-understandings to err—yet they occupy 
the heart of modern thought. Modernity’s “metaphysics,” Niebuhr writes, “fails to 
comprehend the unity of mind and nature, of freedom and necessity, in the actual life of 
man.” In the name of a kind of mechanistic ontology, it attempts to separate elements 
that cannot be so tidily disaggregated. On the other hand, “[i]n its purest form the 
Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which 
he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence and may 
reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life.”

So what are the dimensions of this unity? How can it be understood? The relevant 
dialectical categories for Niebuhr are nature and spirit, both of which we apprehend 
through an examination of ourselves in the light of the transcendent reality beyond 
ourselves. Man is undoubtedly a natural being; this is a most prominent fact that he 
confronts in his examination of himself. To the extent that he lives a determinate span,

\[247\] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 140. For a detailed explanation of the biblical conception of man as unity, particularly the Hebraic conceptions of *ruach* and *nephesh*, which “connote the Hebraic sense of the unity of body and soul,” see ibid. at 151-52.

\[248\] Ibid., vol. 1, 12. Niebuhr notes that the Biblical view of the unity of man emerges initially out of “primitive Hebraic psychology” in which “the soul of man resides in his blood and the [Greek] concept of an immortal mind in an immortal body remains unknown to the end.” Ibid., vol. 1, 13.

\[249\] Ibid., vol. 1, 4.

\[250\] Ibid., vol. 1, 123.

\[251\] Ibid., vol. 1, 150. Although Niebuhr doesn’t link this anthropological account to Trinitarian theology, the rather obvious resemblance reinforces the relationship between the revealed knowledge of God and the understanding of human nature.
dependent upon the mundane necessities of eating, drinking and procreating to survive, he is wholly “in nature,” and to the extent that he recognizes his natural limitations as a creature, he remains bound by nature, the most obvious limitation being his recognition of his mortality. Yet in his capacity to “know the world” and to make himself an object of his examination, man does so from outside both himself and the world—from a transcendent perspective.\textsuperscript{252} It is from this vantage, as man apprehends himself from without and makes himself an object of his own examination, Niebuhr suggests, that he discovers his capacity for self-transcendence, a great—indeed almost unbounded and even “God-like”—spiritual freedom.\textsuperscript{253} He “is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity.”\textsuperscript{254} Man is therefore both nature and spirit. Niebuhr’s penetrative assessment of human nature depends upon the paradox of, tension between, and synthesis of these two disparate moments of the human condition.

\textit{C. Beyond Natural Law Essentialism}

Given his emphasis on nature, it is worth a moment of digression to address what nature actually means for Niebuhr. After all, it has often been the case that theologically grounded anthropological accounts have appealed to nature as a basis for the account—

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., vol. 1, 55.
\textsuperscript{253} “The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.” Ibid., vol. 1, 3. As Brown explains “[w]e are ‘involved in the flux of nature and time’; we are born, we live, we eat, we make love, we die. But it is also true that we are not ‘involved in the flux of nature and time’ completely, for we transcend, in part at least, that very flux; we not only die but we know that we will die, we reflect on the fact, and we dread our own death. By the gifts of memory and anticipation, we stand in some sense above our mortality and survey it.” Brown, “Introduction,” in The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, xvii. Put differently, one must hold both naturalism and idealism together dialectically.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., vol. 1,181 (emphasis added).
\end{footnotesize}
indeed the very term “human nature” implies a foundational role for unalterable limitation and ordering. But despite Niebuhr’s insistence on at least some natural component to the human subject, appeals to “nature” are not what distinguishes or defines human beings—his is not a teleological theory; in fact, he insists on limits to the philosopher’s deployment of “nature” as a foundation for moral, ethical or political norms.255 Though Niebuhr advances a “Christian interpretation” of human nature—and by his very use of the term implies at least a thin form of essentialism—he nonetheless makes it quite clear that he intends to raise questions about the finality and certainty that is often a central feature of traditional Christian formulations. For Niebuhr, any account of human nature must start with the lived facts of human experience and not fall prey to the inevitable tendency to systematize and totalize. He thus opposes the essentialism of both Aristotle and the Roman Catholic Church on the ground that such a teleological stance fails to do justice to man’s vitality and freedom in history. It is too rational, too systematic. True, God sets “a law for man,” but man, “in his limited way transcends the ‘laws of nature’ and cannot be bound by them.”

Here Niebuhr’s Reformational affinities become clear. For Luther, Providential history is the answer to teleological thinking that predetermines human nature. Moreover, if, as Niebuhr affirms, man is a synthesis of natural limitation and spiritual freedom, then teleology possesses only a limited capacity to explain man to himself; For this reason

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255 This would, of course, follow from Calvin’s contention that the knowledge we require is of man and of God, not merely of nature. The Reformation, in part, represents a repudiation of medieval Catholicism’s efforts to develop a science of nature—a project that emerged out of the medieval importation of Aristotelian teleology into biblical, and particularly Augustinian thought. Related to the problematic relationship of Christianity to teleological accounts, one possible avenue of exploration in this area might well be Niebuhr’s relationship to antifoundationalism—and more generally that intellectual position’s relationship to Christian thought. See Joshua Mitchell, Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History and Identity in Early Modern Thought (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8-9, discussing the basis of antifoundationalism in early modern thought.

256 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 141.
Niebuhr often sides with Marx, Nietzsche and the romantics against the rationalists, whether idealistic or naturalistic, because they understood that man cannot be exhaustively explained in terms of the rational mind. By affirming that man is a synthesis, Niebuhr displaces the easy opposition between essentialism and non-foundationalism. While teleology may play a role, it cannot account for the indeterminate freedom of the human spirit.

In other words, as God’s image-bearer, man possesses broad freedom in history. Attempts to identify and articulate the timeless natural law run afoul of this basic human endowment, and because of their unwarranted confidence in human reason, even indicate a “sinful pretension.”

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257 “There is therefore no uncorrupted natural law, just as there is no completely lost original justice. The freedom of man sets every standard of justice under higher possibilities, and the sin of man perennially insinuates contingent and relative elements unto the supposedly absolute standards of human reason. Undue confidence in human reason, as the seat and source of natural law, makes this very concept of law into a vehicle of human sin. It gives the peculiar conditions and unique circumstances in which reason operates in a particular historical moment, the sanctity of universality. The confidence of medieval Catholicism in the ability of an unspoiled reason to arrive at definitive standards of natural justice thus became the very vehicle of the sinful pretensions of the age. The social ethics of Thomas Aquinas embody the peculiarities and the contingent factors of a feudal-agrarian economy into a system of fixed socio-ethical principles.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 281.

For Niebuhr, man “has a freedom of spirit which transcends both nature and reason.” This spiritual freedom transcends nature because of the human capacity to imagine possibilities and structures beyond those that are given or “natural,” and it transcends reason because of the self’s capacity to justify itself in terms of the self-interested passions, not just through ordered rationality. Reason alone, Niebuhr argues, “is not capable of defining any standard of justice that is universally valid or acceptable,” because the human exercise of reason is ineradicably situated within the particulars of a given political and social setting and, like all other human faculties, is occluded by man’s sinful selfishness. However, Niebuhr’s rejection of natural law thinking should not be taken as advocacy of ethical relativism. Again, he does not think in such binominal terms. Rather, he seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of law and relativism altogether. It is a complicated account; suffice it to say that Niebuhr attempts

260 As Robin Lovin observes, “Niebuhr suggests that any adequate account of human nature must treat freedom not in opposition to a fixed human nature, but precisely as part of that nature. Human nature includes the capacity to stand outside given conditions, to see them as contingent facts, and to imagine how they might have been or might yet be otherwise . . . The characteristic problem with theories of natural law, Niebuhr suggests, is that they deal with the human as creature, but not the human as spirit.” Robin W. Lovin, Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 122-23.
262 See Romans 7:15-24:}

For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”
to situate his own Christian account of man-as-unity in contrast to both the classical and classically-influenced modern accounts.\footnote{See, e.g. Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 7 (“Plato and Aristotle thus share a common rationalism; and also a common dualism . . . ”); vol. 1, 20 (“Descartes, the fountain source of modern culture, manages to conceive of man purely in terms of thought, nature in terms of mechanics and to find no organic unity between the two, thus bearing within himself both the contradictions and extravagances of modernity.”).}

Modernity errs, then, in persisting with its dualisms, that inheritance of classicism which represents a too-tidy disaggregation of man into constituent parts. As Niebuhr explains, “man is not divided against himself so that the essential man can be extricated from the nonessential.” Yet this is the constant temptation of modern thought—to distill the complexity and arrive at a simple identification of the “essential man.” To be sure, Niebuhr does not reject the claim of division, but relocates that division. Here once again we encounter further development of the Christian claim that the classical-modern view is naïve. Any of these anthropological views recognizes the lack of unity within man—the tension between the diverse elements of human personality. The error, however, lies in treating the division too superficially and assigning errancy to this or that element. Thus we get a classical view in which the mind, loosely speaking, is good—even divine, whereas the physical body—and indeed the natural world—is of little use, if not the source of evil, and a modern view which may historicize this movement from darkness to light in self-emancipation.\footnote{See Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” in On History, ed. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 3 (“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.”). See also the discussion of Niebuhr’s account of freedom in Chapter 4, infra.} Christianity counters by acknowledging that this division exists, but affirming that the location of that division is deep within the human soul, and cannot be assigned to this or that “part.”\footnote{See, e.g., Plato, The Republic, tr. Richard W. Sterling and William Scott (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985).} Thus the human attribute most relevant for
consideration of the human predicament is a perhaps paradoxical unity, or synthesis, of
taste and freedom, rather than a dualism of mind-and-body or reason-and-nature.\textsuperscript{266}

Man is thus simultaneously a synthesis, and a \textit{contradiction}. While there is a
“unity of body and soul in human personality”\textsuperscript{267}—the duality is integrated into
unity\textsuperscript{268}—“Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence,” which is “free
self-determination.”\textsuperscript{269} The problem of self-contradiction that Niebuhr identifies has to do
with the nature of freedom—which is why teleological accounts will never suffice. For
Niebuhr, human freedom—and it should be understood that freedom points directly to a
spiritual reality—emerges from man’s spiritual dimension, from consciousness, from
mind and from will. In this Niebuhr identifies with the idealists who valorize the mind
and imagine the possibilities available to mind freed from the limitations of nature. Yet
for Niebuhr this freedom is not merely emancipatory—rather in his freedom man
discovers—even creates—new modes of servitude and brutality. I will have more to say
on this presently when my discussion turns to the problem of errancy and later when I
address political life. For now, suffice it to say that human freedom is not necessarily the
unqualified good imagined by Enlightenment thought; rather, the mode in which that
freedom is exercised has significant consequences.

\textsuperscript{266} Recall that Niebuhr criticizes idealism because it “regard[s] the mind as essentially good or essentially
eternal and the body as essentially evil,” and naturalism because it “seek[s] for the good in man-as-nature
\textsuperscript{267} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{268} Niebuhr traces this rather directly to Hebraic thought. “For prophetic Judaism, existence in this world is
intensely meaningful, though the ultimate center of meaning transcends the world. It knows nothing of the
distinction between pure form and concrete existence, or between a virtuous reason and a sinful body. It
rejoices in the physical creation. ‘Lord how manifold are thy works. In wisdom though hast made them all’
Niebuhr}, 5.
\textsuperscript{269} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 16.
D. Christianity and the Revelation of Individuality

If we are to understand the Christian origins of individuality in Western thought, we must explore the Biblical doctrine that man was “created in the image of God.” In the opening chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Christian and Hebrew Bibles, we read:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.270

The significance of this passage cannot be overstated in terms of its importance for the Christian conception of human dignity and human significance. Yet our task is perhaps less straightforward than it seems, for as Niebuhr reminds us, “[t]he Biblical doctrine that man was made in the image of God and after His likeness is naturally given no precise psychological elaboration in the Bible itself.”271 Scripture offers Hebraic terms such as רוח (ruach or “breath”) and נשף (nephesh or “soul”) and Greek terms such as πνεῦμα (pneuma or “spirit”) to refer to the unity of body and soul, yet as we have already observed Scripture never draws the sharp distinctions preferred in Hellenistic thought.272 Indeed, when Christianity attempts such rigid rationalistic clarity, it tends to do so on the terms of classical, and not Biblical thought, with the best example of such neo-classicism to be found in in the medieval period. “[I]n the latter Middle Ages, when Aristotle shared with Augustine and the Bible the position of ultimate arbiter of theological truth,” the imago Dei was sometimes defined “in terms which do not advance beyond the limits of

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270 Genesis 1:26-27 (ESV)
272 “The Biblical psychology, minus the Genesis doctrine of the image of God in man, does not therefore lay the full foundation for the subsequent Christian view of man but it does fit into the general outline of subsequent emphases by not making to sharp a distinction between body and soul and between soul and spirit, and by not defining spirit in terms of such sharp intellectualistic connotations as are found in Greek philosophy.” Ibid., vol. 1, 152
the Aristotelian conception of man as a rational creature.” This flattens the psychological depth of the Christian understanding by reducing it to philosophical explanation.

For this reason, Niebuhr turns to the theology of Augustine, “the first Christian theologian to comprehend the full implications of the Christian doctrine of man.” Though Augustine flirts with rationalistic terminology, his understanding of man’s image-bearing status ultimately grounds itself in the human capacity for self-transcendence, particularly in the field of human memory. It is an investigation of the experience of the interiority of human being, and the implications of that experience for the self, as opposed to beginning with more rational categories of body and mind. Thus Augustine’s examination of memory points first to the nature of the self, and then further to the implications that the self can transcend itself—a matter of crucial significance for Niebuhr’s account. For Augustine, memory allows man to transcend not only time, but also the self. The recognition of the capacity of memory to achieve this kind of self-transcendence leads Augustine to the conclusion that “the limits of the self lie outside the self.” In a sense we might say memory offers a window to eternity.

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273 Ibid.
274 Ibid., vol. 1, 153-54.
276 “All this I do inside me, in the huge court of my memory. There I have by me the sky, the earth, the sea, and all things in them which I have been able to perceive—apart from what I have forgotten. There too I encounter myself: I recall myself—what I have done, when and where I did it, and in what state of mind I was at the time.” Ibid.
277 Ibid., vol. 1, 156.
278 Augustine’s understanding of memory is undoubtedly influenced by Plato’s doctrine of ἀνάμνησις (anamnesis)—that memory is an un-forgetting of ideas one knew before birth. See Plato, Meno, tr. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, Cambridge (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980), 86b. In Book X of his Confessions, Augustine wonders how we can desire happiness when we have never known it: “How then, do I seek for the happy life? For I cannot find it until I can reach the place where I can truly say: ‘It is enough: it is there.’ How then, do I seek it? Is it by remembrance, as though I had forgotten, but can still remember that I have forgotten? Or is it through desire to learn something unknown, something which
In other words, the freedom man enjoys in the wide range of his memory points to the heart of Niebuhr’s account of human stature and individuality. As Niebuhr explains, Christianity “is responsible for a heightened sense of individuality” because “the human spirit, in its freedom is finally bound only by the will of God, and the secret of its heart is only fully known and judged by the divine wisdom.” Christianity elevates the individual human being above his location in a given family, tribe or community. It lifts his moral obligations from abstract ethical rules or norms of conduct associated with any temporal human community or law to direct accountability before God. (This conception of individual freedom, Niebuhr argues, actually doesn’t emerge fully until modernity, because the medieval period remained bound by a feudal-agrarian economy and the influence of the Greek rationalism of “natural law” philosophy and religious authoritarianism of which Niebuhr is so critical.) While he sees the modern notion of individuality as emerging from both the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance, Niebuhr argues that the expression of that individuality differs for each movement. The Reformation, through the Lutheran conception of the “priesthood of all believers,” “represents the final development of individuality within the terms of the Christian religion.” As a result, the Christian understood his “individual responsibility to

either I never knew or which I have so completely forgotten that I cannot even remember that I have forgotten it? Is not the happy life the thing that all men desire, literally every single man without exception? But where did they get the knowledge of it, that they should desire it so? Where did they see it, that they should love it so? We have it certainly, but how we have it, I do not know... Is this form of knowledge, I inquire, in the memory? If it is, then we must have experienced happiness some time previously. I am not now asking whether this is an experience which we have all had individually, or whether the experience was in that man who first sinned, in whom we all died and of whom we are all born in misery.” Augustine, Confessions, Book X, Ch. 18, 221-22. Although in a different sense than Plato, who advocated for the reincarnation of the soul, Augustine, too, supposes the idea of memory as a kind of un-forgetting, only what is remembered is that placed in the soul by God.

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279 Ibid., vol. 1, 57.
280 Ibid., vol. 1, 59.
281 Ibid., vol. 1, 59-60.
God.”

In a very real sense, the individual is elevated above all legal and rational norms in his direct moral accountability to God, giving him both a heightened stature and a heightened responsibility.

The Renaissance, by contrast, sought to move individuality a step farther still. It drew on notions of “the infinite potentialities of the human spirit.” God becomes not the judge of human sinfulness but rather the witness of or fulfillment of human potential. This Niebuhr sees as an inheritance of medieval mysticism and nominalism. It points towards that most “unchristian concept and reality: the autonomous individual” who both “ushers in modern civilization and who is completely annihilated in the final stages of that civilization.”

Here again the theological foundation of individuality becomes crucial. Individuality emerges out of man’s status as image-bearing creature. He is thus both reflective of God and accountable to Him and to His law. As Niebuhr observes, though there is a “strong anti-legalism” here, it “is not antinomian because it is bound to the will of God as revealed in Christ.” The unity retains both freedom and—scandalous though the notion might be—bondage. The secularized version of individuality, however, is the autonomous individual, who indeed is a law unto himself, yet this individual cannot be sustained by himself; lacking that Divine foundation, he eventually dissipates into an anonymous member of a commercial-industrial civilization which

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282 Thus, Niebuhr points out, Luther can write “When you lie upon your deathbed you cannot console yourself by saying ‘The pope said thus and so.’ The devil can drill a hole through that assurance. Suppose the pope were wrong? Then you will be defeated. Therefore you must be able to say at all times: ‘This is the word of God.’” Ibid., vol. 1, 60.
283 Ibid., vol. 1, 61.
284 Ibid.
285 Ibid., vol. 1, 59.
286 Ibid., vol. 1, 58.
eliminates “individual initiative, resourcefulness and decisive action.”288 Here again we confront provocations regarding the nature and possibility of freedom. Niebuhr insisted that modern thought deeply misunderstood the dimensions, both ontologically and morally, of human freedom, and argued that this had profound implications for the modern capacity to account for human errancy. We turn first to the nature of freedom, according to Niebuhr, and then to the matter of human errancy.

III. History Versus Ontology: The Ambiguity of Freedom

Niebuhr’s qualified understanding of freedom weaves throughout his discussion of politics just as it grounds his account of human nature. And in keeping with the rest of his thought, it is a complicated, nuanced account that requires some unpacking, as it integrates multiple, countervailing intellectual trajectories. To summarize briefly, if somewhat cryptically: Niebuhr offers an ontological view of freedom that contrasts with the predominantly historical conception of freedom reflexively endorsed by modern thought.289 Accordingly, if we are to grasp what exactly Niebuhr has in mind when he talks about freedom and its implications for political life, it may help to first appreciate the “modern” view against which Niebuhr positions his account of freedom. That view, Niebuhr contends, maintains “extravagant estimates of freedom”290 and makes the “grievous” error of identifying freedom with virtue.291 This is so both because the modern understanding of freedom inherits the anthropological errors associated with classical thought and because it remains captive to Enlightenment presuppositions regarding the

288 Ibid., vol. 1, 66.
289 Putting the matter into a theological register—and a perhaps more cryptic one at that, the “problem of modernity” is present in Adam. See Mitchell, Joshua, Not by Reason Alone.
290 Niebuhr, Faith and History, 70.
291 Ibid., 89.
occasion and means of its emergence that owe a surprising and largely unacknowledged debt to Christianity.

I have already suggested that moderns do not think of freedom ontologically, but rather historically; in less enigmatic terms we might say that moderns do not consider freedom a primordial condition of human being, but rather an emergent phenomenon in human history.292 It is in this sense that Niebuhr might suggest that we are all unwitting heirs of the Enlightenment’s Kantian conceit of man’s gradual release from a “self-incurred tutelage.” Modern thought imagines a historical dialectic of bondage and freedom; a movement from ignorance to knowledge, from tradition to innovation, from the “picture-thinking” of religion to the unmediated knowledge of philosophy.294 As Niebuhr puts it, for “modern culture . . . history [is] the story of man’s increasing power and freedom,”295 a power and freedom which we deem virtuous.

A. Classical and Christian Roots of the Modern Conception

Like the modern anthropologies Niebuhr so carefully parses, and which we examined in Chapter 2, this imagined history traces its foundations to roots in both classical and Christian thought. Here again we confront what Niebuhr considers to be a


293 Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” in On History, 3 (“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.”).

294 See G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ¶ 765 p. 463 (“This form of picture-thinking constitutes the specific mode in which Spirit, in [the religious] community, becomes aware of itself. This form is not yet Spirit’s self-consciousness that has advanced to its Notion qua Notion: the mediation is still incomplete. . . . The content is the true content, but all its movements, when placed in the medium of picture-thinking, have the character of being comprehended.”) (emphasis in original).

295 Niebuhr, Faith and History, 30.
perennial predicament of the modern: the engagement with and adoption of ideas and conceptions that endeavor to synthesize antithetical understandings inherited from the classical and Christian eras. Indeed, if one wishes to think in the dialectical terms so typical of Niebuhrian thought, it may better serve to think not in terms of a historical dialectical movement between ancient and modern, or darkness and light, but rather to investigate the hermeneutical dialogue\textsuperscript{296} between classical and Christian sources in birthing the modern.

The classical sources of modern conceptions of freedom find their origin in Plato’s famous Cave Allegory, related in Book VII of the Republic.\textsuperscript{297} In that myth Plato famously depicts the individual soul’s ascent from the darkness of ignorance, represented by the flickering shadows cast upon the wall of the Cave before a row of prisoners, to the brilliant light of knowledge, represented by the “light” of the Good illuminating the soul now unbound and freed from the darkness of the Cave. Crucial for our purposes is the fact that Plato has in mind the possibility of the individual’s transformation in the light of the Good. Here two key features of his account are of particular importance: First is the fact that while there is undoubtedly a temporal dimension to the story—a movement of the individual soul from ignorance to knowledge—that temporal dimension is limited to the individual life; no conception of history enters into the account. In fact, as Niebuhr argues, the conception of any meaning in history eludes the classical mind; the Greeks did not contemplate the historical horizon.

Neither Greek nor Roman classicists had any conception of meaning in human history. History was a series of cycles, a realm of endless recurrences. Aristotle

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maintained that the arts and sciences were lost and found against not once but an infinite number of times. Zeno envisioned the end of the world as a huge conflagration which would destroy the world’s body. This pessimism about both man and his history is the natural consequence of the mind-body dualism which characterizes Greek thought far beyond the limits of Platonism. It culminated invariably in the conviction that the body is a tomb, a conviction which makes neo-Platonism the logical consummation of Greek thought.

Second, neither the individual prisoner nor anyone else initiates this transformation; human agency is notably absent. Instead, Plato presents a recurrent note of involuntary compulsion—even force—and implies that it is the Good itself that compels the individual’s upward ascent.

One prisoner is freed from his shackles. He is suddenly compelled to stand up, turn around, walk, and look toward the light. . . . Again let him be compelled to look directly at the light. Would his eyes not feel pain? Would he not flee, turning back to those things he was able to discern before, convinced that they are in every truth clearer and more exact than anything he has seen since? . . . Then let him be dragged away by force up the rough and steep incline of the cave’s passageway, held fast until he is hauled out into the light of the sun.

Thus the soul is liberated by force and dragged kicking and screaming into the light of knowledge of the Good against its will.

The Cave Allegory, in one form or another, lies at the heart of modern thought, yet modern thought reinterprets the myth from an account of the treacherous spiritual ascent of the individual soul from opinion to knowledge into a metaphor for the historical

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298 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 10. *See also ibid.*, vol. 2, 11 (“‘Christ,’ declares St. Paul, is ‘to the Greeks foolishness’ because ‘they seek after wisdom,’ This is to say that the expectation of the disclosure and fulfillment of the meaning of history at a point in history or at the end of history, has no meaning for the Greek world.”).

299 Joshua Mitchell comments, “[t]hat Socrates says nothing about the source of the prisoner’s liberation is itself ground enough to think that the cause of the prisoner’s turn towards the Good is the Good itself, which breaks in “suddenly [ex-aiphnê]\(s\) as an irruption from beyond the Cave.” Joshua Mitchell, *Plato’s Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 72 (footnotes omitted). Human agency—particularly of the sort imagined by Kant, is nowhere to be found.


302 For a fascinating meditation on the consequences and influence of the Cave Allegory on western thought, see Arthur Herman, *The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization* (New York: Random House, 2013) (arguing that the intellectual and philosophical rivalry between Plato and Aristotle laid the foundations of and shaped western culture).
ascent of the entire human race from the darkness of ignorance to the light of understanding. It is this innovation of history which modernity inherits from Christianity.\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Faith and History}, 21. Niebuhr’s dependence upon Charles Norris Cochrane’s \textit{Christianity and Classical Culture} is evident here, as he attributes the triumph of Christianity in large part to Augustine’s \textit{City of God} because “it marked the triumph of the Christian faith over the culture which informed the Roman civilization, the inadequacies of which made it impossible to deal creatively with the new problems of freedom and order which arose after it became apparent that Augustus’ imperial solution for the problem of order had only temporary but not permanent validity.” \textit{Ibid. See also} Charles Norris Cochrane, \textit{Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine} (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003).} According to Niebuhr, Christianity’s success in supplanting classical thought is attributable in no small part to the intellectual triumph of the Christian notion of history over the classical notion of endless recurrence in the fifth century: \footnote{It is worth noting that Augustine, in his \textit{City of God}, is among the first to make the move from ontology to history. In clear contrast to the modern tale, Augustine, however, understands God to be the author of this unfolding, and therefore only God, \textit{and not} man, can finally know the end. The modern move is to reject this epistemological humility, instead asserting that the end of history is freedom. In such a narrative, hope is not necessary; we have supplanted it with knowledge.} “The Biblical-Christian historical spirituality triumphed over classicism in western culture when it became apparent that the classical doctrine of recurrence made it impossible for men to deal creatively with the endlessly novel situations and vitalities which arise in history.”\footnote{Perhaps the best explication of this argument may be found in Mircea Eliade, \textit{The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History}, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1954) (arguing that the Hebrew faith broke with the mythic-cyclical view of Ancient Near Eastern religion, introducing a historical and linear view of a God Who intervenes in history: “It may, then, be said with truth that the Hebrews were the first to discover the meaning of history as the epiphany of God, and this conception, as we should expect, was taken up and amplified by Christianity.”).} This Christian understanding of history draws upon both the Messianic expectations of Hebraic thought as well as Christianity’s professed fulfillment of those expectations in the Person of Christ and the anticipated future eschaton in which God makes right what man cannot, achieving a final justice at the end of history.\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 2, 287ff.} Christianity, in other words, infuses meaning into problems, such as the problem of suffering, which are evidently problems of history and historical movement and for which classicism’s natural philosophy was ill-equipped to address, much less resolve.
Set against this backdrop the development of the modern conception of human freedom as an emergent phenomenon in human history becomes clearer. Modern thought historicizes the Cave allegory’s concept of the individual soul’s movement from darkness to light. It is perhaps worth emphasizing again that here modern thought draws, whether explicitly or not, on Christian historical thought, whether we look to Augustine’s two cities, or Joachim of Flores’ three moments of history, or Luther’s understanding of pre-and post-Incarnation epochs of “law” and “grace.” Suffice it to say that in the modern understanding, whether Christianity’s debt is acknowledged or not, the final meaning of history is found in humanity’s movement from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge, bondage to freedom. Here it is worth quoting Niebuhr at length:

We cannot understand the spiritual problem of our age if we fail to apprehend a profounder cause for the triumph of modern culture over the Christian faith. That cause was the introduction of a new and more plausible version of the classical idea of simple rational intelligibility as the key to historical meaning. The modern version was more plausible because it rested upon the new appreciation of the significance of time and the realization that there is actual growth and development in both nature and history. This new view of a moving, a growing, a developing world seemed to resolve every perplexity about life and to hold the promise of emancipation from every evil.

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The vast panorama of historical occurrences ceased to be a mystery, difficult to comprehend meaningfully because it contained a simple pattern of intelligibility. Amidst all the confusion of the rise and fall of empires, of civilizations and cultures, one clear pattern was discernible: history was the story of man’s increasing power and freedom.

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307 “The supposed break that early modern thought purportedly represents is, after all, the offspring of a Christian trinitarian schema in which history is divided into the ancient, medieval and modern periods.” Mitchell, Not By Reason Alone, 18 (although Mitchell immediately rejects this formulation).

308 See Eric Voegelin, The New Science of Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 110-14 (arguing that Joachim’s “trinitarian eschatology created the aggregate of symbols which govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day.”), ibid., 111. See also Niebuhr, Faith and History, 2 (“Joachim of Flores... transmuted Christian eschatology into the hope of a transfigured world, of a future age of the Holy Spirit, in which the antinomies and ambiguities of man’s historic existence would be overcome in history itself.”).
Modern culture is always an essentially temporalized version of the classical answer to the problems of human existence. Anaxagoras had said: ‘In the beginning everything was in confusion; then Mind came and ordered the chaos.’ The modern version is: ‘In the beginning everything is in confusion; but Mind grows progressively to order the chaos.’

Thus does the modern account of freedom historicize classical thought and secularize Christian thought to offer its unique account of freedom as humanity’s liberation from a bondage of its own making. According to the modern tale, the ancient authorities of priest and king who formerly obstructed human freedom (and therefore precluded the fullness of human flourishing) have been swept away with the new recognition of human autonomy. Armed with the flowering insights of the natural and social sciences, egalitarian and democratic politics can then emerge as man both masters the natural world and gains social and political autonomy. Set against this backdrop we can now see more clearly how Niebuhr characterizes the modern conception of freedom as historical, rather than ontological and why he focuses on the link between freedom and virtue. For modern thought, freedom has both an origin and an evolution, and this evolution is bound up with the notion of progress—civilization’s upward ascent; there is a moral component to historical movement. From this vantage it would be incoherent to qualify the

Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 30 (emphasis added). From the Christian perspective, modernity captures the Reformational insights of the historical dialectic of law and grace best articulated in the work of Martin Luther. According to Luther, history must be understood in terms of the Christ event, and more specifically, its meaning as the pivot point of history in which man’s relationship to God moves from one of Law, expressed in terms of the Hebraic law given to Moses at Sinai, to Grace, expressed in terms of the sacrificial death of Jesus in fulfillment of the requirements of Law, making possible the new dispensation of Grace. For a fuller account of the influence of the historical dialectic of law and grace, see Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History and Identity in Early Modern Thought* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 19ff.

“A further consequence of modern optimism is a philosophy of history expressed in the idea of progress. Either by a force immanent in nature itself, or by the gradual extension of rationality, or by the elimination of specific sources of evil, such as priesthoods, tyrannical government and class divisions in society, modern man expects to move toward some kind of perfect society. The idea of progress is compounded of many elements. It is particularly important to consider one element of which modern culture is itself completely oblivious. The idea of progress is possible only upon the ground of a Christian culture. It is a secularized version of Biblical apocalypse and of the Hebraic sense of a meaningful history, in contrast to the meaningless history of the Greeks.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 24.
“goodness” of freedom; by juxtaposing freedom with bondage and placing them in an historically dialectical relationship, the modern moral estimation of freedom as an unqualified good follows almost inexorably.\textsuperscript{311}

When juxtaposed with modernity’s historical account of freedom’s emergence, we can now begin to comprehend the distinctiveness of the ontological account Niebuhr offers. Unlike the modern, who sees freedom as a hard-earned benefit of man’s recent rejection of antiquated traditional understandings of human beings (recall Aristotle’s “slave by nature” in Book I of the\textit{Politics}\textsuperscript{312}), Niebuhr insists on freedom’s primordiality. “The essence of man,” Niebuhr writes, “is his freedom.”\textsuperscript{313} Freedom does not\textit{emerge} as a result of political or intellectual shifts in social or cultural conditions, rather it simply\textit{is} a basic precondition of human being in the first place. And while it is “modern” to recognize the movement of history, it is a modern error to place human freedom, rather than divine completion, at the purported culmination of that movement. This modern error emerges from the failure to reckon with human sin.

\textbf{B. \textit{The Edenic Myth and Human Being}}

As a way of explaining the Christian, theological understanding of freedom’s primordiality, Niebuhr proffers the biblical account of the Garden of Eden set forth in Genesis 1-3. It should be noted at the outset that Niebuhr views the account as mythical,

\textsuperscript{311} For an analysis of the theological dimensions of this historical dialectic of bondage and freedom (or in the terms of Christian—or at least Lutheranism—law and grace), see Mitchell,\textit{Not By Reason Alone}, 19ff.

\textsuperscript{312} “Accordingly, those who are as different[from other men [as the soul from the body or man from beast—and they are in this state if their work is the use of the body, and if this is the best that can come from them—are slaves by nature. For them it is better to be ruled in accordance with this sort of rule, if such is the case for the other things mentioned. (9) For he is a slave by nature who is capable of belonging to another—which is also why he belongs to another—and who participates in reason only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it.” Aristotle,\textit{Politics}, Book II, Ch. 1, 1245b16 – 23, tr. Carnes Lord (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 1984, 41.

\textsuperscript{313} Niebuhr,\textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 17.
one designed to reveal truths about the human condition, rather than one intended to represent a historical event. Indeed, for Niebuhr the power of the account emerges precisely from this mythical understanding, and efforts to historicize the account tend to destroy the insights it offers.\(^{314}\) In the Edenic myth, God creates Adam ("אָדָם", which is simply the Hebrew word for "man") in his own image. Man is a “natural creature” but one possessed of a kind of self-determination—or at the very least possessed with a fundamental choice, presented in the text through the proscription against eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.\(^{315}\) In Niebuhr’s terminology, man is “both free and bound, both limited and limitless.”\(^{316}\) He “stand[s] in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.”\(^{317}\) In other words, freedom is present at the beginning; it simply is the fundamental condition in which we find ourselves. It is not an achievement of humanity but a divine endowment, though that endowment itself is conditioned by the choice God gives man between good and evil. It is this choice, Niebuhr holds (following Kierkegaard) which fosters human anxiety. “Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved.”\(^{318}\) It is the “dizziness of freedom.”\(^{319}\)

\(^{314}\) Ibid., vol. 1, 260ff.

\(^{315}\) “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Gen. 2:15-17 (ESV).

\(^{316}\) Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 182.

\(^{317}\) Ibid.

\(^{318}\) Ibid.

\(^{319}\) Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 61 ("Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.").
We have already noted that Niebuhr imagines the human being as an uneasy synthesis of nature and spirit in which the spiritual man recognizes his status as a creature of nature and wrestles with the tension between these dual aspects of his being. As Niebuhr puts it, poised “at the junction of nature and spirit,”

[the freedom of his spirit causes him to break the harmonies of nature and the pride of his spirit prevents him from establishing a new harmony. The freedom of his spirit enables him to use the forces and processes of nature creatively; but his failure to observe the limits of his finite existence causes him to defy the forms and restraints of both nature and reason.]

Thus, for Niebuhr, it is man’s innate capacity for self-transcendence—his freedom that prompts his anxiety. As we have seen in Chapter 3, torn between the fact of his natural finitude and his ability to imagine “the whole” beyond himself, man yearns to overcome his natural limitations and is tempted to escape them through the twin idolatries of pride and sensuality. Niebuhr explains:

[m]an is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching its power beyond its limits.

Man’s uneasy suspension between freedom and finitude, and his final inability to “obscure his blindness” provokes a fundamental anxiety that is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must

321 Ibid.
322 Thus, man experiences “both [...] involvement in nature and [...] transcendence over it,” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1, 181. Compare this to Tocqueville’s account of religious hope: “The short space of sixty years can never shut in the whole of man’s imagination; the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy his heart. Alone among all created beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense longing to exist; he scorns life and fears annihilation. These different instincts constantly drive his soul toward contemplation of the next world, and it is religion that leads him thither. Religion, therefore, is only one particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself.” Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 1, part 2, chap. 9, 296-97.
Man is free and has knowledge of his freedom; therefore he is anxious. Nevertheless, Niebuhr is careful to clarify that “anxiety is not sin.” It is, rather, both sin’s precondition and “the basis of all human creativity.” The anxiety born of freedom has both “creative and destructive elements. . . . The same action may reveal a creative effort to transcend natural limitations, and a sinful effort to give an unconditioned value to contingent and limited factors in human existence.”

Man is free to choose good or evil. It is in his response to anxiety that he sins—either by “deny[ing] the contingent character of his existence (in pride and self-love)” or by “escap[ing] from his freedom (in sensuality).”

Developments in history neither ameliorate nor exacerbate this anxiety any more than they allow his freedom to emerge; just as man experiences, at every moment, the “paradox of freedom and finiteness,” so does he experience anxiety at every moment in time. Historical developments do not deepen or sharpen the human anxiety that is always already present. This is not to suggest that history has no trajectory for

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324 Ibid., vol. 1, 182 (emphasis added).
325 This, in a sense, captures the “dizziness of freedom” to which Kierkegaard referred. See supra, n.30.
326 Ibid., vol. 1, 183. “Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin. Man is a creature of time and place, whose perspectives and insights are invariably conditioned by his immediate circumstances. But man is not merely the prisoner of time and place. He touches the fringes of the eternal.”
328 Ibid., vol. 1, 183.
329 Ibid., vol. 1, 184.
330 “Therefore I say to you be not anxious’ contains the whole genius of the Biblical view of the relation of finiteness to sin in man. It is not his finiteness, dependence and weakness but his anxiety about it which tempts him to sin.” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1, 168.
331 “[W]here there is history at all, there is freedom; and where there is freedom, there is sin.” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, Ibid., vol. 1, 80.
332 Thus, for Niebuhr, “man is both creature and imago Dei, finite and self-transcendent, bound by natural necessity and yet free, nature and spirit, vitality and form, individual and communal, partial and fragmentary and yet open to indeterminate possibilities, etc. He is and always will be, full of these varied polarities; his philosophical self-understanding and social existence reflect the tension between these
Niebuhr; on the contrary, as I have already noted, he explicitly rejects “the meaningless history of the Greeks” in favor of the Biblical “sense of a meaningful history.” And though history does not comprise an account of man’s endless upward ascent, it does have both direction and meaning. Man has a destiny. This destiny, however, is not revealed in a historical dialectic of bondage and freedom, or ignorance and knowledge, but rather in the fact of the Incarnation. “History can be meaningful, therefore, only in terms of a faith which comprehends its seeming irrationalities and views them as the expression of a divine wisdom which transcends human understanding.” Importantly, then, our understanding of freedom—and for that matter our understanding of history is grounded in the external perspective of God. The relevant dialectic for Niebuhr, therefore, is thus not historical but vertical—between the temporal and the eternal, the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas Dei*.

It should now be clear why Niebuhr views freedom as ontological, and furthermore why he offers only a qualified estimation of its virtue. The worth of freedom is utterly dependent upon our assessment of the exercise of that freedom, and that

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333 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 315. (“[T]he whole of modern secular culture (and with it that part of the Christian culture which is dependent on it) assumes that growth means progress. . . . We have sought to prove that history does not support this conclusion.”).
334 In typical Niebuhrian fashion, he immediately complicates things: “The idea of progress is possible only on the ground of Christian culture.” Progress “is a secularized version of Biblical apocalypse and of the Hebraic sense of a meaningful history . . . But since the Christian doctrine of the sinfulness of man is eliminated, a complicating factor in the Christian philosophy is removed and the way is open for simple interpretations of history, which relate historical process as closely as possible to biological process and which fail to do justice either to the unique freedom of man or to the daemonic misuse which he may make of that freedom.” *Ibid.*
335 Thus God’s “final” self-communication in history points for Niebuhr to the *disclosure* of history’s meaning in Jesus Christ.” Gilkey, *Niebuhr’s Theology*, 367. “The role of Christ is thus not to reveal the promise of a future divine sovereignty in history but to reveal in his life and death the divine mercy in, through, and beyond the divine judgment, to manifest the divine conquest of evil through forgiveness and renewal rather than through power and sovereignty, that is, in and through human freedom, and not over it.” *Ibid.*, 376 (emphasis added).
exercise is achieved in the condition of anxiety. Man is capable of higher forms of creativity—the historical progress so celebrated in modern thought—but is simultaneously capable of using his freedom to wreak havoc and destruction. And for Niebuhr, the usual human pattern is to exercise the freedom of the self destructively—either through the self-assertion of pride or the self-annihilation of sensuality. Each of those movements constitutes a poor use of human freedom. Only when the self recognizes, in faith, its dependence on God, does it exercise its freedom properly.

In sum, Niebuhr does not hold that freedom is bad or undesirable—that would be a simple negative of the modern view in which freedom is historicized. Rather, Niebuhr offers the alternative, ontological view that “the essence of man is [and always has been] his freedom”; freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be human. The modern construction of a tautology between freedom and goodness fails, Niebuhr holds, because it naively overlooks the moral ambiguity at the heart of freedom. “The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies . . . from gauging the perils of freedom accurately.” An empirical understanding recognizes that freedom conditions the possibilities of both good and evil. It is neither to be uncritically celebrated nor ruthlessly limited; rather it must be recognized and protected even as we remain conscious of the conditions it make possible for human agency and therefore for political life.

337 See Ch. 3, I §II.B, supra.
338 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, 17 (emphasis added).
339 Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, xii.
340 This is, of course, precisely the theme of the Edenic account in Genesis 2 and 3. When presented with the freedom to choose between good and evil, man chose evil! Niebuhr alludes to this narrative when he observes that “chaos is a perennial peril of freedom.” Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, 122.
IV. Christianity Part Two: Sin, Errancy and the Problem of Evil

There is perhaps no better evidence of our modern anthropological perplexity than our apparent inability to offer any serious account of evil. As the political theorist Charles Mathewes has observed, “Modernity has a hard time thinking about evil, because we moderns lack ways to acknowledge its persistence and pervasiveness, its intimacy and intransigence, so lack the resources by which we might bring the challenge of evil into reflective focus.” Indeed, as Niebuhr points out, as a consequence of the aforementioned dualism we tend to pursue diametrically opposed strategies for dealing with human errancy (the use of the term “evil” has itself fallen into disfavor). Rationalist heirs of the Enlightenment view errancy as an artifact of our primitive past of nature and impulse, and therefore seek to educate man out of the realm of natural impulse and into the realm of knowledge and freedom. For the rationalist human errancy becomes a technical—even a scientific—problem. Naturalists and counter-Enlightenment romantics answer that it is the increasing elaboration of human culture and society that cause men to err, and therefore counsel a “return to nature.” Contesting narratives of progress and decline confront one another without resolution. We can see this clash exhibited in the current public policy debates over the use and abuse of natural resources, wherein

342 Ibid. Nonetheless, as Matthew Sitman argues, “to be a theorist of modernity is by necessity to be a theorist of evil. That is, it is impossible to give even minimal consideration to the theory and practice of politics in Europe since the fragmenting of Christendom and the passing of medieval society without confronting the desolation and despondency of the twentieth century: its two world wars, the Holocaust, the rise of totalitarianism and the looming possibility of nuclear annihilation.” Matthew Sitman, *Reinhold Niebuhr, Modernity and the Problem of Evil: Toward a Politics of Hope*, presented at the Eric Voegelin Society Meeting, 2009.
343 See Ch. 2, §II.B, supra., Ch. 3, §II.B, supra.
344 This of course, indicates a rather obvious debt to the Judeo-Christian Edenic narrative.
345 For a fascinating study of decline narratives in particular, see Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).
scientific investigation and applied technology battle environmental preservation. Scientists insist on the possibility that we may improve the human condition through increased mastery over the caprices of nature, whereas environmental preservationists aver that our ever-increasing distance from and attempted mastery over nature sow the seeds of our own destruction. Both strategies cannot be pursued simultaneously.

**A. Niebuhr’s Recovery of the Doctrine of Original Sin**

Niebuhr attributes the modern failure to develop an adequate account of evil both to the incoherence of the often diametrically opposed anthropological presuppositions which we have already discussed as well as to the modern rejection of “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith,” that of original sin. Sin is, of course, a concept that few take seriously today; at a minimum it strikes the modern mind as an affront to our dignity (a peculiar irony given the theological sources of Western concepts of human dignity) if not a moralistic weapon deployed by a crabbed clergy or resentful bourgeois. Even Niebuhr acknowledged the inevitable complications associated with the notion of original sin when, toward the end of his public career he expressed some doubt regarding whether his use of the term undercut the persuasiveness of his claims regarding human errancy:

> I made a rather unpardonable pedagogical error in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which I hope I have corrected in the present volume. My theological preoccupation prompted me to define the persistence and universality of man’s self-regard as ‘original sin.’ This was historically and symbologically correct. But my pedagogical error consisted in seeking to challenge modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture . . . The reaction to my ‘realism’ taught me much about the use of traditional symbols. The remnants of social optimism pictured me as a regressive religious authoritarian, caught in the toils of an ancient legend. But it was even more important that the ‘realists,’ including many, if not most, political philosophers who were in substantial agreement with the positions taken in my Gifford

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Lectures, were careful to state that their agreement did not extend to my ‘theological presuppositions.’

Despite this qualified disavowal, however, he never offered any real alternative to the term *sin*, and I consider it necessary to engage with both the theological concept as well as the underlying psychological account Niebuhr presents if we are to understand how Niebuhr’s account of evil and errancy counsels a corrective to the inadequacy of modern anthropology.

By *sin* Niebuhr means not simply bad acts, but rather the tendency to self-deceptive pride and self-seeking that infects the human will, “the unwillingness of man to acknowledge his creatureliness and dependence upon God and his effort to make his own life independent and secure.”

Quite simply, for Niebuhr sin provides the best available description of the human tendency towards outsized self-importance, partiality, failure and moral corruption. It is not low self-esteem, faulty education or inadequate social institutions, but *sin* that offers a way for man to understand the limitations of his

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348 “The universal inclination of the self to be more concerned with itself than to be embarrassed by its undue claims may be defined as ‘original sin’.” Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 30.
350 And while there continue to be notable attempts, particularly among secular “conservatives,” to reframe the concept of sin in less controversial and more “scientific” terms such as “unintended consequences.” See, e.g., Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (2 vols.) (London: Routledge, 1945); Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1961), or “epistemological modesty.” See, e.g., David Brooks, “The Big Test,” in *The New York Times* (Feb. 21, 2009), A25; David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011) (“Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know. Epistemological modesty is the knowledge of how little we know and can know. Epistemological modesty is an attitude toward life. This attitude is built on the awareness that we don’t know ourselves.”). For Brooks, as for Socrates, the problem is noetic. This is all the more striking when one realizes that Brooks does have some conception of the notion of *sin*. See David Brooks, “Tree of Failure” in *The New York Times* (January 14, 2011), A27. However, sin, despite its religious roots for Brooks, inevitably becomes a secularized synonym for human limitation or ignorance rather than a concept that captures the extreme self-centeredness of a corrupt human will. This misses the centrality of *willfulness* to the notion of sin. Following such a secularizing approach would be to once again mistake the problem of the human predicament for a noetic one rather than a problem of will and to side with classical culture and the Renaissance against Christianity and the Reformation.
capacity and his projects. Indeed, sin points Niebuhr to his “realistic” approach to politics—it is the link between his anthropology and his political theory. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from this assessment that Niebuhr offers a fundamentally pessimistic vision of human capacity—the common error of those skeptical of the concept. From the perspective of immanent reason, it would certainly appear so; the notion of an inborn capacity for errancy implies an unchangeable condition which reason cannot touch. From the transcendent perspective, however, this is not the case. To understand this, however, requires an elaboration of Niebuhr’s account of the relationship of sin to freedom—a relationship to which I have already alluded but not discussed in detail.

The ironic truth of the doctrine of original sin, so disfavored by the modern mind, which associates it with bondage, is that the concept of sin presupposes—and indeed depends upon—a highly nuanced understanding of freedom. The existence of sin offers man a certain realm of free action otherwise denied him. More practically, the understanding of sin, coupled with the soul’s orientation towards faith, allows man to continue striving for the accomplishment of his projects in history while avoiding both overconfidence and the temptation to a kind of nihilistic fatalism. In short, recognition of sin coupled with an orientation towards faith gives man hope:

[the hope of Christian faith that the divine power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable prerequisite for diligent fulfillment of our historic tasks. Without it we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human

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351 Here, despite Niebuhr’s general sympathy for romantic thought, he offers a rather stark counter to Rousseau, the progenitor of this line of argument. See, e.g. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 121 (‘Rousseau’s romanticism is provisionally pessimistic, yet it becomes the very fountain of optimism in modern educational theory.’). See also ibid., 94 (noting that in Rousseau “the seat of virtue is found in rational impulse unspoiled by rational disciplines.”)
powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities.352

B. Niebuhr, Augustine and Kierkegaard: Anxiety and the Psychology of Sin

I have already alluded to the discontinuity between Niebuhr’s account of sin and what he considers the optimism of modern thought.353 Nonetheless, the account Niebuhr offers moves beyond a merely dogmatic formulation of the question. Instead, he frames a defense of the theological conception of original sin in terms largely psychological and empirical in nature. In other words, while affirming the truth of the doctrine, his defense emerges not from an insistence on doctrinal orthodoxy but rather upon the grounds of empirical validity and descriptive adequacy. Thus we encounter his aforementioned observation that “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”354 Niebuhr’s project seeks, at least in part, to defend the religious doctrine of sin in the terms and language of modern thought. He is not interested in simply affirming a religious doctrine without more; rather he attempts to explain to a modern audience relatively hostile to the doctrine of original sin why it ought take sin more seriously both as a way of understanding the human predicament and as a language through which the modern world may grapple with evil.

Once again we must keep in mind the dialectical method through which Niebuhr approaches anthropological problems, as well as his affinity for existential thought. His account of sin draws largely upon two Christian thinkers in this category: Augustine of Hippo and Søren Kierkegaard. From Augustine, Niebuhr draws the doctrine of original

353 “The final certainty of modern anthropology is its optimistic treatment of the problem of evil.” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 23; Cf. Ibid., vol. 1, 24 (referring again to “modern optimism” and the “idea of progress.”).
354 Niebuhr, Man’s Nature and His Communities, 24
sin in the first place. From Kierkegaard, Niebuhr inherits the importance of the condition of anxiety (for Kierkegaard, related directly to the condition of sin) for disclosing the nature of human being. As we have already seen, in the face of more dualistic accounts Niebuhr affirms that man is an uneasy unity of nature and spirit. Human self-transcendence—the ability to move beyond mere nature in spiritual freedom—prompts us to recognize both our natural finitude—the truth of our eventual death—as well as our capacity to move outside of the merely natural. This tension provokes the anxiety that leads to sin. Torn between the fact of his natural finitude and his ability to imagine “the whole” beyond himself, man yearns to overcome his natural limitations and is tempted to escape them through the twin idolatries of pride and sensuality.

Niebuhr explains the internal experience of this reality:

Man is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching its power beyond its limits.

356 Cf. The Sickness Unto Death and The Concept of Anxiety.
357 With Kierkegaard, in other words, he affirms that “man is a synthesis.” Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death, 13.
358 Thus, man experiences “both [] involvement in nature and [] transcendence over it,” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 181. Compare this to Tocqueville’s account of religious hope: “[t]he short space of sixty years can never shut in the whole of man’s imagination; the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy his heart. Alone among all created beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense longing to exist; he scorns life and fears annihilation. These different instincts constantly drive his soul toward contemplation of the next world, and it is religion that leads him thither. Religion, therefore, is only one particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself.” Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 1, part 2, chap. 9, 296–97.
360 Niebuhr’s account is remarkably redolent of Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of man in the second volume of Democracy in America: “If man were wholly ignorant of himself he would have no poetry in him, for one cannot describe what one does not conceive. If he saw himself clearly, his imagination would remain idle and would add nothing to the picture. But the nature of man is sufficiently revealed for him to know something of himself and sufficiently veiled to leave much in impenetrable darkness, a darkness in which he ever gropes, forever in vain, trying to understand himself.” Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), vol. 2, part 1, chap. 17, 487.
Man’s uneasy suspension between freedom and finitude, and his final inability to “obscure his blindness” provokes a fundamental anxiety that is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion.\textsuperscript{361}

Anxiety is inevitably linked to freedom—man is free and has knowledge of his freedom; therefore he is anxious.\textsuperscript{362} Nevertheless, Niebuhr is careful to clarify that “anxiety is not sin.” It is, rather, both sin’s precondition\textsuperscript{363} and “the basis of all human creativity.”\textsuperscript{364} Anxiety has “creative and destructive elements. . . . The same action may reveal a creative effort to transcend natural limitations, and a sinful effort to give an unconditioned value to contingent and limited factors in human existence.”\textsuperscript{365} Anxiety, then, is the unavoidable fact of the human condition. It is only in man’s response to anxiety that he sins—either by “deny[ing] the contingent character of his existence (in pride and self-love)” or by “escap[ing] from his freedom (in sensuality).”\textsuperscript{366}

In other words, when confronted with the anxiety associated with the reality of the human condition, we choose either prideful self-assertion or solipsistic sensuality.

\textsuperscript{361} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 182 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{363} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 183. “Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin. Man is a creature of time and place, whose perspectives and insights are invariably conditioned by his immediate circumstances. But man is not merely the prisoner of time and place. He touches the fringes of the eternal.” \textit{Ibid.}, vol. I, 28-29.
\textsuperscript{364} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. 1, 183.
\textsuperscript{365} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. 1, 184.
\textsuperscript{366} “Therefore I say to you be not anxious’ contains the whole genius of the Biblical view of the relation of finiteness to sin in man. It is not his finiteness, dependence and weakness but his anxiety about it which tempts him to sin.” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 168.
According to Niebuhr,

When anxiety has conceived it brings forth both pride and sensuality. Man falls into pride when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance; he falls into sensuality when he seeks to escape from his unlimited possibilities of freedom, from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination, by immersing himself into a ‘mutable good,’ by losing himself in some natural vitality.\(^{367}\)

1. The Problem of Pride

While both pride and sensuality represent grave peril, “Biblical and Christian thought has maintained with a fair degree of consistence that pride is more basic than sensuality and that the latter is, in some way, derived from the former.”\(^{368}\) Pride is the original sin.\(^{369}\) “[T]he sin of man consists in the vanity and pride by which he imagines himself, his nations, his cultures, his civilizations to be divine.”\(^{370}\) Man’s anxious insecurity and ignorance renders this pridefulness utterly pervasive, resulting in rebellion against God and injustice to men.

Man is insecure and involved in natural contingency; he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human creatureliness. Man is ignorant and involved in the limitations of a finite mind; but he pretends that he is not limited. He assumes that he can gradually transcend finite limitations until his mind becomes identical with universal mind. All of his intellectual and cultural pursuits, therefore, become infected with the sin of pride. Man’s pride and will-to-power disturb the harmony of creation. The Bible defines sin in both religious and moral terms. The religious dimension of sin is man’s rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God. The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice. The ego which falsely makes itself the centre

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\(^{367}\) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 186.
\(^{368}\) *Ibid. See also ibid.*, vol. 1, 228 (“Without question Biblical religion defines sin as primarily pride and self-love.”).
\(^{369}\) Although “it cannot be claimed that Christian thought is absolutely consistent in regarding pride as the basic sin . . . [t]he definition of sin as pride is consistently maintained in the strain of theology generally known as Augustinian.” *Ibid.*., vol. 1, 186. *See also* Augustine, City of God, book XIV, chap. 13: “Now could anything but pride have been the start of the evil will? For ‘pride is the start of every kind of sin.’ And what is pride except a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation? For it is a perverse kind of exaltation to abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed and to become, as it were, based on oneself, and so remain. This happens when a man is too pleased with himself: and a man is self-complacent when he deserts that changeless Good in which, rather than in himself, he ought to have found his satisfaction.”
\(^{370}\) Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 137.
of existence in its pride and will-to-power eventually subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life.  

Pride in its modern iteration, moreover, is no artifact of historical moments or cultural transformation; rather, “the pride of modern man is a new version of the old human pride which finds the conclusions of Biblical religion too damaging to human self-esteem.”

Moreover, while Niebuhr understands the temptation to pride as a danger for all individuals at all times, he also warns of the still greater dangers associated with “group pride.” Here again, anthropology drives politics. He views the collective as even more dangerous than the individual because “the pretensions and claims of a collective or social self exceed those of the individual ego. The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centred and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual.”

Individuals, well aware of their own weakness, band together under the banner of the nation, which “seek[s] to break all bounds of finiteness [and] pretends to be God.” Indeed, it may be the most feeble and anxious who most desire the powerful state to compensate for that weakness.

This is both the reason for human greatness and the occasion for man’s failure. Recall that for Niebuhr weak, powerless men will band together under the mighty state, which then serves as a prosthesis, “transcend[ing] their individual power and prestige,” magnifying their capability to exert their will-to-power and offering them access to a level of power and prestige that, individually, they could never hope to possess. The power unleashed by this collective pride, Niebuhr warns, is a far “more pregnant source

\[\text{\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., vol. 1, 177-78.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{372} Ibid., vol. 1, 149.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{373} Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 208.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{374} Ibid., vol. 1, 212.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{375} As Niebuhr explains, “[i]t may be that such group pride represents a particular temptation to individuals who suffer from specific forms of the sense of inferiority.” Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{376} Ibid., vol. 1, 210.}\]
of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride.”\textsuperscript{377} The danger is a collection of weak individuals actively willing domination by an all-powerful state.\textsuperscript{378} Writing in the 1930’s, Niebuhr observed a particularly acute example of this problem in the context of American race relations, observing that “[i]t is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race.”\textsuperscript{379} Instead, Niebuhr observed, the kind of non-violent resistance eventually adopted by Dr. Martin Luther King two decades later was necessary; simply put, “the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so.\textsuperscript{380} Niebuhr thus worried more about the dangerous consequences of pride expressed as violent will-to-power and domination than about the sensual escape of the masses into a politics-denying triviality. This is an understandable concern, particularly when viewed in light of the violently destructive political regimes and racial discrimination plaguing the West during Niebuhr’s lifetime. And it offers us perhaps a better way of understanding violent and extreme movements today than the largely economo-political approach now common.

\textbf{2. The Problem of Sensuality}

With pride, man seeks security in the elevation of the self to the place of God. He fails to grasp the mystery inherent in his self-transcendence—that is to say he fails to recognize that his self-transcendence points beyond himself to God. Instead he takes upon himself the divine office self-referentially. Recognizing his self-transcendence, he

\textsuperscript{377} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. 1, 213.
\textsuperscript{378} \textit{Ibid.}, vol. 1, 208.
\textsuperscript{380} \textit{Ibid.}, 253.
fails to apprehend its Referent. Pride implicates the notion of man as God’s image-bearer but errs in that man then worships the *image*—himself—rather than the God who bestowed His image on man. The alternative to this prideful elevation of the self is a kind of resigned acquiescence that seeks security in some other element of the created order. In this alternative error, which Niebuhr terms “sensuality,” man throws himself into some partial element of the world and finds meaning and security in that element.\[381\] If pride is the idolatry of the self, sensuality is simply idolatry.\[382\] In psychological terms, Niebuhr understands sensuality as an intentional “effort to escape from the freedom and the infinite possibilities of spirit by becoming lost in the detailed processes, activities and interests of existence, an effort which results inevitably in unlimited devotion to limited values.”\[383\] Sensuality represents man’s exhausted effort to turn inward and idolatrously endeavor to make some small part of life the whole.\[384\]

Niebuhr spends far less energy developing a theory of sensuality than of pride, and both admirers and critics of Niebuhr have criticized this emphasis on pride at the

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\[381\] “Sometimes man seeks to solve the problem of the contradiction of finiteness and freedom, not by seeking to hide his finiteness and comprehending the world into himself [pride], but by losing himself in some aspect of the world’s vitalities. In that case his sin may be defined as sensuality rather than pride.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 179.

\[382\] Even this formulation may be too simple; Niebuhr noted the tension in Christian theology on the matter: “Is sensuality . . . a form of idolatry which makes the self god; or is it an alternative idolatry in which the self, conscious of the inadequacy of its self-worship, seeks escape by finding some other god? The probable reason for the ambiguous and equivocal answers to this question in the whole course of Christian theology is that there is a little of both in sensuality.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 233-34.

\[383\] Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 185. Niebuhr scholar Robin Lovin’s own characterization of Niebuhr’s dialectical tension between pride and sensuality illuminates the similarity between Niebuhr and Tocqueville—in fact he almost transposes it into a Tocquevillian idiom. “The same anxiety that drives one person to a vaulting ambition to secure fame and power may lead another, who has fewer outlets for ambition, to a sensual lassitude that fears no loss because it finds nothing worth grasping.” Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 112.

\[384\] Tocqueville recognized this same danger in his prophetic account of modern “soft” despotism, observing that “I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches and feels nothing. He exists in and for himself . . . Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 2, chap. 6, 691-92.
expense of a theory of sensuality.\(^{385}\) I believe that what we now consider an oversight may be attributed to two factors. First, during Niebuhr’s lifetime the sensual sins—not only those associated with sexual norms but those associated with consumption of controlled substances and ostentatious displays of wealth as well—were subject to widespread social disapproval. As Niebuhr observes, “The sins of sensuality, as expressed for instance in sexual license, gluttony, extravagance, drunkenness and abandonment to various forms of physical desire, have always been subject to a sharper and readier social disapproval than the more basic sin of self-love.”\(^{386}\) Given that the common moral norms of the time tended to rough accordance with Christian proscriptions, Niebuhr likely deems them less worthy of attention. Second, to the extent that Niebuhr does address sensuality from a theoretical perspective, he does so in the context of his critique of what he considers to be Augustine’s “morbid” use of “sex as the primary symbol of [sensual] passions.”\(^{387}\) Indeed, his discussion of sensuality focuses largely on sexuality; in that he certainly anticipated the importance of sexual politics in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But in doing so Niebuhr may have avoided developing a more general theory of sensuality that understands the problem from the perspective of a loss of faith in God to begin with. Put differently, sensualism, like pride, is a byproduct of what Charles Taylor has called the “immanent frame.”\(^{388}\)

In his weighty tome *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that modern man occupies a social space or order characterized by instrumental rationality, a secular (as opposed to

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\(^{385}\) Lovin notes that “on the whole, Niebuhr gives less attention to sin as sensuality than sin as pride. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 143. (For an excellent discussion of the dangers of modern sensuality, see *ibid.*, 143-57).

\(^{386}\) Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 228.

\(^{387}\) *Ibid.*, 231.

sacred) understanding of time, and a basic human self-sufficiency.\(^{389}\) This order he views as “natural” (in contrast to “supernatural”) or “immanent” as opposed to “transcendent.” In such a world, the movement towards God, to the extent it even constitutes an option, is just that—an option—and not an imperative.\(^{390}\) And prideful self-elevation strikes us as rather silly—like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. We are left with only ourselves, and therefore with what Niebuhr considered sensuality—“an effort to escape the prison-house of self by finding a god in a process or person outside the self.”\(^{391}\) Even a moment’s reflection reveals the truthfulness of this insight. Sex is only one of many ways we attempt to lose ourselves in some particular of the world—there are many others involving everything from obscure hobbies to consumption of mass media in all its forms. In short, the Christian evidence that modern man has lost his way grounds itself, in part, on the abundant evidence of widespread, crabbed sensuality in the world today.

3. The Third Way: The Response of Faith

Still, for Niebuhr the idolatry of pride, the eternal human temptation to “be as gods”\(^{392}\) constitutes the *fundamental human problem*. Of course, Niebuhr’s emphasis is understandable both as a historical and a theological matter. Historically speaking, he had witnessed global war, holocaust and the rapid expansion of two brutal totalitarian regimes. Against such a backdrop it is hardly surprising that Niebuhr concerns himself

\(^{389}\) Ibid., 541-43.

\(^{390}\) As the philosopher James K. A. Smith observes, even religious believers occupy the immanent frame: “We now inhabit this self-sufficient immanent order, *even if we believe in transcendence*. Indeed, Taylor emphasizes the ubiquity of the immanent frame; it is ‘common to all of us in the modern West’. So the question isn’t *whether* we inhabit the immanent frame, but *how*. Some inhabit it as a closed frame with a brass ceiling; others inhabit it as an open frame with skylights open to transcendence.” James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 92-93.


\(^{392}\) Gen. 3:4 (ESV).
less with the lonely, isolated and enervated soul collapsing into sensuality than with the destructive consequences of man’s evident desire to rekindle “the ancient fire.”  

From a theological perspective, Niebuhr follows the Augustinian tradition that associates pride with original sin, which renders his emphasis on human pride a logical consequence of his theology. Yet, although he views democracy as one institutional mechanism that might mitigate the negative consequences of pride on human societies, and thus writes approvingly of the American founders—a topic which I will take up in detail in Chapter 4, Niebuhr nonetheless holds that neither anxiety nor the temptation to idolatry can be “solved” in history; the temptations to pride and sensuality perdure as perennially attempted modes of response to the anxiety of existence. Yet, Niebuhr argues, there is a third way proposed by the Christian faith—a dispositional solution in which man, by faith in a God far larger than himself, is oriented towards both humility of spirit and hope as a way of mitigating the effects of pride in the human heart.

An immediate caution is in order: we should not misunderstand Niebuhr as arguing rather simply—even evangelistically—for a return to the hegemonic position of the Christian church. Indeed, while the Christian religion ideally articulates a prophetic opposition to the inevitable tendency of nations towards “national self-deification,” it

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393 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 490 (“Must the ancient fire not some day flare up much more terribly, after longer preparation? More: must not one desire it with all one’s might? even will it? even promote it?”).

394 “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defence* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xi.


too, can “become the vehicle of collective egoism.” As evidence, Niebuhr points to the historic church of Augustine, which consciously set the civitas Dei over against, and in judgment of, the civitas terrena, yet “bec[ame] the instrument of the spiritual pride of a universal church in its conflict with the political pride of an empire.” While the church offered a counter to the idolatrous claims of the Holy Roman Empire, in the course of doing so, and making claims to final authority and universality, the church itself became a “vehicle of collective egotism.” Thus, Niebuhr explains, “[t]he fact that human pride insinuated itself into the struggle of the Christian religion against the pride and self-will of nations merely proves how easily the pride of men can avail itself of the very instruments intended to mitigate it.” As with the state and, indeed, with all secular institutions, the church can place truth “in the service of sinful arrogance.”

It is worth noting that Niebuhr’s conception of the true, prophetic purpose of the Christian religion well illustrates the virtue of Christian faith for moderating modernity’s excesses. For Niebuhr, the prophetic charge appointed to the church is to “judge the relative character and contingent achievements” of nations and political powers, a task the church undertakes from a location outside the world of time and history, “within terms of a religion of revelation in the faith of which a voice of God is heard from beyond all human majesties and a divine power is revealed in comparison with which the nations are as a ‘drop of a bucket.’” This is in the manner of a proclamation, a prophetic voice of divine power and judgment calling the nations to account, declaring:

398 Ibid., vol. 1, 215.
399 Ibid., vol. 1, 216.
400 Ibid., vol. 1, 217.
401 Ibid., vol. 1, 217.
402 Ibid., vol. 1, 217.
403 Ibid., vol. 1, 214.
404 Ibid., vol. 1, 215.
Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, He taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto Him?\(^{405}\)

Still, even in its pronouncement of “the prophetic truth that all men fall short of the truth,” the church remains susceptible to the debilitating and corrupting effects of group pride.\(^{406}\)

For Niebuhr, then, it is not the church that can save us.\(^{407}\) The final truth, the “general judgment upon the collective life of man, [is] that it is invariably involved in the sin of pride.”\(^{408}\) Instead, Niebuhr argues, it is the disposition of the heart that represents the solution to anxiety—the disposition of faith. “Faith in the wisdom of God is thus a prerequisite of love because it is the condition without which man is anxious and is driven by his anxiety into vicious circles of self-sufficiency and pride.”\(^{409}\) Christian faith in the hope for redemption beyond history preserves men from seeking to ameliorate their anxiety through idolatrous, frenzied pride, sensual individualism. Yet this hope is no stoic

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\(^{405}\) Isaiah 40:15-18.


\(^{407}\) Niebuhr’s lack of ecclesiology is a point on which Niebuhr has received no small amount of criticism, despite his discussion of the topic in vol. 2 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* at 138-39, 144-52. See, e.g. John Howard Yoder, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 29 (April 1955), 101-17; Wendy Dackson, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Outsider Ecclesiology,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God & Power*, ed. Richard Harries & Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 88-89. (“Ecclesiology is one of the weaker aspects of Niebuhr’s thinking . . . There are very few definitions of ‘Church’ in Niebuhr’s writings, and even fewer expansions of that idea. A reader will be hard-pressed to find as much as a chapter on the nature of the Church in Niebuhr’s work, let alone how that essence is lived out in responsible action, either towards its members or towards a wider society. This is the main difficulty in pinning down a well-elaborated ecclesiology in the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr.”). But See Gabriel Fackre, “Was Niebuhr a Christian?”, *First Things*, October 2002. (“Critics often accuse Niebuhr of lacking an ecclesiology. As a pastor and teacher in the church he helped to found—the Evangelical and Reformed Church—I saw for myself his deep immersion in and love for the Church. This ecclesial context is basic to who he was and how he thought, especially so his shaping by both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions of his church. While Niebuhr never attempted to construct a systematic ecclesiology, his life and faith cannot be understood without a grasp of the functional ecclesiology in which they are grounded.”).

\(^{408}\) Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, vol. 1, 214.

resignation or quietist withdrawal. Rather, it frees men from the exhaustion of their futile, sinful efforts to overcome their fundamental anxiety and allows them to carry out their appointed work with diligence. Thus,

[t]he hope of Christian faith that the divine power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable prerequisite for diligent fulfillment of our historic tasks. Without it we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities.

The world community, toward which all historical forces seem to be driving us, is mankind’s final possibility and impossibility. The task of achieving it must be interpreted from the standpoint of a faith which understands the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements and yet has confidence in their meaning because it knows their completion to be in the hands of a Divine Power, whose resources are greater than those of men, and whose suffering love can overcome the corruptions of man’s achievements, without negating the significance of our striving.410

V. Conclusion

Only by recognizing the final impossibility and unachievability of all human projects in time and acknowledging in faith his dependence on God for their completion can man fully accept the tension between the imperative for action in the world and the recognition of the ultimate imperfection and finitude of all human plans. This leads to an ethic of humility and a serenity that looks beyond history for fulfillment of hopes that can only be met beyond time, yet at the very same time, a confidence in the future.411 Men must always act with the humble recognition that they will never fully achieve their desired ends, and that the consequences of acting in the world may prove far different

410 Niebuhr, Children of Light, 189-90.
411 It is no accident that the Latin etymology of the word “confidence,” con fide, literally translates as “with faith.”
than those originally intended. Thus does the theology of original sin lead to a doctrine of politics, the subject to which I now turn.
Chapter 4

TOWARD A NIEBUHRIAN POLITICS: REALISM, UTOPIA AND DEMOCRACY

Any error in the appraisal of the moral resources of individuals is accentuated when it is made the basis of political theory and practice.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

This project began with the claim that the anthropological framework at the heart of Western modernity fails to comprehend man, and therefore that to the extent we grapple with what appear to be intractable political problems, we ought to attend first to the fundaments of modern anthropology if we hope adequately to confront the second-order matter of political life. For that reason, the last two chapters have investigated the anthropological question in detail. Chapter 2 explored the Niebuhrian critique of the prevailing and largely incoherent philosophical anthropologies undergirding modern political theories, while Chapter 3 dealt with Niebuhr’s Christian theological anthropology, laying out what Niebuhr identifies as the points of nexus and divergence between Christian and modern thought and defending the importance of

Niebuhr’s recovery of the Christian doctrine of original sin. Having accomplished those two tasks, with Niebuhr’s assessments firmly in mind we can now return to the question of politics. Specifically, what consequences for political life would the adoption of Niebuhr’s Christian anthropology entail? What likely pitfalls might we avoid by correcting for the modern anthropological errors he identifies? In short, how might a Niebuhrian approach inform our appraisal of the current moment?

If we take seriously the questions Niebuhr raises regarding the ambiguity of human freedom and the limits of human virtue, we can begin to sketch a “Niebuhrian” politics that follows therefrom—a politics that many have termed “chastened,”413 but perhaps better understood not primarily in terms of its refusal to adopt unreservedly idealistic aspirations for politics, but instead in terms of its fundamental grounding in the status of man in relation to—or indeed, before God. So understood we can describe Niebuhr’s as a political theology414 (or perhaps more accurately a theological politics415) in which each element of the political theory itself depends upon a recognition of the authority and finality of God’s providential judgment and the reality of man’s divided nature. I acknowledge at the outset that taking this approach to Niebuhr’s thought marks out controversial territory; after all, some secular “Niebuhrians,” attracted to the empirically compelling account of politics he offers, endeavor to adopt this or that


414 I here rely on William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott’s definition of the term: “Political theology is, then, the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God’s ways with the world.” William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, “Introduction” in The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2.

415 I borrow this term from Stanley Hauerwas, see Stanley Hauerwas, Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence (Eugene, OR: Brazos Press, 2004), 34, cognizant of the fact that Hauerwas remains deeply critical of Niebuhr’s political theory as misguided and/or insufficiently theological. See Stanley Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology ( Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 87ff.
element of Niebuhr’s political theory shorn of its theological foundation and affirm that
we can embrace Niebuhr’s political insights without accepting his underlying theological
affirmations.\textsuperscript{416} However, I want to argue that such an approach is at best misguided, and
at worst draws its advocates into precisely the kind of naïve and vaguely liberal politics
of which Niebuhr was so deeply critical. Against this position I contend that Niebuhr’s
compelling political insights are compelling precisely because they apprehend the
existential predicament of man before God. This is why Niebuhr begins his project by
talking about doctrines of human nature, and why his account of human nature is
grounded in theology. In this he is deeply influenced by Calvin, who famously opens his
Institutes of the Christian Religion with the declaration that “nearly all the wisdom we
possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of
God and of ourselves.”\textsuperscript{417} As Chapter 3 demonstrates, even a cursory glance at Niebuhr’s
political counsel reveals both his insistence on the centrality of human fallenness to an
adequate apprehension of political reality and possibility, and his commendation of
theological virtues as a means of its amelioration. Thus Niebuhr would require us to

\textsuperscript{416} James Gustafson describes this view as “agree[ing] with [Niebuhr’s] analysis of the significance of
events and circumstances while rejecting his theological concepts and their foundations,” which “seems to
imply that his theology was accidental to his interpretive and evaluative powers. It was dispensable
baggage. Or if the theology was important, its import resided in its biographical function. It could be
claimed that it was necessary for Niebuhr personally, but not necessary for others.” James M. Gustafson,
Morton White, Arthur Schlesinger, and Hans Morgenthau, among others, seem to fall into this camp. \textit{See,
e.g.} Morton White, “Epilogue for 1957: Original Sin, Natural Law and politics,” in Morton White, \textit{Social
Thought in America}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (criticizing Niebuhr’s identification of psychological realism with the
theology of original sin). More recently political theorist Joshua Cherniss has adopted this approach. \textit{See}
Joshua Cherniss, “Between Cynicism and Sentimentality: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Political Ethic of
Chastened Liberalism (August 31, 2012). APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper. Available at SSRN:
http://ssrn.com/abstract=2104761, as has George Klosko, \textit{See George Klosko “Accepting Limits” [review
of Patrick J. Deneen, \textit{Democratic Faith}], The Review of Politics 68:4 [Fall 2006] (“If Niebuhr is right about
empirical validation of original sin, the evidence that constitutes the validations renders otiose the
theological claims it is said to support.”).}

exhibit humility rather than pride; a contrite spirit rather than the arrogant refusal to admit wrongdoing; forgiveness of our fellows rather than retributive justice; and, ultimately to embrace hope rather than either the undue, “easy” optimism of modern culture or the excessive pessimism of the religious traditionalist.\footnote{418} I will have more to say about this in Chapter 5, but for the moment suffice it to say that to take Niebuhr’s political counsel seriously, one must at least entertain the possibility that his theological claims regarding God and man, too, must be taken seriously.

Accordingly, this chapter will begin by expanding on the question of whether Niebuhr can be secularized, and will contend that the attempt to do so effectively strips Niebuhr’s thought of the very core of its insights. Having addressed this topic, the chapter will then turn to three central concerns for Niebuhr’s political theory: First, a Niebuhrian approach to politics, cognizant of the reality of human sin, raises serious questions about the extension of ethical norms to political decisionmaking; it is skeptical of the possibility of political perfectionism.\footnote{419} Second, and relatedly, a Niebuhrian approach to politics strongly repudiates any and all utopian expectations; it is wary of claims to final

\footnote{418} I claim that these virtues are inescapably theological, because the soil from which they grow and are cultivated requires the perspective which I have previously characterized as *transcendent*, rather *immanent*. I recognize this contrasts with the views of those who in Niebuhr’s own time dubbed themselves “atheists for Niebuhr,” see n. 5, *supra*, and n. 13, *infra*, as well as those who in more recent times conclude that Niebuhr’s account offers a brief for basic liberalism or political dispositions that can be grounded in the secular and the immanent. *See* Cherniss, “Between Cynicism and Sentimentality,” n. 5, *supra*.

\footnote{419} This thought is developed best in Niebuhr’s 1934 work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *ibid*. In his skepticism regarding political perfectionism Niebuhr shares an affinity with Tocqueville, who observed the connection between conditions of equality and optimism regarding the capacity of reason to perfect humanity. *See*, e.g., Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 1, chap. 9, p. 453 (emphasis added) (“[W]hen castes disappear and classes are brought together, when men are jumbled together and habits, customs and laws are changing, when new facts impinge and new truths are discovered, when old conceptions vanish and new ones take their place, then the human mind imagines the possibility of an ideal but always fugitive perfection.” *See* also Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, 219-20 (discussing “the logic of . . . equality that gravitates (theoretically) toward universalism.”).}
knowledge regarding the movement of history.\textsuperscript{420} Third and finally, a Niebuhrian approach to politics strongly endorses democracy—although not for the reasons commonly provided; indeed, Niebuhr’s defense of democracy turns its traditional justification upon its head.\textsuperscript{421} Recognizing the partiality in any political position Niebuhr would have us resist ideological dogmatism (this may be one of the reasons why political commentators have such a difficult time pigeonholing Niebuhr as a “liberal” or “neoconservative”).\textsuperscript{422} There is no such thing as an ideological enemy, because a Niebuhrian approach would resist ideological politics as a species of idolatry. In consequence, a Niebuhrian can, in humility, extend a charitable attitude towards those he or she opposes in the political arena. Furthermore, and finally, a Niebuhrian approach would eschew either excessive optimism or excessive pessimism. Indeed, here more than perhaps any other element of Niebuhr’s thought we find the tension between immanence and transcendence. Put in terms that I will later unpack in detail, the dichotomy between optimism and pessimism resides in the world of immanence; it is only in the realm of the transcendent that we locate the ground for hope. In consequence, because the Niebuhrian approach does not place ultimate human aspiration in the lap of politics but rather in the providence of God, it approaches political life with a hope born of a theological anticipation of the divine completion of human projects, rather than either mounting a desperate drive for this-worldly fulfillment or acquiescing to the inevitability of decline.


\textsuperscript{421} Niebuhr’s little booklet \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness} is largely concerned with this question. See Reinhold Niebuhr, \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{422} See Chapter 1, \textit{supra}.
I. A Secularized Niebuhr?

I have already alluded to the question of whether a “Niebuhrian” political theorist must take Niebuhr’s theology seriously. An easy and superficial response would be to point out that the answer to this question must be “no,” simply because there are a number of theological skeptics who identify with Niebuhr’s political theory; the very fact of their existence presumably resolves the question. Such a skeptic might acknowledge that while Niebuhr routinely deploys theological terms like “humility,” “faith,” “charity” and “hope,” more than one secular commentator purports to render Niebuhr’s political theory—particularly his realism, his sense of irony, and his insistence on the requirement for contrition—in secular terms such that Niebuhr’s political theory may be “rescued” from the theological doctrines upon which he believed it to depend.423 This was the case even in Niebuhr’s own day, when he ably secured an audience far beyond his fellow Christians notwithstanding his strong insistence on the relevance of orthodox Christian doctrines of original sin and Christ’s atonement, and his deeply biblical understanding of “prophetic religion.” Indeed, some of the secular admirers of his time, including Harvard historian Morton White, even referred to themselves as “atheists for Niebuhr.” Viewed from this vantage, although Niebuhr’s work was inescapably apologetic424 in that he

423 See n. 5, supra.
424 As Gary Dorrien explains, Niebuhr took for granted that theology in a modern context had to be apologetic, taking on the arguments of skeptics and secular critics. The old liberals were right to privilege the critical challenges of Christianity’s cultured despisers. In Niebuhr’s case, the key “despisers” were nonreligious academics who shared his politics. Some of them, notably Harvard historian Morton White, called themselves ‘atheists for Niebuhr.’ Niebuhr was highly attentive to the atheists for Niebuhr. In his last substantive book, Man’s Nature and His Communities, he disclosed that their criticism was the chief influence on his later career. The reactions of political philosophers to The Nature and Destiny of Man were especially significant to him; they applauded his discussions of human nature, but spurned the theology. Niebuhr’s last books . . . were pitched to his secular admirers. Man’s Nature and His Communities reworked his familiar arguments about realism, politics, and human nature in secular language, resorting to what Niebuhr called ‘more
sought to “defend[ ] and justify[ ] the Christian faith in a secular age, particularly among what Schleiermacher called Christianity’s ‘cultured despisers,’” that faith itself would not be a *necessary* component of Niebuhr’s political theory given the persuasiveness of what are essentially political conclusions drawn at least in part from empirical observations.

But it would be a terrible mistake to assume that the theological “dross” may be distilled from the ethical and political gold in Niebuhr, that Niebuhr’s politics can somehow be cleanly extracted from their theological and anthropological ground, leaving us with an *ethos* cut off from its roots. Niebuhr will not allow us simply to leaven our liberalism with some vaguely secularized versions of “contrition, hope and forgiveness” that further shape and perfect the modern liberal achievement. Preliminarily we should acknowledge that Niebuhr himself roundly rejects such an approach. Indeed, he insists that part of the modern political problem is precisely that we maintain a naïve confidence in human virtue and capacity within the immanent frame despite the obvious evidence to


See Cherniss, “Between Cynicism and Sentimentality, 48 (“While secular liberals may not easily adopt central features of Niebuhr’s position, his account of moral psychology and social ethics—by drawing on the ethical ideas, as opposed to the theological doctrines, of Christianity—adds important elements to the conception of a liberal political ethos that more purely secular liberals neglected or subordinated.”)

*Ibid.*, 49 (“The primary significance of Niebuhr’s *Christian* realism for his political thought was thus, I suggest, not his furnishing of a (putatively) firmer foundation or justification of liberalism in Christian doctrine, but the enrichment and complication of a liberal political ethos with elements of contrition, hope and forgiveness, which could both sustain, and soften, the skepticism, sobriety and fortitude counsel by other ‘chastened liberals.’”).

Even those attempting such a project acknowledge this fact. See *Ibid.*, 48 n. 180 (acknowledging that “Niebuhr regarded the theological elements of his thought as crucial to its coherence.” and that “Niebuhr’s religious commitments and the theological sub-structure of his thought provided, in his own eyes, the underlying unity which kept the various elements of his position from flying off in opposite directions—and which justified the affirmation of hope and moral obligation in the face of his ‘realism.’”)

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the contrary. Indeed, “it is because a philosophy of the enlightened mind and a
civilization of great technical power cannot solve these ultimate problems of human
existence that the frame of meaning established by the traditionally historic religions has
become much more relevant to modern man than seemed possible a century ago.”
Niebuhr’s entire project presumes that the modern, secular and immanent understanding
of man leads to collapse and failure. In the modern world of the Deus absconditus, we
oscillate between an overly optimistic idealism and a too-fatalistic or pessimistic
realism. And if we abstract out the ethical ideals from Christianity, as some would
counsel, we step back and discover that we have simply re-created the very same
liberal Protestantism which Niebuhr considers so astonishingly (and destructively) naïve.

In other words, the secularization project inevitably fails. One thinks here of
Nietzsche’s pithy comment apropos of his liberal European peers that “It is the church,
and not its poison, that repels us.—Apart from the church, we, too, love the poison.”

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here anticipates the much later collapse of the so-called “secularization thesis.” See, e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr,
Pious and Secular America, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958 (“[T]he assumption that we live in
a secularized world is false: The world today, with some exceptions attended to below, is as furiously
religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature
written by historians and social scientists over the course of the 1950’s and ‘60s, loosely labeled as
‘secularization theory’, was essentially mistaken.”)).
430 “The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies from gauging
the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to injustice
and oppression. When this optimism is not qualified to accord with the real and complex facts of human
nature and history, there is always a danger that sentimentality will give way to despair and that a too
consistent optimism will alternate with a too consistent pessimism.” Niebuhr, Children of Light, xii. Joshua
Mitchell identifies this bipolar psychological condition in Tocqueville as well, to whom Mitchell attributes
a fundamentally Augustine psychology. See Joshua Mitchell, The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on
Religion, Democracy and the American Future (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press,
1995), 3 (“By the Augustinian self I mean the kind of self that is prone to move in two opposite directions:
either inward, in which case it tends to get wholly shut up within itself and abandon the world; or outward,
in which case it tends to be restive, overly active, and lost amid the world, searching at a frenzied pace for a
satisfaction it can never wholly find there.”).
431 See Cherniss, “Between Cynicism and Sentimentality,” 48 (Recommended that we “draw[] on the
ethical ideals, as opposed to the theological doctrines, of Christianity.”).
432 Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche ed. Walter
Nietzsche recognizes that the liberal modern, though he may reject the authority of the church, nonetheless embraces the underlying theological anthropology which bequeaths human dignity, equality and freedom. But if we abandon the one, Nietzsche argues, it is impossible to make a conclusive case for the other. It is well beyond the scope of this project to engage in a lengthy discussion of the political theory of liberalism; suffice it to say that Niebuhr concurs with Nietzsche in the recognition that the anthropological claims undergirding political theory matter—indeed his project depends upon such a recognition—and that the effort to have a political theory with a naïve view of man is destined to fail when confronted with more powerful and determined foes unfettered by any Christian notions of human nature. This, after all, constitutes one of the central themes of The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. To claim Niebuhr’s politics without his theological anthropology effectively turns his entire project on its head, because for Niebuhr the theological anthropology establishes the basis for the political counsel. One who has not sinned has nothing for which to be contrite. One who has no Divine obligation to love his neighbor has no basis upon which to forgive, and one who lacks any conception of eternity will inevitably place his hope in things temporal, with all the political consequences, some terribly violent, which tend to follow.

Niebuhr, Children of Light, 12 (“Moral cynicism had a provisional advantage over moral sentimentality. Its advantage lay not merely in its own lack of moral scruple but also in its shrewd assessment of the power of self-interest, individual and national, among the children of light, despite their moral protestations.”).
II. Realism, Idealism and Sin: The Division of Ethics from Politics

A. The Ideal and the Real

“Politics will,” Niebuhr writes, “to the end of history be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and the coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.” 434 In other words, Niebuhr understands ethics and politics—at least to the extent that politics involves the use of force—as occupying distinct, if interpenetrating, spheres. 435 436 Put in more theoretical terms, we might conceptualize this distinction as one between the idealism of ethical thought and the realism of political calculation—and of course in the study of politics it is not uncommon for thinkers and points of view to be broadly characterized as either “realist” or “idealist.” On the one hand we imagine the clear-eyed, sober-minded realist to be one who addresses political questions without regard to the ethical or moral dimension—Niccoló Machiavelli, for example 437 —while on the other the more sentimental “idealist” brings the full scope of ethical and moral thought to bear on

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434 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 4.
435 Indeed, the distinction forms the basis Moral Man, Immoral Society, which marked a conclusive break with his Social Gospel roots.
436 Cf. Immanuel Kant, Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, tr. James W. Ellington (Hackett, 1993), 30 (“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.”). For Kant, man must treat his neighbor as an end (a subject) and not a means, yet he often does just that. As a result existence in the world of time always presents an unresolvable tension between the ethical requirements of treating others as ends and the political exigencies of power that press against such ethical requirements.
437 Machiavelli’s classic formulation of the political realists’ claim for themselves the mantle of perspicuity as to the realities of political life is found in his pamphlet The Prince, published posthumously in 1532, in which he famously declared that unlike his apparently benighted predecessors who “imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth,” he would “go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it.” Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, ch. XV, tr. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1998, 61.
political problems—Immanuel Kant being paradigmatic of the type. Though distinguishing matters so starkly risks oversimplification, as is often the case with such heuristic antinomies, the dichotomy allows us to clarify the proper relationship and to distinguish between various views on the subject.

B. Ethics and Politics in Theory and Practice

When Niebuhr surveys the contemporary political landscape, particularly in light of his theological anthropology, he concludes that modern thought suffers from a surfeit of optimism in its attempt to instantiate ethical norms in political societies. This error he attributes directly to our inadequate anthropology, which ignores “the most obvious and irrefutable evidence” that human nature is more complicated. In theological terms, Niebuhr objects to what he deems a naïve and un-empirical rejection of original sin. The optimism of modern culture, Niebuhr writes, “makes the central message of the gospel,

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439 For a fascinating historical study of this tension which attributes it to the original debate between Plato and Aristotle, see Arthur Herman, The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization (Random House: New York, 2013) (arguing that the intellectual rivalry between Platonic idealism and Aristotelian realism established an intellectual tension that has shaped Western civilization in the more than two millennia since.).

440 I recognize the limitations of the realist-idealist typology. As Elshtain argues, “[T]here is interesting work to be done if we but leave off the by now threadbare ‘realism-idealism’ divide and get serious about the intricate texture of the world, laced through and through as it is with ideas, noble and ignoble; aspirations, for good or ill; enthusiasm, that heal and kill; and all the rest. These enter into the stream of the world – they are not off to the side in some private sanctuary.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, “On Never Reaching the Coast of Utopia, International Relations 2008 Vol. 22, No. 2 (2008) 147, 168. That said, Niebuhr uses the typology himself, so the student of Niebuhr ought not casually abandon it.

441 This “sentimentality” Niebuhr considers a “peculiar vice of liberal Protestantism” which “adjust[ed] its faith to the spirit of modern culture [and] imbibed the evolutionary optimism and the romantic overestimates of human virtue, which characterized the thought of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic Movement.” Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 78.

442 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 121. Elsewhere Thomas Sowell has termed the two contrasting views of human nature the “constrained” or flawed” view, and the unconstrained” or perfectible view. Thomas Sowell, A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles (New York: William Morrow, 1987). Essentially for Sowell the question is whether human nature can be perfected through social engineering or not.
dealing with sin, grace, forgiveness and justification, seem totally irrelevant.”

And of course, anthropological errors have consequences, which for Niebuhr are only compounded and magnified when they purport to ground political thought or action.

Any error in the appraisal of the moral resources of individuals is accentuated when it is made the basis of political theory and practice. It is necessary therefore to deal circumspectly with the facts, if the confusion which always exists in the area of life where politics and ethics meet, is to be resolved.

If we allow our unwarranted optimism to preclude us from attending to the evident facts of our condition, Niebuhr holds, we will surely suffer the consequences of our naivety.

By failing to recognize the moral complexity of human beings at the anthropological level, collapsing the distinction between individual/ethical and political/social morality, placing too much faith in reason and embracing a too-uncritical approbation of freedom, we create significant political risks, both to the individual and to the stability of the larger society. Here we encounter Niebuhr the quintessential political realist: while we may wish that men were basically good and that evil were but an artifact of social conditions, structures or education, the reality we confront gives the lie to our fantasies. And the consequences of the anthropological error multiply exponentially when we move from the actions and decisions of the individual human as ethical or moral actor to the actions and decisions of the group—be it an economic class, adherents of a given political ideology, or members of a nation-state. For this reason, Niebuhr advises that

[a] sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial and economic; . . . this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing . . . Individual men may be

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445 For an interesting, if much earlier, take on this view, see Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1995) (“Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.”), xv.
moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in
determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the
advantages of others to their own . . . But [this is] more difficult, if not
impossible, for human societies and social groups. In every human group there is
less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, 
less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egotism than the individuals, who comprise the groups, reveal in their personal relationships.\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, xi- xii.}

In other words, for Niebuhr, politics forbids the kind of perfectionism that characterizes
an individual moral ethic. This is so for reasons both theoretical and practical.

From a theoretical perspective the easy fusion of ethics and politics represents a
kind of category mistake, or a failure to recognize crucial distinctions between the
character and purposes of the two fields. In the simplest terms, ethics and politics are
directed to distinct ends. The highest value in ethics is that of selflessness, while in
politics it is justice.\footnote{“[T]he conflict between ethics and politics is made inevitable by the double focus of the moral life. One
focus is on the inner life of the individual, and the other in the necessities of man’s social life. From the
perspective of society the highest moral ideal is justice. From the perspective of the individual the highest
dean is unselfishness. \textit{Society must strive for justice even if it is forced to use means, such as self-assertion, resistance, correction and perhaps resentment, which cannot gain the sanction of the most sensitive moral spirit. The individual must strive to realize his life by losing and finding himself in something greater than himself.” \textit{Ibid.}, 257.} Any \textit{individual} may permit injustice to be committed against him
or her; indeed ethical morality may \textit{require} such permission—one thinks here of Jesus’
admonition in the Sermon on the Mount:

\begin{quote}
But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, 
turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your
shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with
them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the
one who wants to borrow from you.\footnote{Matt. 5:39-42 (ESV).}
\end{quote}

Unselfishness in the face of evil or violence visited on one’s person may well represent
the highest aspiration of an ethical life; this is certainly the case for Christianity.\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, 263} But if
this ethic of self-denial is transferred to political or social life, it is not hard to see how
Niebuhr cites the Christian pacifism of the 1930’s as the quintessential example of this problem. The pacifist refuses to make “discriminate judgments between social systems.” Consequently, “[p]acifism either tempts us to make no judgments at all, or to give an undue preference to tyranny in comparison with the momentary anarchy which is necessary to overcome tyranny.” The ethical norm of pacifism engenders injustice when imported into politics. 

Put in more theoretical terms, while the ethic of non-resistance counseled by and embodied in Jesus may dictate individual self-denial, it cannot require inaction in the face of brutality, for to do so would be to acquiesce in, or even encourage, injustice in the political life of the society. Thus in his essay “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist,” Niebuhr attacks Christian pacifism on the ground that in its misguided effort to apply the “absolute ethic of Jesus” to political life it actually violates the love commandment in two respects. First, the very determination to maintain one’s individual ethical commitments may result in a deep injustice at the social level. “Resist not evil,” Niebuhr argues, may offer a profoundly moral and spiritual ethic for the individual, but it is a sure ticket to terrible evil at the social level. Second, introducing the absolute ethic of

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450 Indeed, “[i]f it is made absolute, we arrive at the morally absurd position of giving moral preference to the non-violent power which Doctor Goebbels wields, over the type of power wielded by a general.” Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist” in The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Robert McAfee Brown, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 107. 
451 Ibid., 117. 
452 Ibid. 
453 Niebuhr is very careful to distinguish between non-resistance and non-violence: “Curiously enough the pacifists are just as guilty as their less absolutist brethren of diluting the ethic of Jesus for the purposes of justifying their position. They are forced to recognize that an ethic of pure non-resistance can have no immediate relevance to any political situation, for in every political situation it is necessary to achieve justice by resisting pride and power. They therefore declare that the ethic of Jesus is not an ethic of non-resistance but one of non-violent resistance; that it allows one to resist evil provided the resistance does not involve destruction of life or property. There is not the slightest support in Scripture for this doctrine of non-violence. Nothing could be plainer than that the ethic uncompromisingly enjoins non-resistance and not non-violent resistance.” Ibid., 107. 
454 Ibid.
Christianity as a final norm for politics invariably dilutes the ethic due to the necessary compromises required in politics. Thus Christ’s admonition to “resist not evil” moves from a counsel of non-resistance to a justification for theories of non-violent resistance despite the fact that “nothing could be plainer than that the ethic uncompromisingly enjoins non-resistance and not non-violent resistance.” 455 Non-resistance simply has no place in politics, Niebuhr argues, because politics always encompasses the use of power and force. 456 Non-resistance, therefore, could almost be considered a form of anti-politics. Non-violent resistance, by contrast, can be a powerful, forceful mode of political action—one need look no farther than the highly successful American civil rights movement spearheaded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In practical terms, the introduction of perfectionist ethics simply fails to recognize the transactional and approximate nature of politics.

In theological terms, politics is the realm in which to act is to sin, and any endeavor to maintain clean hands betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the very nature of the endeavor. This requires a Christian understanding if we are to make sense of it:

The Christian faith ought to persuade us that political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners. It ought to mitigate the self-righteousness which is an inevitable concomitant of all human conflict. . . . It is as foolish to imagine that the foe is free of the sin which we

455 Ibid. Interestingly Niebuhr attributes this error in part to the lingering effects of Platonic dualism. Non-violent resistance avoids the physical evils committed by the body and allows the self to contend in the spiritual realm. It should go without saying that true non-resistance refuses to contend in either realm. 456 It is worth noting that this view of politics emerges from a distinctly Christian context. Contrast it, for example with Hannah Arendt’s understanding, grounded largely in classical thought. For Arendt, politics represents the realm in which action can take place, and therefore offers the stage for great deeds and words. Rather than a sphere of sin, politics is the sphere in which man may attain immortality. See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958). And in any event, Arendt would insist upon the distinction between power and force. Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969). 43.
deplore in ourselves as it is to regard ourselves as free of the sin which we deplore in the foe. 457

If we recall Niebuhr’s account of the ambiguity of freedom, this begins to make more sense. Action itself is colored by the possibility for great nobility and great treachery, for creativity and destructiveness. To the extent that politics requires action, it is inevitably a field shot through with sin. If one desires to maintain his or her ethical purity, the only sure way to do so is not to act. And yet, the very failure to act itself can be the occasion for sin, as Niebuhr argued in chastising his fellow Christian pacifists for essentially maintaining their clean hands at the expense of the neighbor. 458 What Niebuhr counsels, then, is a sober-minded recognition of the terrible reality of action—that it cannot be undone, its consequences often unforeseen. 459 For this reason, a theological hope becomes a necessary orientation in political life. Man must hope for God’s judgment and mercy to finally resolve what he himself cannot.

It is instructive to compare at least one alternative understanding of politics—that of political theorist Hannah Arendt, to that of Niebuhr. For Arendt, deeply influenced by classical thought, the political arena is the locus of immortality, in that it conditions the possibility of action. Like Niebuhr, Arendt recognizes that action cannot be undone, and in some sense political action becomes the only means by which man can create something that lasts. But where Niebuhr would hope for divine completion of human projects, Arendt would insist that the greatness lies in the action, more than in its

458 Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist,” 110 (“arguing that the pacifist’s failure to oppose aggression means that “a morally perverse preference is given to tyranny over anarchy (war).”).
459 For an extended discussion of Christianity’s relationship to the “terror of history,” see Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 161-62 (“Since the ‘invention’ of faith, in the Judaeco-Christian sense of the word (for God all is possible), the man who has left the horizon of archetypes and repetition can no longer defend himself against that terror except through the idea of God.”).
consequences for the allocation of resources or the distribution of power. For Arendt, Niebuhr’s understanding of politics would typify a modern confusion between the economic and political spheres, while Niebuhr would likely respond that Arendt, though she recognizes the unpredictability of human action, fails to take the notion of sin seriously (as thought grounded in classical theory would not) and fails to appreciate the brokenness inherent in human interaction and the potential destructiveness associated with action, whether or not it produces greatness.  

C. Politics and Power: Justice and the Law of Love

As we have already mentioned, Niebuhr’s recognition of the fundamental power struggle at the heart of politics emerges directly from his meditations on the nature of man, and his critique of modern politics therefore emerges from that source. So if we are not to assess politics in terms of ethics, how can we navigate the waters between the idealism of ethical thought on the one hand and the realism of political calculation on the other? Niebuhr argues that while we must not confuse the two, we also must not or abandon one or the other. Instead, Niebuhr counsels, we must again hold together an uneasy amalgam of paired opposites in a dialectical relationship. We must be politically realistic about what is possible while refusing to abandon a more open-ended ethical idealism that can both inform and chasten our political choices. Because human beings are characterized by the capacity for great nobility as well as the capacity for great treachery, and because human freedom occasions both creation and destruction—in short, because man is a sinner created in God’s image—politics can never become the realm of

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460 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 232 (“[P]rocesses are started whose outcome is unpredictable, so that uncertainty rather than frailty becomes the decisive character of human affairs.”) (emphasis added).

the purely ethical; it will instead always require balances of power.\footnote{462}{In this Niebuhr’s political theory is in accord with that of Madison and the other authors of The Federalist: “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” Federalist 51, in The Federalist, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2001), 43. For commentary on Niebuhr’s “Madisonianism,” see Deneen, Democratic Faith at 255-56, 259 and 350 n.57, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, Man’s Nature and His Communities (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965) (“James Madison was the only one of the founding fathers who made a realistic analysis of both power and interest from a political and democratic perspective. He was governed by a basic insight of political realism, namely the ‘intimate relation’ between reason and self-love. Unlike the idealists, he knew the need for strong government. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, he feared the dangers of strong government and thought that the ‘separation of powers’ itself would prevent tyranny. Madison shared the dear of ‘factions’ with all the Founding Fathers, but gave us the best pre-Marxist analysis of the basis of collective and class interests of varying classes.”).}

But the moral dimension of those balances of power is always both informed by, and placed under the judgment of, the higher ethical norms. Here Niebuhr’s account of human freedom frames his understanding of the manner in which ethics evaluates politics. “The freedom of man sets every standard of justice under higher possibilities.”\footnote{463}{Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, vol. 1, 281.}

Justice, Niebuhr argued, is never perfect, but always an approximation of a more ideal possibility.\footnote{464}{Ibid., 22.} That possibility, for Niebuhr, was the “law of love.”

\textbf{1. The Law of Love and the Ethic of Jesus}

Despite his rejection of natural law theory,\footnote{465}{See Ch. 3, supra.} Niebuhr was no relativist. His critique of natural law theory rested not on the claim that transcendent moral authority does not exist, but rather on the ground that natural law theory errs in understanding that authority far too narrowly. Indeed, Niebuhr readily acknowledged the presence of “a fairly universal agreement in all moral systems that it is wrong to take the life or the property of the neighbor,” though he quickly qualified this admission by pointing out that

\begin{quote}
\textit{The freedom of man sets every standard of justice under higher possibilities.}
\end{quote}
“it must be admitted that the specific applications of these general principles vary greatly according to time and place.” At bottom, however, he insisted that “this minimal standard of moral conduct is grounded in the law of love and points to its ultimate fulfillment.” The universal “law of love” is, on Niebuhr’s view, the final moral standard, one that precludes relativism but avoids the alternative error of an overelaborated moral code.

But what is this “law of love” and how does it relate to human efforts to instantiate justice in given historical circumstances, particularly if one dispenses with the theory of a natural law? For Niebuhr, the law of love captured the ethical ideal of prophetic biblical religion that was given its highest expression in the life of Christ. It consists of three basic terms, derived from Matthew’s account of Christ’s response to the Pharisee lawyer’s question regarding which was the greatest commandment of the Hebrew law:

The specific content of this higher law, which is more than law, this law which transcends all law . . . contains three terms: (a) The perfect relation of the soul to God in which obedience is transcended by love, trust and confidence (“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God”); (b) the perfect internal harmony of the soul with itself in all of its desires and impulses: “With all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy mind”; and (c) the perfect harmony of life with life: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

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466 Ibid., 64.
467 Ibid. (emphasis added).
468 Ibid., 22.
469 Matthew 22:37-40 (“Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked Him a question, tempting Him and saying, ‘Master, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said unto him, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’”).
Niebuhr understood the first element, the relation of the soul to God, to consist in the “faith and “hope” of the Pauline triad. Man’s freedom becomes “intolerable” absent “faith in God’s providence, while hope consists of “faith with regard to the future.” History can only have meaning, Niebuhr held, “in terms of a faith which comprehends its seeming irrationalities and views them as the expression of a divine wisdom which passes human understanding.” This capacity only becomes available through the biblical revelation; importantly, it is not accessible through reason unaided—an important caveat to the liberal modern account of the meaning of history as the achievement of human freedom in time (and another reason why the notion of a secularized Niebuhr is incoherent). The second element, the soul’s internal harmony, derives directly from communion with God. Again, this is an ideal possibility rather than a present reality. A different way of expressing it is in the soul’s recognition that “there ought not be a sense of ought; it is the ‘thou shalt’ which suggests that there are no “thou shalts” in perfection.” Likewise, the love of the neighbor depends on a “perfect accord of life with life and will with will” that “derives from perfect faith and trust in God.” This is not a present reality, but rather an ideal possibility that “points to God as the final realization of the possibility.”

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472 Ibid.
473 Ibid.
474 Ibid.
475 Ibid.
476 Ibid., 283. It is instructive to compare this insight to Nietzsche’s recognition that the “thou shalt” of the Hebrew Bible must be rejected if the self is to will itself. See Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None (Wilder Publications, 2008) ch. I, 30 (“What is the great dragon which the spirit is no longer inclined to call Lord and God? “Thou-shalt,” is the great dragon called. But the spirit of the lion saith, “I will.”).
477 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1, 293.
478 Ibid., 294.
Men, Niebuhr argued, can only be perfectly free under the law of love. Moreover, “the freedom of the self is such that no rule of justice, no particular method of arbitrating the interests of the other with those of the self, can leave the self with the feeling that it has done all that it could. *In its freedom it constantly rises above these laws and rules and realizes that they are determined by contingent factors and that they fall short of the ultimate possibility of loving the neighbor ‘as thyself.’*” No system of justice adequately captures the law of love, precisely because the law of love represents a standard beyond the capacity of unaided human beings to reach. Nonetheless,

Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated. They are fulfilled because the obligation of life to life is more fully met in love than is possible in any scheme of equity and justice. They are negated because love makes an end of the nicely calculated less and more of structures of justice. It does not carefully arbitrate between the needs of the self and of the other, since it meets the needs of the other without concern for the self.

Importantly, the law of love does *not* constitute a moral or ethical program. Human efforts to enforce the specific teachings of Christ, such as those in the Sermon on the Mount or certain biblical parables, in a rote or programmatic fashion inevitably fail to apprehend the prophetic nature and essential ethic of the law of love. As Niebuhr explains,

> [t]he religion of Jesus is prophetic religion in which the moral ideal of love and vicarious suffering, elaborated by the second Isaiah, achieves such a purity that the possibility of its realization in history becomes remote. His Kingdom of God

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479 Niebuhr clearly draws on the Apostle Paul’s conception of freedom “in Christ”: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:1-2.


482 Here again it is worth noting Niebuhr’s affinity with Tocqueville who, in comparing Christianity and Islam, commented that “the Gospels, on the other hand, deal only with the general relations between man and God and between man and man. Beyond that, they teach nothing and do not oblige people to believe anything. That alone, among a thousand reasons, is enough to show that Islam will not be able to hold its power long in ages of enlightenment and democracy, while Christianity is destined to reign in such ages, as in all others. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 445. Vol. II, Part I, ch. 5
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 every historical achievement.\textsuperscript{483}

The law of love thus marks the standard against which \textit{all} human structures, institutions and relationships must be judged. It represents the ideal possibility, but one that human beings in history are incapable of fully instantiating. We might say that it is the absolute ethical norm that places all contingent norms (\textit{i.e.}, political norms) under its judgment. It is prophetic in that it understands that “God, as creator and judge of the world, is both the unity which is the ground of existence and the ultimate unity, the good which is, to use Plato’s phrase, on the other side of existence . . . The conscious impulse of unity between life and life is the most adequate symbol of [God’s] nature.”\textsuperscript{484} Moreover, the acceptance that “[l]ove [i]s the quintessence of the character of God is not established by argument, but taken for granted.”\textsuperscript{485} Reason accepts its truth in \textit{faith}. Faith is a prerequisite for reason’s ability to grasp the truth of the revelation that God is love, and that the law of love in fact fulfills—and in a sense, negates—all human law.\textsuperscript{486}

Because the law of love is decidedly not a prescription for specific moral rules or actions, it cannot be invoked to justify any given temporal order, no matter how “just” human beings claim it to be. The law of love therefore does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life . . . It has nothing to say about the relativities of politics and economics, nor of the necessary balances of power which exist and must exist even in the most intimate social relationships. The absolutism and perfectionism of Jesus’ love ethic sets itself uncompromisingly not only against the natural self-regarding impulses, but against the necessary prudent defences of the self required because of the egotism of others. It does not establish a connection with the horizontal points of a political or social ethic or with the diagonals which a prudential individual ethic

\textsuperscript{483} Niebuhr, \textit{Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 19.
\textsuperscript{484} \textit{Ibid.}, 22-23.
\textsuperscript{485} \textit{Ibid.}, 24.
\textsuperscript{486} Cf. Augustine \textit{Tractate 29 on the Gospel of John} (“If you have not understood, I say, ‘Believe!’ for understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand. (\textit{ergo noli quaerere intelligere ut credas, sed crede ut intelligas}).”

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draws between the moral ideal and the facts of a given situation. It has only a vertical dimension between the loving will of God and the will of man.\textsuperscript{487}

In other words, the law of love does not comport with any conceivable natural order—including order(s) advanced by political theory—nor does it reflect any kind of self-assertion. It involves instead a rejection of the assertion of and expansion of the self, a disavowal of calculating prudence, a refusal to take pride in one’s place, and a willingness to forego vengeance.\textsuperscript{488} Rather than insisting on these elements of various moral systems and structures, the law of love “demands an absolute obedience to the will of God without consideration of those consequences of moral action which must be the concern of any prudential ethic.”\textsuperscript{489}

2. The Dialectical Relationship Between Political Justice and the Law of Love

Given Niebuhr’s depiction of the law of love as universalist, perfectionist “love absolutism,”\textsuperscript{490} and an “impossible possibility,”\textsuperscript{491} how—if at all—does the law of love relate to temporal justice? How does it relate to politics? After all, justice—the political world—seeks preservation of the individual from encroachment by others, calculates the costs and benefits of particular social and political arrangements, and establishes rewards and penalties for social behaviors. It endeavors to render to each what is due.\textsuperscript{492} From this perspective at least, Niebuhr’s account of the law of love seems baldly inconsistent with the basic requirements necessary to the ordering of any political community in that it offers no set prescription nor does it validate those orders already in existence. How can a

\textsuperscript{487} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{488} \textit{Ibid.}, 25-26.
\textsuperscript{489} \textit{Ibid.}, 32.
\textsuperscript{490} Niebuhr, \textit{Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 30.
\textsuperscript{491} \textit{Ibid.}, 62-83.
\textsuperscript{492} Cf. Plato, \textit{Republic}. 

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morally just order be established under the law of love if the law of love insists on the
negation of the very “ought” that is the moral center of systems of justice?

Niebuhr responds by pointing to the dialectical relationship between justice and
the law of love, which is another way of identifying the dialectical relationship between
ethics and politics. While “the achievements of justice in history may rise in
indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood . . .
each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in perfect contradiction
to love.” 493 Put simply, the law of love both informs and corrects immanent conceptions
of justice. It has the simultaneous effect of fulfilling and negating (aufheben) justice. As
Flescher explains, the law of love “informs justice before justice does its work” and
“serves as a corrective of justice when, due to its use of coercive means, justice threatens
to become as tyrannous as the injustice that it seeks to prevent.” 494

Love informs justice by contributing something to the meaning of justice,
namely, a consciousness of its transitory nature; justice alone cannot sustain our
obligation to attend to others. Love corrects justice by inundating the self with
the feeling that it should repent for having resorted, albeit necessarily, to the use
of coercive means, means that are potentially the very same instruments of
injustice. A justice ill-informed or uncorrected by love is a justice that is self-
defeating. Love, it is true, cannot be made to be a self-sufficient ethic through
appeals to justice, for love is and remains an absolute standard that cannot be
relativized through a method that compromises its relation. To the degree that
justice approximates love, the burden to inform and correct justice lessens by just
that much. 495

It should be evident that Niebuhr hardly advocates a naïve effort to realize the law
of love in history; indeed, he reserves some of his sharpest criticism for the liberal
Christianity of the early and mid-twentieth century that erroneously (and naïvely)

494 Andrew Flescher, “Love and Justice in Reinhold Niebuhr’s Prophetic Christian Realism and Emmanuel
Levinas’s Ethics of Responsibility: Treading Between Pacifism and Just-War Theory,” The Journal of
Religion 80:1 (Jan. 2000), 70.
495 Ibid. (emphasis added).
believed “that we are dealing with a possible and prudential ethic of the gospel.” Niebuhr sees any effort to articulate justice as inevitably provisional. Though human beings must seek justice in the ordering and structuring of their social and political relations, those efforts toward a just ordering always remain under the final judgment of the law of love. Any given account of justice, though it may approach the law of love to a greater or lesser degree than other accounts, can only approach the ideal possibility of perfect love; progress is at best asymptotic. “Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history [and thus] the achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood, but each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love.”

This is due, in part, to the fact that the “principles of justice are abstractly conceived, while structures and organizations embody the vitalities of history.”

To put the matter somewhat cryptically, we might observe that in his conception of the law of love, Niebuhr alerts us to the problem of “totalities.” In this he is the heir of Kierkegaard’s polemic against the Hegelian system and anticipates both Levinas’ defense of “infinity” over and against “totality” and Taylor’s insistence on the

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496 Niebuhr, Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 37.
498 Ibid., 247.
499 Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, tr. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) (“Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself. No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny little dingle-dangle as the Herr Professor who is writing the system.”).
500 Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 22. (“[T]he concept of totality . . . dominates Western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to bring forth its objective meaning”).
transcendent possibilities beyond the immanent frame. The danger comes when we confuse the abstract perfection of our principles of justice with the messy realities of any attempt at their instantiation. Furthermore, while men must always seek justice, they must in humility recognize the imperfection, incompleteness, and final inadequacy of their efforts.

...the hope of Christian faith that the divine power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable prerequisite for diligent fulfillment of our historic tasks. Without it we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities.

For Niebuhr, it is only with the theological virtues of faith, hope and love firmly set before them that men may carry out their appointed work with diligence. In other words, the democratic society that we seek to preserve and improve cannot “work” unless people themselves, have faith—an understanding of what living in hope, by God’s promise, and through God’s love, is.

III. History and Sin: Against Utopia

A. Christianity and Universal History

I have already alluded to the concept of history in the context of the theological doctrine of Providence and in Chapter 3’s broader discussion of freedom; specifically, Chapter 3 addressed the ontological grounding of Niebuhr’s account of human freedom over and against the modern, historical understanding of freedom’s emergence in history, and explained Niebuhr’s argument that the modern “myth of progress” emerges from the

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combination of a secularized Christian notion of providential history with Plato’s account of the soul’s movement from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge. I suggested that the relevant dialectic for Niebuhr is not historical but vertical; extra-temporal and not intra-temporal—that is to say that for Niebuhr the relevant categories are the temporal and the eternal, rather than the ancient and modern or primitive tradition and modern Enlightenment. But this begs the question of how Niebuhr understands “history” in the first place—and while Niebuhr’s dialectic seeks to embrace both time and eternity because it presupposes faith in a sovereign God, we should not therefore conclude that Niebuhr’s rejection of the alternative, “intra-temporal” understandings leaves history with no place in his thought; indeed, if he is to engage with modernity, he must engage with history, and the relationship between eternity and time proves central to his understanding of historical meaning.

Eternity both “stands over time” and “at the end of time.” It stands “over time” to the extent that it is “the ultimate source and power of all derived and dependent existence.” Eternity is the “source and ground” of the temporal. God thus exists

503 Of course, the themes of darkness and light pervade the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, as well. See, e.g. John 1:1-9 (ESV) (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”).


507 Ibid. See also David Bentley Hart, The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness and Bliss (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013) for a similar description of the distinction between time and eternity: (“God, therefore, is the creator of all things not as the first temporal agent in cosmic history (which would make him not the prime cause of creation but only the initial secondary cause within it), but as the eternal reality ‘in which all things live and move, and have their being,’ present in all things as the
outside time and comprehends events in time simultaneously rather than in any temporal succession. Eternity stands “at the end of time” to the extent that the process of linear time cannot be comprehended absent an end. In this sense we might say that eternity outlasts time. There is a distinction between the process and the principle underlying the process. These two dimensions of the relationship between eternity and time, Niebuhr argues, allow us to hold two perspectives regarding the meaning of history simultaneously. From the perspective of eternity as “over time,” we can conceive of absolute meanings, universal qualities that are not “historicized.” From this perspective human actions have “universal” significance and meaning regardless of their impact (or nonimpact) on temporal events. From the perspective of eternity as “at the end of time” we can conceive of a final accounting for and meaning of human actions. Acts, from this perspective, have meaning within history. Both views, the “view from above” and the “view from within” are required if we are to adequately assess historical meaning.

Once again, however, the ground of his thought when it comes to theories of history is theological, for Niebuhr attributes the notion of universal history in the first place to the biblical account of God’s sovereignty and power notwithstanding the multiple accounts of universal history of the kind that pervade modern thought.

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actuality of all actualities, transcendent of all things as the changeless source from which all actuality flows.”).

510 “Every act stands altogether in relation to itself and altogether in relation to something else; it is both a point of repose and a stepping stone; and if it were not so it would be impossible to conceive the self-surpassing growth of history.” Benedetto Croce, History as the Story of Liberty (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000)
511 See, e.g. Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” in On History, ed. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001), 11 (“Whatever concept one may hold, from a metaphysical point of view, concerning the freedom of the will, certainly its appearances, which are human actions, like every other natural event are determined by universal laws. However obscure their causes, history, which is concerned with narrating these appearances, permits us to hope that if we attend to the play of freedom of the human will in the large, we may be able to discern a regular movement
The radical otherness of God is an offense to all rationalistic interpreters of life and history. Yet the worship of this God is the basis for the only possible universalism which does not negate or unduly simplify the meaning of history in the process of universalizing it. . . . The idea of a universal history emerges by reason of the fact that the divine sovereignty which overarches all historical destiny is not the possession of any people or the extension of any particular historical power.  

Here we encounter a central feature of Niebuhr’s understanding of history—and one that is profoundly Augustinian in nature. For Niebuhr, while history possesses meaning (an insight which is one of the endowments of Hebraic thought) we cannot fully ascertain that meaning through reason alone, nor is meaning in history the possession of any particular historical people or culture. In Augustinian terms, Niebuhr affirms the ambiguity of the saeculum over and against modern claims of finality in time.  

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512 Niebuhr, Faith and History, 103-04  
513 Niebuhr understands the notion of historical meaning in Hebrew thought as a direct response to the problem of historical meaninglessness found in Greek dualism: “In Greek thought the tendency always is to regard history as meaningless or evil by reason of its involvement in time and nature. In Hebraic thought it is fully understood that there could be no history at all if human action and existence did not stand in the dimension of eternity as well as time. For this reason the content of revelation is not primarily the assurance that God can speak to man but rather the assurance that His final word to man is not one of judgment but of forgiveness and mercy.” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1, 144.  
515 In Niebuhrian terms, one might say we “have” but do not “possess” an understanding of meaning in history. Cf. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 2, 147 (“It was on the other hand the expression of the pride of priests, seeking to transmute an ultimate religious position, which can be held only by faith, into a human possession and into an instrument of authority over other types of knowledge.”).  
516 “If the Christian conception of grace be true than all history remains an ‘interim’ between the disclosure and the fulfillment of its meaning . . . The fulfillments of meaning in history will be the more untainted in fact, if purity is not prematurely claimed for them.” Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 2, 213. See
in the world of time is complex and inscrutable; only the divine perspective can finally resolve its paradoxes and injustices. This is so because of the fact of human freedom. In a very real sense it is human freedom, and more specifically the ambiguity of that freedom (man’s capacity for creativity and destruction) that “sows confusion into the order of history and makes its final end dubious.” From Niebuhr’s perspective, secular or rational claims to finality in history tend to run aground on the unpredictability of human activity. Perhaps ironically, human intransigence often confounds the neat progress of history in modern accounts. Put in terms that will require further elaboration presently, as with politics, human history is characterized by sin, both in terms of the events of history as well as of human interpretations thereof. Thus for Niebuhr, when man views history, he looks “through a glass, darkly” now knowing only “in part.” Full knowledge awaits God’s final eschatological judgment and mercy. As a consequence, “the real content of this meaning must be illumined by the light of faith.”

also R. A. Markus’ singular work regarding Augustine’s understanding of sacred and secular history, R.A. Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Among other things, Markus argues that “Augustine’s thought moved with increasing certainty towards the rejection of any attempt to introduce any division derived from sacred history into the history of the age after Christ. . . . [O]ne of the fundamental themes of his reflection on history [is] that since the coming of Christ, until the end of the world, all history is homogeneous, that it cannot be mapped out in terms of a pattern drawn from sacred history, that it can no longer contain decisive turning-points endowed with a significance in sacred history. Every moment may have a unique and mysterious significance in the ultimate divine tableau of men’s doings and sufferings; but it is a significance to which God’s revelation does not supply the clues.” Ibid., 20-21. From a Niebuhrian perspective, modern historical understandings that offer the “meaning of history,” be they Kantian, Rousseauean, Hegelian, or Marxist, fail to grasp this fundamental distinction regarding the nature and meaning of history, and the various mythologies of progress or secular eschatological fulfillment can to a greater or lesser extent be traced to this error. See also John Gray, Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 2 (arguing that “the radical Enlightenment belief that there can be a sudden break in history, after which the flaws of human society will be for ever abolished, is a by-product of Christianity. The Enlightenment ideologies of the past centuries were very largely spilt theology . . . Whether they stress piecemeal change or revolutionary transformation, theories of progress are not scientific hypotheses. They are myths, which answer the human need for meaning.”).

Niebuhr, Faith and History, 105.
I. Cor. 13:12.
B. Secular Eschatology and Utopian Dreams

But the fact remains that much of modern thought is preoccupied with meaning in history. Indeed, Niebuhr goes so far as to argue that “the dominant note in modern culture is not so much confidence in reason as faith in history.”\(^{520}\) I have already contended that Niebuhr’s politics makes little sense without his theology—that faith is required for Niebuhr’s understanding to have a purchase. Indeed, the very notion of an “impossible possibility” borne out of sacrificial, self-giving love must ground itself on a faith that God can complete what human agency alone cannot. And to be clear: for Niebuhr, human beings must have faith. It is in the nature of the human condition that men must adopt beliefs about the world that cannot be grounded fully in reason. Faith, in other words, is an element of the ontological condition of being human. The question then is not “faith or reason?” but rather “which faith?” Without faith in God to complete the projects man cannot himself achieve, we will not abandon faith; rather, we will redirect its object. Thus without faith in God to achieve final justice in eternity, Niebuhr insists, we will inevitably move towards dreams of utopia in the world of time. And indeed, our utopian dreams rest in part upon our failure to recognize the ethical limits of human action which is directly related to our unwillingness to acknowledge God’s divine sovereignty (in theological terms, our “rebellion”).\(^{521}\) “The utopian illusions and sentimental aberrations of modern liberal culture are really all derived from the basic error of negating the fact of original sin.”\(^{522}\)

\(^{520}\) Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 3.

\(^{521}\) Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 140. (“The sin of man is that he seeks to make himself God . . . The serious view which the Bible takes of this sin of man’s rebellion against God naturally leads to an interpretation of history in which judgment upon sin becomes the first category of interpretation.”).

\(^{522}\) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 273 n.4
According to Niebuhr, the modern pattern is to first equate human virtue with the goodness of some “scheme for international justice or social peace.” Upon the inevitable failure of the scheme’s realization—or its achievement only after terrible bloodshed, the result is either despair or some form of scapegoating of one or another form of economic, social or political organization. Logically speaking, we convince ourselves that if the error is not in fact at the heart of the human condition, then errancy must be located elsewhere. Indeed, we see this in our modern iterations of left and right, in which the political right attributes political and social pathologies to an overweening governmental apparatus, while the political left blames the economic power of global capitalism. Neither side is sufficiently self-reflective or astute regarding the human condition to consider the possibility that no political organization will offer an ultimate solution to the problem of errancy because the problem is one at the heart of human nature and not merely locatable in a particular group or class.

Because Niebuhr insists upon the limits of politics and refuses to entertain the possibility of temporal achievement of perfect justice, many consider Niebuhr too pessimistic. But Niebuhr has a significant target in mind, one that he sees at the heart of modern politics and which brings the historical element into play, namely, this tendency to place eschatological hope in political life rather than in God; indeed, for

523 Ibid.
524 This is the same path Plato follows in the Republic: having failed to show what the Good is, in Bks. VI & VII, he then proceeds to show where life goes without it. See Joshua Mitchell, Plato’s Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 75-99 (discussing the soul’s decline from timocracy to tyranny).
525 Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, in an essay entitled “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Dualism,” that “Niebuhr’s dialectic makes him unqualifiedly pessimistic about the future of things.” 148. Elsewhere he refers to Niebuhr’s “pessimistic imperfectionism,” 151 The Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project. Charles Mathewes reaches a similar conclusion. See Charles T. Mathewes, Evil and the Augustinian Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 131 (Niebuhr’s “realism is . . . concomitantly too ethically pessimistic, because his anthropology is partially subjectivist.”).
Niebuhr this utopian error characterizes virtually all modern political and economic movements—the religious hope in a final fulfillment of history has been secularized and transmuted into a political hope (to borrow from a contemporary of Niebuhr’s, the political danger is the ever-present human desire to “immanentize the eschaton”).

Niebuhr is willing to concede the possibility of historical movement—but that movement takes place cognizant of the horizon of eternity and of the final inscrutability of God’s purposes for history. The modern error of placing eschatological hope in the world of time comes in part from a kind of forgetting of the influence and meaning of Christianity despite the fact that it has bequeathed to us some of our foundational understandings—elements which we now take for granted without recognizing their genealogical origin in expressions of Christian faith. After all, one cannot immanentize an eschaton until one can imagine an eschaton in the first place. This is the great historical inheritance of Christianity—the conception of linear time, and moreover, a concept of linear time that offers a movement towards fulfillment of what is now only partial. Here two conceptions merge: the conception of historical movement and the concept of religious hope or fulfillment. In the Christian conception, the Providence of God supervenes over history to guide it towards the eventual fulfillment, though that fulfillment arrives not “in time” but in eternity. Modernity’s attempt at secularization of this concept, Niebuhr argues, cannot help but eventuate in utopian dreams.

526 Eric Voegelin, The New Science of Politics: An Introduction (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 120. (“The problem of an eidos in history, hence, arises only when Christian transcendental fulfillment becomes immanentized. Such an immanentist hypostasis of the eschaton, however, is a theoretical fallacy. Things are not things, nor do they have essences, by arbitrary declaration. The course of history as a whole is no object of experience; history has no eidos, because the course of history extends into the unknown future. The meaning of history, thus, is an illusion; and this illusionary eidos is created by treating a symbol of faith as if it were a proposition concerning an object of immanent experience.”).

527 See Eliade, Myth of the Eternal Return.
Indeed, Niebuhr would hold that this is not merely an accidental error but an inevitable one. That is to say that when faith is abandoned or lost, what remains is not a distilled secularity but rather some other form of secularized religious hope—albeit one that lacks the self-awareness of its own religiosity. This can take the form of any one of a number of utopian political movements, as Niebuhr points out, or it can merely involve taking the partial and elevating it to universal significance. In other words, men will worship,\(^{528}\) and the question is whether that worship will be properly directed at its object—God, or directed elsewhere—what traditional Hebrew thought terms *idolatry*.\(^ {529}\) This is one of the reasons Niebuhr insists that an understanding of religion must be a part of serious political reflection; it helps apprehend the occasions on which secular ideologies seek essentially religious fulfillment. Even if one rejects the truth claims of religious faith, Niebuhr would still insist that one must *understand* the ongoing religious influence upon political thought and action. But his stronger claim is that the abandonment of religious faith can have potentially catastrophic consequences for politics, democracy more specifically, and freedom, because the religious element in man does not go away, rather it reasserts itself in other, purportedly secular ideological guises, then lashes out in rage when its utopian dreams fail to materialize. In short, we must either wrestle with the meaning of faith, or we will confront the consequences of the frustrated eschatological claims of modern politics.\(^ {530}\) Christian faith offers the antidote

\(^ {528}\) We might say that human beings are not *homo sapiens* but *homo religiosus*.


\(^ {530}\) Despite this problem, Niebuhr recognizes that moderns will not soon return to religious belief, because of the negative associations they make between religion and repressive politics: “It will be a long while before modern idealists will recognize that the profundities of the Christian faith, which they have disavowed, are indispensable resources for the historic tasks which lie before us. These profundities were disavowed partly for the good reason that they were corrupted by obscurantism and were intimately related to cultural presuppositions of civilizations, long since destroyed. They were also disavowed for the bad
to this perfectionism in its simultaneous recognition of the partiality of all human endeavor and of the perfection of the divine standard for human being.

In its profoundest insights, the Christian faith sees the whole of human history as involved in guilt, and finds no release from guilt except in the grace of God. The Christian is freed by that grace to act in history, to give his devotion to the highest values he knows, to defend those citadels of civilization of which necessity and historic destiny have made him the defender, and he is persuaded by that grace to remember the ambiguity of even his best actions. If the providence of God does not enter the affairs of men to bring good out of evil, the evil in our good may easily destroy our most ambitious efforts and frustrate our highest hopes.\(^{531}\)

Put in the starkest theological terms, only through God’s gracious intervention is man saved. He cannot save himself.

\[\textit{C. The Metanarratives of History}\]

Interestingly, Niebuhr perhaps anticipates some of the so-called “post-modern” criticism of the allegedly self-satisfied narratives of liberal modernity (what Niebuhr repeatedly termed liberal modernity’s “easy conscience”).\(^{532}\) With the post-modern critique of meta-narrative Niebuhr would affirm the faith in progress as a profoundly misguided myth, every bit as religious in nature as the professions of the rankest fundamentalist.

The various principles of interpretation current in modern culture, such as the idea of progress or the Marxist concept of an historical dialectic, are all principles of historical interpretation introduced by faith. They claim to be conclusions about the nature of history at which men arrive after a “scientific” analysis of the course of events; but there can be no such analysis of the course of events which

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\(^{531}\) Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist,” 118.

\(^{532}\) See, e.g. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. 1, 23, 93, 94, 104.
does not make use of some presupposition of faith, as the principle of analysis and interpretation.\textsuperscript{533}

Liberal modernity confidently affirms its account of progress—to the point that some could even speculate that man had reached “the end of history.”\textsuperscript{534} Yet the account itself requires a fundamental presupposition—a faith—in the intelligibility of historical movement and the existence of such a metanarrative.

Every larger frame of meaning, which serves the observer of historical events in correlating the events into some kind of patter, is a structure of faith rather than of science, in the sense that the scientific procedures must presuppose the framework and it can therefore not be merely their consequence.\textsuperscript{535}

The postmodern response has been to recognize this faith for what it is and to problematize the claims of rational grounding for what are in actuality religious claims. But in its total rejection of rationality the postmodern response offers no basis for adjudication between potentially commensurable positions, preferring instead a claim of the impenetrability of rival perspectives.\textsuperscript{536} In Niebuhrian terms we would aver that postmodern thought offers no “final dike against relativism.”\textsuperscript{537}

Yet if postmodern thought gets the naivety of liberal thought right, it then errs in its embrace of identity politics and consciousness raising. I will have more to say on identity politics below. As for “consciousness-raising,” such an approach, while laudable in its intentions, likewise fails in its inability to recognize how an increase in knowledge, or “consciousness” can be deployed to serve self-interest. If the liberal narrative fails in its assessment of self-interest as benign and therefore harnessable in the interest of

\textsuperscript{533} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 1, 141.
\textsuperscript{534} Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” \textit{The National Interest} (Summer 1989).
\textsuperscript{535} Niebuhr, \textit{Faith and History}, 119.
\textsuperscript{536} Although hardly a postmodern, Alasdair MacIntyre appears to concede this position in \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
\textsuperscript{537} “The final dike against relativism is to be found not in [] alleged fixities, but in the law of love itself. Niebuhr, “Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism,” in Brown, \textit{The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr}, 159.
economic improvement and political stability, the post-modern turn fails in its ignorance of the reality of self-interest at the heart of every political movement. It is the Marxist error\textsuperscript{538} moved into another register.

\section*{IV. Politics and Sin: The Possibility of and Necessity for Democracy}

Niebuhr’s skepticism of the possibility of an ethical politics and his rejection of the dreams of utopian politics point to his determined and relatively innovative defense of democratic politics. Particularly interesting is Niebuhr’s strong commendation of democracy given his general critique of claims of universal validity advanced by particular, interested organizations of political or social power on their own behalf. After all, Niebuhr contends that such claims tend to reflect the confluence of pride and self-interest in which proponents fail to apprehend their relative position in history as well as their vested interest in a given social or political arrangement. Thus could Niebuhr critique Aquinas’ account of feudalism.\textsuperscript{539} Yet Niebuhr attempts to establish an arguably similar apology for Western democracy, indeed penning an entire volume devoted to the task.\textsuperscript{540} And he does so remaining fully cognizant of the irony associated with such an

\textsuperscript{538} Niebuhr lauds what he calls Marxism’s “great insights into the ideological character of all cultural enterprises,” Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 1, 48, but nonetheless chastises it for failing to turn its insightful analysis on the working class itself. So on the one hand, Marx “recognizes, as no hedonist can, the profound paradox of human spirituality and morality: that the interests of the self cannot be followed if the self cannot obscure these interests behind a façade of general interest and universal values.” \textit{Ibid.}, 35. On the other hand, however, “Marxism . . . tentatively discovers and finally dissipates a valuable insight into human nature. It dissipates the insight because it fails to recognize that \textit{there is an ideological element in all human rational processes which reveals itself not only in the spirituality of the dominant bourgeois class, and not only in the rationalization of economic interest; but which expresses itself in all classes and uses every circumstance, geographic, economic, and political, as an occasion for man’s assertion of universal significance for his particular values.} This defect in human life is too constitutional to be eliminated by a reorganization of society; a fact which constitutes the basic refutation of the utopian dreams of Marxism.” \textit{Ibid.} (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{539} See Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 1, 281.

\textsuperscript{540} See \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness}. 

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undertaking in light of his skepticism regarding claims to finality in time;\textsuperscript{541} even his defense of democracy is qualified by this recognition:

Democracy, as every other historic ideal and institution, contains both ephemeral and more permanently valid elements. Democracy is on the one hand the characteristic fruit of a bourgeois civilization; on the other hand it is a perennially valid form of social organization in which freedom and order are made to support, and not to contradict each other.\textsuperscript{542}

Like much in Niebuhr’s thought, our appreciation of the validity of the democratic political form that extends beyond its instantiation in late Western modernity must hold its particularity and universality in a dialectical tension. So even though democracy’s genealogy derives from the post-feudal emergence of the middle, “bourgeois” classes in Western Europe, we can still recognize its potential validity beyond that instantiation. The reasons for this, Niebuhr argues, have to do with the affinity between the democratic form and the structure of human nature, understood theologically.\textsuperscript{543}

\textit{A. The Imperfection of Man and the Democratic Form}

Ideally democracy is a “perennially valid” form of social and political organization in a way that feudalism, for example, is not, because it does justice to two

\textsuperscript{541} Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny}, vol. 1, 98 (pondering “why it is that man is prompted and tempted to claim a dignity and eminence which no man ought to possess; and to affirm a finality for his convictions which no relative human judgment deserves.”), 284 (“Men do have to make important decisions in history upon the basis of certain norms, even though they must recognize that all historic norms are touched with both finiteness and sin; and that their sinfulness consists precisely in the bogus claim of finality which is made for them.”).

\textsuperscript{542} Niebuhr, \textit{Children of Light and the Children of Darkness}, 1.

\textsuperscript{543} As Paul D. Miller observes, “an appreciation for human sinfulness—which Niebuhr drew from his Christian faith—helps us guard against unchecked power in government. But an appreciation for human potential—drawn from the Biblical notion that human beings are made in the image of God—should also lead us to value human freedom. As Niebuhr famously put it in his foreword [to \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness}], ‘Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.’ Importantly, Niebuhr grounded democracy’s necessity in the nature of mankind, without qualification, not in cultural or social factors unique to the West. What is true about human nature in the West is also true of human nature in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.” Paul D. Miller, “What Realists Get Wrong About Niebuhr,” \textit{The American Interest} (Feb. 21, 2015) (accessed at http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/21/what-realists-get-wrong-about-neibuhr/).
dimensions of human existence: man’s spiritual stature on the one hand, which gives rise to his individuality, and his social character, on the other, which gives rise to his obligations to his neighbor. Democracy takes into consideration both the uniqueness and varieties of life as well as the common necessities of political society. There is always the risk that middle-class democracy will exalt the individual at the expense of the community—indeed this is a phenomenon often seen in so-called “conservative” politics of our time; but its emphasis upon liberty still points to a valid element—the spiritual stature of the self-transcendental individual created in the image of God—which transcends its occasionally excessive individualism.

Here again we confront a dialectical approach to understanding and accounting for political life. Democracy, Niebuhr believes,

requires a spirit of tolerant cooperation between individuals and groups which can be achieved by neither moral cynics, who know no law beyond their own interests, nor by moral idealists, who acknowledge such a law but are unconscious of the corruption which insinuates itself into the statement of it between even the most interested idealists.\(^{544}\)

Indeed, he argues that the real danger to democratic society stems from the failure of idealists—the so-called “Children of Light” to recognize the partiality and imperfection of their own convictions.\(^{545}\) In short, democracy requires defense because of the imperfection of man, and not because of the possibility of his perfection. Niebuhr’s creative contribution to democratic political theory thus depends upon his claim that the usual theoretical basis for democratic politics, one that idealizes the nobility and

\(^{544}\) Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, 151-52.
\(^{545}\) *Ibid.* “Democracy may be challenged from without by the force of barbarism and the creed of cynicism [Niebuhr almost certainly has fascist politics in mind here]. But its internal peril lies in the conflict of various schools and classes of idealists, who profess different ideals but exhibit a common conviction that their own ideals are perfect.”
greatness—indeed the potential perfectibility—of man, rests upon flawed, optimistic, even “stupid” anthropological assumptions that are inherent in modern thought but which should no longer remain credible to the late modern mind. Yet for Niebuhr this does not mean that democracy must give way to authoritarianism. Rather, as he famously observes, “[m]an’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

This virtually turns on its head both the traditional, idealistic defenses of democracy as liberating the human spirit in its ascent to moral perfectibility and the traditional defenses of more authoritarian regimes as necessary to control human errancy.

As Niebuhr’s friend and colleague Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. comments,

Traditionally, the idea of the frailty of man led to the demand for obedience to ordained authority. But Niebuhr rejected that ancient conservative argument. Ordained authority, he showed, is all the more subject to the temptations of self-interest, self-deception and self-righteousness. Power must be balanced by power. He persuaded me and many of my contemporaries that original sin provides a far stronger foundation for freedom and self-government than illusions about human perfectibility. Niebuhr's analysis was grounded in the Christianity of Augustine and Calvin, but he had, nonetheless, a special affinity with secular circles. His warnings against utopianism, messianism and perfectionism strike a chord today...We cannot play the role of God to history, and we must strive as best we can to attain decency, clarity and proximate justice in an ambiguous world.

Thus unlike many democratic theorists, Niebuhr grounds his defense of democracy explicitly upon the ambiguous truth of the human condition—upon sin—rather than on one of the discredited modern anthropological mythologies of progress or

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546 See, e.g., Thomas Jefferson’s letter to John Adams, 1819: “No government can continue good, but under the control of the people.”
547 Niebuhr, *Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 33 (referring to democratic theory as “stupid . . . in seeking a too simple harmony between the individual and the national community.”).
548 Ibid.
549 *Children of Light*, xi.
perfectibility. For Niebuhr “the same radical freedom which makes man creative also makes him potentially destructive and dangerous . . . the dignity of man and the misery of man therefore have the same root. This insight . . . justifies the institutions of democracy more surely than any sentimentality about man, whether liberal or radical.” Here we see the link between the ontological account of freedom outlined in Chapter 3 and the philosophical case for democratic politics.

For Niebuhr, democracy offers individuals a means to exercise their divinely given freedom while at the same time preserving some modicum of political order as a bulwark against the antinomian anarchy that can also eventuate from that freedom unfettered. Notwithstanding this strong endorsement, however, Niebuhr remains always cognizant that “even the best human actions involve some guilt,” and he thus cautions those with ambitious projects to remake societies. As he explains,

Our dreams of bringing the whole of human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice. The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning. Our own nation, always a vivid symbol of the most characteristic attitudes of a bourgeois culture, is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy. The infant is more secure in the world than the mature man is in his wider world. The pattern of the historical drama grows more quickly than the strength of even the most powerful man or nation.

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551 “Niebuhr’s understanding of democracy rested fundamentally on a recognition of human equality born of the shared recognition of our insufficiency, and hence of our mutual humility . . . Niebuhr identifies democratic humility with the long tradition of religious humility, thereby calling both to task for the overestimation of their own sense of righteousness.” Patrick Deneen, Democratic Faith (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 254.
554 Ibid., 3.
B. Utopian Dreams Redux: The Limits of Democratic Politics

Given his recognition of the ironic imperfection of all human effort, one suspects that Niebuhr might cringe at the recent declarations of American intent to “end[] tyranny in our world.” For Niebuhr, such an audacious plan runs the risk of collapsing into exactly the type of utopian commitment that he finds so dangerous in the various totalizing movements of the twentieth century.\(^{555}\) It is our natural human tendency to become impatient with the imperfections of our world, particularly where the necessary correctives appear so transparently obvious. Accordingly, “[d]espite the enduring historic connections between democracy and political pluralism, leaders of powerful democratic states may find it difficult to wait for these developments to happen. Because democracy makes global order possible, the argument goes, those who believe a global order is necessary must work aggressively to spread democracy.”\(^{556}\) Yet to embark on ambitious social and political reforms without acknowledging the difficulty and complexity occasioned by the introduction of such change can be ruinous. “What [Niebuhr] counsels in these situations,” Niebuhr scholar Robin Lovin explains, “is both realism and restraint. [He] warns that we are apt to overestimate our ability to influence outcomes and that we do not need to use power merely because we think we have it.”\(^{557}\)

So Niebuhr, though deeply committed to the potential democracy offers for the full flourishing of human personhood, would nonetheless counsel caution to those who

\(^{555}\) “[A] sense of humility which recognizes that nations are even more incapable than individuals of fully understanding the rights and claims of others may be an even more important element in such a discipline [of the exercise of power]. In so far as men and nations are ‘judges in their own case’ they are bound to betray the human weakness of having a livelier sense of their own interest than of the competing interest. That is why ‘just’ men and nations may easily become involved in ironic refutations of their moral pretensions.” \textit{Ibid.}, 138-39.


\(^{557}\) \textit{Ibid.}
seek to promote democracy and remake the globe. Moreover, by taking seriously both the realities of power and the fact of human cultural diversity, he might question whether some societies are even ready for democracy, a concern that both he and German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer have expressed. Niebuhr believes that “[a] democratic society . . . requires not only a spiritual and cultural basis which is lacking in the Orient but a socio-economic foundation which primitive and traditional civilizations cannot easily acquire,” while Bonhoeffer feared “that in a country like Germany it will be impossible to introduce all the various forms of democratic liberties” without significant postwar cultural renewal.

C. Identity and the Predicated Being

It is worth noting here that Niebuhr’s formulation of democracy presumes a self-understanding of human beings as errant and prideful, and sharing that quality as a universal attribute (this is why I earlier insisted that to understand Niebuhr we must both engage the concept of “human nature,” however unpopular or out of vogue such a conception of the self may be, and attend to the theological dimension of Niebuhr’s thought). The alternative is a culture of predicated beings—or beings with identities which operate more fundamentally than any common inheritance of the human condition. In the latter environment, the honor of one’s in-group takes precedence over the commonality between groups—or indeed, between individuals. The question for the

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political future increasingly influenced by so-called identity politics is whether democracy can work at all where constituents see themselves as predicated beings with identities. Given the inadequate foundation of idealism, which Niebuhr ably dissects, democracy may in fact require an understanding of common human fallibility as the universal ground from which politics emerges. Put in theological terms, it may be the case that democracy can only work where beneath the predicates of his identity, man understands himself, fundamentally, as a sinner. Only with such a theological self-understanding can man adequately ground virtues of humility, charity and forgiveness. Viewed through this lens, we can understand democracy as a profound yet precarious achievement. If we abandon the notion of universal human errancy in favor of the approach of an identity politics that locates errancy in the “other” or the “privileged” we may unwittingly destroy the political foundation on which we stand.

Niebuhr thus reminds us that while democracy may be desirable, its emergence will be at best a slow, organic task, and not one for the impatient. Democracy, in short, is

561 “Privilege theory” has, in recent years received increasing academic attention. See, e.g., Peggy MacIntosh, White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies, 1988 (in which MacIntosh defends consciousness-raising of white privilege as a means of combating racial oppression); Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, eds., Privilege: A Reader (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 2 (“Students who are write, heterosexual, male or middle class need to go further. We need to see how we are stakeholders in the understanding of structural inequality, how the dynamics that create inequality for some also benefit others. Privilege needs to be made visible.”); Beverly Greene, “Beyond Heterosexism and Across the Cultural Divide—Developing an Inclusive Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Psychology: A Look to the Future, in Linda D. Garnets and Douglas C. Kimmel, Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Experiences (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 391 (“Although privilege and disadvantage go hand in hand, they are usually invisible to those who hold them. Ignoring the presence of systems of privilege leads to the denial of disadvantage. That denial silences and renders invisible those who are not privileged and further marginalizes them . . . If heterosexual, white skin, middle class, able-bodied, or other forms of privilege are denied, the disadvantages associated with membership in disadvantaged groups is denied as well.”).

562 The recent emergence of theories of “microaggressions” raises the same problem of political incommensurability. See Derald Wing Sue, Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.), 5 (emphasis added) (“Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. Perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication.”).
an achievement, not an inevitability. A Niebuhrian perspective can support democracy while remaining cognizant of the fundamental limitations facing any particular program designed to ensure its advance.

[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.

Note again that the assumption is one of gradual, tentative steps, always cognizant of the dangers associated with human frailty and the tentative nature of our political achievements. For Niebuhr, there remains something radically incomplete about all human endeavors, despite our best efforts. Niebuhr recognizes this fact in his emphasis on the “unresolved tension in all human experience” which “reveals the nature of ultimate reality and locates our place within it.” For Niebuhr, the willingness to live in the incomplete and dwell in tension offers a way to avoid the realist tendency towards despair and the idealist tendency towards sentimentality. As Bonhoeffer insisted, we live in the “penultimate,” and humans must reject radical claims to justice and relativistic compromise in favor of making “responsible choices among the concrete possibilities now available.” This is the Niebuhrian political task.

563 Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, 49 (“The indeterminate creativity of history validates the idea of a free or democratic society, which refuses to place premature checks upon human vitalities. The destructive possibilities of these vitalities prove democracy to be a more difficult achievement than is usually supposed.”) (emphasis added).
564 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 61.
565 Lovin, Christian Realism, 1.
566 Bonhoeffer, Ethics, 146-70.
567 Lovin, Christian Realism, 5.
V. Conclusion

A Niebuhrian politics can rightly be termed “chastened,” yet it is so precisely to the extent that it recognizes human sin in the course of developing its counsel. But there is more to the picture than mere realism, anti-utopianism and even democracy. For underlying all of these practical counsels is a theological orientation that combines the virtues of humility, charity and hope. It recognizes the partiality in any political position such that it can, with humility, extend a charitable attitude towards those it opposes. Furthermore, because it does not place the ultimate human aspiration in the lap of politics but rather in God, it approaches political life with a hope born of a theological anticipation of divine completion of human projects, rather than a this-worldly fulfillment.

Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious devotion to moral ideals. It requires religious humility. Every absolute devotion to relative political ends (and all political ends are relative) is a threat to communal peace. But religious humility is no simple moral or political achievement. It springs only from the depth of a religion which confronts the individual with a more ultimate majesty and purity than all human majesties and values, and persuades him to confess: “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.”

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568 Niebuhr, The Children of Light.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of men. And so it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

At the outset of this investigation I proposed that political theory suffers from a deepening inadequacy to the increasingly intractable political problems of the current moment. I suggested that though political theorists, and more particularly historians of political thought, inhabit a unique perspective from which to apprehend current political problems, we have had little of substance to offer, tending instead to disappear down rabbit holes of largely academic questions having scant relevance to contemporary politics. I further posited that this failure of perspicuity points to a more significant and deeper failure of understanding having to do with our grasp of the human condition itself. The last three chapters have pursued this proposition through examining

570 Indeed this may be one reason why some seek to exclude political theory from departments of politics all together.
the anthropological question in detail; first by considering Niebuhr’s critique of modern anthropologies (Chapter 2), then by investigating his Christian alternative (Chapter 3), and finally by developing the political outworkings of that Christian anthropology (Chapter 4). Throughout I have insisted, against the recurrent efforts to “secularize” his thought, that Niebuhr must be understood theologically—that is to say that one cannot arrive at the insights of a Niebuhrian political theory without working through the foundational theological anthropology which grounds the theory; indeed, theological realism is a fundamental assumption upon which this project rests. But that claim itself implies a second, broader claim worth considering as this investigation comes to a close, namely, that the “intractable political problems” we confront point to a deeper confusion, one that is cultural—and therefore spiritual—in nature.

I. Of Civilizations and Cultures.

Niebuhr himself reached this conclusion in assessing the political crises of his own day. “Every great crisis in world history,” he writes, “represents a breakdown both in the organization of civilization and in the life of a culture. It is a spiritual as well as a political and economic crisis.” Politics, Niebuhr argues, resides at the civilizational level, defined as the “political, economic and social arrangements and mechanisms by which the life of men is ordered.” “Culture,” by contrast, refers to the “philosophical,

571 For a broader and more technical discussion of the relationship of theological realism to political and moral realism, see Robin Lovin, Christian Realism and the New Realities (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6 (arguing that theological realism affirms that “our language about God or about the divine is not merely a way of expressing emotions of awe, joy, or terror,” that “[s]tatements about God or the divine can be true or false,” and that “[t]heir truth or falsity, moreover, depends on a state of affairs that exists in reality, and not on our ideas about it.”).
573 Ibid.
esthetic and religious ideas and presuppositions that inform the political organization and that in turn emerge from it.\textsuperscript{574} While the two relate dialectically, Niebuhr understands the civilizational as the bodily and the cultural as the spiritual—and therefore “deeper”—foundation. When civilization confronts crisis, a robust culture may withstand the turmoil. But when culture itself is in crisis, the spiritual confusion only heightens the political turmoil, raising the possibility of both civilizational and cultural collapse.\textsuperscript{575}

What we confront today, I argue, is not merely political confusion and polarization—that is to say, civilizational turmoil—but rather a cultural, and therefore spiritual, crisis. The problem theorists of politics must face is that the civilizational tools we typically wield are inadequate to what is a fundamentally cultural task. We haven’t gone deep enough. Here again, Niebuhr concurs. “Modern culture,” he argues, “has no perspective from which it can view our contemporary crisis.”

If our problems are in fact not primarily political, but in fact cultural and spiritual, then theorists of politics must attend to the available cultural and spiritual resources if we are to offer adequate counsel. Yet modern culture, and more particularly modern political theory, has busied itself disregarding, if not dismantling, those resources. The positive project for the Niebuhrian, therefore, is not more political argument or policy prescription, but rather recovery and renewal of the spiritual capital of our common culture. \textit{That} is why Niebuhr matters: he serves as a wise guide to our retrieval of those long neglected resources. Principal among them are the Reformational insights regarding human nature—those which we explored in Chapter 3—and more broadly, the insights of the Augustinian tradition, particularly its sober assessment of

\textsuperscript{574} \textit{Ibid.}, 6-7.
\textsuperscript{575} \textit{Ibid.} 7.
political possibilities in light of the anthropology of sin. Armed with a realistic wisdom regarding the possibilities and limitations available to human beings in the political and cultural worlds, we can then tackle our cultural and civilizational problems firmly cognizant of the penultimatecy of politics yet with a confident foundation grounded in hope, love and forgiveness.

II. Recovering the Augustinian Reformation: The Redemption of Modernity

I have presented Niebuhr largely as a critic of modernity; and indeed, he offers a harsh and unsparing assessment of its mythos. The uncritical acceptance of narratives of human innocence and social progress, the countervailing and internally inconsistent accounts of “essential” man, and the modern inability to grapple with the origin of evil all suffer Niebuhr’s withering assault. Yet it is as important to recognize the significance of the move that Niebuhr doesn’t make—that is to say that he rejects the temptation to look backward and idealize a prior historical dispensation—as the move he does. Unlike many (in fact, most) critics of modernity, Niebuhr overcomes the temptation to “return to the old.” We are not simply to look backward to classical thought, nor are we to recover the medieval synthesis. History moves in one direction; the temptation to nostalgia is just that—a temptation, and one which we must resist. The world cannot be reenchanted. This is not to say that we cannot learn lessons from prior ages; to the contrary, Niebuhr’s genealogical excavation of Western thought consists in part of an insistence upon the importance of the illuminative possibilities of careful study of its history; more

576 I am indebted to Matthew Sitman for the concept of “redeeming modernity.”
578 For a brief discussion of reenchantment and revolution, see Mitchell, Tocqueville in Arabia, 33.
specifically he insists on the relevance of recovering largely abandoned, Reformational understandings of God, man and history as a means of balancing out the extremes of the modern thought traceable to unchecked Renaissance optimism. But the value of the excursion into intellectual history is in its illuminative dimension, not because history reveals a past golden age whose experience we can recapture or to which we might return.

For this reason Niebuhr refuses to advocate the return to a past “synthesis,” however “wise and reserved” it might have been. He instead counsels the development of a new one—albeit one of creative and fruitful tension—between Renaissance and Reformation, each of which offers new insights, and neither of which has successfully engaged with the other:

Both Renaissance and Reformation explored complexities of human nature beyond the limits understood in the “medieval synthesis.” But the discoveries of each stood in contradiction to the other. Some of the confusions of modern culture about human nature arise from this unresolved contradiction. Others are derived from the fact that the Renaissance triumphed over the Reformation so completely that the insights of the latter were preserved only in a few backwaters and eddies of modern culture.

Niebuhr’s account of modern man (which I developed in Chapter 2) demonstrates how the intellectual triumph of the Renaissance has deprived modern thought of the deep human insights found in the Reformation (developed in Chapter 3), eventuating in considerable confusion regarding our basic understanding of man—a confusion that is

579 “In such an analysis [of the question wither prelapsarian righteousness can be realized in history] it will be important to reconsider the almost forgotten issues which were once raised by the Protestant Reformation.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 298-99.


581 “As between Reformation pessimism and modern Protestant and secular optimism about the nature of man, the more moderate Catholic theories seem wise and reserved by comparison. Yet the Catholic synthesis broke down under the combined pressure of Renaissance and Reformation.” Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 299. “It is not possible to return to the old, that is, to the medieval synthesis, though we may be sure that efforts to do so will undoubtedly be abundant.

primarily cultural and spiritual, not merely political. Niebuhr sees recovery of the
spiritual resources available in the Reformational insights regarding human nature, when
held in creative tension with those predominant insights characteristic of the Renaissance,
as necessary to amelioration of the cultural crisis we face.

In the course of this project I have largely sidestepped questions regarding the
nature of modernity. This is for good reason; I am less concerned with offering an
extended reflection on the central disputes regarding modernity than I am with assessing
Niebuhr’s own reflections on the matter. But here I must say something more about
modernity, given that I initially characterized Niebuhr as an “empathetic” critic of
modernity who acknowledges its achievements.583 Recall that for Niebuhr, the
Renaissance and Reformation represent the modern instantiations of classical and
Christian culture.584 Each movement has its strengths and weaknesses. The Renaissance,
which Niebuhr considered largely triumphant in modern thought, harbored a confidence
in human possibility that was the product of classical optimism and Christian historical
consciousness, while the Reformation preserved the insights of human limitation
attributable to the biblical religion of Augustine. Both are valid. There should be no
“culture war” between them,585 because each offers partial, but not complete, insights
into the human predicament.

For Niebuhr, the constructive task for moderns is to hold those two moments
together, recognizing and inhabiting the tension between them. We must “bring

583 See Chapter 1, supra.
584 See Chapter 3, supra.
585 Cf. James Davison Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law and
Renaissance and Reformation insights about human nature into fruitful interrelation,”

all the while “discriminat[ing] carefully between what was true and false in each

movement.” According to Niebuhr, the events of history have justified the dynamism of the Renaissance interpretation of history, but falsified its optimism. The scientific project, whatever our assessment of its merits and demerits, has supplied ample evidence of historical dynamism, and yet this growth cannot be identified with moral “progress” given the obvious facts of history (which in Niebuhr’s case were the carnage of world war). Likewise, history has validated the “basic truth” of the Reformation—its account of human nature and the requisite need for grace, but has “challenged its obscurantism and defeatism.”

At this point I should acknowledge, in the event that it has not already become clear, that underlying this project is my intent, through Niebuhr, to offer a qualified defense of the Reformational insights into human nature as a corrective to the neo-Renaissance account so dominant in modern life. I believe this to be necessary because absent those insights modern culture is doomed to a restless oscillation between an unwarranted optimism and a dangerous pessimism borne of overweening hopes in human capacity, which when dashed drive us to despair. Neither optimism nor pessimism equips

587 Ibid., vol. 2, 205.
588 Ibid.
589 Ibid.
590 These insights round out what is otherwise a severely inadequate anthropology. “The Reformation . . . disclosed some ‘facts’ about man which are only disclosed on the presupposition of the dramatic encounter between a divine and human self. These facts are validated continually by experience; and their discovery places the Reformation in the unique position of contributing to the sum of human knowledge despite its lack of interest in the pursuit of knowledge and despite or perhaps because of, its ‘fideism’, that is, its appeal to faith rather than reason, and its cavalier attitude towards the disciplines of culture, particularly towards philosophy.” Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 120.
us for the hard work required to take on the necessary political, moral and cultural tasks appointed to us.

The hope of Christian faith that the divine power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable prerequisite for diligent fulfillment of our historic tasks. Without it we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities.\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Children of Light}, 189-90.}

We must recognize both historical possibility and historical limitation, and hold them together not by rationality alone, but with the disposition of faith.

On the one hand life in history must be recognized as filled with indeterminate possibilities. There is no individual or interior spiritual situation, no cultural or scientific task, and no social or political problem in which men do not face new possibilities of the good and the obligation to realize them. It means on the other hand that every effort and pretension to complete life, whether in collective or individual terms, that every desire to stand beyond the contradictions of history, or to eliminate the final corruptions of history must be disallowed.\footnote{Niebuhr, \textit{Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 2, 207.}

The temptation to finality constitutes one of the most dangerous temptations human beings can face. We imagine possession of the final meaning of history, or that we have arrived at the end of history. We adopt philosophies, claiming to have comprehended the world in a system of meaning. . . social philosophies certain that they have found a way to achieve perfect brotherhood in history . . . psychiatric techniques which pretend to overcome all the anxieties of human existence and therefore all its corruptions. There will even be engineering schemes for fulfilling life by the mere multiplication of comforts.

This, in short, is idolatry. Moreover, if we recall Niebuhr’s account of freedom, such philosophies and claims fail in no small part \textit{because they deny the significance of human freedom.} In the same way that medieval Catholicism erroneously declared feudalism to be the order ordained by God,\footnote{See Chapter 4, \textit{supra}.} these philosophies, psychologies and scientisms attempt to calcify the modern political and cultural order in defiance of human freedom to both

\footnote{\textit{Children of Light}, 189-90.}
\footnote{\textit{Nature and Destiny of Man}, vol. 2, 207.}
\footnote{See Chapter 4, \textit{supra}.}
imagine and strive for higher possibilities *even as we recognize the impossibility of their final achievement*. Our wisdom—and indeed our *theological* wisdom—begins when we recognize “what man ought to do and what he cannot do . . . his obligations and final incapacity to fulfill them . . . the importance of decisions and achievements in history and their final insignificance.”

The embrace of Reformational thought points us further back, however, for the Reformation, too, has its intellectual genealogy. It is not too strong to observe that the Reformation constituted fundamentally a recovery of Augustinian theology, particularly in its notion of grace and its insistence on the limits of human moral capacity. Niebuhr once observed of Augustine that “whatever may be the defects of his approach to political reality, and whatever may be the dangers of a too slavish devotion to his insights, [he] nevertheless proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker.” Niebuhr’s recovery of the doctrine of original sin appealed rather directly to Augustinian thought, as did his political realism—though he assessed Augustine’s realism as “too pessimistic.” To the extent that I argue in favor of a recovery of Reformational insights, I understand them more broadly as dependent upon Augustinian thought or what might be termed the “Augustinian tradition.” With Niebuhr, I concur that the psychological and theological insights of this tradition have been largely abandoned in the current moment, and that this is a tragedy because it is just those insights we most need. They can clarify our self-understanding at precisely those points where it most suffers confusion. Not only that, but

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594 Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 212
596 Charles Mathewes provides as good a definition of this as anyone: “By talking about the ‘Augustinian tradition,’ then, I want to designate that whole constellation of themes, thinkers, concepts and arguments which derive their essential insights from St. Augustine’s thought.” Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 61.
the Augustinian tradition offers a way of being-in-the-world which allows us to pursue political ends even as we recognize their partiality and incompletion—or more so, even if we anticipate that we will not succeed—at least not completely. This some have characterized as a “politics of hope”—one that may ground our otherwise schizophrenic self-understandings.597

III. The Penultimacy of Politics: Humility, Love and Forgiveness, and Hope

I suggested at the outset of this project that the lessons we learn from careful consideration of Niebuhr’s mature thought point not to a specific set of policy prescriptions or ideological positions, but rather to a particular approach towards political life—one which a number of other Niebuhr scholars have characterized as “chastened.”598 I have since elaborated on this claim, arguing that Niebuhr’s central insight is to recognize the spiritual and cultural character of problems many mistake for civilizational or political ones. The cultural tools we must recover if we are to move forward include (1) an epistemological modesty that recognizes the cognitive and moral limits of reason and therefore counsels humility; (2) a sober-minded recognition of the final impossibility of temporal justice in the face of the demands of the law of love, which grounds the need for forgiveness; and (3) an understanding of the moral ambiguity

597 See, e.g., Joshua Mitchell, The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy and the American Future (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3 (explaining the “Augustinian self,” that “kind of self that is prone to move in two opposite directions, either inward, in which case it tends to get wholly shut up inside itself and abandon the world; or outward, in which case it tends to be restive, overly active, and lost amid the world, searching at a frenzied pace for a satisfaction it can never wholly find there.”).

of history which, albeit ironically, opens the door for the possibility of hope. Together, these three features anchor the further conclusion that politics is, of necessity, contingent, provisional, imperfect and therefore *penultimate*.

**A. Humility and the Limits of Reason**

We have seen that Niebuhr devotes considerable time and attention to a kind of phenomenological analysis of reason.\(^{599}\) He recognizes the central role reason plays in Western thought and repeatedly alludes to what he considers to be modern culture’s relative overconfidence in man’s rational faculty, specifically, the Enlightenment “belief that the growth of human intelligence would automatically eliminate social injustice,”\(^{600}\) a belief which is “still the creed of the educators of our day and is shared more or less by philosophers, psychologists and social scientists.”\(^{601}\) The problem, of course, is that despite the evident expansion of man’s rational power and knowledge, injustice not only remains but has flourished, giving the apparent lie to the continuing belief that the expansion of knowledge will eventually resolve the moral problem of justice.

Here again we must recall Niebuhr’s account of human sin, for it is our sin which both occludes the perspicuity of our reason and then bends reason to serve our own interests, often at the expense of justice. Recall that for Niebuhr man’s sin centers on his prideful situation of himself at the world’s center. His sin is his self-interest and outsized pride, almost inevitably expressed at the expense of others (and magnified when aggregated into “group pride.”).\(^{602}\) Our “perennial mistake,” Niebuhr observes, “is to exempt reason from either finiteness or sin or both and to derive universal rational norms

\(^{599}\) *See* Ch. 2, *supra*  
\(^{600}\) *Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 23.  
\(^{601}\) *Ibid.* 24  
\(^{602}\) *See* Ch. 3, III.B.1, *supra*.  

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from this confidence in reason.” In short, we expect too much. Niebuhr here anticipates the later, “postmodern” critique of Enlightenment thought more generally in which skeptics question the notion that a “neutral” reason can apprehend an “objective” truth. Niebuhr zeroed in on this problem half a century ago, recognizing and insisting that the human will, divided as it is, is always already present in the exercise of human reason, and therefore that reason must be understood and analyzed dialectically rather than univocally.

Reason, Niebuhr argued, is equivocally situated in service of both the “self as subject”—or the self-that-transcends itself—and the “self as agent”—the anxious self in action. In other words, the same self which purports to deploy reason as an instrument to ascertain the “objective” truth is, to put it tersely, self-interested. The self’s “universal judgments, its effort to relate all things to each other in a system of coherence” can on the one hand be “the instrument by which the self-as-subject condemns the partial and prejudiced actions of the sinful self,” while on the other hand they can supply “the vehicle of the sinful self by which it seeks to give the sanctity of a false universality to its particular needs and partial insights.” The predicament is inescapable. Any claim to impartial objectivity or universality is made on by and on behalf of a finite, “partial” creature. Historical examples are replete, with Niebuhr’s most common target being medieval culture’s claim of universal validity for the feudal social structure—a claim that fails on both cognitive and moral grounds:

605 One might say that reason speaks with a forked tongue.
The confidence of medieval Catholicism in the ability of an unspoiled reason to arrive at definitive standards of natural justice thus became the very vehicle of the sinful pretensions of the age. The social ethics of Thomas Aquinas embody the peculiarities and the contingent factors of a feudal agrarian economy into a system of fixed socio-ethical principles.\textsuperscript{608}

Niebuhr offers similar grounds for his critique of “traditional” or “historical” standards regarding the family as “reinforcing male arrogance and [re]tard[ing] justified efforts on the part of the female to achieve . . . freedom.”\textsuperscript{609} In each case purportedly objective reason has been deployed on behalf of interest in such a way as to claim universal validity for what are quite evidently partial, temporal and relative norms.

Yet despite the dialectical operation of reason and its inevitable coloration by sinful self-interest Niebuhr refuses to counsel relativism. We are not to reject reason altogether—to do so would be to commit the opposite, “Lutheran” error that involves reason “so completely . . . in the corruption of sin that it has no confidence in any . . . norms.”\textsuperscript{610} Rather, Niebuhr would require us to hold together the ideal possibility of objectivity and the real experience of subjectivity in our exercise of reason. It is an instrument we wield fully cognizant of the latent self-interest at its heart, rather than naively innocent of its multivocity. This requires us to hold our rational judgments, be they political, cultural or religious, with a loosened grasp, recognizing the human propensity to absolutize the relative even as we accept the obligation to establish moral rules to which our politics and culture adhere. Put in slightly cryptic terms, Niebuhr holds that epistemological modesty requires us to acknowledge, and even to protect, the remainder. Any totalizing system that fails to do so will inevitably deploy reason to

\textsuperscript{608} Ibid., vol. 1, 281.
\textsuperscript{609} Ibid., vol. 1, 282.
\textsuperscript{610} Ibid., vol. 1, 284.
justify its own power at the expense of the outsider while failing to recognize its own fundamental irrationality.  

As a consequence of this phenomenology of reason, it follows that a certain level of political—and indeed, religious—humility is required if we are to avoid new forms of totality in our democratic politics.

Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious devotion to moral ideals. It requires religious humility. Every absolute devotion to relative political ends (and all political ends are relative) is a threat to communal peace. But religious humility is no simple moral or political achievement. It springs only from the depth of a religion which confronts the individual with a more ultimate majesty and purity than all human majesties and values, and persuades him to confess ‘Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.’

Appreciation of the reality of human sin in the context of so-called “rational” politics thus further illuminates the reality of the imperfection of man’s political ends when placed before the absolute perfection of the Divine. The appropriate response, Niebuhr argued, is not sinful pride in the rightness of one’s position, but humility regarding the penultimacy of one’s political ends. To be clear, this is emphatically not to suspend all judgment regarding the relative good of particular ends—such relative judgments are the necessary constituents of political life—but rather to acknowledge their relativity. In consequence, no political actor or movement can consider itself and its ideals fully “rational” or universal. One can thus vigorously advance one’s own political agenda while simultaneously extending a graceful toleration towards his or her opponents—a political attitude sorely lacking in today’s polarized climate.

See also “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” in Christian Realism and Political Problems, 181 (“In contrast to th[e] logic of culture religions the emphases in the Christian faith upon the unique, the contradictory, the paradoxical, and the unresolved mystery is striking . . . a realm of freedom and mystery is indicated beyond the capacity of reason to comprehend. This is where reason starts and ends. The final irrationality of the givenness of things is frankly accepted.”)

Niebuhr, Children of Light, 151.
While Niebuhr recognized the obvious political destructiveness of moral cynicism, he worried as much about the blasé self-certainty of moral idealism that could obstruct such toleration. The failure to recognize the “corruption which insinuates itself into the statement of [moral law] by even the most disinterested idealists”—their failure to recognize their own sin—leads to the naïve and politically dangerous “conviction that their own ideals are perfect.”613 In theological terms, Niebuhr recognized the tendency to thoughtless Pharisaism even in the most dedicated of moral reformers. An awareness of the pervasiveness of human sin in all human endeavors, he argued, reinforces the tolerance of political opposition so necessary to the mechanics of democratic politics. Absent this humility, one’s relative political opponents become one’s absolute political enemies, and the temptation to leverage the full powers of the state upon the recalcitrant turns out to be too strong to resist, with all the violent and destructive consequences that inevitably follow.

B. The Limits of Justice: Love, Forgiveness and Hope

If man is a sinner, the obvious consequence is that he will sin, and that even in the most well-intentioned of endeavors, he may harm the interests and offend the rights of others. Yet the ever-present tendency to human pridefulness obscures the partiality that pervades our actions and attitudes, leaving us blind to our own self-regard.614 It is only in apprehending our own bent towards errancy that we can recognize the reality of this partiality and its inevitable participation in all of our endeavors and maintain a healthy humility. Even still, it is in the nature of modern political life, given our incredible technological development and the sheer scale of our societies, that the mistakes of the

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613 Ibid., 152.
614 Niebuhr, Irony of American History, 42.
well-intentioned will be both large and numerous. Even our grandest achievements will be shaded with the stain of imperfection and limitation. As a consequence of this reality—as a consequence of the fact that both we and our projects are fragile and fallen—the capacity for forgiveness is of urgent importance. Indeed, forgiveness is the only proper response to “the contrite recognition that our actions and attitudes are inevitably interpreted in a different light by our friends as well as our foes than we interpret them.” It is the “final oil of harmony in all human relations.”

In a broken world, the final truth, the “general judgment upon the collective life of man, [is] that it is invariably involved in the sin of pride.” And history reveals to us injuries done and harms caused that cannot be adequately addressed through a system of remedial justice. Here we find the proper relationship between forgiveness and faith, hope and action:

The hope of Christian faith that the divine power which bears history can complete what even the highest human striving must leave incomplete, and can purify the corruptions which appear in even the purest human aspirations, is an indispensable prerequisite for diligent fulfillment of our historic tasks. Without it we are driven to alternate moods of sentimentality and despair; trusting human powers too much in one moment and losing all faith in the meaning of life when we discover the limits of human possibilities.

For Niebuhr, only by recognizing the final contingency of all human projects and acknowledging in faith our dependence on God for their completion can we fully accept the tension between the imperative for action in the world and the recognition of the ultimate imperfection and finitude of all human plans. This leads to an spiritual ethic—one of humility, a willingness to forgive, and a serenity that looks beyond history for fulfillment of hopes that must otherwise flag. As Niebuhr famously reminded us:

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615 Ibid.
617 Niebuhr, Children of Light, 189-90.
There are no simple congruities in life and history . . . It is possible to soften the incongruities of life endlessly by the scientific conquest of nature’s caprices, and the social and political triumph over historic injustice. But all such strategies cannot finally overcome the fragmentary character of human existence. The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it.

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 are 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.\textsuperscript{618}

Men, therefore, must always act with the humble recognition that they will never fully achieve their desired ends, and that the consequences of acting in the world may prove far different than those originally intended. They must “walk by faith, not by sight.”\textsuperscript{619}

\textsuperscript{618} Niebuhr, \textit{Irony of American History}, 63.
\textsuperscript{619} II. Cor. 5:7 (ESV).
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