

# LIBERALISM IN DARK TIMES

THE LIBERAL ETHOS IN THE  
TWENTIETH CENTURY

JOSHUA L. CHERNISS



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To Cary and Deborah Cherniss

But the liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand.

ISAIAH 32:8 (KING JAMES VERSION)

Don't imitate them! Don't imitate them! Surpass them in your moral conduct; surpass them by your generosity. I do not ask, however, that you should lose strength in the struggle or zeal in the fight. I ask for hard, steely breasts for combat, . . . but with sensitive hearts, capable of shuddering at human pain, able to shelter mercy and tender feelings, without which that which is most essential to human greatness is lost.

INDALECIO PRIETO,  
RADIO ADDRESS OF AUGUST 8, 1936

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## A NOTE ON SOURCES, CITATIONS, AND ABBREVIATIONS

TO CAPTURE THE FLAVOR as well as the meaning of the arguments I discuss, and to let my protagonists speak as much as possible for themselves, I have made liberal use of quotations. These are, whenever possible, taken (or, where shades of meaning seem to me to require it, adapted from) readily available English editions; where they are not, translations are my own (with assistance from Alexander Baron-Raiffe in the translations from Aron). Within the notes, I have identified sources by the name of the author and main title. Full details are given in the bibliography, for help in compiling which I am grateful to Cynthia Charlton and Laura Hartmann-Villalta.

The following abbreviations are used, in the chapters identified, to refer to frequently cited works, full information on which can be found in the bibliography:

### Chapter 2

E&S: Max Weber, *Economy and Society*

FMW: H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber*

HCC: György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

MWB: Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*

PW: Max Weber, *Political Writings*

TE: György Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics*

### Chapter 3

CaC: Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat*

CTOP: Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*

LCE: Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*

N1: Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935–1942*

N2: Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942–1951*

P: Albert Camus, *The Plague*

R: Albert Camus, *The Rebel*

RRD: Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*



#### Chapter 4

- CO: Raymond Aron, *The Committed Observer*
- DT: Raymond Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*
- HTL: Raymond Aron, *History, Truth, Liberty*
- IPH: Raymond Aron, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*
- ME: Raymond Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists*
- MTM: Raymond Aron, *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes*
- OI: Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*
- PH: Raymond Aron, *Politics and History*
- P&W: Raymond Aron, *Peace and War*

#### Chapter 5

- CLCD: Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*
- CRPP: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*
- IAH: Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*
- MMIS: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*
- MNHC: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities*
- NDM: Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*
- PSA: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America*
- TERN: Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*
- TPL: Larry Rasmussen, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*

#### Chapter 6

- AC: Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current*
- CTH: Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*
- HBIL: Isaiah Berlin, "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty," in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, 93–129
- PI: Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions*
- PITC: Isaiah Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century" (1949), in Berlin, *Liberty*, 1–32
- POI: Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton University Press, 2013)
- RT: Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*
- SR: Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*

# LIBERALISM IN DARK TIMES



## INTRODUCTION

# The Vices of Virtue

## LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF RUTHLESSNESS

Virtue itself has need of limits.<sup>1</sup>

In that “how” lies all the difference.<sup>2</sup>

HOW DO HUMANITARIAN IDEALISTS become butchers of human beings? How do they convince themselves that they are virtuous in their butchery? This is a question that should trouble those of us who cherish hopes of bettering the world through politics. It is the question of Robespierre, the champion of the rights of man and opponent of the death penalty who presided over the Reign of Terror; the question of György Lukács, the sensitive idealist turned commissar, panegyrist of Lenin, and abettor of Stalin. It is a question raised by countless others who have traveled from humanism to inhumanity, who have embraced murderous causes because they came to believe it morally imperative and politically urgent to do so.

It is easy (at least for some of us) to condemn the French Revolutionary Terrorists, Stalinist secret police, or Maoist Red Guards. But a careful study of the personal roots of these horrors should be an antidote to complacency—as, perhaps, should a moment of self-examination. Few of these political murderers started out as monsters. And readiness to sacrifice individuals in the pursuit of moral causes often takes less dramatic and bloody forms, which many of us could find in ourselves, if we looked. Anyone who feels the force of revulsion against the injustice, cruelty, and oppression of this world should be alert to this temptation; so should those who believe that they have discovered the



truth about how to improve human life (whether this truth is secular or religious, and identified with the political right or left). Ruthlessness—understood as both a feature of action and a quality of thought and feeling that rejects all scruples, doubts, hesitation, and remorse in pursuing some ultimate purpose or serving some paramount principle—possesses an attractive simplicity and strength. It grants a sense of direction and meaning, garrisoning the mind against the terror of uncertainty. It lends a feeling of strength, a patina of psychological power, a glamor of toughness: hence politicians seem never to tire of declaring metaphorical wars—or (for example) announcing the goal of achieving “total domination” through the use of force by “very tough, strong, powerful people.”<sup>3</sup> Ruthlessness possesses a self-enforcing psychology: once one has set one’s heart on ruthlessness, it can be hard to escape. And the pragmatic arguments for ruthlessness are potent. Within politics—a realm of passionate, often unprincipled, struggle—how can one be effective in urgently pursuing a just cause, especially when faced with the ruthlessness of others, without hardening one’s heart, stopping one’s ears, getting one’s hands dirty?<sup>4</sup>

Many political evils, of course, stem from garden variety villainy—ambition, venality, the appetite for domination or longing for submission. But righteous ruthlessness is particularly troubling, insofar as it can transform apparent virtues into terrible vices. As a disillusioned Communist in Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* reflects, the terrible paradox of Communism was that it “freed people from morality in the name of morality”; for the sake of a “fine and noble” cause, it justified killing, crippling, uprooting and terrorizing, and licensed “pharisees, hypocrites, and writers of denunciations.” This showed how “the very concept of good” can become “a scourge, a greater evil than evil itself.”<sup>5</sup> The combination of idealism and cynicism in the pursuit of noble goals through brutal means is particularly potent in its appeal, and horrific in its consequences.

## Liberalism and the Politics of Limits

The tendency to pass from humanitarian idealism to ruthlessness can occur among adherents of diverse political visions and programs. No ideology or party is immune; governments and movements have called for the brutal infliction of death, imprisonment, and material misery in the name of freedom or justice, capitalism or socialism, “growth” or “greatness,” and numerous other inspiring slogans. Yet there is a strong affinity between this tendency and *anti-liberal* politics—politics that forcefully rejects liberal principles and seeks to demolish liberal institutions. And while individuals from across the political

spectrum have diagnosed, and proposed prophylactics against, political ruthlessness, there is a strong affinity between liberalism and a propensity to feel horror at political ruthlessness, and to regard combating it as a vital political task. Those who have been repulsed by political ruthlessness have often been driven toward liberalism, whatever their ideological starting point. Indeed, liberalism itself emerged out of reaction against the ruthlessness of the French Revolutionary Terror, and fear of answering reactionary ruthlessness.<sup>6</sup> Not all forms of liberalism are equally concerned with ruthlessness—or able to resist impulses toward ruthlessness on behalf of liberal objectives. While recent liberal theory may not license ruthlessness, it also has little to say about it, having focused largely on questions of justification and institutional principles. Yet not long ago, the practical challenge of ruthlessness inspired a distinctive strand of liberal thinking. I reconstruct, retrieve, and develop that liberalism here.

“Liberalism” covers broad, well-trodden, and contested terrain; any definition is liable to be controversial.<sup>7</sup> It variously denotes support for a mildly redistributionist welfare state combined with significant personal liberty and commitment to the free market, or a political theory defined by the framework of the social contract, or “methodological individualism,” or affirmation of the “priority of the right over the good.” I do not use liberalism in any of these ways here. Likewise, by “anti-liberalism” I do not mean libertarian, communitarian, civic-republican, conservative, socialist, or perfectionist critics of the foregoing positions, but rather those who reject liberal principles and practices, and seek to overturn them, root-and-branch.<sup>8</sup>

Liberal politics is limited politics—institutionally, normatively, ethically.<sup>9</sup> Institutionally, liberals embrace limits such as the rule of law (enforced through an independent judiciary); charters of guaranteed individual rights; the selection and removal of political officials by popular vote; an internally diverse civil society, endowed with protections against the dictates of the state, and with the power to criticize or resist the state. Beyond this, liberalism inculcates norms of recognizing such limits as legitimate and desirable. It may also encourage internalizing acceptance of limits in undertaking political action, even in the silence of the law. This insistence on limits reflects a commitment to promoting individual liberty, understood as the ability of “[e]very adult . . . to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult”;<sup>10</sup> and promoting a society marked by the diversity (and disagreement) that the practice of liberty produces. Liberalism seeks to reduce, as

much as possible, the fear, the frustrating sense of immobility or entrapment, the cramping of character and narrowing of horizons through deprivation or coercion, and the arbitrariness and arrogance of authority, within a society.

Liberalism's "negativity"—its tendency to define itself in terms of what it opposes and seeks to protect against—should not be overstated (as it often is<sup>11</sup>). Liberalism reflects not only fears, but ideals: aspirations to rich individual self-development, and a society marked by greater justice and mutual respect. It does not merely accept diversity (and even discord), but "rejoice[s]" in it, because "it is in diversity alone that freedom can be realized"—for a "free society is not one in which people are merely allowed to make effective social choices among a variety of alternatives, but one in which they are encouraged to do so."<sup>12</sup> Liberal politics is not only a limited, but (as the word's origins suggest) a generous or "magnanimous politics."<sup>13</sup> But this generosity typically takes the form of forbearance and tolerance, which is one reason why it is not always recognized (another is liberals' own failures to live up to their ideals). Liberals do not, like conservatives, stand athwart history shouting "stop." At their best, they stand between vulnerable individuals and the predations of power, and insist on limits—"so far, but no further," as Camus had it. There is more to liberalism than this. But this is liberalism's spine.

Political ruthlessness is naturally opposed to liberalism thus understood. It is defined by an insistence that certain goals or principles override individual rights or liberties and justify the use of unbridled power, the infliction of untold suffering, the obliteration or blighting of countless individual lives. Such ruthlessness poses a serious problem: how can liberals respond effectively to it without emulating it? It also challenges the seriousness and sincerity of liberalism. Is the liberal who refrains from pursuing her goals when doing so seems to require ruthless action really that committed to those goals in the first place?

This liberal vulnerability is evoked whenever people quote (whether wryly, regretfully, or maliciously) Robert Frost's definition of a liberal as one "too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel." Here Frost identifies liberalism with a feature of character, outlook, and approach—and a consequent deficiency in action. This deficiency may seem fairly harmless, as political vices go—even endearing. But what happens when liberals find themselves in a quarrel with those who oppose liberalism root and branch—and particularly those who oppose it in a way that threatens the basic values and interests that liberals hold dear? What happens, in other words, when liberals come up against political ruthlessness? This question is at the heart of what I call

(adopting a phrase from Isaiah Berlin) “the liberal predicament.” The main crux of this predicament can be articulated as: how to combat anti-liberal movements, which are not constrained in the way that liberal movements and regimes are, without either sacrificing political efficacy or betraying basic liberal principles in the name of defending them? Faced with ruthless anti-liberal attacks, to remain a good liberal (in the sense of adhering to liberal principles) threatens to make one a failed liberal. Yet to become ruthless in the fight against ruthlessness threatens to leave one no longer a liberal at all.<sup>14</sup>

It is telling that Frost and Berlin characterized liberalism as they did at roughly the same time.<sup>15</sup> In the twentieth century, political ruthlessness achieved particular salience as a defining challenge for liberalism. As I show in the next chapter, the embrace of ruthlessness was generated and justified by a reaction against liberalism’s perceived failings. Liberalism, in turn, was redefined by its encounter with political ruthlessness. This reflects an important, but often neglected, feature of twentieth-century politics: the conflict between liberals and their fiercest opponents in the early- to mid-twentieth century was fundamentally “ethical” in two distinct senses.

First, the terms of this conflict centered, to a significant extent, on questions of *political ethics*. As distinct from moral philosophy, political ethics (as I understand the term) assumes that politics involves its own characteristic means, challenges, burdens, and opportunities; thinking about “political ethics” means beginning from these political phenomena, rather than beginning with a more universal theory of morality and seeking to draw out applications to politics from this “pre-political” moral theory. At the same time, recognizing the porousness, complexity, and inextricability of politics and other facets of life, political ethics approaches questions about how to act politically within a larger context of thinking about how a life should be lived, and what sort of character we should try to cultivate (or what qualities we want to characterize our conduct toward and relationships with others). As distinct from more “architectonic” forms of political theory, political ethics is concerned, not with general moral duties or purposes, or the institutional architecture of politics, but with the conduct, character, and cultivated convictions of individual actors, as these arise in their pursuit of political projects. If political theory on the whole identifies what sort of political order we should seek, political ethics asks what we should and should not do and be(come) in pursuing that order.

Many accounts of twentieth-century political thought focus on questions of ends, institutions, and policy (the relationship between politics and economics and the proper goals of economic policy; the basis, functions, and

boundaries of the state and political membership; the meaning of concepts such as liberty, equality, justice, authority, or legitimacy).<sup>16</sup> These issues were obviously crucial. But the clash between liberals and anti-liberals also centered on political-ethical questions: how the demands of politics relate to the dictates of personal morality; the relationship between means and ends; the significance of personal character in defining political action. Faced with grotesque horrors—massacre, torture, cynical manipulation, blatant lies, pervasive terror—those I term “tempered liberals” reaffirmed the moral value of scruples—of “inner doubts and hesitations as to the propriety of this or that . . . practice.”<sup>17</sup> They also grappled with the ethical challenges that commitment to scruple imposed.

The conflict between liberals and anti-liberals was “ethical,” second, insofar as both sides were defined by a *political ethos*: a “stance” or “bearing,” formed by patterns of disposition, perception, commitment, and response, which shapes how individuals or groups go about acting politically.<sup>18</sup> The liberals I discuss here, in particular, came to be preoccupied with what the American literary critic Lionel Trilling termed “the morality of morality”: reflection not on what course of action should be chosen, but on the *quality* of the moral life lived in pursuit of that course. This quality of moral life, Trilling added, is shaped by the “sensibility” and “manner” through which “political views” are related to the “character of our personal being.”<sup>19</sup> These liberals articulated, defended, and exemplified a liberalism shaped by a combination of sensibility, manner, and personal being, with reflection on the “morality of morality.”

Retrieving this ethically centered liberalism has two implications for how we think about political theory, and liberal theory in particular. First, it nudges us away from the focus on institutions, and the tendency to think in terms of general principles, which have shaped much recent liberal theory, and toward greater attention to individual character, temperament, and sensibility. In this regard, my account converges with the recent turn of a diverse range of political theorists to the idea of *ethos*—a term I have adopted, and which I clarify in the next chapter.<sup>20</sup> This turn reflects a sense that there is something else, besides “the *formal features* of government” (that is, “institutions, laws, and procedures”<sup>21</sup>), the *general principles* of political morality, or the proper *ends* of politics, to which political theory should pay more attention. Yet the nature of this “something else” often remains obscure. An ethos may be conceived, as William Connolly suggests, as the sensibility or manner through which a “creed” or belief system is applied.<sup>22</sup> I will suggest a more complicated picture: an ethos, as I use the term, encompasses both such a sensibility or temper, and

the larger framework of perception and thought through which it is brought to bear on determining how to hold and act on the creed. To embrace one or another “creed” will influence one toward and away from one or another ethos (or several *ethes*); at the same time, one’s ethos will dispose one toward particular creeds. To take ethos seriously is not to neglect the power or importance of theories, doctrines, or arguments. It is, rather, to recognize the important role ethos plays in how these come to be applied—or lived—in political practice. A major claim of this book is that there is something not only paradoxical, but (potentially) self-defeating, and even pathological, about seeking to live a *liberal* “creed” through an illiberal ethos.

Through my analysis of political ruthlessness, and of a line of liberal response to it, I develop an account of ethos that allows us to better grasp what distinguishes liberal and anti-liberal politics, and that may aid us in evaluating different ways of applying and defending liberal ideals. In doing so, I suggest a larger claim: that attending to ethos is vital to understanding what moves and guides individuals, appreciating the quality of their actions, and comprehending what attracts them to, and divides them into, different political camps. In order to understand what was (and is) at stake in the conflict between liberalism and its fiercest enemies, we must, as Amanda Anderson has argued, move beyond blunt ideological labels, defined in terms of doctrines and programs, and attend to contrasting “style[s] and disposition[s].”<sup>23</sup> Politics should be approached, not solely through the question of “who does what to whom for whose benefit,”<sup>24</sup> but also through the additional question of “*how* do they (the actors) do it (the action) to them?” And this “*how*” should be approached in terms not only of processes of action, but also of the attitudes sustained and the temper and dispositions displayed in actions—qualities that determine the full significance of the action itself. As Andrew Sabl has noted, in politics “Decency”—and much else, both good and bad—“lives in the adverbs: how one intends to exercise power, within what constraints, with what underlying attitudes.”<sup>25</sup> The description and analysis of political action should be conducted in a more adjectival and adverbial style than we are often accustomed to practice it.

In addition to suggesting how political (especially liberal) theory may benefit from attending to ethos, my historical account retrieves “another liberalism,”<sup>26</sup> different from those most often encountered in histories of liberalism or discussions of contemporary liberal theory.<sup>27</sup> This liberalism was conceived by those who articulated it as an ethical disposition, irreducible to logically entailed principles or programs. I call this *tempered liberalism*. It is a liberalism tempered—that is, at once chastened, and ultimately reaffirmed and strengthened—by the

crucible of criticism, struggle, and tribulation; a liberalism that is informed by and seeks to maintain a poise of balance between (and maintain its balance *against*) extremes; and a liberalism that centers on personal temperament, seeking not to advance a general theory or program of institutional design or a set of general principles, but to cultivate a particular way of thinking about and engaging in political life. “Tempered” also indicates opposition to ruthlessness—insofar as to be tempered is to be restrained, balanced, circumspect.<sup>28</sup> The ethos of tempered liberalism was not *only* the antithesis of ruthlessness. But rejection of ruthlessness, extremism, and fanaticism was among its central features.

Concerns with both political ruthlessness and liberalism’s ability to respond to it—to both counter it effectively and avoid incubating it within liberalism itself—are all too relevant; and I will return to the contemporary resonance of tempered liberalism in the conclusion. But my concerns here are not only contemporary or normative. This is a work of history, which enriches existing accounts of liberalism’s past and challenges perceptions of “Cold War liberalism.” There has been, among many political theorists and historians, what Jan-Werner Müller calls a “systematic forgetting” of what Cold War liberals “actually said and meant.”<sup>29</sup> Narratives of postwar liberalism typically identify one, or some combination, of several tendencies. One is a change of *mood* from a more ambitious and hopeful to a “conservative,” gloomy, anxious liberalism, which discouraged political experimentation and effervescence.<sup>30</sup> Closely connected to this is a shift in *political program* from the more “progressive” liberalism embodied in the New Deal (especially in its earlier years) to a combination of “managerial” rule, cultural “consensus,” and defense of the status quo.<sup>31</sup> Another story depicts liberalism becoming abstract, individualistic, and privatized; this shift was both substantive (emphasizing personal rights, private interests, and fair procedures rather than civic duties, virtuous character formation, and the common good) and methodological (relying on abstract theorizing rather than “thick” political and social analysis).<sup>32</sup> Postwar liberalism, on this account, was *de-moralizing*, in the double sense of sapping enthusiasm by failing to offer an inspiring ethical ideal and undercutting concern with civic virtue; and *de-politicizing*, encouraging a retreat from civic responsibilities. Finally, critics attribute to postwar liberalism a growing rigidity, as it defined itself against a Communist “other,” dug in its heels, and closed its mind.<sup>33</sup> These shifts are seen as fostering “quietism,” “defeatism,”<sup>34</sup> “disillusionment,” a “celebration of apathy,” and “the sickness of complacency,”<sup>35</sup> thereby stifling political imagination and experimentation, and obstructing progress.<sup>36</sup>



These stories, accurate concerning *some* postwar liberalisms, do not capture the full story; they are misleading when applied to tempered liberals, who remained morally robust and politically engaged—and, indeed, stressed the need to cultivate an ethically strenuous set of dispositions, if liberal politics were to be sustained. Nor did tempered liberalism represent a turn to a cramped liberal fundamentalism. This, indeed, is one reason for its neglect. Always too complex, unsystematic, and personal to serve as the basis of a movement or ideology, tempered liberalism was eclipsed both by alternative responses to totalitarianism which offered more robust defenses of the superiority of constitutionalist and capitalist institutions, and the more systematic “high liberalism” of Rawls and others. Subsequent “communitarian” and “realist” critiques of Rawlsian, “individualist,” or libertarian variants of liberalism, for all their theoretical and practical importance, have tended to lack tempered liberalism’s sense of the existential fragility of liberalism as a political achievement, and the ethical demandingness of liberalism as a political disposition. Recent expositions of liberalism have also neglected tempered liberals’ practice of *exemplarity*—their efforts to engage in a noncoercive and nonperfectionist political-ethical pedagogy through the evocation of a liberal ethos, both in their accounts of others and their own conduct and authorial personae.

For Lionel Trilling, the “great vice of academicism” is “that it is concerned with ideas rather than with thinking”—fostering the belief that “some ideas can betray us, others save us,” so that we are inclined to “blame ideas for our troubles, rather than blaming what is a very different thing—our own bad thinking.”<sup>37</sup> Liberal theory, in our day as in Trilling’s, sometimes falls prey to academicism; tempered liberalism provides a corrective. It is certainly no political panacea. But its proponents are too often neglected—or dismissed for what they are confidently, but wrongly, assumed to have said and done. The recovery of what tempered liberals faced and proposed is important both to setting the historical record straight, and setting liberalism on a more fruitful path of political engagement, which grapples with questions of character and the challenges of ruthlessness, and provides a perspective from which to confront the challenges and dangers that continue to face liberalism.

## The Shape of Things to Come

In this book I examine four thinkers who contributed to the articulation of tempered liberalism: Reinhold Niebuhr, Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, and Isaiah Berlin. These thinkers shared a sometimes ambivalent but enduring



commitment to democracy, a combination of connection to and departures from classical liberalism, an eschewal of systematic theory—and, above all, a central preoccupation with political ethics and “the liberal predicament,” and recognition of ethos as a crucial dimension of politics.<sup>38</sup> They also occupied similar ideological space. All viewed themselves, at least initially, as men of the left; and their liberalism was definitively left of center, affirming both liberal personal freedoms and some version of a “mixed economy” and redistributionist welfare state—and implacably opposed to both Fascism and Communism. Roughly contemporaries (born between 1892 and 1914, and prominent following World War II), they were intellectual and political fellow-travelers (Berlin and Niebuhr were friendly and shared a mutual admiration; Berlin and Aron, and Aron and Camus, knew each other but were cooler in their mutual regard). Each articulated distinctive variations on a tempered liberal vision—and exemplified different versions of how a tempered liberal ethos could be lived.<sup>39</sup> Each recognized ruthlessness as a temptation, to which they were drawn to varying degrees and for various reasons. Each developed (similar) diagnoses of ruthlessness, its attractions, psychological-ethical grip, and dangers; each saw ruthlessness, and the anti-liberal politics and ethos to which it was connected, as an ethical problem that was deep, and not simple. They all faced up to “the liberal predicament”: how to respond to anti-liberal ruthlessness without coming to imitate it, thereby betraying liberalism itself—but also without betraying one’s responsibility to fight for liberalism effectively. And they all responded to this problem by turning their attention to matters of ethos.

Reflecting my concerns with questions of personal character, temperament, style, bearing, and conduct—and echoing their own approaches—my treatment of these figures is “exemplary”: I not only reconstruct their arguments, but evoke their personal visions and dispositions, analyze their intellectual style and sensibility, and explore what we can learn from both their practice of political reflection and reflections on political practice. To thus treat them as exemplary is not to claim for them perfection; it is to suggest that we can learn not only from their arguments, but their examples—or, that their efforts to set examples of intellectual engagement and liberal political commitment themselves embody political-ethical arguments, and, taken up critically, can serve as a form of political pedagogy.

Before turning to these individuals, the first chapter clarifies the concept of ethos, explicates the phenomenon of *morally inspired ideological ruthlessness*, and seeks to substantiate my claim that such ruthlessness constituted a central element in twentieth-century political thought and practice, one that

presented a particular challenge for liberalism. In the process, I show how considerations of political efficacy and personal purity intertwined in inspiring ruthlessness; and how the vindication of ruthlessness formed a central part of an ethical critique of liberalism. Chapter 2 then provides a more in-depth exploration of the way in which the imperatives and attractions of realism and moral purism intersected, and how these connected to struggles with and over liberalism, through the stories of two representative figures of the early twentieth century. Max Weber's political ethics anticipated, and in some cases directly informed, tempered liberalism—though Weber remains a politically and ethically ambiguous figure. These ambiguities are reflected in the intellectual and political vicissitudes of Weber's friend György Lukács, who illustrates how impulses toward moral purity and hard-headed realism—and an ethos of intellectual extremism and total commitment—came together to inspire ruthless, anti-liberal politics.

The next four chapters examine four thinkers who, formed by the crisis of liberal democracy between the wars, became leading liberal voices in the post-war period. Despite significant differences of intellectual framework, personal sensibility, and political approach, Camus, Aron, Niebuhr, and Berlin shared a preoccupation with the political-ethical problems raised by the assault on liberalism in their day. All approached politics in terms of the personal choices involved in political action and the importance of ethos in informing these choices—though they varied in the extent to which they approached politics and its ethical demands from the perspective of political leaders (as Aron and, to a lesser degree, Berlin did), or from the perspective of ordinary citizens and committed activists (as Niebuhr and, especially, Camus did). They also differed in how they navigated between the perspectives of engaged political actor and critical intellectual—and their different formulations of a tempered liberal ethos reflect this. None of them were simple or sanguine in their commitment to liberalism; some went through periods of flirtation with anti-liberalism. Each sought to temper liberalism with an awareness of liberalism's drawbacks and defects; and to maintain an ethical equipoise between excessive moral idealism and excessive realism. Each struck this balance differently; their differences complement and temper one another, revealing tensions within tempered liberalism, but also contributing to its overall richness and capacity for self-correction.

In the conclusion I draw out some of these tensions, and the vulnerabilities to which they point. I also draw together the insights of the thinkers I have discussed to offer my own conception of tempered liberalism as a

distinctive political stance from which to interpret and evaluate liberal goals and practices. And I draw on the insights and lessons of tempered liberalism to offer arguments on how to respond to the ethical challenges liberalism recurrently faces.

The reader may ask: why look for answers, or at least matter for reflection, in the pages of twentieth-century history? Is there not a danger of foisting our perceptions of the present onto the past, thus distorting it by remaking it in our own image; or of being captured by the (purported) lessons of this past, so that we are blind to the specific conditions of the present? Ought we not do our thinking for ourselves, based on the circumstances of our own time? To this, three points can be made. First, we must of course do our own thinking for ourselves. But we seldom do such thinking wholly alone: we draw from others, different from ourselves, to sharpen our vision and widen our imaginations. The history of political thought should certainly seek a fuller and more faithful understanding of the past in its own terms; it may also serve to liberate us from the thrall of received ideas. But it also contributes to our political thinking as a source of good interlocutors, and even models.

Second, drawing on history to inform political judgment and imagination does not depend on discerning exact parallels or establishing simple lessons to be mechanically applied. We should, rather, use the combination of similarity and difference, proximity and distance, to see more clearly *both* the uniqueness of our time and the ways in which we are not the first to encounter certain problems—and that we may be unconsciously emulating follies that we readily recognize in others. Such comparisons need not assume eternal, unchanging verities; but they do posit recurrence. Like the Polish dissident intellectual Adam Michnik, I return to past political and moral thinking “not so that the language of that reign of terror may never repeat itself, but because I’m convinced it will inevitably do so”—if it has not already.<sup>40</sup>

Third, there *are some* respects in which the twentieth century is lamentably relevant. While changes in technology, demographics, the workings of the economy, and the global political order have created a significantly different world,<sup>41</sup> the mid-century world of economic collapse, cultural despair, mass displacement, and ever-looming war seems familiar; so do the responses of demagoguery, dehumanizing hatred of others, fanatical partisanship, a longing for macho “heroes” free of scruple and doubt, a taste for amoral “greatness,” and ideological extremism. Twentieth-century politics are, to borrow a phrase from James Joyce, a nightmare from which we are still trying to awake—and into which we often seem to be sinking.<sup>42</sup> Political theory and moral inquiry

should not shrink from confronting that nightmare. In doing so, they may be greatly helped by those who lived through it—and in whom it bred an anxious, but resolute, wakefulness.

My retrieval of a facet of twentieth-century political argument, and of the tempered liberal response, is thus intended to be both of historical interest, and of more than historical interest. The story I tell has a resonance beyond the particular time I discuss. It is a story of the vices of virtue: of how terrible evil can grow out of idealism, benevolence, and conscientiousness. It is also (I hope) a story of how political actors can learn, not (as Machiavelli has it) “how not to be good,” but rather better and worse ways to go about trying to be good within the circumstances of politics. It is an argument for modesty, fortitude, forbearance, intellectual flexibility, ethical resolution, and decency as political dispositions—and a reminder that these seemingly humdrum, unheroic qualities may in fact be demanding and necessary virtues. My approach—turning from general ethical problems posed by ruthlessness for liberal politics, to a particular historical period and tendency of thought as a way of thinking about these more general problems—is admittedly, and deliberately, untidy. I have sought to address problems of political ethics through an exploration of history and psychology, which necessarily remains suggestive and open-ended. To deal with matters of ethos rather than concepts or logical systems introduces a necessary degree of imprecision. In a work animated by the conviction that the search for simplicity and purity is delusive and dangerous, a certain untidiness may be a virtue. Readers should not look to obtain answers to all questions raised in this book; the point is rather to show the importance of grappling with the questions—and that some ways of grappling are better than others.

Before proceeding, I wish to clear up a possible misapprehension. In this book I not only reconstruct, but defend, tempered liberalism, and draw on it to criticize a set of impulses often exhibited in anti-liberalism: intolerance, self-righteousness, craving for simplicity and certainty, deafness to dialogue, righteous ruthlessness. This threatens to produce an “anti-anti-liberalism” resembling that which it opposes in dogmatism, self-righteousness, and intolerance. This is a danger to which the thinkers I discuss were keenly alive (though not always immune). Indeed, tempered liberalism was defined by an effort to avoid becoming what it opposed. For my part, I disclaim any moral superiority. I have been preoccupied by the vices just mentioned not only because I feel horror at them, but because I recognize their pull in myself. One is less interested in diseases to which one is immune.

# 1

## “Squeamishness Is the Crime”

### RUTHLESSNESS, ETHOS, AND THE CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM

Incorrect merciful impulses postpone the cleansing that precedes reform. Short-term niceties must yield to long-range necessity. Morals will be revised to meet the requirements of today. Meaningless platitudes will be pulled from tongues and minds . . . The greatest danger is not excessive zeal but undue hesitation . . . Squeamishness is the crime.<sup>1</sup>

Anyone desiring a quiet life has done badly to be born in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

### Ruthlessness and the Story of Twentieth-Century Politics

Lev Zalmanovich Kopelev was, by most measures, a good man. He was also, for the first half of his life, a devout Communist. His faith in Marxism survived the punishment that his moral decency provoked. While serving as a propaganda officer and translator in World War II, Kopelev denounced the Red Army's systematic campaign of rape and other war crimes against the vanquished population of East Prussia. This “bourgeois humanism” earned him ten years in the gulag. Released in 1954, after Stalin's death, he rejoined the Communist Party, optimistically embracing Khrushchev's “thaw.” After finally breaking with Communism in 1968, Kopelev sought to reckon with his earlier beliefs in several memoirs. Here he is describing his experience as a twenty-one-year-old Party activist in his hometown of Kharkov during the Holodomor, the state-imposed terror-famine of 1932–33:

I saw people dying from hunger. I saw women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes . . . I saw all this and did not go out of my mind or commit suicide. Nor did I curse those who had sent me out to take away the peasants' grain in the winter, and in the spring to persuade the barely walking, skeleton-thin or sickly-swollen people to go into the fields in order to "fulfill the Bolshevik sowing plan."<sup>3</sup>

How did a sensitive, morally brave young man come to act this way? Why was he unable to turn from his course?

These questions are crucial to understanding the experience of the twentieth century. Human history is full of crimes, miseries, and follies; it is futile to award comparative points for horror. Yet we should take seriously the perception, voiced by many of its participants, that the twentieth was, as Isaiah Berlin declared, "the most terrible century in Western history"—a sentiment which reflects the fact that, as Berlin's cousin Yehudi Menuhin remarked, the century "raised the greatest hopes ever conceived by humanity, and destroyed all illusions and ideals."<sup>4</sup> (Or so it seemed: illusions, it turns out, are resilient.) The scale and intensity of suffering and degradation—especially in contrast to the expectations with which the century began, and the comfort enjoyed by many—are extraordinary; they call for explanation.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter offers a tour of the ethical landscape of early twentieth-century politics, and a conceptual framework for making sense of it. I first analyze the phenomenon of ruthlessness and underscore the importance of a particular sort of ruthlessness in early twentieth-century political thought. I next lay out the connection between this sort of ruthlessness and critiques of liberalism. After an excursus clarifying the concept of ethos, I highlight the way in which the assault on liberalism was inspired by disgust with liberalism as a feature of character, and the articulation of a distinctively anti-liberal ethos.

## An Anatomy of Ruthlessness

Ruthlessness, as I use the word here, refers to a way of inhabiting or experiencing one's own moral life. It involves, first, an approach to deliberation—a way of thinking about one's actions—that disregards, suppresses, or drastically subordinates all other considerations or values to some paramount consideration, principle, or goal. Ruthlessness also involves linked features of sentiment and sensibility. First, it indicates a single-minded intentness on a single goal—what Hawthorne termed an "inveteracy of pursuit that knew neither

rest nor conscience.”<sup>6</sup> This lack of “conscience” indicates a further feature: an absence of reservation, remorse, or regret (or an alacrity in dismissing such feelings) when engaging in actions that harm people or violate commonly held moral standards; and a failure to perceive or consider that others may have a just grievance against one.<sup>7</sup>

Many people act ruthlessly, or display elements of ruthlessness in thought and feeling, *some* of the time. Some bring themselves, or are brought, to *act* ruthlessly, without developing a ruthless mind-set or disposition—or can only partially and ambivalently muster up a ruthless mind-set to match their actions (Hamlet, who is “cruel to be kind” and constantly self-questioning, embodies this partially successful ruthlessness: his conscience is continually making a “coward” of him—that is, marring his ruthless dedication to his end with paralyzing scruples). Many are indoctrinated or habituated into ruthlessness. Some embrace ruthlessness as a normative model for thought, feeling, and action, and seek to cultivate ruthlessness as an ethic or ethos in themselves and others. It is this last phenomenon that particularly interests me here.<sup>8</sup>

To explore the roots of this ruthlessness, let us return to Kopelev, and the question of how his humanistic idealism compelled him to serve inhumanity. Kopelev fell prey to the tyranny of doctrine: a “rationalistic fanaticism overcame my doubts, my pangs of conscience and simple feelings of sympathy, pity and shame.”<sup>9</sup> This involved not only dedication to an ideal, but subscription to an ethical theory:

With the rest of my generation I firmly believed that the ends justified the means. Our great goal was the universal triumph of Communism, and *for the sake of that goal everything was permissible*—to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering our work or could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way.<sup>10</sup>

Achieving a moral goal demanded dedication, determination, a temporary suspension of humane sentiment and principles. But there was also at work the intoxicating consciousness of serving a larger cause—and the sense of certainty and moral superiority that this granted, and that those who experienced it feared losing. What Kopelev and his comrades dreaded most was “to fall into doubt or heresy and forfeit our unbounded faith.”<sup>11</sup>

Two features of this sort of ruthlessness struck observers with particular force. One was the way in which those who committed heinous actions were motivated by sincere benevolence and idealism. Some, of course, were simply malevolent or power-hungry. But the peculiar horror of twentieth-century



atrocities lay in the fact that some of the most ruthless proponents of terror were genuine philanthropists, motivated by passionate devotion to ideals of justice and liberation. The second was the way in which cruelty, certainty, and self-righteousness amplified one another, and allowed men to torture and kill "peacefully and with a quiet conscience, with the feeling that they had done their duty, with the smell of roasting human flesh still in their nostrils, and slept—the sleep of the innocent after a day's work well done."<sup>12</sup>

Here we observe a distinctive political-ethical phenomenon, that of *ethical-ideological-political* ruthlessness (I will, in what follows, generally drop this unwieldy string of qualifiers, and use "ruthlessness" as shorthand). It was *ethical* in arising from the conviction that ruthlessness was demanded by a correct understanding of the dictates of morality—whether because moral duties require one to act ruthlessly, or because personal qualities of hardness, resolution, and certainty are virtues. It was *ideological* insofar as it was inspired by belief in a (putatively infallible) theory about how the world works, and a rejection of considerations that did not "fit" the theory. It was *political* not only in occurring within political action, but in reflecting the conviction that ruthlessness was demanded by the conditions of political life.

Three doctrinal elements were central to the articulation of ruthlessness as a political ethic: *end-maximalism*, *historicism*, and *realism*. End-maximalism starts from an absolute, uncompromising commitment to achieving a particular end. The end-maximalist evaluates courses of action solely in terms of their (anticipated) contribution to realizing this end. All other considerations—the action's other consequences, or its intrinsic moral quality—are treated as irrelevant. In seeking to abolish "all the evils of the present and finally establish a free world," Stephen Spender wrote (characterizing his support for Communism in the 1930s), "one did not have to consider, except from the point of view of their effectiveness, the means which were used nor the fate of individuals."<sup>13</sup> This goes beyond more moderate forms of consequentialism, insofar as the means are not merely subordinate to the end at which they aim; they actually "have no moral weight and do not enter into the moral scales."<sup>14</sup>

*Historicism*, as understood by Karl Popper and others,<sup>15</sup> holds that history follows a discernible pattern, perception of which provides the key to acting correctly. The direction and ultimate outcome of history gives meaning to past and present, and an assurance of the future; it is the measure of value, without which judgments are merely emotional responses, and actions, "dreams and adventures."<sup>16</sup> By subordinating present to future and persons to process, historicism undermines concern with the responsibility and the well-being of



present-day individuals. In making history the measure of morality, it fosters worship of efficacy and success. It also encourages an emulation of History's ruthlessness. As a character in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* says, History is "an inhumane, unscrupulous builder, mixing its mortar of lies, blood and mud."<sup>17</sup> So must he who would make history be.

Historicism played a role in liberal thought as well—sometimes with similarly ruthless results, as it was deployed to justify imperial rule, state-building, and the agonies of economic "development." Tempered liberalism's turn against theories of historical progress and toward historical skepticism reflected not only intellectual doubts, but moral repulsion at the callousness of earlier liberal historicism. But the historical philosophies of anti-liberal ideologies went further, and more readily justified ruthlessness, by embracing an "apocalyptic" sense of the present as a crucial crisis point in the process of historical unfolding.<sup>18</sup> This lends particular urgency to immediate conflicts and choices, and justifies drastic action as both necessary and limited: ruthlessness, called for by the exceptional moment, can be abandoned with a sigh of relief once the moment has passed. In this view, the future looms as a time of vindication, which will retroactively absolve the sins and salve the sufferings of the present. The early Nazi leader Gregor Strasser contrasted the "confusion" and "decay" of the recent past with the "new world" that Nazism would create;<sup>19</sup> the Bolsheviks juxtaposed a vision of genuine freedom, democracy, fellow-feeling, and community with a vivid perception of the "abomination" of contemporary capitalism and imperialism—and declared that "[t]o make the individual sacred we must destroy the social order which crucifies him, And this problem can only be solved by blood and iron."<sup>20</sup>

A third element was "political realism." This involved both a perception of political reality and a conception of the normative standards appropriate to politics. On the "realist" view, politics is a process of struggle, success in which requires the often harsh and underhanded use of "power" (understood as the ability to make others do one's will, often through the threat or use of force). Normatively, politics is ethically "autonomous," subject to a set of normative standards drastically different from those of private life.<sup>21</sup> These standards are consequentialist: the ability to achieve desirable political ends is, for the ideological realist, the sole criterion for evaluating the value of political actions. Realists differ over the proper ends of politics: we may distinguish between "idealist realists," for whom the final end of politics is the achievement of some moral ideal; "reason-of-state realists," for whom it is the defense of the nation-state and the increase of its power relative to other states; and "nihilist realists,"

for whom achieving power, and asserting one's will over others, is an end in itself.<sup>22</sup> Aside from matters of doctrine, "realism" is marked by certain attitudes and dispositions—above all, an impatience and disgust with idealism or moralism, and a belief that it constitutes a danger. Realists as such do not embrace ruthlessness or cruelty; but they regard weakness, naivete, and hypocrisy as much more serious, and contemptible, vices.<sup>23</sup>

In the interwar period, the realist view of politics was radicalized, in two senses. First, "realism" (or "Machiavellianism"), often identified with the project of building nation-states and an emphasis on the "national interest" as the primary goal and criterion of politics, was married to ideological-revolutionary projects: the goal of "Realpolitik," in the revolutionary-realist view, was not the building of a powerful, secure nation-state, but the creation of a new order that would realize a visionary ideal.<sup>24</sup> Second, the conception of political conflict was radicalized, as politics came to be equated with war, and political opponents regarded not as adversaries, but mortal enemies—and those who were not enemies could be strategically sacrificed. This view seemed plausible in a world in which political conflict often *did* degenerate into civil war. It also followed a seemingly irrefutable logic. In order to effect change, one must have power. In order to attain power, one must *defeat* the other side. In order to retain power in conditions marked by the breakdown of traditional institutions and authority, one must remove opponents' ability to unseat one—that is, one must crush them. Trotsky rejected "moralist" condemnations of "terrorism" on the grounds that Communism was engaged in a "life and death struggle," which required the use of power without scruple: "Who aims at the end cannot reject the means."<sup>25</sup> Two decades later, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that, "in a period of revolutionary tension or external threat there is no clear-cut boundary between political divergences and objective treason." In such conditions, "tolerance amounts to weakness . . . Humanism is suspended and government is terror."<sup>26</sup> The definition of treasonous or warlike acts extended even to thought and discussion: in the context of the Cold War, criticism of Communism could only serve to threaten the USSR, and "should be regarded as an act of war."<sup>27</sup>

For proponents of *ethical* ruthlessness, politics was akin not simply to war, but to a *just* war. This reflected a Manichean conception of the world in terms of a stark opposition between good and evil, purity and corruption, innocence and guilt—and an identification of oneself with the former, and one's opponents with the latter. Manicheism often involved a historical narrative—whether a retributive narrative of unjust victimhood and righteous vengeance,

or a triumphalist picture of ethical superiority and destined victory (Nazism and Communism combined both of these narratives into particularly powerful historical dramas). History came to be identified with a story of purifying (and purgative) moral transformation between the “children of light” and the “children of darkness.”

The ethic of political ruthlessness involved a mixture of high-minded dedication to ideals, and cynicism about the nature and demands of political reality. The complexity of this mixture provoked many analysts to simplification. Some blamed the disasters of the century on deluded *idealists*, with their pretensions to remake the world in the shape demanded by morality; such delusions fostered irresponsibility, haste, intolerance, and fanaticism.<sup>28</sup> Others were inclined to attribute the decline of politics into savagery to excessive, debased “realism”—a contempt for ideals and infatuation with power that allowed moral constraints to be sacrificed in the name of expediency.

Both views are partly correct—and too simple. It is true that there were distinct “realist” and “idealist” rationales for adopting political ruthlessness. But each of these contains an element of the other: “idealist” ruthlessness typically reflected a “realist” assumption that ruthless action was necessary to achieve morally desirable ends within politics; “realist” justifications frequently included a sense of an imperative to achieve some goal, and an ethical censure of those who rejected ruthlessness as irresponsible and ignoble. In the ideological struggles of the twentieth century, idealism and cynicism, absolute faith and moral relativism, were blended. Arthur Koestler captured the ambiguities in his account of the revolutionary ascetic who “reads Machiavelli, Ignatius of Loyola, Marx and Hegel; he is cold and unmerciful to mankind, out of a kind of . . . abstract and geometric love” which impels him to “strip himself of every scruple in the name of a higher scrupulousness.”<sup>29</sup>

The logic behind the blending of realism and idealism was given compelling voice by Bertolt Brecht. In *The Measures Taken*, Brecht’s Communist agents explain the need for violence (the murder of a comrade who has endangered their mission) because “violence is the only means whereby this deadly / World may be changed.” The play is an unsparing depiction of the meeting of the “Inflexible will to change the world” with a “realistic” perception that what is needed to change the world is the conquest of *power*. It also gives eloquent expression to the moral disgust that led idealists to embrace brutality. The Young Comrade—the play’s ultimate victim—is driven to join the Party by his idealistic instincts: “The sight of injustice compelled me to become a fighter. Man must help Man. I support the cause of freedom. I believe in

humanity."<sup>30</sup> This promotes an all-absorbing sense of mission, which requires the suppression of compassion, and resignation to be the victim or executioner of ruthlessness. This ruthlessness is presented as a model for emulation—and a moral challenge to the audience:

With whom would the just man not sit  
To help justice?  
What medicine is too bitter  
For the man who's dying?  
What vileness would you not suffer to  
Annihilate vileness? . . .  
Sink in filth  
Embrace the butcher, but  
Change the world: it needs it!<sup>31</sup>

Brecht represents one response to the moral choices facing those committed to radically remaking the world: that of the grim revolutionary realist. Another was articulated in an earlier parable-play by a German poet-activist. Radicalized by service in World War I, Ernst Toller became "intoxicated" by the promise of the Bavarian Revolution of 1918. His eloquence and energy catapulted the twenty-five-year-old poet to the presidency of the First Soviet Republic of Bavaria—for six days, before he was supplanted by the Communists. When the Soviet Republic was crushed by a coalition of Social Democrats and right-wing paramilitaries, most of Toller's fellow leaders were summarily murdered. Captured and tried for treason, Toller was saved from execution thanks to support from members of the German intelligentsia (including Max Weber), and a sympathetic court.<sup>32</sup>

While imprisoned, Toller wrote *Masse Mensch* (*Masses/Man*, 1919). This expressionist verse-play's protagonist, Sonia (or "The Woman"), representing the morally idealistic socialism to which Toller was dedicated, struggles for the soul of the revolution against "The Nameless," representing the spirit of revolutionary ruthlessness. The latter embodies the combination of "realism," Manicheanism, end-maximalism, and apocalyptic hopes for a final violent push that would end all war forever, which inspired the drive to ideological ruthlessness in twentieth-century politics. For "the Nameless," nonviolent protest, attempts at persuasion, "tender-hearted speech" expressing "pious sentiments," are useless. The times demand "steely armor," "ruthless war," "a last, most ruthless fight," which are necessary to effect both political and spiritual transformation: for only by engaging in "ruthless action" can a "free

people/Come to be.”<sup>33</sup> This requires not only merciless violence against the enemy, but strict internal discipline (internal to both the movement, and the self). Next to the masses and their historical mission, “The individual, his feelings and his conscience” count for nothing. The voice of individual judgment will only “split” and delay the forces of revolution; thus, he orders Sonia, “For the cause / Be silent.”<sup>34</sup>

Sonia, however, will not be silent; through her confrontation with “The Nameless,” Toller stages a debate between two fundamental political-ethical visions:

THE NAMELESS: Our Cause comes first.

I love the people that shall be,

I love the future

THE WOMAN: People come first.

You sacrifice to dogmas,

The people that are now.

THE NAMELESS: . . . Who wavers, helps our masters—

The masters who oppress us and starve us—

Who wavers,

Is our foe

THE WOMAN: If I took but one human life,

I should betray the Masses.

Who acts may only sacrifice himself.

Hear me: no man may kill for a cause.

Unholy every cause that needs to kill.<sup>35</sup>

Here we see a confrontation between two sorts of moral absolutism: an absolutism of ultimate ends which fosters ruthlessness, and an absolutism of purity of means, committed to decency and respect for human life as sacred. The latter is an attractive position. Yet when the world is menaced by ruthless fanatics, is it possible to conceive of a cause that does *not* need to kill in defense of the people of today? In the face of violent fury on both sides, to preserve moral purity seems to demand withdrawal from political action; and in times of crisis, to abandon political efficacy for the sake of moral purity seems irresponsible, even narcissistic.

Proponents of political ruthlessness thus had a strong case against morally purist critics. Brecht put the point sharply: “If at last you could change the world, what / Could make you too good to do so? / Who are you?”<sup>36</sup> Even Stuart Hampshire, an opponent of Communism, acknowledged that if

political leaders are "too weak, too scrupulous, too inexperienced, or too pure," they will render themselves "ineffective and impotent." And then, the "safety of the morally innocent and their freedom to lead their own lives" will suffer.<sup>37</sup> Moral purism may also become as ruthless as the political "realism" it opposes. At the extreme, the purist asserts "*fiat justia, et pereat mundus.*" How can we classify a mind-set that contemplates, or indeed commands, allowing the world to perish for the sake of fidelity to principle, as anything other than ruthless?

Both the ruthless political realist, and the ruthless political idealist, operate with a conception of "pure" politics. The "realist" posits a politics purified of extra-political morality—of all goals and standards that do not belong to "the political." The moral purist dreams of a politics purified so as to be governed wholly by extra-political morality. Both positions reflect a desire for a simple existence without loss, regret, or sin—or at least a clear-cut *standard* against which existence can be judged. In either case, the quest for purity, achieved by pushing aside all considerations that conflict with the "one thing needful"—whether this is effective service to a political cause or uncompromising adherence to absolute moral imperatives—can make the soul hard, harsh, domineering. It also fosters self-righteousness: those who sincerely pursue purity are apt to fall prey to the illusion that they are pure (or at least, purer than others).

The temptations of purity, and the competing claims of moral integrity and political efficacy, pose challenges to all who would seek some balance and reconciliation between the demands of efficacy and decency. But they have posed particular problems for proponents of liberalism, within the ideological context of the twentieth century—and beyond.

## Ruthlessness and the Crisis of Liberalism

By the time it was three decades old, the twentieth century had seen a crisis, brief resurgence, and renewed crisis of liberalism. Argument over the meaning and merits of liberalism figured centrally in the major ideological conflicts of the day, as liberals and anti-liberals each defined themselves against the other, and the other against themselves.<sup>38</sup> To its many critics, liberalism appeared politically and intellectually inadequate, lacking the energy and conviction needed to confront crisis and change; as Mussolini remarked, "all the political experiments of the contemporary world are anti-Liberal."<sup>39</sup> A disciple of the French far-rightist Charles Maurras agreed, asserting that "fascisms" only

come into being because of “the political and social failure of liberal democracy.” Even Max Ascoli and Arthur Feiler, liberals both, saw the rise of totalitarianism as a response to “democratic decay.”<sup>40</sup>

This crisis arose in part from a questioning of the historical, sociological, and psychological assumptions on which liberalism was seen to rest. Liberalism appeared to many hopelessly hopeful, wedded to an “incomparable”—and unsustainable—“optimism” concerning the power of human rationality and benevolence.<sup>41</sup> This optimism had been under stress for some time; but it was decisively shattered by World War I, and the ensuing decades of economic instability and political upheaval. The Russian Revolution, too, posed a fatal challenge to liberal assumptions: as Isaiah Berlin later wrote, Lenin’s success “showed that terrorism paid, that charismatic leaders were obeyed, that democratic methods could be ignored, that minorities could sit on top of majorities and dominate—and oppress—them in their own name, without effective opposition.”<sup>42</sup> Subsequent events, identifiable merely by mention of toponyms (Auschwitz, Katyn, Dresden, Nanjing, Hiroshima) further undermined faith in humanity, forcing many liberals to reject the optimism and rationalism of earlier “official liberalism” and emphasize “the dimension of anxiety, guilt, and corruption” in history.<sup>43</sup> By 1956, Judith Shklar averred that “no reasonable person can today believe in any ‘law’ of progress”; the optimism of earlier liberalism was “dead.”<sup>44</sup> This opened up a larger crisis of belief in the meaningfulness of history and the validity of human values. Liberals who came of age in the interwar period lacked the confidence of their elders in the values with which they had grown up. Rather than welcoming onrushing historical change, they sought to put brakes on it, to swim against the current; or they simply despaired.<sup>45</sup>

Not only liberalism’s historical vision, but its political assumptions, came under attack. Many liberals had assumed that politics would be directed by an enlightened elite. World War I revealed that supposedly enlightened elites could descend into brutal, self-destructive folly. Decades of political reform had politically empowered the masses. Political elites now depended upon populations whose assumptions, interests, and wishes diverged sharply from their own, and who seemed to many observers terrifyingly (or tantalizingly) susceptible to the charisma of individuals, the explanatory power of ideologies, and the romance of radical upheaval. Politics, it seemed, was not safe, rational, interest-based, or conducive to consensus, but rather a battlefield in which irrational passions, visions, “myths,” and sentiments of national, social, racial, or ideological solidarity reigned.<sup>46</sup>



Liberalism was also subjected to an *ethical* critique, which indicted liberal thought for embracing false, confused, dangerous, and dishonest ways of thinking about the ethics of political action—and asserted that liberal practice lived down to the sins of liberal theory. We may distinguish five interconnected but distinct lines of this ethical critique. One was that liberal institutions, practices, and ideals fostered an *ignoble*, petty type of personality. This was given influential voice by Nietzsche, who accused liberal institutions of “mak[ing] people small, cowardly, and pleasure-loving” by “undermin[ing] the will to power.”<sup>47</sup> Liberalism was, ethically, “herd-animalization”—a debasing of the human. Many right-wing critics of liberalism—and some left-wing ones (including, as we shall see, the young Camus)—partook of this line of critique.

The second line of critique identified liberalism as an ideological rationalization of privilege, injustice, and oppression, as embodied in the violence of capitalism and imperialism. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, the putative “purity of [liberal] principles not only tolerates but even requires violence.” The “formal and ‘universal’ rules” touted by liberals were in fact “the rules of the capitalist game,” which served to hinder efforts to fight oppression by the powers-that-be—but did not inhibit those powers from inflicting violence on those who challenged them.<sup>48</sup> Liberal protestations against the inhumanity of revolutionary measures disguised a deeper inhumanity at liberalism’s heart. Liberal notions of freedom, democracy, and justice were shams; so were the institutional and ethical limits they professed—and sought to impose on opponents.<sup>49</sup>

A third line of critique granted the sincerity of liberal commitments, but held these to be culpably *innocent*. Liberalism failed to recognize the reality of politics: that one must often pursue ultimate goods through dubious means. It held to a hopelessly utopian faith in human reason and legal forms, as evidenced by the enthusiastic liberal constitution-mongering of the interwar period, during which liberal democracies were created by legalistic fiat—and soon fell, due in part to their faith in the adequacy of enlightened constitutional forms to both satisfy the people and protect against political dangers.<sup>50</sup> In the postwar period, Jean-Paul Sartre charged that liberals lacked an appreciation of the “dialectical” nature of change—the fact that humanistic ideals could only be realized through ruthless struggle which seemed to defy humanistic principles. Liberalism was “utopian” in assuming that a humane society could be achieved “*at once* through simple interior disposition”—through good will and decent personal conduct.<sup>51</sup>

This evasion of hard political realities, and their insistence on observing self-restraining ethical and institutional limits, left liberals *impotent* in the face



of political horror. This critique was expressed by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, surveying the horrors of the Japanese conquest of China in 1938: “the liberal and humanitarian intellectual, can only wring his hands over all this and exclaim: ‘Oh dear, things are so awful here—so complicated. One doesn’t know where to start.’”<sup>52</sup> Liberalism often seemed unable to offer either inspiration, or clear guidance, for political action. It encouraged muddle and resignation, in the name of respect for norms of fairness and moderation. For those appalled by social injustices and miseries, and longing for a sense of direction and purpose, liberalism’s reformist means appeared “sickly and pale, fit for maiden ladies and unsophisticated suburbanites”—an unflattering contrast to the excitement and effectiveness of revolutionary ideologies.<sup>53</sup> While liberals cherished dreams of civility and innocence, the masses groaned and the world burned.

Failure to grapple with the reality of politics might be pardonable, were it not for the fact that liberalism is a *political* doctrine; the liberal doesn’t have the excuse of the moral purist who simply renounces politics. Thus, charges of innocence and impotence were closely related to that of *irresponsibility*. Liberals’ fastidious recoiling from the horrors and harsh demands of politics was morally blameworthy insofar as a pragmatic “economy of violence” was likely to produce a quicker, and thus ultimately less bloody, resolution to conflict. This charge of irresponsibility was directed both at liberals as individuals, and the institutions of parliamentary democracy, which, critics alleged, allowed leaders to evade taking responsibility. Liberalism’s call to limit power seemed to such critics merely a limitation of liability. Liberal parliamentarianism manifested a dangerously inconstant political style: too much eloquence, too much intrigue, and not enough serious work and genuine leadership. The result was incoherence and instability. While the charge of irresponsibility reflected a longer-term dissatisfaction with the style of parliamentary politics, it had particular force amid the upheavals of the twentieth century, when conflicts between implacably antagonistic opponents created peremptory demands for decisive action. Carl Schmitt derided the liberal attempt to turn politics into “endless conversation”;<sup>54</sup> across the political spectrum, Trotsky asserted that the “imminent requirements of history” could not be met through the “debating society” of parliamentary democracy, but only through the “systematic and energetic use of violence.”<sup>55</sup>

These charges of hypocrisy, innocence, impotence, and irresponsibility fueled a politics of *anti-liberalism*. “Anti-liberalism” involves more than having reservations about, or being committed to values that conflict with, liberal

theory and practice. Rather, the anti-liberal holds the liberal understanding of politics, morality, and the relationship between them to be so fundamentally mistaken as to demand resistance and overthrow. For the anti-liberal, correct ethical perception *demands* the uncompromising and unfettered pursuit of appropriate ends through unlimited political force—and thus, the overturning of liberal constraints. This shapes the common institutional face and political program of anti-liberalism: an embrace, in Lenin's words, of "authority untrammelled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatsoever, and based directly on force," and a rejection, in the words of Hitler, of "all liberal forms of autonomy." For the Nazi judge Roland Freisler, this meant eradicating the very idea of "fundamental rights which create free spheres for individuals untouchable by the state."<sup>56</sup> (True to his word, Freisler presided over brutal show trials; his rabid haranguing of the defendants was filmed, and then screened for the edification of the German public—a true exemplification of the ethical ideal of Nazism).

Rejection of liberal constraints and scruples could reflect both "realistic" and "moralistic" orientations to political ethics. The former stress liberalism's naivete and irresponsibility; the latter indict liberal failures to follow through on their own (stated) commitment to principles of liberty, equality, and justice. Often these lines of attack were combined within a single argument; and both can be found in a variety of *ideological* positions. Toller points to this similarity of ethical reasoning among ideological opponents when he has Sonia argue that those who ruthlessly employ violence to liberate the masses are morally indistinguishable from their right-wing opponents, who fight to defend the state: "You murder for mankind / As they, deluded, murdered for their state. / Some even thought / That by their State . . . / They might redeem the earth. / I see no difference."<sup>57</sup>

Yet, I wish to suggest, there *was* a significant difference, insofar as some variants of anti-liberalism particularly got—and get—under liberals' skins, and thereby bring the *ethical* demands and vulnerabilities of liberalism into relief. These variants critique liberalism while *appealing to values and principles that liberals themselves hold dear*. This is especially true of left-wing anti-liberalism, which tended to invoke values—such as the equality of individuals, and their claims to emancipation from domination or enslavement, a just allocation of resources and opportunities, a decent level of well-being—that were also affirmed by liberals.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, right-wing anti-liberals usually rejected basic liberal assumptions, values, and goals; and defended values (tradition, hierarchy, irrational and sacrosanct authority—and, in the most radical

cases, violent conquest and racial chauvinism) which left most liberals cold. As Isaiah Berlin wrote, the “natural inclination” of liberals was “towards the left, the party of generosity and humanity, towards anything that destroys barriers between men.” Many liberals were inclined, with Berlin, to see Communism as “the treacherous heir” of liberalism; they did not see Fascism in the same light.<sup>59</sup> Left-wing anti-liberalism thus poses a more pressing and interesting ethical problem for liberals. It expresses liberalism’s uneasy conscience and challenges liberals’ claim to be the party of humanity, justice, and freedom. Left-wing anti-liberals also offered a picture of confidence, conviction, consistency, and efficiency that liberals often envied. They forced liberals to confront their failings and vindicate their principles. Left-wing anti-liberals thus posed the sharpest conceptual and emotional challenges to liberals’ approach to political ethics. This, and the fact that right-wing anti-liberalism appeared to pose a less severe threat after 1945—more than any fundamental commitment to capitalism or nationalism—was why many tempered liberals took Communism and other left-wing opponents of liberalism as their main theoretical antagonists.<sup>60</sup>

### The “Liberal Predicament”: Anti-Liberalism as a Moral Dilemma

Faced with accusations of innocence, hypocrisy, and irresponsibility, and feeling a sense of impotence, during the 1930s many liberals found it difficult to resist a temptation to either capitulate to, or emulate, their opponents. Some were drawn toward (or into) Communism.<sup>61</sup> Others looked for alternative ways to combine more-or-less liberal ends with anti-liberal means. Thus, in response to the “self-distrust” and “feebleness” besetting liberalism, H. G. Wells called upon liberals to “move with the times,” acquire a “backbone,” and transform themselves into “an effective phalanx” of “Liberal Fascisti” (or “enlightened Nazis”), which would abandon the “sentimental casualness of nineteenth-century Liberalism” and cultivate the “hard conviction and hard effort,” and the “power of belief and devotion” of a “militant,” “disciplined sect” animated by a “revolutionary spirit.”<sup>62</sup> While the postwar period was one of greater confidence among liberals, calls to emulate the Communist opponent remained widespread—the logic now being less “if you can’t beat them, join them” than “in order to beat them, match them.” This generated both calls for more militant political conduct and a quest for a firm philosophical

foundation for liberalism, whether in the moral truths proclaimed by revived natural law theory, or the "scientific" truths revealed by positivism and behaviorism.<sup>63</sup> Whatever their intellectual inclinations or political affiliations, both political leaders and intellectuals committed to the cause of Western democracy called for the elucidation of liberalism as a "fighting faith"—which often meant the proclamation of liberal orthodoxy and a program of liberal militancy.

Yet it was unclear to many whether liberalism could beat Communists, or other competitors, at their own game—and remain truly liberal. As the Italian American anti-Communist publicist Max Ascoli wrote, "We are no match for communism in a game of deception and ruthlessness, and if in order to destroy communism we adopt its totalitarianism, we lose our own identity." Liberals were "in constant danger of totally disfiguring ourselves when, threatened or exasperated," they "hit back at" Communism using its own methods.<sup>64</sup> For Ascoli this was a problem, but not a reason to abandon liberalism. A harsher view was taken by Trotsky's erstwhile acolyte turned conservative ideologue, James Burnham, who in *Suicide of the West* (1964) anathematized liberalism as the "ideology of Western suicide." While their enemies shamelessly exploited the freedoms guaranteed by liberal principles, liberals were hamstrung by a sense of guilt about imitating the "methods of the enemy"—and so were "demoralized in advance" in any confrontation. Faced with ruthless opponents, liberalism could "survive in application only by violating its own principles." This made it fundamentally unsuited for power; if liberalism were not supplanted by a more resolute and ruthless conservatism, Western society would collapse.<sup>65</sup> Burnham's prognosis echoed conclusions already reached by many. As Hannah Arendt wrote, "Liberalism . . . has demonstrated its inability to resist totalitarianism so often that its failure may already be counted among the historical facts of our century."<sup>66</sup>

In short, liberals faced "the liberal predicament": how to respond to the ruthlessness of anti-liberals without either abandoning liberalism's core ethical values or allowing anti-liberals to triumph politically. They also faced a theoretical challenge: how to justify insistence on liberal limits and scruples, and condemn anti-liberal ruthlessness, without falling into rigid, blind absolutism? They found themselves searching for a stance that would allow them to avoid both political impotence, and the betrayal of their essential principles.

Some liberals chose to evade these issues entirely, placing their faith in the capacity of liberal institutions and policies to provide people with better lives, and as a result, to win widespread adherence; thus they emphasized the ability

of liberal policies to foster economic growth (and the tendency of economic growth to foster liberal societies), or the way in which constitutional practices both protected and inculcated respect for freedom.<sup>67</sup> Others sought to refute the charges of critics such as Burnham by cultivating a tough realism. The interwar experience of liberal failure fostered the belief among “liberal realists” that “liberalism, if left to its own devices, was incapable of ensuring its own survival.”<sup>68</sup> In defending democracy against totalitarianism, Karl Loewenstein wrote, “fire is fought with fire”: this required exceeding the constraints imposed by liberal commitments to individual rights and, in some cases, democratic procedures, in the name of serving liberal values of “human dignity and freedom.”<sup>69</sup>

This problem of political strategy was related to a problem of belief and motivation. Here again, liberalism was pulled in conflicting directions. On the one hand, many critics attributed liberalism’s frailty to its failure to offer a compelling vision and authoritative intellectual system. This created a damaging *motivational* gap: liberalism could inspire neither widespread assent among the masses, nor determination to fight among its partisans. Liberals lacked all conviction, while their opponents were full of passionate intensity. Liberals also lacked the firm intellectual foundations needed to vindicate their claims: they were intellectually flabby as well as politically spineless. Indeed, critics alleged, liberalism’s tolerant relativism actually paved the way for totalitarianism.<sup>70</sup> Accepting the validity of these claims, many postwar thinkers called for a “new faith”—or a revival of an older faith, in “the rationality of the common man,”<sup>71</sup> objective moral standards, and human dignity—as necessary to justify and motivate resistance to totalitarian evil. Some defenders of liberal democracy duly sought to renounce modern scientific rationalism and relativism, in favor of a return to natural law.<sup>72</sup> Others sought to avoid the dangerous ground of normativity altogether, offering purely “rational” defenses of liberal democracy,<sup>73</sup> adducing (and seeking to promote) a “consensus” around liberal-democratic ideals,<sup>74</sup> or emphasizing the material advantages of liberal democratic institutions and trusting that such advantages would eventually produce convergence around commitment to these institutions.<sup>75</sup> Still others sought to rebuild a defense of liberal democracy on a more solid if less exalted idea of “objective” but not “metaphysical” morality.<sup>76</sup> Despite significant differences, these responses all tended to foster what Judith Shklar termed “ideologies of agreement,” motivated by longing for unity and aversion to “moral diversity,” discord, and uncertainty, which sought to establish some foundation or conclusion beyond dispute.<sup>77</sup>

A different path was taken by "tempered liberals."<sup>78</sup> They sought precisely *not* to offer an "ideology of agreement," but to celebrate disagreement and ambivalence. They eschewed the quest for "true certainty" or "true revelation" to compete with Marxism.<sup>79</sup> They also rejected the idea that power should be loosed from the restraints of individual morality in the pursuit of liberal goals; and resisted the attractive simplicity of both untrammelled militancy in fighting their opponents, and unwavering adherence to pure principle. In response to the liberal predicament, they concluded that, as Bernard Williams later wrote, a "[d]ecent political existence lies somewhere between" a ruthlessness that subordinates all moral considerations to some single ultimate objective on the one hand; and "an absurd failure to recognize that if politics is to exist as an activity at all, some moral considerations must be expected to get out of its way." They sought to elucidate and inhabit a "space between cynicism and political idiocy"—a terrain of genuinely political ethics and ethical politics.<sup>80</sup>

This middle space of decency is harder to describe than it is to gesture at, and harder still to inhabit in practice—particularly as the alternatives offered emotional satisfactions and intellectual consistency and clarity. Yet "tempered liberals" sought this middle space—and identified it, not with a doctrine to be discovered, but with an ethos to be cultivated and inhabited.

## The Concept of Ethos

"Ethos" serves as shorthand for a set of linked phenomena, which we can identify in both individuals and (more tenuously) larger entities:<sup>81</sup> a complex of dispositions, perceptions, self-understandings, values, and styles, which interact to guide the way in which an agent engages with the world. Increasingly used by political theorists,<sup>82</sup> who agree in stressing its importance in contrast to formal rules and principles, ethos remains elusive. The term is derived from an ancient Greek word meaning, roughly, "disposition, character" and "outward bearing."<sup>83</sup> It received its fullest theoretical elaboration from Aristotle, who used the term in two further ways. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, it refers to conduct-guiding dispositions (liberality, gentleness, or self-control) which are acquired through habituation, as opposed to those that can be acquired through theoretical instruction.<sup>84</sup> In the *Rhetoric*, ethos refers to a mode of persuasion in which a speaker reveals himself as "a certain kind of person" in the way in which he speaks, such that he renders his arguments credible to his audience through his perceived moral authority.<sup>85</sup> This involves

a mixture of disposition, intention, and skill—or, as Aristotle specifies, a combination of practical judgment (*phronesis*), personal moral excellence or goodness (*arête*), and a benevolent attitude (*eunoia*)—which are exhibited through the *choices* the speaker makes about how to present himself and his case.<sup>86</sup> On both Aristotelian understandings, an ethos cannot be formulated in terms of general principles or laws, and is not reducible to matters of belief; it is informed by perceptions, reflection, personal dispositions, and reactions.

Recent discussions of ethos in political theory, while sometimes influenced by Aristotle, probably owe most to Michel Foucault. For Foucault, an ethos is a style of life, “a mode of being . . . along with a certain way of acting, a way visible to others,”<sup>87</sup> which finds its expression in *action*.<sup>88</sup> An ethos may “infuse,” “inflect,” or inform action, but does not *dictate* a course of action—a crucial difference between an ethos and a moral code.<sup>89</sup> Instead, ethos influences *motivations and judgment*, disposing individuals to act in some ways and not others. The motivational force of ethos is also emphasized by G. A. Cohen (who was *not* influenced by Foucault), who defines ethos as a “structure of response” constituted by “the attitudes people sustain toward each other in the thick of daily life.”<sup>90</sup> Building on these analyses, we may say that a *political* ethos is shaped by the attitudes that political actors sustain toward their conduct of politics, and toward themselves and others qua political actors. This way of thinking guides both their choices about how to engage in political action and the judgments they form of their own and others’ political conduct.

We can distinguish the following components that form an ethos, as I understand it:

1. *dispositions*—more or less stable and recurrent features of thought, choice, and action—that are valued, cultivated, and exhibited by an actor;
2. *sensibility*—a pattern of perception, feeling, and judgment, which shapes evaluations and responses to experience;
3. the “tone of temper and tenor of conduct”<sup>91</sup> that characterize how one acts toward others and expresses oneself through speech and behavior;
4. the *self-understanding* of the actor qua actor—how actors understand the field of activity in which they are engaged, and the nature and demands of their role in that activity;
5. the set of *values* and ideals that guide an actor in action.



Ethos thus bridges cognitive and habitual, intellectual and affective, doctrinal and dispositional elements. On the one hand, an ethos is shaped both by explicit principles or ideals and by a broader conception or picture of the world—or of the particular realm or activity with which the agent is concerned.<sup>92</sup> In the case of a *political* ethos, this includes a conception of the activity of politics itself, and the standards of conduct appropriate to it—e.g., whether politics is analogous to combat, or economic bargaining, or the reasoning and communication of intellectual inquiry. An ethos also, more broadly, is shaped by an agent's conception of good character. When we say that an agent's ethos is characterized by adjectival qualities such as generosity, sobriety, compassion, or "hardness," we mean that the agent *values* these qualities as features of (political) action, based on a particular conception of how life (or politics specifically) should be conducted. We *also* mean that this individual exhibits, or strives to exhibit, qualities such as generosity, sobriety, humility, compassion. These qualities also shape *perception*: to have an ethos characterized by generosity, sobriety, humility, for example, is to perceive others, and the possible courses of action before one, in ways that reflect generosity, sobriety, humility, etc.

Ethos is not identical to "character"—though the two are closely related, and thus easy to conflate.<sup>93</sup> Not only does ethos have a doctrinal element as well as a dispositional or characterological one; it also need not be constant or comprehensive in the way that character is often taken to be. On many accounts (including a common understanding of Aristotelian virtue ethics<sup>94</sup>), one simply *has* a certain character, which abides through shifting circumstances: the just man dependably acts (and thinks, and feels) justly, the generous man generously, the ruthless man ruthlessly, and so on. An ethos, as I understand it, need not be so constant—though it will be *broadly prevalent*. This, I think, tracks our ordinary usage in speaking of dispositions and features of temperament. We talk of someone as being kind, or scrupulous, or contemplative, or modest (or nasty, imperious, or arrogant) because in a number of circumstances the person's actions, means of expression, thoughts and feelings (insofar as we are privy to them), strike us as kind, scrupulous, contemplative, modest, etc. And we are apt to describe the individual this way, even as we know that this person has thoughts and feelings that run counter to these characteristics, and that these (unkind, unscrupulous, rash, immodest) thoughts and feelings will sometimes guide that person's behavior.<sup>95</sup> In a similar way, we can—and typically do—identify certain *styles* as being characteristic of individuals. Doing so does not assume constancy, or require that



acting, thinking, or responding in these “characteristic” ways be automatic, or even easy. An ethos will be, to some degree, aspirational—though with hard work, and good fortune, it may become habitual.

On this understanding, ethos has a strongly interior quality; but it is expressed in action, through what Irving Howe termed “*moral style*”—the “embodiment in conduct of a moral outlook.”<sup>96</sup> Conduct is not, of course, shaped *only* by ethos; the pursuit of goals or values is shaped by the encounter between circumstances, and a mixture of ethos, *precepts* (which can be stated in propositional form), and situational judgment (though the capacity for such judgment may itself be helped or hindered by ethos). But a description of conduct that omits the sensibility and style that characterize it will be incomplete; an understanding of how conduct comes to be undertaken will be similarly incomplete without attention to the agent’s ethos. Ethos informs the *quality* of deliberation and action. Such qualitative differences can be significant, indeed decisive, in shaping the moral significance of actions.

As I show in the ensuing chapters, tempered liberals came to see ethos both as crucial to defining the quality of politics and as a decisive dimension of what separated liberals and their opponents. They thus developed variants of what Karuna Mantena terms “dispositional politics,” marked by focus on means, and an analysis of the interaction between moral-psychological dispositions and political outcomes.<sup>97</sup> My account goes beyond Mantena’s analysis in distinguishing between features of *conduct*—strategies, tactics, and practices of political action—and features of *ethos*, which have to do with the dispositions and outlook of political actors. An agent’s ethos shapes how that person thinks about, and decides to engage in, conduct; and ethos is expressed through, and shapes the quality of, conduct. The practice of nonviolence, or parliamentary bargaining, or debate within an open “public square,” will have a very different character, and may produce very different consequences, depending on the ethos participants exhibit. The conduct adopted by political actors will in turn reinforce and spread those dispositions and ways of thinking—and also transform them.

Because it is complex, the explication of an ethos (or of different, rival *ethes*) is a challenging task, for which many political theorists are ill-prepared. We have tended to be trained to focus on concepts, principles, and processes, more than on the web of sensibilities, dispositions, aspirations, and evaluative assumptions that shape thinking and link it to acting. To capture an ethos requires “thick description” and attention to particulars. To attend to ethos is to sacrifice a degree of simplicity and a certain sort of precision, for the sake of

greater richness and (hopefully) truthfulness. It is also the case that the very concept of ethos is hard to fix precisely, since it refers not to a single thing but to a web of things, the relationships between which are open to question. But if it is sometimes obscure to invoke "ethos," the same holds true of other concepts—structure, interests, relations, power, identity, subjectivity. To talk of anything is to open up seemingly endless lines of inquiry. We must, at some point, make a stop in explaining each of our terms, in order to make a start in using our terms to explain things.

## Ruthlessness as an Ethos and Anti-Liberalism as an Ethical Project

The idea that liberalism—often identified as an ideology, theory, or philosophy—is also a matter of ethos is hardly new. In the mid-twentieth century, Bertrand Russell asserted that the "essence" of liberalism "lies not in *what* opinions are held, but in *how* they are held."<sup>98</sup> For Russell, a liberal ethos included a spirit of toleration; abhorrence of dogmatism and fanaticism; respect for individual convictions; acceptance of variety and disagreement (within the bounds of civility<sup>99</sup>); moderation in action and indeed in feeling; and avoidance of conflicts that rendered reason-giving, deliberation, and compromise impossible. Anti-liberalism, for its part, was defined not just by an alternative model of political institutions, but an ethos of discipline, dedication, resoluteness, and ruthlessness, which rejected traditional (liberal) moral standards as signs of weakness. Calling activists in Ukraine during the terror-famine to action, one Party leader declared that "You must assume your duties with a feeling of the strictest Party responsibility, without whimpering, without any rotten liberalism. Throw your bourgeois humanitarianism out of the window and act like Bolsheviks worthy of Comrade Stalin . . . This is no time for squeamishness or rotten sentimentality . . . What's required from you is Bolshevik alertness, intransigence and courage."<sup>100</sup> The architects and executioners of atrocities like the terror-famine were extreme cases; but similar denigrations of liberalism's ethos were expressed by milder radicals. The young Reinhold Niebuhr complained that liberalism's "gray spirit of compromise" smothered "the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks"—tracks that seemed to lead to a morass of mediocrity, drift, injustice, and disaster. Something "less circumspect" than liberalism was needed "to save the world."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, in 1939 the young

Raymond Aron warned that the moral weakness displayed by liberals was strengthening the case of their totalitarian opponents; they had to “show themselves capable of the same virtues the totalitarian regimes claim to monopolize”: “heroic” strength, conviction, and capacity for work and sacrifice.<sup>102</sup>

The mightiest anti-liberal ideological movements—Communism, Fascism, Nazism—were bent on projects of ethical transformation, or “remaking souls.”<sup>103</sup> Such projects were tied to ruthlessness in two ways. First, ruthless dedication and guile were needed to overcome the formidable obstacles to the prodigious task of moral regeneration: “tearing the old skin off mankind and giving it a new one,” Arthur Koestler wrote, was “not an occupation for people with weak nerves.”<sup>104</sup> Second, ruthless dedication and discipline was itself a feature of the ethical ideal at which anti-liberal projects of reformation aimed. Ruthlessness as a feature of ethos was thus both an end and a means; it was both instrumental to creating, and constitutive of, a new ethical character and ethical life.

The conceptual tool of ethos is useful for comprehending not only the aims and appeal of anti-liberalism, but the phenomenon of ruthlessness itself. Ruthlessness is a matter of perception, sensibility, and disposition, related but not reducible to moral propositions. It involves a particular way of inhabiting one’s moral life, marked by lack of reservation and regret in harming others, impatient disregard for qualifications and complications, contempt for hesitation, ambivalence, and sentiment, and impervious insensitivity to doubts, scruples, and remorse. The phenomenon of ruthlessness, in turn, also illuminates the relationship between an ethos and an *ethic*. An “ethic of ruthlessness” may be thought of as a normative position, expressible in terms of propositions, which enjoins or justifies ruthless conduct. Accepting an ethic of ruthlessness may lead one to cultivate an ethos of ruthlessness; being dispositionally ruthless may dispose one to accept an ethic of ruthlessness as plausible—or as a useful justification of one’s inclinations. At the same time, an ethos of ruthlessness involves more than just the disposition to act ruthlessly. It encompasses endorsement of ruthlessness as appropriate to, and worthy of approbation in, political action. Those characterized by a ruthless ethos not only act ruthlessly. They feel morally superior in doing so, regarding their ruthlessness as proper and even virtuous: a point of pride or a higher calling.

Political ruthlessness also illustrates the interplay of ethos and ideology. On the one hand, an embrace of ruthlessness appeared to reflect the specific content of different anti-liberal ideologies—frameworks of propositions about

the world, and prescriptions for how to change it. On the other hand, a shared ethos united anti-liberals across ideological divides—and facilitated the movement of some individuals from far Left to extreme Right, or vice versa. Thomas Mann made this point in *The Magic Mountain* via the character of Naphta, the “revolutionary of reaction.” Naphta, a Jewish-born Jesuit-Bolshevik, extols “absolute authority and an ironclad bond—discipline and sacrifice, renunciation of the ego and coercion of the personality.” The Proletariat must embrace means that are “terroristic—that is, anti-liberal.” This requires the subordination of the individual to the sect (or Party), which “relieve[s] the individual of the burden of conscience, and in the name of an absolute goal, consecrates every means, even to bloodshed, even to crime.”<sup>105</sup> This spirit, this ethical project, was common to the movement Naphta embraced, and the movement that would have murdered him as a Jew and a Leftist.

The ethical project, outlook, and style of the ruthless anti-liberal hero were all strikingly set out in S. G. Nechayev’s *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (1869). The revolutionist as envisioned by Nechayev is an ascetic, who purges himself of all that is extraneous to the pursuit of his goal:

All the gentle and enervating sentiments of kinship, love, friendship, gratitude, and even honor, must be suppressed . . . and give place to the cold and single-minded passion for revolution. For him, there exists only one pleasure, one consolation, one reward, one satisfaction—the success of the revolution. Night and day he must have but one thought, one aim—merciless destruction. Striving cold-bloodedly and indefatigably toward this end, he must be prepared to destroy himself and to destroy with his own hands everything that stands in the path of the revolution.<sup>106</sup>

Here literary style communicates the ethos prescribed. To emphasize that revolution must be the single, obsessive end of the revolutionist’s thought and action, Nechayev reiterates the word “one,” and ends every sentence by naming the ultimate goal (“revolution” or, in one case, “destruction”—which amounts to the same thing). Nechayev’s prose encapsulates a way of life, a spirit, which attracts or repels, terrifies or inspires—and the example of which moves admirers to a particular manner of conduct, a project of self-formation. Among those inflamed by Nechayev’s sermon was the young V. I. Ulyanov—later known as Lenin. Lenin’s calls for “strict, iron discipline,” “unconditional boldness,” and “supreme courage and determination,”<sup>107</sup> in turn, shaped the Communist ethos of “discipline, business efficiency, utter emotional identification and a sense of *total* dedication.”<sup>108</sup>

Seeing anti-liberalism as tied to a particular ethos helps us to understand its power to attract and inspire. Those who rebelled against liberalism were often attracted by the exemplification of a (brutally) heroic anti-liberal ethos, exemplified in the figure of anti-liberal militants whose dedication, single-mindedness, lack of hesitation, remorse, or indulgence toward themselves and others were at once impressive, enviable, and guilt-inducing. As Kopelev recalled, his youthful “fanaticism” was “nourished not only by speculative newspaper and literary sources. More convincing than these were people who in my eyes embodied, personified our truth and our justice, people who confirmed with their lives that it was necessary to clench your teeth, clench your heart and carry out everything the party and the Soviet power ordered.”<sup>109</sup> It is impossible to understand the ability to foster conviction and motivate cruelty, even in those disposed to mercy and doubt, of the anti-liberal causes of the twentieth century (and other times), without taking into account the potent impressions created by exemplars of an anti-liberal ethos.

In the middle years of the twentieth century, the combination of the “contempt for liberalism”<sup>110</sup> as weak, foolish, decadent, and decrepit with the confident and furious embrace of an anti-liberal ethos was formidable and unavoidable: a resort to argument on the level of institutional arrangements, public policies, or abstract principles would not suffice. Liberals had to show that they were capable of responsibility, leadership, vigor, self-sacrifice—while challenging the way that these qualities were understood by anti-liberals. Proponents of “tempered liberalism” accordingly undertook three broad, interlinked tasks. First, they sought to critically reconstruct liberalism—to identify and correct liberalism’s internal weaknesses and failings. Second, they sought to reconceive liberalism as a particular “temper,” a “certain condition . . . of mind or state of being,” rather than (merely) an institutional framework or policy.<sup>111</sup> Finally, they sought (with varying degrees of self-consciousness) not only to explicate, but to *exemplify*, a liberal spirit, which could belie anti-liberal ethical critiques, and resist the temptations and pathologies of an anti-liberal ethos.

This project was strikingly articulated by Lionel Trilling, whose book *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) sought to combat Stalinism’s influence on American thought. Stalinism for Trilling involved not a doctrine but a disposition: a hostility to complexity, paradox, irony, and spiritedness, which afflicted not only Communists, but many liberals—including *both* those who were uncritically indulgent toward Communism and those whose anti-Communism was rigid and fundamentalist. The book’s title was both revealing and ironic.

Liberalism was a matter of "imagination," not doctrine. Yet the problem with liberalism was "an inadequacy of imagination," which left liberals unable to comprehend—and thus constantly surprised and bewildered by—the world. Liberals had to cultivate dispositions of "worldliness"—an "acceptance of man in the world without the sentimentality of cynicism and without the sentimentality of rationalism"—and "moral realism," or awareness of "the contradictions, paradoxes and dangers of living the moral life."<sup>112</sup>

Trilling, and the other "tempered liberals" discussed here, wrote in the wake of an intellectual movement that had plunged many of Europe's finest minds into a morass of political and moral confusion and conflict, in which they found themselves meting out and suffering ruthless violence. In this chapter, I have sketched some of the rationales for this ruthlessness and some of the forms it took. But a fuller understanding of the connection between political fanaticism and the ethical beliefs and sensibilities that inspired it requires a closer examination of the commitments and convolutions that drove some of these individuals. In the next chapter, I turn to the century's beginnings—and to Central Europe, where many of the anti-liberal ideologies that dominated the century took shape, and where liberalism suffered some of its earliest crises and defeats.

## 2

# Between Tragedy and Utopia

## WEBER AND LUKÁCS ON ETHICS AND POLITICS

Two souls, alas!, dwell in my breast,  
and each would be severed from the other.<sup>1</sup>

MANY OF THE ARGUMENTS explored in this book can be considered responses to, or (mis)applications of, Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber’s political thought revolved around the rival claims of responsibility and conviction; on closer examination, it furnishes a more fine-grained taxonomy of moral purism and political realism—and highlights dangers of each. His experiences allow us to anchor these general positions in the circumstances of early twentieth-century European thought and politics. The marriage of sober realism and moral seriousness he proposed inspired later proponents of “tempered liberalism”—and some of liberalism’s most formidable opponents. Weber thus highlights the ambiguities of an attempt to stake out a political ethos between the claims of realism and idealism, pessimism and aspiration.

### Weber’s Politics: A Liberal Problematic, and a Problematic Liberalism

A cloud of political dubiety hangs over Weber. He has been labeled a “cold-blooded realpolitiker” and “modern Machiavelli;”<sup>2</sup> readers as different as Jürgen Habermas and Leo Strauss have seen in his thought the roots of the anti-liberal political irrationalism that consumed Germany.<sup>3</sup> A central leitmotif of

Weber's view of the world was that of *struggle* or *combat*; he repeatedly called for a disposition of *toughness*, and practices of self-discipline and self-hardening. He also embraced an ethos of *intellectual* extremism, which called for pushing ideas to their limits.<sup>4</sup> The "ethic of responsibility," often taken as an inspiration for a sober liberalism,<sup>5</sup> has been reinterpreted by some scholars as closely tied to dedication to a(n arbitrarily chosen) *cause* (*Sache*)—so that Weber may appear close to those anti-liberals who advocated ruthless action on behalf of an ardently embraced mission.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the cause to which Weber himself was passionately devoted was, in many ways, a liberal one. Weber sought to preserve space for individual choice and "freedom of movement" against both institutional structures (bureaucracy) and intellectual systems (teleological determinism).<sup>7</sup> He was revolted by German society's deference to the conformist, complacent "men of order" (*Ordnungsmenschen*), and widespread celebration of an "ethos" founded on the "corporal's form of power": "Give commands, fall in line, stand at attention, show off with big talk."<sup>8</sup> This reflected not strength, but inner weakness: deprived of the "carapace of bureaucratic regimentation," most Germans were incapable of acting with dignity. For Weber, the "central question" of the day was how to foster an *ethos* fit for free human beings against this ethos of boastful belligerence and inner bankruptcy.<sup>9</sup>

Weber was no conventional liberal. He renounced the optimism and "eudaimonism" of much liberalism as false and puerile,<sup>10</sup> and asserted that politics should be guided by concern not with material "well-being" or happiness, but with the "*quality of the human beings*" reared in society.<sup>11</sup> Statecraft should aim at cultivating what was "valuable in man: his personal responsibility, his basic drive toward higher things, toward . . . spiritual and moral values"—even when "this drive confronts us in its most primitive form."<sup>12</sup> Yet Weber was committed to the ideal of freedom, which he identified with liberalism; he considered the cause of liberalism his own. His political involvement was sporadic, if passionate, and ideologically varied, but tied to (various strands of) German liberalism. The son of a National Liberal politician, he aligned, first, with Pastor Friedrich Naumann's National-Social Association (which combined elements of nationalism, liberalism, and social democracy); after the fall of the *Kaiserreich* he joined in the formation of the left-liberal German Democratic Party. He ended his life a defender (albeit a characteristically ambivalent one) of the Weimar Republic, whose constitution he helped to draft—infamously contributing to the formulation of article 48, which would allow Hitler to assume emergency powers and overthrow the Republic.



Weber's liberal commitments particularly emerge in his diagnosis of the prospects of democracy in Russia following the abortive revolution of 1905, which he described as a "freedom struggle."<sup>13</sup> Weber unsparingly noted the obstacles to liberal reform, and the illusions and miscalculations of the liberal forces. Nevertheless, he concluded by affirming that the liberal goal of an "'inalienable' sphere of freedom and personality must be won *now*." Liberalism's "vocation" lay "in working to spread the old, fundamental, individualistic notion of 'inalienable human rights' amongst the masses, rights which have come to seem as 'trivial' to us Western Europeans as black bread is for the person who has enough to eat."<sup>14</sup> His analysis of the challenges facing liberalism in Russia also reveal Weber's concern with the "liberal predicament." The options open to Russian liberal democrats were "filled with renunciation." Their "duty" to their ideals committed them to policies that worked to their political disadvantage; but if they were concerned with the fate of their ideals, they could not be indifferent to political efficacy.<sup>15</sup> The plight of liberals was thus tied to problems of political ethics.

### An Anti-"Ethical" Ethic?: Against "Panmoralism" and Realpolitik

His preoccupation with political ethics dated back to Weber's youth, as the son of a worldly politician father, comfortable in the tough world of German politics, and a morally idealistic, devoutly Protestant mother. It also reflected a larger intellectual milieu, later (1922) characterized by his colleague Ernst Troeltsch as pulled between "an abundance of remnants of Romanticism and lofty idealism" on one side, and "a realism which goes to the verge of cynicism and of utter indifference to all ideals and all morality" on the other—but marked above all by "an inclination to make an astonishing combination of the two elements—in a word, to brutalize romance, and to romanticize cynicism."<sup>16</sup> Weber's own development reflected the clash between ethical idealism and realpolitik; his arguments about political ethics alternatively succumbed to, and struggled against, the tendency to combine romanticism and cynicism. As a boy, he adopted a hard-bitten, "realistic" viewpoint. Studying Roman history, he dismissed Cicero as an irresponsible dilettante who indulged in windy speeches when he should have simply "bumped off" Catiline.<sup>17</sup> This precocious "matter-of-factness" contrasted with the ethical rigorism of Weber's mother and her family, whose liberal-Christian idealism reflected the influence of the

American Unitarian theologian William Ellery Channing. On reading his work, young Max found Channing's views "childlike" and "naive"—yet also found his idealism "refreshing." Already, Weber recognized the compelling claims of both Channing's ideals and a rival "heroic ethic," defined by dedication to "suprapersonal cultural" (as opposed to moral) values.<sup>18</sup>

The proponent of ruthless power politics vividly emerges in Weber's inaugural address at the University of Freiburg, "The Nation State and Economic Policy" (1895)—which, he proudly noted, caused a scandal because of the "brutality" of its views and language.<sup>19</sup> Here Weber set out many of the core tenets of *realpolitik* or "political realism": (1) an assertion of the *autonomy* of politics from the logics of both economics and ethics; (2) the idea that "the essence of all politics . . . is *struggle*"<sup>20</sup> and the pursuit of power advantage over others; (3) an assertion of the power of the *nation-state* as the prime criterion and goal of political striving; and (4) an ethos marked by hardness, lack of sentimentality, and singular focus on the pursuit of national power. As Weber remarked, "Politics is a hard business, and he who wants to be helmsman of the fatherland's political development must have steady nerves and must not be too sentimental."<sup>21</sup>

Over time, Weber continued to insist on the centrality of struggle and the gap between politics and morality—but in less celebratory tones. The mature Weber was a pluralist, who held that there are multiple "highest ideals," in light of which life is invested with manifold, conflicting meanings, and between which individuals must choose. While the conflict between these ideals is often tragic, it is also ethically positive: the condition of having to choose can promote a type of human character marked by independence, ethical self-awareness, and strengthened commitment.<sup>22</sup> Weber's pluralism applied both between, and *within*, different "life orders," each with its own characteristic form, means, and standards. Politics was one of these spheres: its internal "laws" were defined by its reliance on the use of coercion, and the necessity of using others as instruments to larger purposes.<sup>23</sup> This meant that politics conflicted with *morality*,<sup>24</sup> understood in Kantian terms as defined by an imperative to treat others always as ends in themselves, not mere means; and to *love* one's fellow human beings, according them just as much value as one accords oneself. Weber rejected "panmoralism": the assertion that the same standards of morality apply in all spheres of life.<sup>25</sup> Panmoralism was anti-political, in two respects: it ruled out political action, which necessarily involves morally unacceptable means; and it devalues the proper aims of politics—the promotion of the values of "culture," which could only be attained by means of discipline, subordination, and thus inequality.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, while asserting that the standards of politics “had nothing to do with *private* morality,”<sup>27</sup> Weber also rejected the idea that morality and politics “have nothing at all to do with one another,”<sup>28</sup> warning that while “politics is not an ethical business,” there nevertheless existed “a certain minimum of shame and obligation to behave decently which cannot be violated with impunity, even in politics.”<sup>29</sup> He praised the idealistic motivations of the Russian radicals he knew in Heidelberg, and the Russian revolutionaries of 1905, with their “unconditional readiness for martyrdom” on behalf of their ideals.<sup>30</sup> A concern for ethical standards beyond political success was also reflected in Weber’s responses to World War I and its aftermath. Initially an enthusiastic supporter of the German war effort, he became a sharp critic of the folly *and* dishonor of German policy (particularly its use of submarine warfare and annexation of Eastern territory).<sup>31</sup> He boldly criticized the government and public opinion, declaring that bellicosity and demagoguery revealed not strength, but inner weakness, and warning that in times of war, “prudence” (as his biographer has written) “required greater courage than did warlike shrieking.”<sup>32</sup> As Germany slid toward civil war following military defeat, Weber condemned a resort to violence as “sterile,” and urged political leaders faced with upheaval to keep “a cool head and their nerve,” adding that, if compelled to “suppress violence with violence,” they must hasten to restore “the guarantee of civil liberty immediately.”<sup>33</sup> This did not indicate disavowal of violence—Weber stridently encouraged guerrilla resistance to foreign occupation following Germany’s defeat.<sup>34</sup> But it did reflect awareness of the deep ethical cost of violence. Weber also expressed respect for the use of nonviolent protest, noting that, in Russia prior to the Revolution of 1905, “the tactic recommended by the liberals has quite often been effective, namely to face the troops unarmed rather than provoke them into fighting by the use of bombs and armed resistance.”<sup>35</sup> And he criticized a “realistic” interpretation of human motivation, which attributed action to the will to power and material interest, as a false guide to human behavior—*especially* politics, in which people seek not just material but “ideal things,” and are guided by such motives as honor and solidarity.<sup>36</sup>

Weber’s dissent from *realpolitik* was sharpest in relation to the ethos it reflected. He attacked three elements of this ethos: (1) a general attitude of cynicism and brutality, which sneered at ethical scruples and relished domination; (2) elevation (or worship) of *success* as a mark of merit; and (3) chauvinistic nationalism. As a young man, Weber bemoaned the pervasive “worship of ruthlessness, militaristic and otherwise, the culture of so-called realism, and philistine contempt for all those who hope to attain their ends without appeal

to the evil qualities of men, in particular, brutality.”<sup>37</sup> Nearly two decades later he attacked the “‘sated’ type of German who cannot bear not to be on the side of the ‘winning cause’ (whichever it may be), his mind elated and his chest puffed up with his qualities as a practitioner of *Realpolitik*.”<sup>38</sup> A decade later, Weber returned to the theme: “On the whole, people are strongly inclined to adapt themselves to what promises success, not only . . . to the extent that they seek to realize their ideals, but even to the extent of giving up these very ideals. In Germany this mode of behavior is glorified by the name *Realpolitik*.”<sup>39</sup> Although known for warning of the dangers of the “ethic of conviction” (*Gesinnungsethik*), Weber maintained that actions should be judged “not merely by their success-value [*Erfolgswert*] but by their convictional-value [*Gesinnungswert*].”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, he insisted that “idealism” was “a highly desirable element” in politics, and went so far as to express the hope that his nation would do “what is honest and *therefore* politically right.”<sup>41</sup> He recognized that *both* realism and idealism might reflect an “ignoble” desire to show oneself to be in the right, to lift oneself up by casting others down—a sign of Wilhelmine Germany’s bedeviling sin of “vanity.”<sup>42</sup>

Weber’s ambiguous position—his attacks on both “moralism” and “realism,” combined with admiration for both the matter-of-fact pursuit of national power politics and the ardent idealism of revolutionary activists—was connected to a political ambivalence, which saw him torn between a defense of moderation and a willingness to embrace political extremes. Thus, in May 1919, he declared that “To restore Germany to her old glory, I would . . . ally myself with any power on earth, even with the devil incarnate.” But he immediately added that “it is impossible to have politics in Germany as long as it is possible for madmen of the right and the left to peddle their madness.”<sup>43</sup> This encounter with political extremism provoked one of the most striking discussions of the problem of political ethics that the century produced: Weber’s lecture “Politics as a Vocation.”

### Weber among the Militants: The Context and Argument of “Politics as a Vocation”

In “Politics as a Vocation” Weber famously addresses “the real relationship between *ethics* and *politics*”<sup>44</sup> through a discussion of two political ethics: that of conviction, and that of responsibility. On a conventional view, this dichotomy is equated with that between deontic and consequentialist ethical

theories.<sup>45</sup> Such interpretations reflect Weber's own presentation of the ethics as reducible to two fundamentally opposed "ethical maxims."<sup>46</sup> There are, however, problems with identifying the two ethics with types of *moral theory*. We can translate either ethic into a theory of moral value; but something is lost in the translation—particularly if it leads us to identify the "ethic of responsibility" with consequentialism. The view of Weber as a simple proponent of the "ethic of responsibility" is also complicated by his acknowledgment of the validity of some manifestations of the ethic of conviction.<sup>47</sup>

We can better understand a Weberian "ethic" as akin to an *ethos*. Both the terms *Ethik* and *Ethos* feature significantly in Weber's studies of religion (as well as fleetingly in "Politics as a Vocation"<sup>48</sup>); while there are nuances of difference between the two,<sup>49</sup> both generally indicate a combination of (1) a *belief system* or outlook, which posits certain "ideals" and fosters certain "attitudes toward the world," (2) a *certain way of life*, consisting of certain *habits, duties, and goals*, which is directed to the cultivation of (3) a *character* suited to these habits, duties, and goals.<sup>50</sup> These together shape the disposition of the personality.

In addition to clarifying the nature of a political "ethic," it is important to grasp the goals toward which "Politics as a Vocation" is directed. These were at once *diagnostic, normative, and pedagogic-therapeutic*.<sup>51</sup> Many of the "diagnostic" questions with which Weber is concerned are also ethical. Some are general: what does it mean to adopt politics as a profession? What sort of character, and what conception of political activity and one's relation to it, does politics demand? What can one expect or hope for from a life devoted to politics? Other diagnostic questions concern immediate circumstances: what are the possibilities for responsible political action in a "disenchanted" world marked by crises of liberal institutions in the face of mass democracy, and of the individual self in the face of mass society? What will *become* of the inner characters of those who engage in political struggle under these circumstances? *Normatively*, Weber asks: what could *justify* the use of (coercive) political power? His answer is far from clear, but seems to be bound up with the quality of character of the politician. Only those who live up to the challenges of politics in their inward character have the "right" to "seize the spokes of the wheel of history."<sup>52</sup> These diagnostic and normative concerns came together in Weber's analysis of the distinctive character-type of the individual with a *vocation* for politics. The politician of vocation or "calling" imposes a demanding ethic of inward self-control to *form* his character into an ordered, coherent *personality*, marked by devotion to particular goals and by particular

dispositions; this allows him to meet the demands of politics, and invest his existence and action with *meaning*.<sup>53</sup>

*Pedagogically-therapeutically*, Weber sought to foster self-reflection, dispel revolutionary “intoxication” and romantic illusions, distance his audience from their desires, and force them to “objectively” face hard realities, in order to fortify them against both seduction by political fanatics and fantasists, and disillusion in the “polar night of icy darkness” that he saw coming. Such disillusionment, he feared, would cause them to become cynical and embittered, or propel them into a “mystical flight” from the world.<sup>54</sup> This therapeutic exercise may also have been directed at *himself*, as an effort to curb his own inclination toward irresponsible intransigence. These therapeutic aims were linked to an *exemplary* function of the lecture: to model a sober, “realistic,” mode of political engagement.

This agenda was motivated by the context in which the lecture was given: “the collapse of Germany, Russian bolshevism, the chiliastic excitement of youth” who felt “called upon” to establish an “unprecedented social order . . . filled with ethical and religious ideals of justice and brotherhood.”<sup>55</sup> Initially reluctant to accept the invitation from the Munich University Free Students’ Union (FSB) to speak on “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber only agreed to participate upon learning that Kurt Eisner would be invited in his place. A socialist journalist and leader of the revolution that had overthrown the Bavarian monarchy in November 1918, Eisner typified much that Weber detested—the “littérateur” playing at politics, carried away (and carrying others away) by impassioned but empty rhetoric.<sup>56</sup> This verdict undervalued Eisner’s personal integrity and anticipated his political haplessness. By the time Weber delivered his lecture in January 1919, Eisner’s party had suffered electoral defeat by the conservative Bavarian People’s Party. Eisner would be assassinated a month later, on February 21; this precipitated the violence that led to the establishment of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic. The violence to come was easily anticipated: Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had been murdered (by right-wing paramilitaries acting at the behest of the social-democratic government) weeks before. Weber coldly remarked that Liebknecht had “called upon the mob to fight, and the mob killed him.”<sup>57</sup>

Not only the occasion, but the audience, of “Politics as a Vocation” is significant. The left-leaning FSB advocated academic freedom and an autonomous, politically heterogeneous student body. Weber sympathized with this and hoped the FSB might provide a training ground for future German leadership,<sup>58</sup> but he was disturbed by the increasing influence of pacifism in the FSB.

His lecture was directed against political extremism—represented both by morally absolutist pacifism<sup>59</sup> and “the *realpolitik* of idealism” preached by the leadership of the Bavarian Republic, which insisted on the ultimate harmony of personal fulfillment and political achievement. For Weber, this represented the folly of *political romanticism*, with its conflation of politics with both ethics and aesthetics, and its attendant tendency to prioritize emotional uplift above sober political analysis and effective action.<sup>60</sup> Political romantics sought to enjoy the satisfactions of both moral rectitude and power; they refused to recognize the necessary conflict between achieving power and maintaining moral purity.<sup>61</sup> Weber had encountered, and fought, political romanticism during a conference of German intellectuals held at Burg Lauenstein in May 1917. Initially, his primary concern was to defend “democratic individualism” against right-wing “Pan-Germanism.” This led many left-wing participants (including Ernst Toller<sup>62</sup>) to look to Weber for leadership. A group of these young leftists sought his approval for “a proclamation which called, among other things, for the rule of Eros in the world and for the abolition of poverty. Weber was aghast at this confused and unrealistic program.” Sympathetic to the young leftists but “impatient” with their naivete, he sought to teach them “clarity” and “objectivity.”<sup>63</sup> His means of doing so was to lambast the “amateurish pipe-dreams,” “romantic fantasies” and “blissful ignorance” of “politically infantile” “ideologues.”<sup>64</sup> Unsurprisingly, this alienated the support he had inspired.

Toller, Eisner, and their comrades were obvious targets for Weber’s characterization of the “politician of conviction” who feels “‘responsible’ only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction . . . is never extinguished.” This obsession with inner purity reflected “cosmic-ethical rationalism,” which insisted that “only good can flow from good, only evil from evil.” This faith was, Weber asserted, disproven by “the entire course of world history”—and indeed by “any unbiased examination of daily experience,” which reveals that “the achievement of ‘good’ ends is in many cases tied to the necessity of employing morally suspect or at least morally dangerous means.”<sup>65</sup> One had either to accept the demands of political responsibility, and sacrifice personal purity; or adhere to standards of moral purity, and acknowledge that one was thereby renouncing the ability to achieve one’s goals.

This critique of political romanticism and absolutism appears to be directed at moral purism, as represented above all by pacifism, but not at practitioners of political *ruthlessness*. Indeed, Weber’s complaint was partly that idealists such as Toller were not ruthless *enough*. There is therefore a puzzle in Weber’s



linkage of the “ethic of conviction” to ruthless, “realistic” revolutionary movements such as Bolshevism.<sup>66</sup> Weber acknowledged this, noting that the ethic of conviction *logically* should “*reject any* action which employs morally dangerous means.” But, “in the real world” the “proponent of the ‘ethics of conviction’” often transforms into a “chiliastic prophet. Those who have been preaching ‘love against force’ one minute . . . issue a call to force the next; they call for one *last* act of force to create the situation in which *all* violence will have been destroyed for ever.”<sup>67</sup> The same impulse toward perfection could have two expressions: “‘holy’ self-abnegation,” or flight from politics into a realm of pure love; or a fight to realize morality immediately through political struggle.<sup>68</sup> The latter, in turn, could take two forms: a utopianism that expected revolution to succeed by virtue of its moral superiority (as with figures such as Toller and Eisner); and an “asceticism” that sought transformation through forceful authority and discipline (represented by the Bolsheviks).<sup>69</sup>

For Weber, Bolshevism’s flaws were *ethical*, in two senses. On one level, Bolsheviks shared in the political romantic’s deficient understanding of the relationship between ends and means. They failed, first, to recognize the gulf between the ends they claimed to pursue and the ends they *could* achieve, given the realities of human nature and of modern society. On Weber’s view, human beings were deeply “individualistic by nature”; while relations of equality and ties of love might flourish in more intimate, “primal” communities, in large, anonymous, rationalized modern societies human egotism and distance would undermine attempts to create spiritual unity.<sup>70</sup> They also failed to recognize the gulf between the ends they invoked and the *means* they used. While they recognized that morally pure means would not necessarily produce morally good ends, they failed to perceive how the ruthless means of revolution would undermine their ability to achieve the ultimate ends at which they aimed. The only order that could result from their deployment was a “rather ordinary military dictatorship”—which was just what the Bolshevik regime became.<sup>71</sup> The course adopted by the Bolsheviks thereby fell short of the demands both of moral integrity, since they failed to abide by their own values and principles; and *true* political realism, since they (foreseeably) produced results contrary to their goals.

Bolshevism also reflected an ethical failing insofar as it involved a failing of *character*. Behind its veneer of hard-headed realism lay a romantic penchant for extreme positions and grand gestures, and a “sectarian small-mindedness” that led Bolsheviks to focus their attacks, not on the forces of reaction, but on “the ‘rival’ bourgeois democratic parties.” This tendency “destroys all attempts



to educate people in the ways of effective political action.”<sup>72</sup> It also immunized its adherents to self-questioning in a manner reminiscent of the most disciplined and close-minded of religious sects. As Weber wrote in 1906,

Like the thoroughgoing Jesuit, the devout Marxist is imbued by his dogma with a blithe superiority and the self-assurance of the somnambulist. Disdaining to strive for lasting political success, and confident of being above reproach, he accepts with equanimity and a mocking laugh the collapse of all hopes—his own included—of overcoming the mortal foe . . . [he] is always exclusively concerned with the preservation of the pure faith and—if possible—the increase of his own sect by a few souls.<sup>73</sup>

Such reflections seem to anticipate the failure of the left to unite against Nazism in Weimar Germany. Yet a similar dynamic is apparent in the “moderate” social democrats whom Weber himself supported, whose fear of the far left led them to ally with the right-wing paramilitary Freikorps in 1919.<sup>74</sup> Weber’s fear that the inevitable disappointment of radical hopes would provoke frustrated withdrawal, resulting in the triumph of reaction, reflected not only his diagnosis of the failings of younger leftists, but his retrospective judgment on his own youthful political folly. In 1899, he had castigated the “politically naive and morally not-very-elevated speculation on the gratitude of the masses,” in which he and his comrades in the Evangelical Social Congress had indulged. The failure of the masses to be suitably grateful provoked “disappointment and aimless inward rage” in Weber and other elite reformers; their vanity bruised, they withdrew from politics, leaving the “top political positions” to be seized by those who appealed only to power and force.<sup>75</sup> Weber’s writings may be most powerful as a critique of the “congenital folly” of “all ideologically oriented politics of *any* kind”<sup>76</sup>—a tendency from which he was not free, but which, at his best, he rose above.

### Weber’s “Ethic of Responsibility” as Ethos for Political Action

Against political romanticism and moral purism, Weber famously advocated an “ethic of responsibility.” This is, to repeat, not a purely consequentialist ethical theory; it emphasizes the *relationship* between actor and action, stressing the importance of the cultivation of a certain type of personality, marked by “maturity” and a certain kind of integrity, rather than merely looking to

outcomes. It recognizes that action that meets the standard of responsibility will often be unsuccessful, and that action that is both responsible and successful may still be tragic in involving violations of personal morality which properly leave regret. And it stresses the importance of cultivating responsibility as a disposition.

Weber's conception of "responsibility" is complex. It encompasses, first, a sense of responsibility *to* a cause, which leads one to act with a view to best serving that cause. This protects against both opportunism (which seeks power, without concern for the cause), and the "intoxication" of the ideologist whose devotion to his cause is based on the gratification it brings him, rather than the actual fate of the cause in the world. The politician-of-responsibility feels compelled to "take full responsibility" for both the fate that befalls the cause and the costs incurred in serving it. To sustain and live up to responsibility-to-a-cause requires both attachment ("hot passion") and distance ("cool judgment"). A sense of responsibility for what becomes of one's cause provides a bridge between these contrasting elements, harnessing the heat of commitment to motivate actors to exercise that judgment which is necessary to serve the cause well. The dispositions, motives, and consciously developed skills of passion, responsibility, and judgment, joined together and mutually restraining one another, are the qualities that are "pre-eminently decisive for a politician."<sup>77</sup>

This reflects Weber's view that what defines the politician of "vocation" is the *way* in which he engages in politics, and the underlying dispositions and self-understanding that this reflects. A sense of responsibility-to-a-cause is an expression of a broader disposition *to be* responsible. This disposition consists in maintaining, in Nick O'Donovan's words, a "*bearing towards* the result of action," marked by an "attitude of ownership";<sup>78</sup> and cultivating certain qualities of character and habits—including a practice of taking great care in attempting to foresee and control the consequences of one's actions. To be responsible is to strive to make realistic *judgments* about the probability that a certain course of action will achieve the ends invoked to justify it. It also means *taking responsibility*, both for one's judgments (which means acknowledging when these have been mistaken) and for the consequences of one's actions (which means accepting blame). This requires an ability to "maintain one's inner composure and calm," and a quality of distance "from things and people"—including from *oneself*. A politician should be able to step back from his own commitments and ambitions, to see his own fate within a broader perspective. Such "inner *distance and reserve*" in one's "personal bearing" was

both crucial to serving a cause, and the “prerequisite for all personal dignity.”<sup>79</sup>

Weber saw in a disposition of responsibility the antidote to the vices that particularly irked him in contemporary politics: recklessness, self-righteousness, and vanity. The conviction-politician, Weber charged, “holds the world, not the doer, responsible” for the “evil consequences” of his actions. This leads him to be irresponsible both in action—to act without due consideration of the likely outcomes of his action; and in his *affect*—to not *feel* a sense of responsibility for the negative consequences of his actions. This is politically dangerous and ethically vicious. It encourages folly, prevents learning from mistakes, and fosters an intolerant, uncharitable attitude toward others. He who lives according to an ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, will recognize that he has no “right” to assume or demand perfection from others, and will “not feel that he can shuffle off the consequences of his own action . . . and place them on the shoulders of others.” He is not concerned with always being seen to be in the right; he is concerned instead with rightly judging his own actions.<sup>80</sup>

As several interpreters have noted, the ethics of conviction and responsibility are linked to Weber’s “ideal types” of purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and value rationality (*Wertrationalität*).<sup>81</sup> “Value rationality” identifies goals as worth pursuing purely for their own sake; the agent guided by value rationality acts out of “conviction,” in accordance with unconditional imperatives.<sup>82</sup> Value rationality thus appears to correspond to the ethic of conviction; if a similar correspondence holds for purposive rationality and the ethic of responsibility, what light does this shine on Weber’s conception of political ethics?

It may appear to commit Weber to a picture of politics as pure technique, insofar as purposive rationality, on a common understanding, does not allow one to determine which ends to pursue; it merely judges the efficacy of “certain available means” for achieving a given end. But Weber’s conception of “purposive rationality” consists of more than this. It also involves weighing “the end, the means, and the secondary results,” considering not only “alternative means to the end” and the “relations of the end to the secondary consequences,” but also “the *relative importance of different possible ends*.” Such consideration allows agents to answer the question “what will the attainment of a desired end ‘cost’ in terms of the predictable loss of other values?” In “the vast majority of cases,” there will be such “costs” to effective action; thus, “weighing . . . the goal in terms of the incidental consequences of the action which realizes it cannot be omitted from the deliberation of persons who act with *a sense of responsibility*.”

Purposive rationality makes it possible to “indirectly criticize” certain ends as “meaningless” (because present conditions make its attainment predictably impossible), or too costly to other values.<sup>83</sup> Purposive rationality can thus guide decisions about what ends to pursue, as well as how to pursue them. Its difference from value rationality rests in its ability to discern the potential conflicts between values, and reckon with the need to choose between them.<sup>84</sup>

Yet Weber’s ethic of responsibility does not perfectly correspond to the model of purposive rationality. It displays a tension, which continued to mark tempered liberalism, between affirmation of a prosaic, “realist” ethos of sobriety, matter-of-factness, prudence, and moderation;<sup>85</sup> and attraction to a heroic ethos of honor, integrity, and chivalry—ideals that guided Weber’s own judgments and conduct. Honor for Weber consisted in a “minimal sense of shame and dignity which cannot be violated without punishment.”<sup>86</sup> Integrity was a matter of identifying with, and assuming responsibility for, one’s actions—and striving to be clear about what those actions demanded, and cost. A sense of *chivalry* mandates respect for opponents, and concern for anyone over whom one has an advantage of power or status. This attitude—expressed in courtesy (not condescension) and solicitude, and a willingness to stand up for victims of injustice or callousness—also involved certain evaluative attitudes, which stood opposed to the brutal power worship that so revolted Weber in his own society. Chivalry both condemns brutality and insists that mere brute power is nothing to be admired. A sense of chivalry could support commitment to democratic pluralism, insofar as the former encouraged, and the latter depended on, respect for opponents.

Weber’s own sense of chivalry was linked to his liberalism, which was driven by a persistent concern for underdogs, and an “ethical imperative which ordered him to protect the adversary.”<sup>87</sup> His cousin noted that Weber, aged twenty, “always took the side of the weak and oppressed”; in doing so, he showed that he could “step outside himself and forget his assumed air of equanimity”—a case of distance-from-self, passion, and chivalry being bound together. Years later, Karl Löwith recalled Weber’s “feeling of chivalry and his well-developed sense of justice”; Karl Jaspers recalled that during the war Weber “showed a chivalrous concern for every prisoner who was accessible to him and did not hesitate to oppose the then prevailing nationalistic instincts, hatred and spy phobia. He never ceased to regard every man as a man, endowed with inalienable rights.”<sup>88</sup> His commitment to chivalry also inspired Weber’s attacks on wartime chauvinism: “Abusing the enemy? That does not win wars . . . this wave of abuse, which grows in intensity the further its authors

are from the trenches, is hardly worthy of a proud nation.”<sup>89</sup> Weber was perhaps thinking of such chauvinism when in “Politics as a Vocation” he attacked the “profoundly unchivalrous attitude” of “ignoble self-righteousness.”<sup>90</sup>

Another virtue in Weber’s “heroic” ethic was the ability to withstand adversity. This self-control—the product of an “ascetic” process of cultivating a “methodical direction of the entire pattern of life”—was for Weber the definitive quality of the modern “man of vocation”; it made possible both the stolidly acquisitive bourgeois and a new model of hero marked by strong “nerves,” able to calmly withstand the fury of opponents and the vicissitudes of fate.<sup>91</sup> Self-discipline was also necessary to achieve the “matter-of-factness” (*Sachlichkeit*) required by politics.<sup>92</sup> Matter-of-factness involves the ability to see things clearly, as they are—and to recognize the degree to which we must remain uncertain about our perceptions. Such “matter-of-factness” was for Weber tied to a particular orientation to political time: the politician who feels a sense of responsibility to and for his country will “think in terms of the next two or three generations” and not further; for him, questions that the visionary regards as “ephemeral” will appear crucial.<sup>93</sup> (As we shall see, here Weber anticipated later “tempered liberals.”) Matter-of-factness was also associated by Weber with a practice of unsparing “self-scrutiny” and a *tone* of “sombre gravity.”<sup>94</sup> Finally, matter-of-factness had political valence: the “matter-of-fact view of things” was characteristic of “social reformist liberalism.”<sup>95</sup>

Dispositions of honor, chivalry, and integrity were necessary to save self-discipline and matter-of-factness from coagulating into the mechanistic ethos of the “men of order”; self-discipline was necessary to save noble sentiments from becoming political romanticism. Together these qualities fostered *political maturity*—a crucial normative standard for Weber, who defined it as consisting in “the trained ability to look at the realities of life with an unsparing gaze, to bear these realities and be a match for them inwardly.” Only such a capacity would allow political actors to avoid illusion—or despairing disillusion: for politics demanded a “steadfastness of heart which can withstand even the defeat of all hopes.” Only he who can “remain unbroken when the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it” is fit for politics, which requires the “slow, strong drilling through hard boards.”<sup>96</sup> This was an austere demanding ideal; Weber did not expect many to be able to meet the demands he set out. But only the cultivation of a sense of “matter-of-factness”—and of “that very prosaic moral ‘decency’ [*Anständigkeit*]” and “sense of shame,” the erosion of which had been “our most grievous loss” in the war—could restore “poise [*Haltung*]” to a political life that had

become dominated by “loathsome exhibitionism” and “mysticism.”<sup>97</sup> Those unable to meet these standards might still be worthy and noble; but they should pursue some other vocation than politics.

Approaching Weber’s two ethics as accounts of ethos rather than doctrine allows us to address some interpretive puzzles about their relationship to one another, and to other political positions. One is whether the two ethics are irreconcilably opposed; another is the question of Weber’s own attitude toward the ethic of conviction. On a common view, the two ethics embody opposed moral doctrines; and Weber is an advocate of the ethic of responsibility/consequentialism against the ethic of conviction/deontology. But Weber seems to contradict this view (and himself) toward the end of the lecture, asserting that “the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites” but (potentially) “additions to each other”; and only those who unite them are “*capable* of having a ‘vocation for politics.’” Indeed, to *wholly* lack an impulse of fidelity to conviction is to be “inwardly dead.” Weber did not seek to prescribe any one balance between the two ethics. But he did take a stance on the *quality* of politicians’ characters and inner “stance” when he wrote that when “conviction-politicians spring up all around, proclaiming, ‘The world is stupid and base, not I. Responsibility for the consequences does not fall on me but on the others, in whose service I work and whose stupidity or baseness I shall eradicate’, I ask what *inner weight* is behind this ethic of conviction.” In most cases, such people were “windbags,” “intoxicated with romantic sensations.” This was betrayed by their readiness to blame others and insist on their own righteousness. On the other hand, it was “profoundly moving” (*erschütternd*, which might also be translated as “shocking,” or “harrowing”) when a “mature person” who “feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other.’”<sup>98</sup> Fidelity to conviction is serious and worthy of respect *if* it is accompanied by a sense, both sober and scrupulous, of responsibility. For Weber, what mattered was not the maxim that guides action, but the attitude, outlook, and character of the actor.

Weber’s political ethics thus reveal a deep concern with the *character* of actors. Insofar as he *is* focused on consequences, the consequences in question are of two sorts: consequences for the values pursued by a political actor, and consequences for the actor’s own character, moral life, and relationship to himself, his values, and other people. These are not wholly separate, but neither are they in perfect harmony. Sometimes one will face a choice between doing

what will produce the best outcome for one's cause and doing what will allow one to live the best moral life. This conflict may arise *within* those who adhere to an ethic of responsibility, as well as between exponents of an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of conviction. Weber himself experienced this conflict in the tension between a scholarly ideal of uncompromising truthfulness and lucidity, and a concern with political efficacy understood in terms of service both to German national greatness and liberal ideals. For many of his younger colleagues and students, the conflict arose in confrontation with the ethical implications of their commitments to personal moral purity and radical politics. This confrontation made a deep impression on Weber himself; his complex ethical message, in turn, exerted a powerful but ambiguous influence on the radicals he influenced.

### From Purism to Ruthlessness: The Uneasy Bolshevism of György Lukács

When he delivered "Politics as a Vocation," Weber likely had in mind a former member of his Heidelberg circle who, by 1919, had embarked on radical politics: György Lukács (1885–1971). Beyond his relationship with Weber—which was deeply important to both men between their meeting in 1913, to Weber's death in 1920—Lukács's political and intellectual trajectory, from youthful moral purism to "grim pursuit of *Realpolitik*,"<sup>99</sup> encapsulates larger features of the moral and political imagination of his generation, which it throws into particularly stark relief.

In 1919, the newly declared Hungarian Soviet Republic was fighting for survival, not only against internal opponents, but against the armies of neighboring nations. Lukács was acting as People's Commissar for Education and Culture during the weekend and serving as a political commissar in the Hungarian Red Army on weekdays. The desperate struggle called, on occasion, for desperate actions. Lukács later recalled,

It was our job to defend Tiszafüred from the Rumanian attack, and we could have succeeded had there not been a Budapest battalion that simply fled . . . Thinking reasonably, it was not difficult to conclude that it was indispensable to set up a drum-head court-martial, condemn a few from the Budapest battalion to death and have them shot in the market place where the other two battalions stood, so that everybody should see it.<sup>100</sup>



Lukács duly had the unit assembled, and eight soldiers' names read out by the commanding officer. These eight were marched under guard to the outskirts of town; one escaped, one was pardoned, and the remaining six were shot.<sup>101</sup> Lukács spoke proudly of the incident to the end of his life.<sup>102</sup>

Lukács had traveled a long road to this point. Born the son of a wealthy Hungarian-Jewish banker (the future commissar Lukács was, ironically, a hereditary baron), but anguished by a sense of solitude, alienation, and meaninglessness and repulsed by the "inhumanity of individualistic, capitalist society,"<sup>103</sup> young Lukács condemned "relativist," individualistic bourgeois liberalism, constitutionalism, parliamentarianism, and "revisionist" social democracy as vulgar, unjust, and hypocritical: as he remarked, "All this individualism is just humbug; Stefan George is allowed to be a personality, but a policeman and coachman are not."<sup>104</sup> But it was not only injustice that repulsed Lukács, and like-minded members of his generation; they also recoiled from their liberal elders' ethos of tolerance.<sup>105</sup> Young Lukács was an absolutist, who in an early autobiographical work declared, "I can no longer bear the unclarity and dishonesty of everyday life"; he concluded the story by quoting the same passage from Revelations that Rosa Luxemburg would hurl at the reformist Karl Kautsky: "I know your Works, that you are neither cold nor warm; oh, if only you were cold or warm. Because you are lukewarm, however . . . I will spit you out of my mouth."<sup>106</sup>

From his earliest writings, Lukács was preoccupied with what would become known as "the problem of dirty hands." In 1911 he declared that life's greatest tragedy was that "it imposes evils on morally pure human beings . . . it is not possible to remain pure and still live."<sup>107</sup> In the wake of personal tragedy—the suicide of Irma Seidler, the woman he loved—Lukács rejected the ethic of duty he found dominant in his society and embraced an ethic of radical goodness. This, like the ethic of conviction, is defined by subjective intention or *desire*, and not the results this desire produces: "What does goodness care for consequences . . . goodness is divine . . . When goodness appears in us, paradise has become reality and the divinity is awakened in us."<sup>108</sup> Weber was familiar with Lukács's early ethical writings; it has been suggested that his two ethics are derived from Lukács.<sup>109</sup> To draw a direct analogy is, however, erroneous: *both* the "ethic of duty" and the "ethic of goodness" are absolutist ethics of conviction. But Lukács's conception of the "ethic of goodness" may have underlined for Weber the way in which "acosmic love" can foster political ruthlessness. On Lukács's account, goodness was "wild, terrible, blind, and adventurous" in pursuing the "absurd command" issued by "fate" "blindly,



rashly and fiercely to the end.” By subordinating his self (including his intellectual independence) to some higher purpose and sacrificing the personal purity of “clean-kept hands” in its service, the good man (or “saint”) attains a “higher purity” which can be sustained through “sin, deception and horror.”<sup>110</sup> The “ethic of goodness” thus anticipates the ethos of revolutionary militancy.

Aside from brief membership in a socialist student group in Budapest, young Lukács’s ethical yearnings did not (yet) translate into political action. Matters began to change with the declaration of war in August 1914. Horrified by the militarism exhibited by Weber and other German friends, Lukács regarded his day as, in Fichte’s words, “the age of absolute sinfulness,” from which the only way out was revolution.<sup>111</sup> *The Theory of the Novel* (1914–15) expressed Lukács’s despair and his utopianism; it set out the ethical vision that would drive his political commitments via a typology of the novel based on the hero’s responses to an alienating social world. The first two were “abstract idealism,” a quixotic rebellion in the name of the Ought; and the “romanticism of disillusionment”—a resigned retreat into passive contemplation. Dostoevsky suggested a third response: a utopian hope and striving for a future in which human beings would overcome interpersonal alienation to unite in a genuine, frictionless community.<sup>112</sup> There was a dark side to this bright vision: the way to paradise lay through violence. In “On Poverty of Spirit,” Lukács had already invoked Russian terrorism as exemplifying the ethic of goodness. The terrorist is an idealist who “in order to save his soul . . . is forced to sacrifice it. On the basis of a mystical ethic, he has to become a cruel *Realpolitiker*, and break the absolute commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”<sup>113</sup> Now, even more convinced of the evil of the times in which he lived, Lukács found in Dostoevsky a rationale for embracing political revolution.

In October 1918, Lukács found himself having to apply his ideas amid the upheaval of the (liberal) Hungarian revolution. Like many, he despaired at the power of “reactionary” forces, and the apparent impotence and hypocrisy of the liberals and social democrats. In contrast, the Communists offered a model of “decisive leadership, simple analysis, and above all hope for the future.”<sup>114</sup> While he was predisposed to embrace a radical path, Lukács’s tendency toward moral absolutism made him reluctant to accept “dirty hands”—a reluctance he defended in “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem,” published in December 1918.<sup>115</sup>

For Lukács, approaching Bolshevism as an *ethical* problem meant considering the relationship between the means it embraced in pursuing power, and the moral ends it affirmed. Was democracy simply a “tactical weapon” for

socialism, to be discarded when inconvenient? Or was it “so integral to socialism that it cannot be omitted”? On the one hand, to disavow the “old” means of coercion, and insist on “creating a new world with [the] new means” of genuine democracy risked failure in the face of reactionary violence, prolonging the wait for the new order. Furthermore, commitment to democratic means meant respecting the political rights of, and seeking cooperation with, elements who were fundamentally opposed to socialism—who could not be trusted. But a Communist putsch seemed to betray the essence of democracy: the replacement of compulsion by freedom as the basis for social order. The “emancipation of the proletariat” touted by Communists would invert, but not abolish, existing class domination (as a later joke ran, it would replace capitalism’s “exploitation of man by man” with its opposite). The rulers would change; domination would persist—and true democracy would remain unrealized.<sup>116</sup> Both the use of dictatorial means, and adherence to democratic ideals, thus appeared to involve “potentially terrifying sins.” The challenge was to find a political approach that could allow social democracy to further its goals, without “endangering the *purity*” of these goals. But it would be “extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prevent our deviation from the straight path of *conviction* becoming a self-serving act”; and the delay involved in taking this slower route threatened to undermine the moral “pathos” that animated socialism. “Bolshevism’s fascinating power” was that it offered an escape from “compromise.” Lukács felt the force of this power. But he also warned that Bolshevism posed “an insoluble ethical dilemma”: “can good be achieved through evil means, and freedom by tyranny?” Bolshevism was based on the “metaphysical assumption that good can issue from evil, that it is possible . . . to lie our way to the truth. This writer cannot share this faith.”<sup>117</sup>

At this point Lukács embraced the “sluggish, seemingly non-heroic” path of democracy, with its “profound demand for *responsibility*, and long struggles that instruct and educate”—very much the “slow boring of holes in hard boards” advocated by Weber. Indeed, he explicitly linked his insistence on moral integrity against Bolshevik *Realpolitik* to a rejection of an ethic of conviction. Through Bolshevism the individual could preserve the “apparent *purity of his conviction*”; whereas in democracy the individual must “consciously surrender his conviction.” Thus, Bolshevism is identified with a puristic ethic of conviction, combined with a lack of moral scruple regarding means; democracy is identified with an ethic of responsibility, which demands “only [!] superhuman self-abnegation and self-sacrifice from those who, consciously and honestly, persevere to the very end.”<sup>118</sup>

A language of self-discipline, self-abnegation, and self-sacrifice would continue to mark Lukács's political ethics: but his understanding of the direction in which these pointed changed rapidly. By the time "Bolshevism as a Moral Problem" was published, he had joined the Hungarian Communist Party. In a direct reversal, he now affirmed that (in the words of Lucien Goldmann) "a pact with the Devil [is] the only way which leads to God," that the "march of history" or "ruse of reason" would transform immediate evil into the "vehicle of progress which will bring about the good as a whole."<sup>119</sup>

This reversal was not wholly unforeseeable, in light of the arguments advanced in "On Poverty of Spirit." Lukács had temporarily convinced himself to embrace the compromises of coalition politics by casting democracy in heroic terms—as Weber would shortly do in "Politics as a Vocation." But, amidst a struggle between revolutionary and reactionary forces, adherence to democratic means could easily appear both *selfish* and *irresponsible*, while Bolshevism represented a responsible sacrifice of principle for the sake of *real* achievement. Innate intellectual radicalism and absolutism, reinforced by the temper of the times, drew Lukács to the confident, crusading *ethos* of Bolshevism. This ethos was embodied above all by Lenin, who represented an example of successful revolutionary leadership (and who came out of the Russian revolutionary-terrorist background by which Lukács was fascinated). Lukács also encountered it in Béla Kun, the Russian-chosen leader of the Hungarian Communists, whom he met in late 1918. Kun struck Lukács as a man "who *possesses the truth* . . . For the first time, I have met someone in whom Hegel's dialectic has become flesh and blood, someone who truly *lives out* that about which we only prattle."<sup>120</sup> Kun argued that if one wanted the revolution to be *humane*, one must exercise dictatorship with "the utmost firmness and vigor": a quick, brutal exercise of force was the best way to spare more people—and, more important perhaps, to spare the *right* people (the proletariat).<sup>121</sup> Faced with Kun's conviction—and the *charisma* to which it was linked—Lukács was converted to the position he had rejected in "Bolshevism as a Moral Problem."

In the essay "Tactics and Ethics" (written in early 1919, around the same time "Politics as a Vocation" was composed and delivered), the new convert to Bolshevism advanced both an argument for the epistemic superiority of the "science" of Marxism, and an *ethical* argument, in which both his early moral absolutism and the influence of Weber are apparent. Lukács now appeared to embrace a consequentialist view that identified morality with the effective pursuit of revolution.<sup>122</sup> But he also stressed the importance of the character

and consciousness of the revolutionary activist—declaring that “every activity,” no matter how quotidian, “*must be imbued with revolutionary spirit*” and that “[t]he individual’s seriousness and sense of responsibility constitute a moral standard for every deed.” There was a need for “moral transformation,” a “cleansing” of the spiritual corruptions of capitalism and individualism, through the cultivation of a “spirit of comradeship, true solidarity, and self-sacrifice,” which must govern everything the party did.<sup>123</sup>

At the heart of Lukács’s revolutionary ethics lay an extraordinarily rigorous conception of responsibility. Each individual was responsible *for* his action (or inaction), and *before* history. Any ethics worthy of the name rested on the “postulate” that the individual “must act as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world’s destiny.” Such a view placed great moral weight on individuals in the sense of treating their actions as extremely morally significant. (It placed far less moral weight on individuals in the sense of regarding their claims to respect or justice as significant.) Each individual also bore responsibility for all of the *consequences* (intended or not) of his choices. He who “opts” for communism bears “the same *individual* responsibility for each and every human being who dies for him in the struggle, as if he himself had killed them all.” The same logic applied to defenders of capitalism, who bore individual responsibility for “the destruction entailed in the new imperialist revanchist wars,” as well as for the future oppression that capitalism would inflict. *Everyone* was thus implicated in violence. But not all forms of guilt were equal. The individual, choosing between the guilt of participation in violence and the guilt of failing to act to finally end violence, makes the correct choice “when he sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea”—sacrifices “not only of his life, but also of his purity, his morals, his very soul.”<sup>124</sup> A sense of blood-drenched guilt thus became a badge of moral honor; the consciousness of having committed a crime was itself a sign of sanctity. As Commissar Lukács told his troops, “terror and bloodshed are a moral duty, or, more plainly, our virtue.”<sup>125</sup> Thus, insistence on the evil of murder was transmuted into a rationale for murder.

The self-sacrifice demanded by Lukács’s revolutionary ethics included an abandonment of ethical scruples for the sake of service to a larger moral cause. This ethos of self-abnegation encouraged acceptance of cruel injustices. Meeting Stephen Spender in Switzerland in 1946, Lukács and his second wife asked the British poet why he had abandoned Communism. Spender replied that he objected to the concentration camps. To this Gertrud Lukács replied, “Oh, we were always so grateful when our friends were sent to the re-education camps.” Her son had recently returned from the Gulag, his fingers frostbitten.<sup>126</sup>

Lukács's arrival at this point reflected not only his ethics, but a philosophy of history that perceived the present as a decisive moment. With history hurtling forward at increased speed, a firm hand was needed at the wheel: the Communist Party—the embodiment of the ethical will of the proletariat—must guard its ideological purity against “corruption and compromise.” Such purity was necessary, not only to maintain a focused, unified course of political action, but to effect inward transformation—to tear away the “veils that cloud the consciousness of the individual in capitalist society.” This required “engaging the whole personality. Only when action within a community becomes the central personal concern of everyone involved will it be possible to abolish the split between rights and duties, the organizational form of man's separation from his own socialization and his fragmentation at the hands of the social forces that control him.”<sup>127</sup> Politics must be recognized as “a matter touching directly upon the whole life of every human being . . . the starting-point for everyone concerning every question is *tua res agitur*, it's your business.”<sup>128</sup> True freedom could be realized only in such a “democratic” society, in which politics was a matter not of rule, but of action in concert with others, undertaken in a spirit of solidarity. Communist society would be “the first society in the history of mankind” to take (true) freedom seriously and make it a reality. This meant the ultimate disappearance of bourgeois freedom—the freedom “of the egoist, of the man who cuts himself off from others.” To achieve a *truly* free society required the destruction of this liberal ideal of freedom through the “conscious subordination of the self to that collective will that is destined to bring real freedom into being”—that is, the Party. In the period of revolutionary change, freedom must be subordinated to the mission of revolution. Rosa Luxemburg's insistence, against Bolshevik policy, that “Freedom is always freedom for the one who thinks differently,” was dangerously deluded. Respecting such freedom meant protecting “*enemies of the revolution*,” who, by doubting Bolshevism's doctrine, denied its legitimacy, and endangered the whole revolutionary project—which required not merely a seizure of power, but a conquest of the mind.<sup>129</sup> Lukács thus embraced a *Manichean* perception of contemporary politics as a life-and-death struggle between implacably opposed forces of good and evil. In such mortal struggle, anything that weakened or hampered socialism (such as independent-minded, ethical criticism) aided the forces of reaction.

The results of this outlook are evident in Lukács's response to Stalinism. Lukács spent the 1920s deeply involved in the Hungarian Communist Party-in-exile. In 1930 he was called to Moscow, where he would remain until the

end of World War II. With the exception of a few months spent in the infamous Lubyanka prison, he largely avoided Stalin's purges, but spent most of this period in enforced seclusion from politics. The details of his career throughout the worst years of Stalinism remain obscure. Many (including Brecht) came to regard Lukács as a "hack" serving a Stalinist "clique"; and he did his best to cultivate powerful friends and disassociate himself from those who fell from favor.<sup>130</sup> The once idealistic, persistently abstruse Lukács was a survivor. After the war he returned to Hungary; he served as a minister in Imre Nagy's short-lived revolutionary government but was able to escape execution following the Soviet invasion and crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, and renounced his heretical views. He spent the last decades of his life in Hungary, without official position but with a considerable intellectual following—many of whom would become leading dissidents.

These self-abasements and betrayals were demanded by simple self-preservation. But Lukács (who showed remarkable physical courage during the Hungarian Revolution) offered a different rationale. Even though he recognized the evil effects of the purges, he felt that to voice his opposition was not only a "physical impossibility" but a "moral one." When the Soviet Union faced a "life-and-death struggle" with fascism, "a convinced communist could not but say: 'Right or wrong, my party.'" <sup>131</sup> We should take seriously the sincerity of Lukács's explanation—and sympathize with the reasons behind it, even if we condemn his choices. Lukács's sometimes slavish fidelity to Communism, and intolerant denunciations of deviant ideas and sentiments, reflect an effort to avoid falling into despair in the face of an evil that threatened his world and his hopes. The fight against brutal reaction was paramount; the need to support the Communist Party—which appeared to him the only adequate vehicle for this fight—justified any degree of self-abnegation and dishonesty.

His picture of an absolutely good and obligatory cause, and an absolutely evil enemy, was a recipe for ruthless "realism," which Lukács embraced—albeit with qualifications (or equivocations). He praised Lenin's "realistic toughness"<sup>132</sup> and Hegel's "splendid realism,"<sup>133</sup> and attacked "Romantic Utopianism, ideological exaggeration and the crusading spirit."<sup>134</sup> But, in the same period (1922) he also proclaimed the superiority of utopian revolt over the "spirit of compromise and philistinism."<sup>135</sup> A few years later, he identified Hegel's "realism, his rejection of all forms of Utopia" as a "limitation," which fostered an increasingly reactionary position. In the same essay, however, he attacked Moses Hess as an "ethical Utopian," deluded by "moralistic idealism."<sup>136</sup> In the same year he attacked Toller for "abstract and romantic utopianism,"<sup>137</sup> which he contrasted



with Lenin's "exemplary attitude to reality," adding that the aim of Lenin's "real-politik" was "the final elimination of utopianism."<sup>138</sup> Lenin recognized that it was "necessary for the proletariat to use all the means at its disposal to keep the power of the state in its own hands under all circumstances." For, "the more ruthless" the proletariat was, "the greater the victory."<sup>139</sup>

Lukács's convoluted case—his embrace of self-abnegating compromise of ideals and ruthless betrayal of friends, in the pursuit of a stubbornly retained utopian ideal—highlights the link between the absolute ethic of goodness and revolutionary ruthlessness identified by Weber in "Politics as a Vocation." He also reveals the tenuousness of the link between Weber's own ethical stance and the defense of liberalism. Lukács's initial ethical critique of Communism combined a seemingly "panmoralistic" denial that good could come of evil, and an emphasis on responsibility and moderation. Once he turned to Communism, he acknowledged that—as Weber insisted—"action that springs from the purest ethical source can, from a tactical point of view, be completely mistaken." At this point, he also stressed the *responsibility* of the individual to act *as if* his actions would contribute to the realization of the ultimate outcome of historical struggle, even if this could not be known.<sup>140</sup> His embrace of Communism deployed arguments close to Weber's own—and showed how an attempt to reconcile ethical integrity with political responsibility and "realism," or to bestow meaning and unity on life through the affirmation of a "cause," could foster a politics very different from that endorsed by Weber. But while he drew on arguments and ideas from his teacher, he synthesized them with, or through, an intellectual disposition very different from the soberly resigned ethos to which Weber was dedicated.

Weber himself sought to dissuade Lukács from the path of Communist militancy, by appealing both to the disposition of realism (about not only external events and possibilities, but one's self) and the idea of a "calling." Following the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Weber wrote to Lukács seeking to explain why he thought his younger friend grievously misguided. First, the "experiments" of Communism "*can* only have and will have the consequence of discrediting socialism for the coming 100 years." Beyond that, there was the question of Lukács's own calling. "Understandably," Lukács claimed the "sole right to decide about that." And yet, "whenever I think of *what* the present (since 1918) political goings-on cost us in terms of *unquestionably* valuable people, regardless of the 'direction' of their choice . . . I cannot help feeling bitter about this senseless fate," in which Lukács was a fugitive, and "everything will be reactionary for decades to come."<sup>141</sup>

By that point, Lukács was deaf to such arguments. After his conversion to Communism, he wrote to Marianne Weber that any further contact with Weber could only end in enmity.<sup>142</sup> While he movingly expressed sorrow over Weber's death,<sup>143</sup> his public career bore out this analysis. During World War II, he would attack Weber, among other exemplars of German "humanism," for "preparing the ground for German barbarism." This was not their intent; but "In history . . . it is not the human intent which is decisive but the objective results."<sup>144</sup> One of the targets of Weber's advocacy of an ethic of responsibility thus invoked the criterion of responsibility-for-results to condemn Weber.

## Conclusion

The juxtaposition of Lukács and Weber allows us to make better sense of the moral terrain of twentieth-century politics, on which subsequent critics and defenders of liberalism would continue to battle. Both men's responses to the political crises of their day grew from the soil of the German philosophical tradition, fertilized by the "Machiavellian" tradition of *Realpolitik*, and the moral absolutism of Russian thinkers and revolutionaries. Both were preoccupied with "ethical" concerns—questions of political ethics, and the role of character or ethos. In confronting these questions, each was simultaneously drawn to the poles of moral purism and political realism. They each sought to work out a personal response to the conflicting moral demands and intuitions by which they were assailed; in doing so, they both articulated *ascetic* ethics that stressed discipline, sacrifice, and "hardness." Yet the differences in their aspirations, temperaments, and ethics proved decisive. Lukács sought the creation or restoration of a harmonious whole; Weber accepted, even affirmed, division and conflict. Weber sought a way to preserve individual freedom and integrity within an irrational yet rationalizing world; Lukács was ready to sacrifice his own intellectual freedom and integrity in order to overcome the alienation of the self from the world.<sup>145</sup> In the process, he inflicted a grievous alienation on himself. Moved by idealistic moral impulse, he embraced ruthlessness; inspired by a dream of freedom and egalitarian harmony, he justified hierarchic discipline and oppression; driven by a questioning, individual intelligence, he forced himself into a structure—a "steely casing"—of dogma.

Weber's own approach was not free from illiberal tendencies. His insistence that politicians must be "fighters" for a cause can foster extremist bellicosity. The political ethos that he articulated may reinforce the very tendencies that it was designed to resist, by presenting so noble and demanding a picture of



the genuine politician. Those who accept this ideal may despair of living up to it—and so resign themselves to political mediocrity, or renounce political action altogether. They will also be likely to judge actual politicians wanting in relation to this inspiring model—thus reinforcing cynicism about actually existing politics. Weber's own frustrated withdrawal from politics hardly inspires confidence in the ability of his political ethic to effectively motivate and guide sustained political engagement.<sup>146</sup> Yet, for all of his flirtation with forms of extremism and intoxication, Weber resisted the sort of leap that Lukács took: he sought to maintain the poise and distance he identified as necessary for politics—as well as that freedom of intellect from doctrine that he identified as crucial to the vocation of the intellectual.

Weber's example was limited in how far it could serve as a model or guide for later “tempered liberals”—and not only because his own commitment to liberalism was ambiguous. Unlike them, Weber was not confronted by the problem of totalitarianism: a compound of ideological extremism, charismatic leadership, ecstatic mass movement, and unfettered bureaucracy.<sup>147</sup> His political concerns were significantly different from theirs; if his sensibility was more attuned to the “demonic” dimension of life than theirs, it was perhaps because he had not seen human existence rendered as hellish as they had. Nevertheless, Weber did anticipate later tempered liberals in his concern with defending individuality and freedom in the face of technocratic tendencies; his focus on individual character as both a means and goal of politics; and his articulation of an ethos in which passion, commitment, and conviction were combined with a sober distance and realism, a freedom from illusion, and independence of dogma.

It was, indeed, Weber's combination of a somber estimation of the challenges confronting liberalism with dedication to championing liberal values in spite of all, that made him an inspiring exemplar of ethical rectitude for some of his contemporaries. As Karl Löwith attested:

The acuteness of the questions he posed corresponded with his refusal to offer any cheap solutions. He tore down . . . the veils from desirable objects, yet everyone . . . sensed that the heart of this clear-thinking intellect was profoundly humane. After the innumerable revolutionary speeches by the literary activists, Weber's words were like a salvation.<sup>148</sup>

For some, the “tearing down of all the veils”—belief in progress, in natural law, in the harmony of personal morality and politics—leaves liberalism itself exposed and vulnerable. But Weber's insistence on the contingency and

fragility of liberalism is only a *normative* problem from the perspective of an ethic of historical necessity (or success), which identifies a position's normative validity with its having a guarantee of "winning out" in history; or an ethic of normative necessity, which identifies validity with a position's ability to compel assent through reason. Weber rejected both; this rejection was central to his own revision of liberalism. If liberals sloughed off the elements within liberal thought that reflected an ethic of normative necessity and an ethic of success, they could fortify their commitments—and themselves—for the hard, uncertain struggle ahead. To look for guarantees reflected inner weakness. Liberals should exemplify, as well as advocate, a dignified and free life, by affirming and defending principles without guarantees, devoting their lives to values that could not be demonstrated as rationally necessary and whose ultimate triumph was in doubt.

Whether, had he lived longer, Weber would have shared the moral responses of his liberal-humanist admirers cannot be known. But that he may have done so is suggested by an incident from 1918. Weber was discussing the new Soviet regime in a Viennese cafe with Joseph Schumpeter and the banker and political economist Felix Somary. According to Somary's recollections, Schumpeter

gleefully declared that socialism . . . now had to prove its viability. Weber vehemently countered that trying socialism in Russia, given the country's level of development, was basically a crime and would end in catastrophe. . . . Schumpeter coolly replied that this might well be, but that Russia would constitute a "nice laboratory." Weber exploded: "A laboratory with heaps of human corpses." Schumpeter pointed out: "That's what every anatomy lab is." The exchange grew . . . more heated, Weber became louder, Schumpeter more sarcastic, until Weber finally jumped up, exclaiming, "This is unbearable!" and stormed out. . . . Schumpeter wondered aloud how "anyone could yell like this in a coffeehouse."<sup>149</sup>

Both Schumpeter's cold objectivity, and a far warmer faith in totalitarian social engineering, would have wide appeal in the decades that followed. In his passionate reaction of moral protest, as well as in his advocacy of a sober ethic of responsibility that would stand against the moral superficiality of both clinical and chiliastic approaches to politics, Weber stands as the first of a series of voices of liberal dissent. His somber, even tragic, political vision anticipates that of later thinkers who would re-cast liberalism for the dark times of the twentieth century, that age of both "icy darkness," and crematory fires.

# 3

## A Just Man

### ALBERT CAMUS AND THE SEARCH FOR A DECENT HEROISM

We know that man's salvation may well be impossible, yet we say that this is no reason to stop trying. . . . only one thing is left to try, and that is the plain middle course of disillusioned decency, scrupulous fairness, and steadfast support for human dignity.<sup>1</sup>

We are defending not a position but an ethos.<sup>2</sup>

NEITHER WEBER's counsel of resigned sobriety, nor Lukács's surrender of conscience to political necessity and historical faith, give moral scrupulousness in politics its due. When we are confronted by drastic immorality—cruelty, tyranny, rampant corruption—and the despair and capitulation that these inspire, a degree of robust moral intransigence may be a necessary inspiration. But how can righteous revolt—the indignant rejection of injustice and oppression in the name of justice and freedom—remain moderate and humane, and not give rise to a new fanaticism? How can a stance of moral clarity accommodate complexity and ambivalence? How can idealistic integrity avoid political impotence, or naïve innocence?

These questions are posed by the life and work of Albert Camus (1914–1960). Camus's political engagements show what it means to take political morality seriously, and what is required to live up to its demands honestly. He expounded an ethic of modest heroism, and exhibited a sensibility marked by deep severity with himself, which gave his pronouncements a particular moral force (an example of Aristotle's conception of ethos as a means to rhetorical authority). In the view of his friend-turned-opponent Jean-Paul Sartre,

“through the obstinacy of his refusals, he reaffirmed the existence of moral fact within the heart of our era and against the Machiavellians, against the golden calf of realism.”<sup>3</sup> But Camus was sharply aware of the dangers of the extreme to which he was himself drawn—a longing for purity and heroism born of disgust with politics-as-usual. How could personal ideals of heroism, justness, even saintliness, provide guidance for how to live, and act politically? How could they avoid becoming tyrannical and cruel? These were the questions that agitated and drove Camus’s political thought.

### Liberalism and the Search for a “Style of Life”

Although he sometimes referred to himself as a liberal,<sup>4</sup> Camus’s political allegiances do not comfortably conform to conventional liberalism. To describe Camus as “deeply anti-liberal”<sup>5</sup> goes too far. But he was strongly influenced by the strain of French libertarian or anarchist socialism, stretching from Proudhon to Simone Weil, which was hostile to both the liberal state and any sort of moral compromise.<sup>6</sup> He shared much of the interwar critique of liberalism, attacking the corruption and moral mediocrity of interwar France’s political culture, which he identified with parliamentary politics.<sup>7</sup> He charged the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie with discrediting liberal principles by its “essential corruption and disheartening hypocrisy,” and expressed sympathy with those “rebels” who longed for escape from “the world of shopkeepers and compromise”—that is, the world of liberalism.<sup>8</sup> His writings consistently depict bourgeois society and its stand-ins as petty, irresponsible, indifferent to suffering, and oblivious to danger.

Yet Camus could separate liberalism’s seminal insights from its decayed adherents. Drawing on the insights of Constant and Tocqueville,<sup>9</sup> he came to embrace a liberal conception of the *task* of politics as “arranging everyone’s affairs so that each will have the leisure and the freedom to pursue” the search for meaning.<sup>10</sup> This could best be achieved by combining “a collectivist [socialist] economy and a liberal politics,” which could reconcile “justice and freedom.”<sup>11</sup> While “in the face of the prolonged injustice of bourgeois society” the temptation to sacrifice liberal freedoms in pursuit of justice was great, it was nevertheless wrong. Liberty was a crucial component of a decent life for anyone (including the poor); it was also a necessary condition for the pursuit of justice. It was foolish to think that “slaves could ever hope to achieve justice”: only the preservation of liberty made it possible to “denounce, hence to correct” injustices. Camus’s was a strongly social-democratic liberalism, which

appealed to solidarity and civic responsibility and championed the active exercise of political freedoms. But it remained liberalism—a vision of politics defined by the limitation of power and the protection of rights.<sup>12</sup>

Camus's politics were, however, defined not by a theory or program, but an ethos; he sought not an ideology, but "a style of life," an "attitude," and "spirit." This search reflected both his recognition, born of hard political experience, that good principles are "sometimes compromised by the way in which they are applied"; and a lifelong awareness of the importance of *style*, understood as a "whole sensibility," a "way of feeling" that "shows itself in the most widely differing fields."<sup>13</sup> This was no mere aestheticism. The style we cultivate has implications for how we conduct our lives, including our politics. Some styles of speech and thought could foster ruthlessness and moral blindness; on the other hand, cultivating the right tone might be able to expose, and thus dispel, the delusions that deranged political life.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Camus identified the project of *Combat*—the underground Resistance newspaper he helped to write and edit—as the cultivation of "a certain tone," "method," and "manner of speaking" marked by "clear language and unambiguous political ethics," modesty, and self-examination.<sup>15</sup> He and his fellow editors were "*defending not a position but an ethos*," the cultivation of which required a rigorous practice of "stubborn clinging to a certain tone" and "a certain constancy of soul."<sup>16</sup> This ethical project combined modesty and ambition. Rejecting theoretical absolutes, it retained an ambition toward moral transformation. Both the tension it reveals between moral ardor and suspicion of grandiosity, and the ambivalence of Camus's political stance, stemmed from his youth, and persisted throughout his public career.

## The Lure of Extremity and the Heroism of Doubt: Rebellion, War, and Resistance

Camus's perspective reflected a childhood of poverty, far removed from the background of most "tempered liberals." This gave his politics a distinctive tone of indignation, which theirs often lacked. His awareness of injustice was, furthermore, combined with a proud defiance and "uncontrolled appetite for life," which led him to embrace "heroic values."<sup>17</sup> A combination of heroic aspirations and awareness of the acute injustices of capitalism and colonialism drove Camus toward radical politics. So did the rise of fascism, culminating in the Spanish Civil War, which he followed passionately, and which taught his

generation the tragic lesson that “one can be right and still be beaten, that force can overcome spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own recompense.”<sup>18</sup> Camus’s indignation—now hopeful, now despairing—drove him, as it did many of his generation, to join the Communist Party. His decision reflected commitment not to Marxist theory, but to an ideal of revolutionary “asceticism.” In a world “shaped by men without ideals and without greatness,” the urgent political task was not so much to seize the means of production as to “create a new man within ourselves.”<sup>19</sup>

Camus nevertheless had doubts about joining the Party. He had already identified failings in Marxism that he would later attack: “the illusion of progress, class struggle, and historical materialism interpreted as a kind of finality,” and a concern with “the happiness . . . of the working class alone.” He ultimately concluded that it was “better to live with” the Communists than to repudiate them. Yet as an individualist who prized intellectual independence, personal honor, and decency above the demands of revolutionary *realpolitik*, Camus could not last long in the Party.<sup>20</sup> He was expelled in 1937 for his support of the nationalist Algerian People’s Party (the Communist line having shifted from supporting Algerian independence to opposing it as “premature”<sup>21</sup>). Camus’s later recounting of the incident reveals how personal ethics shaped his politics, and the ethical categories that mattered to him. He had been tasked by the Party with recruiting Arab militants; in the process those militants, “whose comportment and loyalty I admired, became my friends.” When they were rounded up, and their party dissolved, those of his erstwhile recruits who had escaped came and asked him whether he would remain silent in the face of such “infamy.” Fifteen years later, the meeting remained “imprinted in my mind; I still remember that I was shaking as they spoke to me; I was ashamed; *I did what was necessary*,”<sup>22</sup> and quit the Party.

At the same time, Camus’s innate modesty and growing skepticism made him distrust absolute moral claims. Passionately indignant at injustice, he struggled with the idea of justice: “Surely I’ve never claimed to be a just man. I’ve only said that we should try to be just, and also that such an ambition involves suffering and unhappiness.”<sup>23</sup> These doubts reflected Camus’s philosophical preoccupations, particularly the influence of Nietzsche, which, combined with his discovery in 1930 that he had tuberculosis and thus was in constant danger of premature death, bred in him an awareness of “the absurd.” For Camus, experience of “the absurd” arises from the confrontation between our longing to discover a source of meaning and values within the world itself; and the realization that no such meaning or values are given or guaranteed by

existence. This creates a crisis for our sense of *justice*—both because it undermines any sense of an objective, eternal moral standard; and because the chasm between what we naturally seek and what we can achieve strikes us as deeply unjust.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1930s Camus was preoccupied with the *nihilistic* response to the absurd: the negation of existing moral standards and social orders, and the rejection of all limits to freedom, understood as unbridled, amoral self-assertion.<sup>25</sup> Having addressed the personal experience of “the absurd” in *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he began to explore its *political* consequences in his play *Caligula*, whose titular protagonist combines rebellion against injustice, absurdity, and dishonesty with intellectual extremism and arrogance. He claims absolute power because he knows what others “need and haven’t got. They’re without understanding and they need a teacher.” Seeing “nothing but his own idea,” denying all other values, and embracing a “ruthless logic that crushes out human lives,” he rejects all distinctions and limits.<sup>26</sup>

What alternative exists, if one is horrified by Caligula (as Camus came to be<sup>27</sup>), but unable to accept conventional denials of absurdity? The play offers suggestions through Caligula’s foils, Scipio and Cherea. The former, “a bold young moralist,” represents ethical purity and humility, which (in some versions of the play) leave him unable to *act*.<sup>28</sup> It is Cherea who offers a political alternative to Caligula’s nihilism. Against Scipio’s single-mindedness for good, and Caligula’s for evil, Cherea is aware of multiple perspectives, without being paralyzed by ambivalence. In a world of frenzied figures, he is described as “composed as usual.” This self-discipline reflects an appreciation of the importance of the *quality* of personal conduct, which should be marked by “courage and deliberation.” Cherea modestly presents himself as “quite an ordinary sort of man,” with “no taste” for Caligula’s “subtleties.” But this is not the whole story. He admits that there are times when he wishes to be free of conventions, morality, the claims of others. But he judges these “passing fancies” of “no great importance.”<sup>29</sup> Cherea realizes that he cannot logically refute Caligula or establish absolute standards of good and evil. But he does believe that he can maintain what Camus would later term a *relative ethic*, which holds that “some actions are—shall I say?—more praiseworthy [*plus belles*, ‘more beautiful’] than others.” Similarly, he does not assert that Caligula is *wrong* in his views, but merely that he is “noxious and cruel, vain and selfish”; in short, “you’re pernicious, and you’ve got to go.”<sup>30</sup> He is a superior soul who rejects the sense of superiority, and masters his moments of misanthropy. Recognizing the absurd, he sides with ordinary people who don’t want to lose everything they



have and hope for. This may be seen as self-indulgent evasion of the hard truth. In fact, it is an affirmation of life, which cannot survive absolute logic. In the face of Cherea's opposition, even Caligula must recognize the "courage" and "simple faith of men who ask to be happy."<sup>31</sup>

*Caligula* reflects Camus's preoccupation not only with the absurd, but with ideas of guilt, innocence, and heroism; his longing for purity, and his affirmation of complexity. His developing understanding of these concepts, and their political import, was shaped by his experience as a journalist in the Resistance under the Nazi occupation, and expressed in his stirring statement of the Resistance's ethos, "Letters to a German Friend." The "Letters" were a hard-won affirmation of morality in the face of its violation. They asserted individual responsibility, solidarity, and hope against the "debased conception of power" and "passion for dishonor" of "realism."<sup>32</sup> This realism involved three elements. First, it denied any standard other than the successful imposition of the will, generally through brute force. Second, it held that, because complicity with violence is inescapable in politics, violence is free of moral taint. Every course of action is equally impure and discreditable—and thus, in the end, none are. The veneration of success as normative and the legitimization of violence as normal together foster the third element of realism: rejection of all moral limits on political action.<sup>33</sup> For Camus, such "realism" reflected both an ignoble surrender to force, and a cruel contempt for human dignity. Thus, he condemned the German occupiers whose tortures aimed to degrade their victims so as "to wipe out anything that isn't vile, anything that isn't cowardly"—to reduce everyone to their own moral level. If they succeeded, "they breathed a little easier. They thought, We're all alike, these people won't be thumbing their noses at us anymore. They were happy to have transformed their silent judges into accomplices of their own degradation."<sup>34</sup> The nobility of the *résistants*, their willingness to sacrifice everything—safety, peace, love, life—for the sake of ethical commitment, gave the lie to this ethic of brutality.

Camus nevertheless addressed his letters to a German *friend*, with whom he shared a disgust with the political status quo, and a sense of existential and ethical vertigo, typical of their generation, which was divided into two very different groups of cynics. The first followed the path of Caligula: rejecting "any human or divine code" in favor of the law of the jungle, according to which "the only pursuit for the individual was the adventure of power and his only morality, the realism of conquests."<sup>35</sup> Camus spoke for the other tendency, of those who had to "overcome" their doubts about their own country and values. The "Letters" affirm both the doubts, and the overcoming. Camus



defends the scruples that his “friend” derides. It is a point of pride that he and his comrades preferred to risk disorder, doubt, and even defeat, rather than run the risk of injustice: for they recognized that moral confidence requires questioning, and victory requires suffering. As he later wrote: “We are wary of judges who never have doubts and of heroes who never have the shakes.”<sup>36</sup> Their fight was harder—but morally sounder—because of their scruples regarding violence: “it is not much to be able to do violence when you have been simply preparing for it for years and when violence is more natural to you than thinking.” On the other hand, “It is a great deal to fight while despising war, to accept losing everything, while still preferring happiness, to face destruction while cherishing the idea of a higher civilization.” Having overcome aversion to violence, the Resistance also had to conquer “the temptation of hatred.” They had to be able to act ruthlessly, without adopting a ruthless *mind-set*: “at the very moment when we are going to destroy you without pity, we still feel no hatred for you . . . we want to destroy you in your power without mutilating you in your soul.”<sup>37</sup>

Camus thus called for a heroism of *non-emulation* of the enemy. Of all that the Resistance had to overcome, “first of all [was] the *constant temptation to emulate you*,” to dehumanize those who had dehumanized them. Thus, “in order to keep faith with ourselves, we are obliged to respect in you what you do not respect in others.” Confronting the “liberal predicament” that this imposed, Camus added: “For a long time that was your great advantage since you kill more easily than we do. And to the very end of time that will be the advantage of those who resemble you.” But the Resistance’s disadvantage was also, ultimately, the source of a spiritual strength which sustained them against overwhelming odds.<sup>38</sup> And, even as they accepted the inevitability of tragic loss, the Resistance also rejected Nazism’s disdain for happiness. It even praised happiness *over* heroism: “heroism isn’t much and . . . happiness is more difficult.” Commitment to happiness was “our best weapon, the one we never put away. For as soon as we lost it we should be as dead as you are.”<sup>39</sup>

The heroes of the Resistance fought not only on behalf of happiness, but out of a sense of *honor*. For Camus, as for Weber, honor was a vital source of ethical direction and motivation. Against his contemporaries’ disdain for honor as an aristocratic relic, a “virtue of the unjust,” he retorted that he *needed* honor, “because I am not big enough to do without it!”<sup>40</sup> When justice seems powerless, self-interest counsels capitulation, reason points to despair, and logic has become homicidal, the “unreasonable virtue” of honor is needed to motivate perseverance and decency.<sup>41</sup> A sense of honor not only sustained

members of the Resistance against despair in defeat; it compelled them to “stretch out their hands even to their enemy to save him from suffering or death.”<sup>42</sup> It thus fostered mercy and self-restraint—virtues that proved difficult and important in victory. In the postwar years, Camus continued to warn against emulation of the anti-liberal foe—above all, by succumbing to hatred. The “most difficult battle” now had to be “fought within ourselves, with an exceptional effort that will transform our appetite for hatred into a desire for justice. Not giving in to hatred, not making any concessions to violence, not allowing our passions to become blind—these are the things we must do.”<sup>43</sup>

### Postwar Perplexities: From Asceticism to Sobriety

Camus struggled to live up to this call. His post-liberation writings reflect, at once, an exultant sense that victory was the first step in a larger “revolution in our political mores”;<sup>44</sup> an anxious fear that this potential regeneration would be stymied by blindness and pettiness; and a sharp stigmatization of France’s traditional leadership. This reflected a *moralism* that sought to “replace politics with morality”; and a *radicalism* that insisted “We must do everything at once or accomplish nothing at all.”<sup>45</sup> He called for an ethos of “obstinacy and intransigence” and condemned the “morality of least resistance and disillusionment,” “disingenuous and spineless compromise,” warning that “he who blindly embraces the lesser evil ends up facing the greater one.”<sup>46</sup> This absolutist spirit was expressed in his support of the policy of *épuration légale*—the “purge” of collaborationists and profiteers via trials for treason and other crimes, many punishable by death. Camus defended the purge as necessary to bring the guilty to justice, avenge the fallen, purify the French body politic. He invoked a Manichean vision of a true France menaced by “a small minority” who were “the cause of her recent woes and who continue to be the cause of her woes,” and had to be destroyed.<sup>47</sup>

It is understandable that, after the agonizing struggle against Nazism, Camus aspired to a radical rebirth, and feared the resurgent power of the collaborationists. Our understanding and sympathy increase if we read details of the hunting, roundup, torture, and execution of resisters and Jews and terrorization of the population at large; if we read the words that the collaborators themselves spoke and wrote during their period of triumph; if we try to enter into the experience of those who had lived in fear and despair, who had seen loved ones brutalized and murdered. This experience is difficult to imagine, and impossible to fully share, for those who have been spared it; we should be

wary of passing judgment on their passing of judgment. Yet it is still disturbing to find Camus adopting rhetorical elements from his enemies—particularly the idea of the collaborationists as a “foreign body” that must be extirpated. Even if the sentiment is understandable, the way in which the sentiment was *thought* and put into action is chilling.<sup>48</sup>

Yet the concern for justice that drove Camus to support *epuration* also drove him to reconsider. Within weeks, he was having doubts; within months, he concluded that the purges were failures. He recognized in those conducting the epurations the same callous disregard for lives, the same obtuse insensitivity to moral distinctions and “proportionate” judgments, of which their enemies had been guilty.<sup>49</sup> Camus’s ideal had been justice without hatred. The reality of the purge convinced him that this combination was impossible to sustain.<sup>50</sup> The experience of having been grievously wrong in his passion for right led Camus to conclude that human beings should give up absolute claims to justice. And they should be wary of the psychological effects of justice pursued with excessive zeal. The pursuit of justice should be balanced by other moral considerations, and by a love of life that goes beyond morality, nourishes it, and prevents it from becoming doctrinaire.<sup>51</sup> This was not a call to abandon justice; but it did involve a shift from seeking to realize a *state* of justice, to an *ethical* program of seeking “to *think* justly, to *see* justly.”<sup>52</sup> Above all, it was necessary to give up the search for purity—an unrealistic and, indeed, inhuman goal. Humanity, Camus insisted, is not “naturally good,” only “worse or better”; and because we are “not absolutely good, no one among us can pose as an absolute judge and pronounce the definitive elimination of the worst among the guilty, because no one of us can lay claim to absolute innocence.” But this did *not* mean accepting the “realist” tendency “to absolve everything, victim and murderer, in the same confusion.”<sup>53</sup>

Camus’s effort to define and exemplify an ethical stance that eschewed the false moral simplicity of Manicheism in favor of a lucid recognition of both the reality of good and evil, and their complex intermingling in human life, was expressed in a series of essays collectively titled “Neither Victims Nor Executioners,” published in *Combat* in late November 1946. The title indicates a typically Camusian stance of double-edged refusal;<sup>54</sup> the contents continued his wartime project of articulating a “plain middle course of disillusioned decency, scrupulous fairness, and steadfast support for human dignity.”<sup>55</sup> Camus continued to criticize “realism,” call for radical change, and condemn half-measures.<sup>56</sup> But now he also rejected “all messianic elements”; and sought to

move from a stringent, intolerant “asceticism” that sought purity, to a disabused “sobriety” that recognized imperfection.<sup>57</sup>

The central problem of the day, Camus asserted, was that human life seemed worthless, and human reason powerless, in the face of nihilism and fanaticism. Camus particularly emphasized the latter: “We have witnessed deception, humiliation, execution, deportation, and torture, and in each instance it was impossible to persuade those who were doing these things not to do them, because they were sure of themselves . . . We suffocate among people who believe they are absolutely right.” Where there is such dogmatic conviction, persuasion is impossible; where persuasion is impossible, argument is likely to be abandoned in favor of violence. The same result—the abandonment of discussion in favor of force—was produced by the embrace of a “realism” that sought to subject life to “the laws of power and domination,” and “embrace[d] horror without flinching” as proof of superior strength and knowingness.<sup>58</sup> Both absolutist fanatics and amoral “realists” excused ruthless action with the justification that “the end justifies the means.” Such reasoning, Camus claimed, reflected either an essentially “nihilist” view that “everything is permitted, success is what counts”; or a *historicist* view that what ultimately matters is the achievement of some larger historical mission. Against such ways of thinking, Camus advocated a “*genuine* realism” which demanded the rejection of certain means, because such means “represent a risk so conclusive, so disproportionate to the likelihood of success” as to be morally prohibitive.<sup>59</sup> Among the means thus ruled out were not only nuclear war and totalitarian rule, but political revolution, understood as the violent seizure of state power, which would be far too costly given the realities of modern military technology.

Against a quixotic, bloody dream of political revolution, Camus called for a revolution in disposition and conduct: more deliberation, hesitation, clear reasoning, and rejection of dogma and drastic measures. Above all, he called for *dialogue*—a theme he ran throughout his work.<sup>60</sup> Camus acknowledged that this avowedly modest program was demanding and risky. Its very modesty undermined its motivational force: “it is hard to gird oneself for a struggle in which the objectives are so limited and there is barely a glimmer of hope.” Nevertheless, under present circumstances the only *honorable* choice was “to wager everything on the belief that in the end words will prove stronger than bullets.” The risks of such a wager were less costly than those of wagering on redemption through ideologically guided violence. For while the lofty goals and dogmatic discipline of ideological movements might inspire devotion, the results they produced were deplorable. Between “actions that will probably be

ineffective and those that will certainly be criminal,” one should choose the former.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond its more general reflections on the competing claims of dogmatism and dialogue, “Neither Victims” identified the fundamental practical question of the day as that of violence: “‘Yes or no, directly or indirectly, do you want to be killed or assaulted? Yes or no, directly or indirectly, do you want to kill or assault?’” Camus’s response seemed decisive: he declared that he could “no longer accept any truth that might place me under an obligation . . . to condemn a man to death.”<sup>62</sup> Camus had of course accepted violence in combating the Nazi occupation, and to launch post-liberation revolution.<sup>63</sup> But he had always been uneasy with violence; and this unease grew as the Occupation receded. Camus reported a postwar encounter with a former Resistance comrade, who informed Camus that he was now a Marxist. “Then you’ll be a murderer,” Camus replied. The friend pointed out that he was already a murderer, as a member of the Resistance. Camus acknowledged that the same was true of him; “But I don’t want to be [a murderer] any more.”<sup>64</sup> Camus thus rejected the tendency, evident in Lukács and others, to regard having been implicated in violence as justifying (or necessitating) further, purgative violence. Yet he echoed Lukács in seeing violence as “both unavoidable and unjustifiable.” “Systematic violence” was “part of the order of things”; pacifistic renunciation meant leaving the world unchanged, or allowing it to be made worse.<sup>65</sup>

Echoes of Lukács can also be found in Camus’s play *Les Justes* (translated as *The Just Assassins*), the very title of which asserts that (terroristic) violence may be just—though, this being Camus, there is a hint of irony and ambivalence. The play dramatizes the assassination of the ultra-reactionary governor of Moscow, the Grand Duke Sergei, by a cell of revolutionaries in 1905. On his first attempt, the assassin found the Grand Duke riding in a carriage with his niece and nephew—and refused to kill innocent children by throwing the bomb. Subsequently, when the Grand Duke was traveling alone, the poet and revolutionary Ivan Kaliayev carried out the attack. The incident fascinated Camus, who returned to it in *The Rebel*.<sup>66</sup> What seized his attention was the way in which the “fastidious assassins” insisted that, even in undertaking destruction, “there’s a right way and a wrong way—and *there are limits*.”<sup>67</sup> But are these limits the right ones? Are the assassins’ principles and sensibilities enough to make them more than murderers? Or are they . . . just assassins?

Camus poses the question without proffering a clear answer. This reflects his conception of tragedy as “ambiguous.” In tragedy the forces confronting one another are “equally legitimate, equally justified”; each is “at the same time

both good and bad.” This is why the chorus in classical tragedies “generally advises prudence. For the chorus knows that up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right which he thinks he alone possesses.”<sup>68</sup> The play doesn’t quite reach this level. It possesses something like a straightforward antagonist in Stepan, an embittered absolutist for whom brutality is proof of seriousness. Stepan loves justice, but hates human beings. And his love for justice is an absolute love, which completely disregards other values and does not tolerate different priorities on the part of others.<sup>69</sup> Against this monomania, Kaliayev insists that “man does not live by justice alone.” Kaliayev does not fight for abstractions, but for those he loves; he will not “strike my brothers in the face for the sake of some far-off city which, for all I know, may not exist. I refuse to add to the living injustice all around me for the sake of a dead justice.” To this Stepan has a ready response: that his comrades seem more worried about the state of their souls than the state of Russian peasantry. While they fret about swiftly killing two aristocratic children, thousands of poor children slowly starve to death. Dora—probably the most lucid conscience in the play—points out the flaw in this reasoning: killing the Grand Duke’s niece and nephew won’t *stop* peasant children from starving to death. (But will killing the Grand Duke do so?) Dora and Kaliayev suggest that Stepan’s logic contains “the threat of another despotism,” which would negate the ideals that justified the revolutionaries’ actions.<sup>70</sup> The consequences of action determine its morality; but the way to avert consequences that will render an action immoral is to accept absolute limits and eschew a certain mind-set or mentality. Consequentialist reasoning should point to an acceptance of limits—and a concern with intention, character, and ethos.

This is not to say that Kaliayev is free of ruthlessness, or illusion. He cannot directly confront the fact that he is killing an individual human being, insisting, “It’s not he I’m killing, I’m killing despotism.”<sup>71</sup> This sounds noble, but it is hardly true. Kaliayev’s action is not enough to “kill despotism”; he has no way of knowing whether it will contribute to despotism’s ultimate defeat. But it very definitely is a man that he kills. Even though he recognizes the “vileness” of using violence,<sup>72</sup> Kaliayev believes that it might be redeemed, under three conditions: that it is carried out in the name of, and *contributes to realizing*, an ideal of justice that transcends the present order of violence; that it respects limits (above all, sparing innocents); and that the perpetrator accepts responsibility for it by sacrificing his own life. This last eventually becomes,

for Kaliayev, “our *only* justification.” Self-sacrifice is both evidence of seriousness, and a matter of justice: if one is going to demand the lives of others, one should also offer up one’s own.<sup>73</sup>

If this is Camus’s view, he seems to slip into the suggestion that, as George Kateb puts it, “the stain of blood can be wiped clean by more blood”; thus “the doctrine of the sanctity of life . . . shows itself to be bloody.” This may make it too easy to resort to violence with a clear conscience, because one believes that one can wipe the stain clean. It may also, as Kateb suggests, render *successful* action impossible (or at least undesirable), because on this view “success becomes a shame,” and those struggling for values are required to accept destruction.<sup>74</sup> But there is reason to doubt that Camus fully endorsed this logic. He declares Kaliayev’s reasoning “false, but respectable,” because “a life taken is not worth a life given.”<sup>75</sup> This can cut both ways. One might see the “life given” freely, for an ideal, as having more worth. On the other hand, the assassin is able to *choose* to die, and dies for *his* ideals; the victim does not choose, and is used to serve the ideals of another. Is death freely chosen really equivalent to—and does it cancel out—death inflicted on an unwitting, vulnerable victim? And does not this very way of thinking assume an interchangeability between people that negates human uniqueness, reducing individuals to units in a moral calculation?

Even if self-sacrifice does serve justice, the absolutist demand for justice may itself be dangerous. Confronted by his victim’s widow, Kaliayev presents himself as concerned only with justice—leading her to exclaim that his voice is just like that of her husband, who also spoke authoritatively of “justice.” Kaliayev resembles the representative of tyranny whom he so easily condemned; as the Duchess points out, if the Grand Duke was so grievously wrong about what justice requires, perhaps Kaliayev and his comrades are as well.<sup>76</sup> A similar point is made by Skuratov, the prosecutor who interrogates Kaliayev. Skuratov is insouciantly involved in the machinery of state executions, which Camus loathed; he is cynical and cruel in his manipulation of Kaliayev. But he has a point in urging Kaliayev to look beyond principles to “the human side” of what he has done: “A man has been killed—and killed in a particularly horrible manner.” When Kaliayev righteously responds, “I threw a bomb at your tyranny, not at a man,” Skuratov dryly and correctly replies: “Perhaps. But it was a living human being it blew to bits.”<sup>77</sup> Kaliayev has treated the Grand Duke as an abstraction; he has not imagined the reality of his action. As Camus wrote elsewhere, such lack of “imagination when it comes to other people’s deaths” was the basis of the self-righteous ruthlessness of ideology.<sup>78</sup>



There is a danger in being so keen on justice, and so confident of one's good intentions in pursuing it: as Skuratov warns, "One begins by wanting justice—and one ends by setting up a police force."<sup>79</sup>

For Camus, it seems, violence can be justified only if it is judged truly necessary under immediate circumstances and acknowledged to be intrinsically immoral—and thus adopted reluctantly, without confidence in ultimate redemption. Even then, violence retains its moral stain. We can never claim purity: absolute rejection of violence leaves the way open for domination by the ruthlessly violent. Hands once dirtied by violence can never become clean, because the damage violence does can never be canceled. It may however be limited. To refuse to be an "executioner" is to refuse to use violence in certain ways, for certain purposes, and to adopt certain attitudes toward one's violence; to refuse to be a victim is to acknowledge that violence remains an available resort in some circumstances. Innocence can only be relative, never absolute; but it is still worth striving for.

This may seem to put excessive weight on the inner state of the actor who contemplates, and commits, violence; and to focus more on the pathos of the actor than the suffering of the victim. Yet this focus reflects a concern with the larger character of the world which the actor inhabits and contributes to making. This can be seen by returning to Camus's encounter with his Communist friend. Camus, we recall, had declared that his friend had resolved to become a murderer—and that he himself had resolved not to be a murderer anymore. He went on to identify why this mattered: "This is the real problem: whatever happens, I shall always defend you against the firing squad. But you will be obliged to approve my being shot."<sup>80</sup> Whether one is content with being a murderer or anguished by it—whether one accepts murder as just and blameless, or as an evil that should be avoided when possible, limited, and atoned for—matters in priming actors for future action that will, in turn, shape the nature of political life.

The value and virtue of the "delicate murderers" for Camus lies in the fact that they *do* agonize over their actions and see the need for justification. Weber, and "realists" after him, suggested that the quest for self-legitimation was pathological, promoting a vain self-righteousness that made violence more ruthless. Camus suggests, however, that the desire for justification may be necessary to retain some idea of morality. If the assassins accept Stepan's view that "We're murderers, and we have chosen to be murderers," they will have to give way to his insistence that "squeamishness is out of place in work like ours."<sup>81</sup> Though a belief in one's own invincible innocence may breed

bloody fanaticism, belief that one is already condemned can promote a no less bloody resignation to ruthlessness. Such cynicism makes it impossible to protest against injustice. As Camus later wrote, when “the concept of innocence disappears from the mind of the innocent victim himself, the value of power establishes a definitive rule over a world in despair.”<sup>82</sup>

Camus’s preoccupation with violence remained acute; his opposition to it became central to his political position and activities, from his crusade against capital punishment to his campaign for a “civilian truce” in Algeria. It also was central to his major work of political philosophy, *The Rebel*.

### An Ethic of Rebellion: Passionate Moderation and the Search for Limits

*The Rebel* (1951) was, of all his works, the one Camus held most dear, the one he believed to be most like himself. It was also the one that earned him the most animosity and derision from his former comrades. Even his allies have been critical. Raymond Aron complained that the book was muddled and disorganized, and that “the moralizing tone militated against philosophic exactitude”; its message, once discerned, proved “rather commonplace.”<sup>83</sup> Tony Judt—an admirer of Camus—was even harsher, pronouncing the book a “messy failure.”<sup>84</sup> Such critics are right (if unkind) in pointing to Camus’s philosophical shortcomings and vague prescriptions. But they fail to appreciate what the book is doing: not advancing a philosophy, but charting the emergence of a revolutionary ethos marked by extremism and ruthlessness—and propounding an alternative ethos of “moderation,” lucid courage, circumspection, and forbearance. To prevent the loathing of oppression from being perverted into a motive for ruthlessness required not the correction of doctrine, but the cultivation of such an ethos.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Camus’s argument was that the prevalence of “crimes of logic” reflected a misguided tendency to elevate logic over “scruples,” and doctrine over character.<sup>86</sup>

Camus’s move toward his position in *The Rebel* had been under way for some time. Nevertheless, the book provoked a rupture with his comrades on the Left, who took it as a Cold War polemic. This was not how Camus wished to be perceived. Against the tendency to adopt one set of rules and standards for “us,” and another for “them”—such that “the murder of a human being elicits your outrage . . . only to the extent that the victim shares your ideas”<sup>87</sup>—he asserted that the same moral standards should be applied to all sides.<sup>88</sup> This

led him to refuse any sort of “complicity, even temporary, even and above all tactical, with regimes or parties whether of the Right or the Left that justify, however little, the suppression of a single one of our liberties”—a repudiation of the actions of *both* sides in the Cold War.<sup>89</sup> He also insisted on the responsibility of individuals to retain intellectual independence and a sense of complexity amid the “shouts of so many people bent on simplifying everything.”<sup>90</sup> This meant rejecting the excuses, and condemning the abuses, of both the West and the Soviet Union. The political implications of this ethical stance were anti-Communist, without being pro-American.

This stance put Camus on a collision course with his comrade Sartre, who had declared that an “anticommunist is a rat. I couldn’t see any way out of that one, and I never will.”<sup>91</sup> Sartre tried to avoid public confrontation—until his journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, published a withering review by Sartre’s acolyte Francis Jeanson. Jeanson portrayed Camus as Hegel’s “beautiful soul,” seeking to preserve moral purity by escaping from the practical, “concrete” demands of history. This was futile, self-indulgent, and effectively reactionary. Jeanson’s review led to an outraged reply from Camus, and a public rejoinder from Sartre, which brought their friendship to an end.<sup>92</sup>

Camus acknowledged the pitfalls of purism. Total rejection of violence seemed, under present circumstances, to require complete withdrawal from politics—“which comes down to condoning other people’s murder, plus a little fastidious sorrow over human imperfection.” But wagering on violence in the hope of success was no more than “tragic dilettantism,” which reduced human beings to “counters in a game”; adopting efficiency or success as the sole criterion of action left no avenue of appeal open to the oppressed, reducing the world to one composed only of “masters and slaves.”<sup>93</sup> Against these alternatives—puristic withdrawal, revolutionary violence, political “realism”—Camus posed an ethic of *rebellion*, which affirms commitment to the world and the human beings who inhabit it; a sense of *personal responsibility* to protest against injustice; and *limits* on the pursuit of any goal.

This last seems paradoxical: Prometheus, the paradigmatic rebel, is defined by his rejection of the limits imposed by the gods. Protest against oppressive limitations is central to rebellion. But rebellion itself affirms the existence of certain limits beyond which human beings should not go. The rebel’s “no” “affirms the existence of a borderline”: it says, “you are going too far,” “up to this point yes, beyond it no.” Rebellion reflects a feeling that another is “exaggerating,” or “exerting his authority beyond a limit where he begins to infringe on the rights of others.”<sup>94</sup> This assertion of limits set by (moral) rights may

resemble, or inspire, liberalism. Rebellion, however, goes beyond the individualism of much liberal thought. It affirms a “common ground where all men . . . have a natural community,” and enlists each individual in defense of a freedom and dignity common to all.<sup>95</sup> Camus was distinguished from many Cold War liberals by his emphasis on solidarity and fraternity and the responsibilities they imposed; these provided motivational resources that their versions of liberalism sometimes lacked.

Camus’s depiction of rebellion is not wholly positive. The rebel’s sense of justice and noble defiance may foster hubris, hunger for power, and a murderous passion for order. Much of *The Rebel* is devoted to tracing the perversions of rebellion, from individualistic “dandies” and Nietzschean nihilists to Jacobins, terrorists, and modern totalitarians. While he attributed much of this perversion to doctrines, Camus also traced it to psychological dispositions. The first of these is a proclivity toward *extremism*. Rebellion is the assertion of a value that is being ignored or denied. In the process of assertion, the rebel reactively places the value that is being denied above all else, declaring it “the supreme good.” When rebellion thus adopts the attitude of “all or nothing,” it negates human existence (which cannot be reduced to simple, polar terms); it submerges human beings in the cause—subsuming or crushing the individual. The rebel thus becomes a fanatic; and “[h]istory offers few examples of fanatics who have suffered from scruples.”<sup>96</sup>

The impulse toward rebellion was also internally menaced by a “metaphysical demand” for unity, simplicity, and order.<sup>97</sup> This fostered a “convulsive effort to control the world,” evident (for example) in the Jacobins’ hostility toward the plurality of both individuals and groups, their obsessive suspicion of “factions,” their embrace of the guillotine as a means of attaining unity through the elimination of those who by their existence disrupted it.<sup>98</sup> The “desire for simplification” encouraged, and was encouraged by, a tendency toward *abstraction* and the imposition of logic on a complex reality. Abstraction excludes particularity—and thus, both love and friendship (“he who loves his friend loves him in the present and the revolution wants to love only a man who has not yet appeared”), which it subordinates to “doctrine” and “plan[s].”<sup>99</sup> The substitution of abstractions for attention to actual human beings was not only diminishing, but dishonorable, reflecting “lack of character,” a desire to avoid the hard work of judgment.<sup>100</sup> This attack on abstraction is closely linked to one of the more controversial features of Camus’s moral outlook: his particularism.<sup>101</sup> Camus confessed that “I cannot love all humanity except with a vast and somewhat abstract love. But I love a few men, living or dead, with such

force and admiration that I am always eager to preserve in others what will someday perhaps make them resemble those I love.”<sup>102</sup> This points not only to the importance of individual relationships, but to the role of individuals as exemplars of what is admirable, as guideposts for the moral life.

Camus identified an additional culprit in the genesis of twentieth-century totalitarianism: *historicism*, which identifies morality not with adherence to fixed principles, but the realization of values in the historical future; it thus fosters a “realist” outlook, which evaluates action based purely on its (probable) results.<sup>103</sup> When confronted with human obstacles to progress, the historicist, fixated on the future and inured to immediate realities, declares: “I can’t hesitate over that detail. I think according to the world and history.”<sup>104</sup> This allows historicists to assure their victims that the victims’ sufferings are merely “provisional,” and will be ultimately redeemed. Such assurances are hollow. Suffering is “never provisional for the man who does not believe in the future”—or for those who will not live to enjoy that future: “Later,” say the adherents of historicist realism, “you shall judge. But the victims will not be there to judge. For the victim, the present is the only value, rebellion the only action.”<sup>105</sup> Camus did not entirely reject the justification of suffering for a future reward: if a struggle “waged by one or two generations” brings about a classless society, those who have waged the struggle may reasonably regard their sacrifices—and, presumably, their crimes—as justified. But if the sacrifice of several generations leads only to an “infinite period of universal strife,” only a fanatic, possessed by unreasoning faith, would continue to approve. Marxism had become such a faith, which justified “injustice, crime, and falsehood by the promise of a miracle.”<sup>106</sup> History vouchsafes no absolute value or certain guidance. “Any historical enterprise” can only be a “more or less reasonable or justifiable” risk. And insofar as history offers only opportunities for uncertain and risky action, “it cannot be used to justify any excess or any ruthless and absolutist position.”<sup>107</sup>

In both historicist philosophy and defenses of Communist atrocity, Camus identified his old enemy, “realism.” He attacked the motley crew of Hegel, Maistre, and Marx for holding that “[t]he conqueror is always right” and exalting “political realism, discipline, force.” Lenin, in turn, exemplified an imperiousness “to anxiety, to nostalgia, to ethics” which shaped the ethos of both Communism and Fascism.<sup>108</sup> Camus again distinguished such cynical “realism” from “true realism.” The former, though “[m]ore brutal,” was ultimately “less efficacious” than the latter, which consists in a determination to rely on “concrete realities” rather than an abstract vision of perfection.<sup>109</sup> True realism

warned against the use of brutal means to attain justice and freedom. Such “barbarism” is “never temporary”: “Terror does not evolve except toward a worse terror, the scaffold does not become any more liberal, the gallows are not tolerant.”<sup>110</sup> This understanding of the relationship between ends and means led Camus to call for those committed to humane values to be “[u]ncompromising as to . . . means,” but willing to accept “an approximation as far as its ends are concerned.” To this he added a challenge: “Does the end justify the means? That is possible. But what will justify the end? To that question . . . rebellion replies: the means.”<sup>111</sup> We can take this to mean that the value of a political struggle is determined not just by the results it achieves (and certainly not by the results it promises), but by the quality of conduct it calls forth.

Camus may thus seem to fall into the panmoralism, or elevation of personal purity over political responsibility, that Weber attacked. Yet he also echoed Weber’s emphasis on the importance of promoting a certain quality of character and of conduct; his attack on the implausibility of assuming that means of political violence could somehow bring political violence to an end; and his insistence on responsibility. Rebellion is *political*—it seeks to effect change in the world. To renounce the pursuit of justice via politics means abdicating responsibility, tacitly consenting to “the silence and slavery of others.”<sup>112</sup> There existed no solution to the problem of means and ends in politics. But one could, and must, refuse to *justify* violence, retaining a sense of the horror of violence and reluctance to engage in it. Motivated by such reluctance, political actors should strenuously strive to find nonviolent alternatives, and mitigate the effects of violence where it proved unavoidable. Camus also suggested certain political rules of thumb: rebels should only “consent to take up arms for institutions that limit violence, not for those which codify it.” It is justified to use violence to overthrow a regime of slavery or political despotism—but only on behalf of a regime that will secure rights and protections against violence for all, not for a revolutionary regime that will pursue lawless vengeance or embark on a dubious project of redemptive transformation.<sup>113</sup> While Camus rejects the sharp distinction between politics and morality asserted by Weber, his argument thus begins to resemble Weber’s use of “purposive rationality” to evaluate political choices (as I have interpreted it).

Camus also resembled Weber in seeking to chasten the aspirations of his audience. Against a longing for a perfection that is deadly, rebellion affirms the world in its imperfection. To accept imperfection and incompleteness was to recognize the folly of violence: it was ridiculous to kill for an approximation,

and once it is recognized that only approximations of justice are possible, violence loses its attraction. Aspiring only to a relative good, rebellion “can only promise an assured dignity coupled with relative justice . . . Between God and history, the yogi and the commissar, it opens a difficult path where contradictions may exist and thrive.”<sup>114</sup> “The yogi and the commissar,” the quietist purist and political “realist,” did not represent, as commonly believed, alternatives of “ineffectual purity” and practical “expediency.” Rather, *both* were ineffectual: while the yogi chooses “the ineffectiveness of abstention,” the commissar chooses “the ineffectiveness of destruction.” Both embrace an ascetic path in the name of absolute values, which neither can fully achieve. Indeed, both undermine the values they posit: the “realism” of the Commissar rejects the complexity of reality; the yogi’s adherence to an absolute ethic of love abandons human beings to suffering—a strange way of expressing love.<sup>115</sup>

Camus’s antidote to absolutism was (ethical) *moderation* (*mesure* in French), which eschewed both purist fanaticism that refuses to adapt to reality, and realist fanaticism that refuses to critically judge reality. As Camus wrote, “Virtue cannot separate itself from reality without becoming a principle of evil. Nor can it identify itself completely with reality without denying itself.” “Moderation” teaches us that “at least one part of realism is necessary to every ethic. Pure and unadulterated virtue is homicidal. And one part of ethics is necessary to all realism: cynicism is homicidal.”<sup>116</sup> Such ethical moderation did not encourage complacency or discourage striving for change; it was a moderation not for “tepid souls,” but “burning hearts.” It was modest, but not mild: It fostered “extenuating intransigence” in standing up to extremists and asserting limits.<sup>117</sup>

The concept of limit was central to Camus’s mature understanding of political ethics. The error of revolutionary rebellion is to fail to recognize limits: a limit on what is permissible, on how much power any human being can exercise on others, and how they may exercise it. The recognition of limits for which Camus called was not a matter of establishing and obeying absolute rules: Camus rejected the idea of a moral code based on “rules and laws,” insisting that ethical life is always too tragically incomplete, and too rigorously challenging, to be circumscribed or navigated by a fixed code. Rather, it involved a *way of thinking* that refuses to be ruled by remorseless logic, that does *not* pursue “what we think to the very end,” but remains tentative, circumspect, and modest.<sup>118</sup> The recognition of limit(s) and practice of moderation were closely tied to the cultivation of the self, a process of self-formation through the imposition of a certain *style* on the self and its conduct of life.<sup>119</sup> To be



moderate is to be “composed” (like Cherea), or *measured*; it is also to cultivate a practice of *taking measure*—of exercising the sort of discriminating judgment, the making of distinctions, that Camus had defended against nihilist extremists.

To embrace an ethic of moderation was not to take the path of least resistance. To the contrary: in an ideologically polarized and fevered world, “excess is always a comfort, and sometimes a career”; while moderation was “nothing but pure tension,” caused by seeking to remain in touch with the opposed poles of reality and idealism.<sup>120</sup> It was fatigue with this tension that led many to surrender to one extreme or another. To combat this fatigue required a lucid perception of the dangers of extremism, which Camus’s work sought to foster. It also required a strenuous and humane fortitude, and a commitment to acting with kindness and decency. Such qualities required something other than a philosophical treatise to capture or inculcate.

### Camus’s Chronicle of Modest Heroism: *The Plague*

The question of heroism—what makes a hero? How is it possible to be one?—figures in several of Camus’s major works. But there was one that he himself conceived as an exploration of “civil heroism.”<sup>121</sup> In *The Plague*, Camus set out what Robert Zaretsky has called a “new form of heroism,”<sup>122</sup> marked by a quiet, modest determination that is aware of the costs it imposes, and accepts them—but not lightly or without regret.

There are problems with reading *The Plague* as political theory. First, there is the matter of genre. Camus himself questioned whether novels can (or should) convey general philosophical messages. The novel “does not offer conclusions about life but instead reveals its unfolding”;<sup>123</sup> novelists, believing that “principle[s] of explanation” are useless, write in “images rather than reasoned arguments.”<sup>124</sup> In fact, in Camus’s work the elucidation of a particular reality—the flavor and atmosphere of a place, the idiosyncrasies of individuals—is always in complex play with a search for truths that are *both* particular and general. *The Plague* is more than an allegory or “philosophical novel”—but it is also both of these things.

But is *The Plague* an *effective* political allegory? Simone de Beauvoir objected that, by pitting his characters against an epidemic rather than human antagonists, Camus had evaded the crucial moral difficulty of totalitarian rule: the origin of evil not in nature, but in human collaborators and executioners.<sup>125</sup> There is validity to this criticism. But it also partially misses the point.

Camus is concerned less with the causes of human evil than the psychological toll and ethical exigencies imposed by *any* annihilating affliction.<sup>126</sup> *The Plague* explores the experience of living in terror and isolation—and the character of that heroism that emerges in fighting against overwhelming odds. And while the plague is not human in origin, Camus is acutely sensitive to the process of moral corruption bred in human beings by the experience of extremity.

Another caveat is more significant. *The Plague* is concerned with a time of extremity—when, according to the austere priest Paneloux, a morality of “All or Nothing” is appropriate and half-measures amount to sins.<sup>127</sup> Here, it seems, there is simply no room for the standards and dispositions appropriate to liberal politics—no room for remaining uncommitted, or seeking ease and happiness; no room for concern with the rights of the infected, who must be ruthlessly quarantined. Happily, this is not the case with “ordinary” politics; it also means that *The Plague* may be limited as a source of political instruction.

Without denying this point, Camus suggests that we should think more about moments of extremity during “ordinary” times. His narrative begins by stressing the “banality” of Oran—and suggests that this made the city particularly vulnerable to plague.<sup>128</sup> plague appears as *nemesis*, to remind the proud of the limits they have forgotten. This is the case of the people of Oran who had forgotten to be “modest,” and “thought everything was possible for them.”<sup>129</sup> They are unable to take the danger seriously, responding to its portents with the “abstractions” of a “business as usual” mind-set. Camus, through the character of Rieux (one of the story’s protagonists, and its narrator), stresses that such failure of imagination is hard to avoid: for “the plague-stricken . . . peace of mind is more important than a human life.”<sup>130</sup> This inability to respond to extraordinary times, to imagine extremity or fully confront it when it arrives, may be a particular vulnerability of (some forms of) liberalism, which value and rely upon institutional regularity. Can liberalism withstand plague?

In one sense, the plague is liberalism’s other, its nemesis. “Plague,” understood as failure of imagination or of moral vision, may take many forms. For Camus one of the most troubling was involvement in, and justification of, political violence. This is expressed through Tarrou, who initially appears in the narrative as a good-natured, calm, slightly eccentric stranger in Oran. Eventually, Tarrou reveals how he has come to his tolerant yet rigorous ethic of observation. As a boy, he believed in his own innocence. But he is disillusioned when he realizes what his prosecutor father actually does: kill living, individual human beings, rather than abstractions called “defendants.” This leads to a rebellion against his father, against the death penalty—and against the society

that is built on it. Tarrou becomes a revolutionary, who believes that in fighting the prevailing order he is fighting murder. Aware that he and his comrades also “passed sentences of death,” he accepts the rationale that this was “inevitable” in building “a new world in which murder would cease to be.” He is able to live with this rationale—until he experiences revolutionary “justice” first hand.<sup>131</sup> Tarrou thus realizes that he has “had plague” the whole time he believed that he was fighting it. When he voices his discomfort, his fellow radicals tell him not to be “squeamish,” to remember that “great issues” are at stake—and that it is playing the reactionaries’ game to allow them a “monopoly” on violence. This argument, he admits, is irrefutable. Yet he rejects it. For once one gives in to the logic of murder, it is difficult to stop. Tarrou’s concern is not with logical arguments, but with the reality of a man or group of men telling a “fettered man” that he will die, and methodically arranging things so that “he should die, after nights and nights of mental torture while he waited to be murdered in cold blood.” His eyes opened, he concludes that “we all have the plague,” that none are innocent. This realization costs Tarrou his peace of mind—which he is still trying to regain. He does not claim to have found the way to innocence: he merely knows that “one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken.”<sup>132</sup> Lest we too quickly applaud him, he points out that this means deserting the field of action for others who are less scrupulous. His own scruples reflect a “deficiency, not a superiority.” Nevertheless, they do prevent him from being a “rational murderer.”<sup>133</sup>

The dynamic of “plague”—of being complicit in the sufferings of others, because we are blinded by abstraction and a confidence in our own innocence—was, for Camus, at work not only in extreme cases, but in the ordinary atrocities of society. Foremost among these was the death penalty. In his attack on this barbarism, he returned to the dangers of a somnolent imagination: “When the imagination sleeps, words are emptied of their meaning: a deaf population absent-mindedly registers the condemnation of a man.” The polity does death in cold blood because its members do not confront the reality of what is happening.<sup>134</sup>

Camus thus attacked *both* homicidal radicalism and callous conservatism for taking flight into abstraction, whether through resort to theories and slogans, or reliance on routine. He also acknowledged that a degree of abstraction is inescapable even for the most noble and clear-sighted. To fully perceive the suffering around us would be paralyzing. And, without direct experience, imagination is a weak force: “since a dead man has no substance unless one has actually seen him dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through

history are no more than a puff of smoke.” It is all too easy to remain wrapped up in ourselves; the suffering of others far away is too remote to be truly shared, because it is not seen. And it is all too easy to look away even from suffering nearby.<sup>135</sup> But, hard as it is, attention, and the comprehension that it brings, are vital—precisely because incomprehension is so common, easy, and destructive. This demand for attention—and thus for an awareness of imperfection and guilt—must haunt, needle, and impel toward criticism and revision any political order or ideology.

The first component of Camusian heroism, then, is a strenuous effort of *truthful attention*, which avoids abstraction and evasion. The heroes of *The Plague* are marked by their capacity to witness reality. This is particularly true of Tarrou, whose focus on seemingly trivial behaviors is revealed to reflect an *ethic of comprehension*—a striving to understand others by devoting to them a searching attention that is morally alert, yet non-condemnatory. Beyond attention, Tarrou practices a morally scrupulous pragmatism, which judges abstract arguments by a simple test: whether or not they end in murder. Rieux, too, engages in a practice of careful attention—to the symptoms of his patients. But he also recognizes that there exists a tension between attaining understanding and *acting* to respond to urgent needs.<sup>136</sup> The Camusian hero strives for some balance between comprehension and action, objectivity and commitment to those who suffer. When such a balance is impossible, one must choose one responsibility over another—while remaining ready to shift back to serving the other when circumstances have changed.

This practice of balancing or shifting—and the recognition of limitations to which it is linked—requires a second component of Camus’s heroic ethos: *lucidity* in recognizing the demands and limits imposed by reality. Rieux acknowledges the strenuous demands of lucidity, which yields awareness of tragedy and limitation. Yet while he rejects “optimistic” views of history, he does not advocate pessimism. He realizes that a life without hope is one of “bleak sterility.” Hope is necessary to ward off not only despair, but misanthropy and numbness to human suffering: The “dominion of the plague” is “ended” once hope stirs. Optimism is dangerous: it prevents one from taking precautions. Very different from optimism is the hope needed by the Camusian hero: a “very old, grey hope, that hope” which is “nothing but a dogged will to live.”<sup>137</sup> To reject illusion, but still to hope, is the third component of Camus’s heroic ethos.

Such hope is hard to sustain in solitude. Even as the plague isolates individuals by breeding a pervasive, isolating mistrust (since one’s neighbor may infect one) and fear of attachment (since others may die, leaving one bereft),<sup>138</sup>

it also creates a consciousness of comradeship based on the realization that the battle against it is the “concern of all.” Rambert—a journalist from France who has been trapped in Oran by the outbreak, cut off from his lover—initially can think only of his own situation. Eventually he joins the sanitation squads organized by Rieux, Tarrou, and their friend Grand. He has come to realize that the plague is everybody’s business, and that, while there is nothing shameful in wanting to be happy, “it may be shameful to be happy by oneself.”<sup>139</sup> The shared suffering breeds a sense of *fraternity* among those who support one another in their common struggles—and in individual struggles which become common struggles. This fraternity is made firmer by a sense of *loyalty*—the quality that, Camus declared, “I have always loved and respected most in this world.”<sup>140</sup> Alongside hope, fraternity provides the strength necessary to sustain attention and struggle. Even as he remained committed to the individual—and the defense of individual rights—Camus recognized, to a greater degree than many (fellow) liberals, the need for an ethos of solidarity and loyalty to others (which goes beyond mere transactional reciprocity) to motivate the struggles on which protections of individual rights depend. But such loyalty or solidarity must not be enforced; and it must come from human relationships, not ideologies or doctrines—or shared circumstances of birth (Rambert is a foreigner to Oran; yet he is part of the fraternity that defends it).

Fraternity is a type of love; and *The Plague* expresses Camus’s belief in the vital importance of love in combating abstraction and inhumanity. Rambert asserts the claims of love against those of “ideas.” “I’ve had enough of people who die for an idea,” he declares (reflecting his experience fighting for the Spanish Republic); “What interests me is living and dying for what one loves”—which means *individuals*, not collectives or abstractions. Rieux, too, insists that “For nothing in the world is it worth turning one’s back on what one loves”—though this is what he himself does.<sup>141</sup> This is in keeping with the *pluralism* that is maintained in the outlook of the Camusian hero, even in times of crisis. As Tarrou reminds Rieux, “it’s too damn silly living only in and for the plague. Of course a man should fight for the victims, but, if he ceases to care for anything outside that, what’s the use of his fighting?”<sup>142</sup> This pluralism leads the heroes of *The Plague* to affirm that heroism’s rightful place is “just after, never before, the noble claim of happiness.”<sup>143</sup> Happiness breeds a dangerous complacency. It may even *invite* plague: the novel’s concluding sentence warns of the day when “for the bane and enlightening of men, [the plague] roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a *happy* city.” Yet Rieux concludes that the Oranians’ stubborn attachment to their dreams of modest happiness was the

source of their resilience.<sup>144</sup> As in “Letters to a German Friend,” heroism is kept from becoming too grandiose and intolerant of human frailty by commitment to happiness. But the hero’s lot is not a happy one: he revolts against injustice and cruelty on behalf of a happiness that heroism cannot bring.

*The Plague* indeed is a parable of tragic revolt—of struggle that must be waged even though it cannot be won. Rieux is “sick and tired of the world he lived in,” and committed to “fighting against creation as he found it.” As a young doctor, he was outraged by the human condition of inevitable sickness and death, and “resolved . . . to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.” With time, he “grew more modest.” But he “never managed to get used to seeing people die”; to Paneloux’s efforts at theodicy, he responds that “until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.”<sup>145</sup> Once one has seen the suffering it brings, “you’d need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague.” Revolt requires the opposite qualities: sanity, courage, and lucidity. It also requires a “salutary pride”—but “no more than the pride that’s needed to keep me going.”<sup>146</sup>

Pride, love, hope for happiness, solidarity with and attention to others are necessary to combat human suffering and the callousness that permits it. This struggle is not so “exceptional” after all. As Tarrou warns, “what’s natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter.” To combat the plague, “we must keep endless watch on ourselves.” This requires “tremendous will-power,” and “never-ending tension of the mind.” But only this course—the “path of sympathy,” of seeking understanding and offering help—can “bring relief to men and, if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good.” Tarrou is determined to do this, as best he can—and “to take in every predicament, the victim’s side—so as to reduce the damage done.”<sup>147</sup>

This goal is both strenuous and modest; if there is a single keynote to the heroism of *The Plague*, it is modesty. The heroism that Camus affirmed is at once unostentatious and defiant. Thus, he praised the British for their “calm determination,” “tranquil courage,” “inner strength,” and “modest reserve” during World War II—which were expressed in the fact that they “forgot to complain.” Britain had “defended its freedom without once raising its voice.”<sup>148</sup> Heroism need not be histrionic, or opposed to the ordinary; in a world marked by crisis and extremity, heroism lay in the struggle to maintain ordinary decency. This was how Camus conceived of his own efforts: “It is from this struggle to remain an ordinary man in exceptional circumstances that I have always drawn my greatest strength and my greatest usefulness.”<sup>149</sup>

Heroism, on Camus's account, is marked by the way in which those who exhibit it understand what they are doing. It is felt as a matter of moral necessity, as "the only thing to do" under the circumstances.<sup>150</sup> This is embodied above all by the "insignificant and obscure" clerk Grand, whom Rieux identifies as "the 'true embodiment of the quiet courage' that inspired the sanitary groups, and the real 'hero' of the story. It is Grand who leads 'an exemplary life,' who represents those rare people who 'have the courage of their good feelings.'"<sup>151</sup> But Grand's heroism is inarticulate; the Camusian hero's ethos of modest decency is most clearly *expressed* by Rieux—another resolutely unheroic hero, who claims to "feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me." Resistance to plague is, he insists, not a matter of heroism, but of "common decency." While Tarrou's question is how to be a "saint" without belief in salvation, Rieux is interested merely in "being a man"; his record of the plague bears witness to the heroism of "all who, while unable to be saints," nevertheless "strive their utmost to be healers."<sup>152</sup>

This aspiration is modest; it may also be unattainable. Tarrou warns Rieux that "your victories will never be lasting"; Rieux acknowledges that his struggle means "never-ending defeat."<sup>153</sup> Eventually, Tarrou wins the peace he sought—but only in death; his "victory" is to struggle to the last, and to die without losing his courage.<sup>154</sup> As for Rieux, he ends up alone with his memories and his wisdom. In accepting their part in a "never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts,"<sup>155</sup> Camus's heroes adopt the attitude summed up in the words attributed to William the Silent: "One need not hope in order to undertake, nor succeed in order to persevere."

Here we arrive at a final worry presented by Camus's depiction of heroism. In linking heroism to the acceptance of inevitable defeat, Camus raises the question of just how emotionally sustainable, widely attainable, and politically *useful* heroism might be. The limitations as well as the nobility of the ethic he had embraced are revealed in Camus's response to the events that befell his native Algeria (where *The Plague* was set) during the struggle for Algerian independence.

### Algeria: The Significance of Silence

Camus was not unaware of Algerian sufferings before 1954. The earliest writings on Algeria that he later chose to reprint were his reports from famine-stricken Kabylia in 1939. Here he put his ethical ideal of honest attention to



lived realities and concrete detail into practice, even before he had articulated it as an ideal. He did not merely express moral outrage, but meticulously documented the causes of the famine and addressed practical questions of what to do. Camus's command of Marx and Hegel may have been inferior to that of his Parisian peers; but he probably had a better grasp of agricultural statistics and techniques than they. (It is hard to imagine Sartre giving so much attention to the best method for drying figs.)<sup>156</sup>

His advocacy of equal citizenship for the native Algerian population outraged Camus's fellow French Algerians (the *pieds noirs*) and led to his being fired, forcing him to emigrate to France to find work. From there, he continued to document the sufferings of Algeria, and to fruitlessly call for the world to send help. He also attacked the "stupid and criminal malady" of French racism, and called for restraint and respect for law in responding to violence on behalf of Algerian independence. These writings earned Camus a certain moral authority. Yet, as the war for Algerian national liberation grew bloodier, he rapidly lost this authority in the eyes of both sides. His response to the Algerian conflict is truly tragic—partly because in retrospect his struggle seems (like that of so many tragic heroes) doomed from the start. French abuses, the bloody intransigence of the *pieds noirs*, the terrorist tactics of the FLN (Algerian National Liberation Front) had made a peaceful resolution impossible. The forces of the center were rapidly disappearing, pulled to one extreme or the other—or butchered by both sides. The ideal of a "new Mediterranean culture" that Camus had expressed in the late 1930s was now a mere will o' the wisp—which he continued willfully to pursue.

Camus's response to the Algerian tragedy reflected not only nostalgia for his dream, but the limitations of an approach oriented by moral perception rather than calculations of efficacy. His practical proposal was for a "civilian truce"—a mutual agreement to not target non-combatants. He advanced two arguments in favor of this initiative. First, morally, "no cause justifies the death of the innocent": if a civilian truce saved even one innocent life, it would be justified.<sup>157</sup> Second, the use of indiscriminate violence was self-defeating: "bloodshed, if it sometimes makes history progress, makes it progress toward even greater barbarism and misery"; "hatred and injustice" would poison the ground of civic life, ensuring that only withered fruit could grow. Camus thus again warned against the error of employing means that undermined the ends they were being used to pursue.<sup>158</sup>

Thus, Camus's response to the Algerian conflict cannot be easily separated from his larger political-ethical outlook. His statements and actions were in

keeping with his earlier stances. As in *The Rebel*, he insisted on the limits demanded by *relative* as opposed to *absolute* standards; as in “Neither Victims Nor Executioners,” he called for dialogue. Again he attacked the failure to confront the reality of human violence and death, and the tendency to reduce one’s opponent to a hateful and hate-filled abstraction. Again he insisted on each individual’s *responsibility* not to surrender to violent rage, arguing that while it might indeed be a “law” of history that when the oppressed take up arms on behalf of justice, they take a step toward doing injustice themselves, there still remained a *choice* about how far to go. There was nothing “realistic” about denying the ability of actors to affect the course of events by the conduct and tone they adopted. Nor was it “realistic” to expect a workable peace to emerge from increasingly inflamed hatred.<sup>159</sup>

Camus attacked both the evasion of responsibility in the name of a “realism” that resigned itself to the supposedly inevitable; and the self-righteous intransigence which held that “one’s brother must die rather than one’s principles.” Principles were important; but it was a strange notion of righteousness to identify virtue with the murder of children.<sup>160</sup> Camus’s expressions of this point—above all, his infamous, much-misunderstood statement, often quoted as “Between justice and my mother, I prefer my mother”—has created the impression that he repudiated justice in the name of familial attachment. What he actually said was “People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. *If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.*”<sup>161</sup> This was a rejection, not of justice, but of the ruthless dismissal of human attachments—or individual human lives—as counting for nothing.

In his picture of Camus as an exemplary “connected critic,” Michael Walzer emphasizes Camus’s rejection of *universalist* ethics, according to which being moral means being impartial—and thus, adopting a stance of *distance* toward one’s own community and prior commitments.<sup>162</sup> This captures a crucial feature of Camus’s moral sensibility. Yet this element of “partiality” was only part of Camus’s ethical vision, which also encompassed a demand to cultivate solidarity with all those who suffer *everywhere*—an ethical imperative he expressed politically in the campaign for human rights.<sup>163</sup> Camus’s ethical practice involved a constant movement from engagement to distance, from affiliation to independence—and from the certainty that comes from embracing a “side” as an activist, to the ambivalence of the self-reliant, self-searching critic. He viewed this as essential to his task as an artist *and* as a citizen: for, in order to “understand this world, one must sometimes turn away from it; to serve men better, one must *briefly* hold them at a distance.”<sup>164</sup>

One respect in which Camus *was* unreservedly critical of a “distanced” perspective was with regard to those who adopted a righteously intransigent position from afar, arguing for policies that subjected others to dangers from which they themselves remained safe. He reproved the metropolitan French for their tendency to blame, and sacrifice, the *pièdes noirs* for their own government’s decisions; as well as French leftists who were happy to excuse or exult over FLN violence that touched others.<sup>165</sup> This distance—physical and emotional—fostered a lazy callousness. Camus was determined to remain emotionally connected, not to one or another community, but to the whole agony of Algeria. He also sought to avoid subjecting others to dangers that he did not himself face: he delivered his plea for a civilian truce in Algiers, with a mob of angry *pièdes noirs* surrounding the building in which he spoke. The cost of his efforts was isolation, ineffectuality, and charges of self-indulgence and vanity.

Camus’s public statements do fall prey to the dangers of moralizing remonstrance. Even his confessions of limitation—“I cannot do violence to what I feel and what I believe . . . I lack the assurance that allows one to settle everything”<sup>166</sup>—can appear priggish. Camus was caught in a bind, one that points to the difficulties of seeking to foster a liberal ethos by exemplification. His statements reveal that he believed the promotion of such an ethos was essential: before there could be any hope of discovering solutions, both sides needed to adopt the sort of conduct and tone that could foster a more humane “atmosphere,” which *might* make it possible to find a way out of the increasingly bloody impasse. His own conduct and tone represented his attempt to foster the atmosphere that he believed necessary to achieving peace. Yet in the atmosphere that actually existed, his gestures could only appear *disconnected* from the bloody reality of Algeria—and increasingly self-involved.

When it became clear that dialogue was no longer possible, Camus withdrew from public polemic. But he did not abdicate his responsibility, privately writing to the French authorities to urge clemency for political prisoners on nearly 150 occasions. From a politics of public advocacy and “relative utopia” he turned to a politics of damage control, in which he could concentrate on solid particulars and make careful distinctions: this individual had killed no-one; this one had used violence, but not against civilians. His public silence itself was a moral act, a refusal to furnish excuses for inhumanity—or to bur-nish his own image as a moral authority when he could not do any practical good.<sup>167</sup> It was also a protest against the deafness of both sides, a demonstration of the death of dialogue. It was not enough; but it was all that Camus

could do under the circumstances. To recommend courses of action based on a dispassionate analysis might have been more useful. But such a course required aptitudes Camus lacked, while going against his greatest strength: the capacity to clearly see, and eloquently state, moral realities.

## Conclusion

Camus is open to the charge of neglecting political reality in favor of a moralistic “anti-politics.” Such anti-politics may be seen as founded on anodyne platitudes that fail to engage with thorny practical problems; and as narrowly focused on particular injustices and sufferings in a way that loses sight of the larger picture (and focuses too much on individual actions, as opposed to underlying “structural” realities). Rhapsodizing about the sacred inviolability of the trees, it loses sight of the forest—and thus, of the need to sacrifice some trees for the health of the ecosystem. Even his admirer Tony Judt has acknowledged Camus’s “romantic inability to recognize not just the political realities of the hour but the very principles of stable government” and his “rejection of disagreeable undertakings and outcomes of any kind.” Jeanson’s charge of being a Hegelian “beautiful soul” may seem justified.<sup>168</sup>

Yet such romanticism is perhaps needed to resist the pull of a too-simple “realism.” And an insistence that certain undertakings and outcomes were not merely “disagreeable” but atrocious was both brave and necessary in a milieu in which the prevailing intellectual tendency (and emotional impulse) was to deny this. Alibis for atrocity are always in plentiful supply; there is always a need for someone to expose the fatuity and inhumanity of these alibis. Camus did this with greater eloquence, honesty, and consistency than most of his generation. While his political engagements reflect a primarily moral impulse, his work avoids conventional moralizing: it is austere, ironic, free of cant and false sentiment. In this combination of romanticism, irony, pathos, and sobriety, Camus’s style, and the ethos it reflects, are distinctive—and attractive. Yet they may also have been a fatal handicap for *political* thought and action. Politics, after all, requires working with others—which means subordinating personal conscience and sentiment for the sake of institutional or collective efficacy. It means building coalitions—and, at some moments, keeping silent about one’s scruples, and throwing one’s support behind one side or the other in a conflict, even if both are morally compromised.

But there should be limits to this. In choosing among the available options and building coalitions, one should temper, not silence, conscience. Camus

performs a valuable service in warning against the urge to flee the responsibility of thinking for oneself into the refuge of fidelity to a party, movement, or ideology that will do one's thinking for one. Political engagement demands capacities for balancing and shifting between different perspectives. Sometimes one should subordinate one's tender conscience in order to commit oneself to a struggle for goals one recognizes as flawed. But one should also strive to retain independence of judgment, as well as a capacity for disagreement and, indeed, disgust.<sup>169</sup> And one should retain a sense of commitment to the victims, "all those who are suffering at this moment," against "the States and parties" who are the oppressors—as all states and parties will be, to some degree and at some point.<sup>170</sup> To recognize this is not to deny the principles of stable government, but to recognize its sometimes tragic costs—and its constant need to be made better.

There is another worry about Camus's ethos as a guide to politics. As with Weber, the moral seriousness and sense of the tragic of this ethos may make political engagement too burdensome, and thus encourage withdrawal—by which Camus was himself tempted.<sup>171</sup> While the worry is a just one, Camus could counter (again with Weber) that an unrealistic sense of politics' possibilities leads to disillusionment and either withdrawal or surrender to cynical opportunism. Just as political action should recognize (ethical) limits, political actors should recognize that politics is always limited in what it can offer to its participants and achieve of its objects. This *modest* conception of politics was, for Camus, crucial to democracy. "[G]ood and genuine democracies" require modesty as a civic disposition. The democrat is "a person who admits that his adversary may be right, who therefore allows him to speak, and who agrees to consider his arguments. When parties and people are so convinced by their own arguments that they are willing to resort to violence to silence those who disagree with them, democracy no longer exists. Modesty is therefore salutary in republics at all times."<sup>172</sup> Modesty serves as *both* a moderating influence and a critical tool. To be modest is to circumspectly eschew "irreparable judgment,"<sup>173</sup> but also to resolutely oppose the pretensions of dogmatists. Camus was accordingly not shy in deploying his modesty critically, to humble the proud and combat the intolerant; indeed, he identified his "vocation" as that of "telling consciences that they are not spotless and reasons that they lack something";<sup>174</sup> and demanded of his opponents, "Are they so sure of themselves, and so prodigiously infallible, that we must concede everything to them?"<sup>175</sup>

Insistence on human limitations fosters what we might call a "Sisyphean" conception of politics. Such a conception begins from historical pessimism,

which recognizes both the necessity of making sacrifices to attain just goals and the paltriness of those goals in proportion to the sacrifices they demand.<sup>176</sup> But it rejects *absolute* pessimism and resignation, insisting that “there are always days when the palaces of oppression crumble, when exile comes to an end, when liberty catches fire.” Such victories, though fleeting and costly, justify a “calm hope” which nourishes acts of resistance and defiance. Even if such actions do not succeed, they are not meaningless: they keep alive a sense of human dignity and conscience. One must continue to “exalt justice in order to fight against eternal injustice, create happiness in order to protest against the universe of unhappiness”—while practicing a politics that “does not believe in absolute and infallible doctrines but in obstinate and tireless if inevitably halting improvement.”<sup>177</sup> Sisyphus “scornfully” defies the gods through his resistance. He lucidly accepts the limits his condition imposes upon him. But he recognizes that within these limits it is still possible to resist. He defies the gods by not giving up on life; this is his “victory.”<sup>178</sup> The Sisyphean political actor defies human ideas and institutions that would set themselves up as gods; she recognizes the impossibility of complete success, but refuses resignation, insisting that even if “we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured,” we still can—and must—“reduce the number of tortured children.”<sup>179</sup> There is a moral imperative to limit the suffering we inflict through our actions. As Camus famously and beautifully wrote, “We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in others.”<sup>180</sup> To “imagine Sisyphus happy” is to find satisfaction in the fight.

Camus’s call for modesty and attack on dogmatism echo other tempered liberals; his account of heroism amplifies elements of tempered liberalism that are often neglected. His thought also highlights ethical resources that often are not given their due in liberal theory, but that can motivate and guide political action in ways that serve liberalism. One of these is a sense of *solidarity*, understood as concern and respect for the vulnerability, suffering, and claims to dignity and happiness that others share with us, and awareness of the dependence of our own well-being on joint action with others. Another is an impulse of rebellion, a passionate objection to injustice and suffering, which helps to guard against tempered liberalism’s tendency toward resignation and accommodation to the world as it is. A third ethical resource is a morally strenuous conception of civic responsibility, based on the conviction that freedom is “a perpetual risk, an exhausting adventure” that demands “strength of soul, and a patient defiance.”<sup>181</sup> This was not Nietzschean elitism: not only those who

can bear the burdens of freedom deserve to have their freedoms protected. But the protection of freedom for all does require excellence of character on the part of some. Camus's depiction of the moral demands of freedom offers a useful reminder that safeguarding rights requires not just institutions, but proud, self-assertive citizens who refuse to bend the knee, and stand up to defend their (and others') rights.<sup>182</sup> Vigilance, imagination, and an intransigently searching, self-critical inquisitiveness are necessary to guard liberalism against the dangers of routine and complacency—which are connected to, and fostered by, a focus on procedures.

Camus's approach offers important inspirations and warnings. It also contains limitations and dangers. In focusing on limits of ethical decency, it tends to slight limits of feasibility. It will often prove inadequate as a guide both to thinking about which of a set of possible, morally worthy goals to pursue, and what particular strategies or tactics to adopt in their pursuit. In his version of a liberal political ethos, responsibility, integrity, decency, and sobriety are given their due—but *prudence* is not. A somewhat more "realist" perspective on politics is needed, one imbued with the sobriety not of a disabused romantic but of a modest rationalist, attuned to the requirements not of moral witness but of political engagement. For this, we must turn from Camus to Raymond Aron.



## 4

# The “Morality of Prudence” and the Fertility of Doubt

RAYMOND ARON’S DEFENSE  
OF A REALIST LIBERALISM

[T]he decision, in our century, is one not only of our society but of our selves. To live in a totalitarian or a liberal country, to choose one or the other, is something fundamental by which one affirms what one is and wants to be . . . through politics one makes oneself.<sup>1</sup>

I don’t like to play at being the universal conscience. I find it indecent.<sup>2</sup>

IN 1946, Raymond Aron joined Camus at *Combat*. Both men issued calls for moral and economic regeneration; both favored a socialism leavened with respect for personal liberties, and opposed Communism. But their editorials differed markedly in tone. Camus expressed moral passion; Aron cultivated a cool rigor, presenting analysis as dispassionately as possible. The stylistic contrast reflected a difference of temper. Camus was a critic of “realism,” seeking justice and goodness. Aron was, as Camus’s biographer noted, “interested in politics as the art of the possible”; though not cynical, “he believed first and foremost in realities . . . Aron thought first of the leaders; Camus addressed himself to the reader.”<sup>3</sup> Both exemplify tempered liberalism; but they represent its “moralistic” and “realist” edges.

Long recognized as a major thinker of his time,<sup>4</sup> Aron (1905–1983) has not secured the intellectual niche accorded to such contemporaries as Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Carl Schmitt, or Leo Strauss—even though he often showed a firmer grasp of political and social developments, and a more lucid

resistance to political fantasy, than his more celebrated peers. This may reflect his very virtues: his sharp criticism and measured conclusions often seem to leave little by way of positive vision; stylistically, his writings bristle with unanswered questions. It may also reflect the intimidating breadth (and quantity) of his writings: as Stanley Hoffmann wrote, the scope of Aron's work “caused his commentators and his disciples to despair.”<sup>5</sup> To avoid despair, I focus on those strands in Aron's work that relate to the problems and project of tempered liberalism. This means treating Aron's work as philosopher, sociologist (including his engagement with the social thought of Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Marx, and Durkheim), and theorist of international relations—all of which were central to his thought—only tangentially. If this neglects many of Aron's central insights, it also illuminates important facets of his intellectual personality and preoccupations, which have not always been properly appreciated. Foremost among these are two themes central to “tempered liberalism”: the questions of how best to understand the relationship between moral ideals and political realities, and how best to balance the demands of political efficacy and personal integrity; and the “liberal predicament” of being hampered by liberal ideals when seeking to combat anti-liberal forces. Aron's responses to these problems highlight the importance and limitations of a “realistic” perspective. They also reveal preoccupations with heroism and personal honor that qualified Aron's realism and liberalism, investing them with complexities that were sources of both vulnerability and strength.

### Early Political Commitments and Philosophy of History

Like most Cold War liberals, Aron's outlook was shaped by the “psychological and material repercussions” of World War I and the interwar crisis of liberal democracy.<sup>6</sup> As he later recalled, in 1914 the world “entered an era of violence and super-violence . . . the democratic and liberal Europe of the end of the nineteenth century—democratic and liberal for itself, not for Africa or Asia . . . was dead.”<sup>7</sup> Aron came of age in a traumatized France whose governing elite proved sclerotic in the face of ideological polarization and international crisis. Politics appeared as an “affair of conscience,” demanding self-examination and commitment.<sup>8</sup> The events of the interwar period left Aron with a sense of the political power of irrationalism and cynicism, and the futility of absolutist moralism. In 1928, at age twenty-three, he took aim at Julien Benda's celebrated

polemic *La Trahison des Clercs*, contesting Benda's call for intellectuals to transcend politics in the name of eternal principles. Benda's position was too pessimistic and puristic: it represented abandonment of the world in which human beings live. Aron shared Benda's ideal of the intellectual committed to "free reflection" and opposed to vulgar materialism and "national prejudices and interests."<sup>9</sup> But he insisted that these commitments imposed a responsibility to join in political struggle. In this, he echoed his Marxist friend Paul Nizan, who insisted that intellectuals had a responsibility to enlist on the side of the working class. Aron never went this far; he sought a middle position between the "idealist" Benda and the "realist" Nizan, one defined by "an *attitude of mind* that is attached to truth and inspired by generosity."<sup>10</sup>

The young Aron was drawn to the Left—with reservations. He admired the Socialist premier Leon Blum's "intellectual and moral style," but found Blum's economic policies wanting. He was never attracted to the Soviet Union, since he was "a liberal by temperament,"<sup>11</sup> who agreed with the older liberal historian (and his fellow French Jew) Élie Halevy's insistence that, unless "human rights, political rights and freedom of thought" were preserved, socialism could only substitute "one servitude for another."<sup>12</sup> Yet Aron's liberalism was qualified by an ardent French patriotism, which led him to feel a responsibility for France's "salvation," and "despondency" over France's "decadence." This, and his "obsession" with "avoid[ing] civil war," led him to wonder "whether one day it would be necessary to choose between the salvation of my country and the preservation of freedom." Struck by the "contrast between the paralysis of democratic regimes" and the energy of totalitarian ones, he concluded "that if we need an authoritarian regime to save France, fine, let us accept it, while simultaneously detesting it."<sup>13</sup> A doubting socialist, a patriot against the Right, a liberal ready to accept authoritarianism, Aron adhered to none of the parties or ideological tendencies of the Third Republic.<sup>14</sup>

Aron's sense of isolation reflected his first-hand experience of the rise of Nazism during an academic sojourn in Cologne and Berlin (1930–33), which distanced him from his more idealistic peers and complacent elders. He was struck by the atmosphere of "fear . . . omnipresent and mortal danger," and the alacrity with which friendly Germans became enthusiasts of Hitler's Reich. Encountering "politics in its ruthless brutality" cured Aron of his "university idealism."<sup>15</sup> He came to appreciate the power of irrational hatreds and the thrill of violence, and encountered his life-long "enemy": totalitarianism. This fundamentally shaped his politics: ever after, in "any form of fanaticism, even one inspired by idealism, I suspect a new incarnation of the monster."<sup>16</sup> Witnessing

the Nazis’ resistible but ineffectually resisted rise confronted Aron with “the liberal predicament”: how to fight a ruthless enemy, without sacrificing freedom.

The roots of Aron’s preoccupation with political ethics predated his German sojourn. He had encountered political moralism in the person of Alain (the pen name of Émile-Auguste Chartier), a charismatic schoolteacher and influential writer. Alain was an unsystematic thinker, whose “*doctrine radicale*” was less a political theory than an ethical outlook, based in hatred of violence, inequality, and oppression, and suspicion of power as invariably corrupting. This was a negative ethos, characterized by wary vigilance and obdurate resistance.<sup>17</sup> Young Aron found Alain’s integrity, anti-militarism, and sympathy for the humble instinctively attractive, and joined Alain’s disciples around the pacifist review *Libres Propos*.<sup>18</sup> By 1933, however, he had abandoned pacifism; following France’s traumatic defeat in 1940 he became harshly critical of his former mentor, quoting Denis Brogan’s indictment that the “authority of a sophist like Alain is . . . enough to predict the ruin of any state.”<sup>19</sup> Alain’s “prestige and illusions” reflected and contributed to the political and moral weakness of the democracies: his doctrine that all political power should be renounced had fostered a “fatal” “resignation to despotism and war.” This “citizen-grumbler’s” refusal to make distinctions—between just and unjust wars, freer or more oppressive regimes—undermined the capacity for discrimination that was necessary to make *responsible* choices; his failure to translate moral feelings into “principles of effective action” rendered him incapable of offering sound political guidance.<sup>20</sup> Aron later tempered this critique, acknowledging that Alain was correct to insist that “the adoration of power or, even more, the claim of those in power to be adored, lies at the root of all tyrannies,” and that the wealthy and powerful will seek domination and must be criticized and resisted.<sup>21</sup> But Alain’s “liberalism based on suspicion” went too far, threatening to render government incapable of fulfilling its responsibilities.<sup>22</sup>

Against the liberalism of suspicion, Aron advocated a liberalism of responsibility, which accepted the need to make use of power, and sought to view politics from the perspective of political leaders. Aron vividly recalled an incident from 1932, when he gained an audience with Joseph Paganon, an under-secretary in the Foreign Ministry, whom he treated to a self-assured lecture on German affairs. After listening attentively, Paganon asked Aron pointedly what *he* would do in the minister’s place. Aron did not remember his answer—or if he said anything at all. After this “lesson,” he determined to “carry out my role

as commentator in an entirely different spirit” from that of intellectuals who criticize policies without trying to imagine what they might do if *they* were charged with making decisions within existing constraints.<sup>23</sup>

Aron’s conception of political responsibility was also shaped by his discovery of Weber’s work while in Germany in 1930–31. Aron was drawn to Weber by an “accord of sensibilities,” finding in him a rare combination of political understanding, dedication to the truth, and an ability “to decide and to act.”<sup>24</sup> Weber recognized the tension between the obligations of the detached scholar with those of the committed citizen, yet still offered a model of how to reconcile these divergent roles. While Aron would come to be critical of Weber, he continued to affirm both Weber’s tragic vision of human beings choosing and acting “at our own risk and peril,” without certainty or hope for a final “reconciliation,” and Weber’s ideal of a “reasonable” and responsible approach to political action.<sup>25</sup>

Weber’s influence, and his own experience, turned Aron against both a French sociological profession that “floated in a space above our real condition” as Nazism “threatened France and Judaism”;<sup>26</sup> and the pacifism he had previously professed. In an early critique of the latter, he addressed the relationship between politics and ethics. Political choices might be “based on moral considerations,” but they should not be derived directly from categorical “moral commands.” Rather, they must be justified with reference to “judgments of value and judgments of fact,” neither of which could claim absolute certainty. Judgments of fact could only be “probabilistic”; judgments of value imposed choices between conflicting and incommensurable “authentic values” (e.g., peace, justice, honor, or “national glory”).<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Aron advanced the “realist” claim that the realities of politics imposed certain priorities—foremost among them the preservation of public order and national security against anarchy and foreign conquest. This, combined with his commitment to patriotism, imposed limits on Aron’s liberalism when it came to countenancing conscientious objection. Citizens had a duty to obey the law, even if they deemed it “absurd and criminal,” and to contribute to defending the political communities whose protection they enjoyed, even when they disagreed with the course of those communities.<sup>28</sup> Aron’s politics would continue to be marked by an emphasis on the need to balance individual rights against obligations of a “civic morality,” which places the survival of the community above all else.<sup>29</sup>

Aron again manifested a “realist” stance in his analysis of French-German relations published in the Catholic journal *Esprit* in 1933. He framed his

analysis with an assertion that "a good policy is defined by its efficacy, not its virtue"; and that "if one wants to think or act politically, one must above all take the world as it is." He attacked "the danger of big words, the hypocrisy of noble formulas," and the tendency to seek refuge from reality in "ideologies" or "dreams of moral revolution." Yet this critique of "idealism" itself expressed an ethical ideal. "Realistic politics" were defined by a "spiritual will" and ethical "discipline" marked by "lucidity," courage, and "the scruple for truth." Aron's goal in the article, indeed, was not so much to advocate a policy as to foster an ethos; he declared that he attached less importance to any particular conclusions than to "the attitude which I have sought to suggest: an honest effort to consent to reality."<sup>30</sup>

Aron's emphasis on political responsibility assumes a capacity to act effectively; his injunction to respect reality implies limitations on what is possible. Issues of individual freedom and historical determinism thus loomed over his thought. Accordingly, he dedicated his doctoral thesis to the philosophy of history. While it is not the most obvious (or attractive<sup>31</sup>) place to turn for an understanding of his political thought, Aron himself described the thesis as "an introduction to political science." He began his oral defense by posing a political question: "Why am I a socialist? What does it mean to have a political position?"<sup>32</sup> The ensuing discussion made clear that the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* was an act of rebellion against the progressive optimism and detachment from political struggle of Aron's elders<sup>33</sup>—who were duly discomfited: one examiner wondered whether Aron was diabolically cynical, or despairing ("satanique ou despere").<sup>34</sup> He was neither; indeed, while it expressed a skeptical, even tragic, philosophy of history, the thesis sought to overcome nihilism and show "the necessity of rediscovering a faith in man."<sup>35</sup> Aron concluded (as he wrote a decade later) that "atheist humanism can define itself only by accepting the limits of human existence": "Man without God risks his life for impure causes and cannot avoid doing so . . . humanity can create itself only through doubt and error," and the responsible man "acts not out of a will to be God but out of a wisdom that willingly falls short of the absolute."<sup>36</sup> Aron thus arrived at the same emphasis on limits and humility that Camus later articulated in *The Rebel*. But his mode of doing so was more philosophically rigorous.

For Aron, historical analysis should aim both at causal explanation—which can only be incomplete, probabilistic, and contestable;<sup>37</sup> and at "understanding" the *meaning* that actions and events had for the historical participants involved. This invariably requires integrating the perspectives of historical

actors with the inquirer's own, which reflects her knowledge of multiple past perspectives and subsequent developments, and her concerns as an agent caught up in her own history. Historical knowledge is doubly "partial": always incomplete, and influenced by the perspective of the observer. Attempts to understand historical events yield a plurality of interpretations, each of which may be valid in relation to the questions the historian asks and the subset of historical phenomena on which she chooses to focus. No grand theory or method can resolve this plurality into a unity.<sup>38</sup>

Alongside this *explanatory* pluralism, Aron articulated a *normative* pluralism, which saw different values as "co-ordinate and not subordinate, just as are models of humanity, the artist and the sage, the hero or the saint." Expanding on this latter formulation, which characterized pluralism in terms of individual types rather than abstract values, Aron added that "One does not ask of the revolutionary the impartiality of the scientist, or of the sage the tragic struggle of the saint, or of the hero the moderation of the judge. In choosing a human model to follow, or a certain activity, one gives up certain merits, and bows to some necessities."<sup>39</sup>

The pluralism of history and of values imposed a need to *choose*. For Aron, the primary political choice was whether to accept or reject the existing order; the fundamental political division was between conservatives and reformers on one side, and revolutionaries on the other. Aron was hardly impartial, asserting that revolutionaries had "no program, unless it is a demagogic one," but only "an *ideology*"—an idealized, probably unrealizable vision of an alternative system.<sup>40</sup> This was part of revolution's appeal: "reform is boring and revolution exciting. The one is prosaic, the other poetic."<sup>41</sup> It was impossible to *know* whether a revolution would be successful (or justified by its results). But there were two bases for reasonable prediction. One was the qualities of "the men who . . . are given the opportunity and responsibility of bringing [the revolution] about." This could only take one so far, since revolutionaries "will be changed by their own victory." There was a need to draw, second, on observation of past revolutions, which suggested that revolutionaries would be just as susceptible to the longing for power, and thus the inclination for domination, as any other political rulers.<sup>42</sup>

Alongside the alternatives of conservation or revolution, Aron posited a "fundamental antinomy" between the "politics of understanding" and the "politics of reason." The former takes its bearings from immediate circumstances and seeks to achieve what good can be achieved at the moment. The latter is founded on an image of long-term transformation; its ethics are



defined by the duty to achieve this ultimate end. The politician of understanding recognizes a constant, dynamic interplay of means and ends: He makes choices concerning means in relation to the ends he seeks, but also makes decisions about what ends to pursue based on the means available and calculations of the likely results of using those means. The politician of reason sees the end as fixed and proceeds to deduce means from it. The difference between the two approaches is thus epistemological, and ethical: a difference between epistemic modesty, which enjoined prudence and flexibility, and epistemic confidence, which enjoined strict adherence to the principles and plans divulged by reason. This was *not* equivalent to a contrast between "idealism" / "moralism" and "realism": Aron identified both the "realist" Weber and the "moralist" Alain with the "politics of understanding," and implicitly associated the "politics of reason" with both pacifist "idealists" and revolutionary "realists."<sup>43</sup>

While he clearly favored the "politics of understanding," Aron acknowledged that *either* approach might be dangerous if it becomes *fanatical*—where "fanaticism" means a single-minded commitment to one goal that sacrifices all others. This could take the form of condemning the present generation to perdition in the name of a bright future (a fanaticism of "reason"); or of identifying an immediate need as "the final human goal" (a fanaticism of "understanding"). Each could foster politically dangerous dispositions—dogmatic self-confidence and rigidity (vices of "reason"), or fickleness and opportunism (vices of "understanding"). Against these, Aron called for the cultivation of humility and flexibility, which acknowledge the limits of our knowledge, and of "sincerity" in committing oneself to goals that remained open to revision; and acceptance of responsibility for defining one's own ethical commitments.<sup>44</sup> This stance may seem too nonjudgmental to license a strong defense of liberalism, and too devoted to ideals of sincerity and integrity to sit comfortably with a politics of compromise. But it does promote an ethos of intellectual honesty, respect for individual freedom, and acceptance of inevitable uncertainty and tragedy, which inoculated Aron against the surrender of judgment and scruples to the dictates of dogma or efficacy.

Insistence on the necessity of choosing and acting in the face of uncertainty led Aron to recognize the importance of ethos in two respects. First, he saw individuals' choices as influenced more by "ethos" (understood as "the psychological conditions of individuals or groups," as shaped by "hierarchies of values") and "originality of character," than by either "general rules or . . . circumstances."<sup>45</sup> Second, he held that ethical judgment should be concerned

not only with consequences or intentions, but the “total personality” of “a unique human being”; action should be seen not as “a question of conforming to the rules, or of obedience to the laws,” but “of *human quality*.”<sup>46</sup> This concern with ethos as an explanatory and evaluative factor, as well as an ambivalent defense *and* critique of liberalism, shaped Aron’s analysis of what he took to be the defining political challenge of his day: totalitarianism.

### Machiavellianism and Fanaticism: Aron’s Response to Totalitarianism and “Realism”

In the late 1930s Aron planned a major work on Machiavelli and “*machiavélisme*.” This reflected a perception of the renewed relevance of Machiavellianism in an age of “modern tyrannies,” when “lying and murder have become methods of governing.” “Machiavellianism” referred both to a type of politics—“governing by terror and ruse”—and a type of political analysis, which focused on effective techniques for gaining, maintaining, and increasing power. Both types of Machiavellianism reflected “*a certain manner of thinking*,” combining pessimism, amorality, and exaltation of self-assertion.<sup>47</sup> Disrupted by the war, the book on Machiavellianism was never completed, and Aron rarely returned to the Florentine thinker (though, as we shall see, he continued to engage with “Machiavellian” positions). It did, however, yield a paper on “Democratic and Totalitarian States,” delivered before the Société Française de Philosophie on June 17, 1939—less than three months before the outbreak of war.

Aron began from the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto’s contention that every polity is dominated by an elite, and that “the nature of a political regime is determined by the *character* of this elite.”<sup>48</sup> Democratic and totalitarian states were distinguished by the domination of democratic and totalitarian elites, defined not by class origin, but by the ethos they embraced. Totalitarian elites had “almost unbounded contempt” for democratic elites’ moderation and self-restraint. They affirmed “community against individualism, heroism against bourgeois values, character against intelligence, discipline against freedom, faith against reason.” They cultivated a “cynical, efficient, naturally Machiavellian, and violent” ethos marked by “essentially military” virtues of “action, self-discipline, and dedication.”<sup>49</sup> Unlike their democratic opponents, totalitarian parties insisted on intellectual and emotional uniformity, only admitting true believers who were willing to surrender their individual judgment: they thus combined “the spread of a fanatic religion with the organization of a

militia." These totalitarian warriors were not heroes, but bullies. Nevertheless, their "caricature of bravery" seemed "to inspire, if not admiration, then at least fear, within the hearts of the hesitant masses and the moderates who often side with whomever seems most likely to win." By acquiring "the prestige of violence," they scored a psychological victory.<sup>50</sup>

This presented a dilemma for democracy—or liberalism. For the conception of "democracy" with which Aron contrasted totalitarianism is distinctly liberal. Aron denigrated the principle of popular sovereignty as "not essential," since it could "lead as easily to despotism as to liberty." What *was* essential was "governance by laws where power is not arbitrary and unlimited"; representation; and "respect for the person and for the mind." Defenders of democracy were "conservative, since we are liberals" who wished to preserve "personal dignity and autonomy."<sup>51</sup> The "we" here is revealing. Aron was committed in the battle between liberal democracy and totalitarianism. But if he was a committed liberal, he was also an anxious one. Liberal practice was uninspiring; liberal theory, founded on the moribund "political and historical optimism of the nineteenth century," untenable. Democracy's "political and moral defects" provided "the best arguments in favor of tyrannies." Democracy's defenders had to surmount the scruples that prevented them from effectively combating their opponents—and show themselves "capable of the same virtues" as those opponents.<sup>52</sup>

Such statements reflect Aron's ambivalence toward "Machiavellianism." Machiavellians, he insisted, pushed their logic too far to be truly "realistic."<sup>53</sup> "[O]bsessed with the struggle for power," these "cynical" "pseudo-realists" failed to recognize the basic human demand for legitimacy.<sup>54</sup> Yet Aron shared the "Machiavellian" apprehension that "peoples who, in the name of laws of ethics, would forget the permanent necessities of domestic order and of international rivalry, would condemn themselves to decadence."<sup>55</sup> His insistence that democracies must rise to the challenge of totalitarianism by emulating their opponents' militant "virtues" amounted to what the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain termed "moderate Machiavellianism."<sup>56</sup> Maritain was in attendance at the presentation of "Democratic and Totalitarian States" and in the ensuing discussion pushed Aron to acknowledge that "if we borrow the totalitarian techniques and the totalitarian virtues . . . we'll become like them." Surely the "heroic virtues" the democracies needed were distinct from the totalitarian virtues: democracies must cultivate "their own virtues which alone could give them the strength to resist."<sup>57</sup> Aron acknowledged the "danger of contagion"—the possibility that features of the totalitarian ethos,

such as “orthodox fanaticism” and “Machiavellian” worship of strength and contempt for the weak, might take root in democratic societies. Liberal democrats were caught between the dangers of infection by their opponents’ vices and defeat due to adherence to their own notions of virtue. In order to avoid these shoals, it was necessary to discriminate between “permissible borrowings” from the totalitarian regimes, and fatal corruptions.<sup>58</sup>

But how to do this? Aron suggested three paths. One was to distinguish the outmoded, ineffectual *institutions* of democracy from its “permanent values,” and discover new institutional arrangements and policies (such as greater economic intervention) that would better serve those underlying values within contemporary conditions. The second focused on the *means* of inculcating virtues and inspiring sacrifice: while totalitarian regimes foster virtue by forcibly imposing militaristic discipline on their subjects, democracies call upon their citizens to accept burdens and sacrifices *voluntarily*. Democracy is thus more ethically demanding—and potentially noble—than totalitarianism: it depends on citizens maintaining a degree of civic virtue. This was related to the third path, which focused on qualities of character and ethical outlook, or *ethos*. Aron followed this path when he warned that in order to save democracy, it was necessary to “reconstruct a ruling elite that is neither cynical nor cowardly, that has political courage without being Machiavellian,” that had both “self-confidence and a sense of its own mission,” *and* “the intellectual courage to call everything into question.” Leaders—and educators—of democratic societies should seek to cultivate a perspective “between the radical cynicism of some and the detached moralism of others.”<sup>59</sup>

Aron still insisted, in a “realist” vein, that “if one intends to survive, one must consent to efficient means. . . . All peoples who want to live must have a minimum of will to power, of consent to violence.”<sup>60</sup> This was too much for Maritain, who subsequently argued (from exile in America) that “moderate Machiavellianism” was an untenable halfway house to “absolute Machiavellianism,” the “boundless and cynical” ruthlessness of which would always give it a practical advantage over “timid” moderate Machiavellians. Against *both* types of Machiavellianism, Maritain insisted that politics should aim at *moral* ends—the promotion of the common good, rather than mere power or success; and that a policy of justice ultimately worked to the achievement of a happy state, while Machiavellianism poisoned the communities that embraced it. In the long term, moral means would triumph over immoral ones.<sup>61</sup> Responding in *France Libre* (the Gaullist journal he assisted in editing from London), Aron agreed that “the quality of the means colors” the results achieved,

that it was "dehumanizing" to desire power "at any price and on any terms," and that "cynicism in the service of the ideal" tended to degenerate into "cynicism pure and simple." But, he insisted, there remained an insurmountable "antinomy" between moral imperatives and the means necessary for political efficacy. In "the real world," "unarmed nations, like unarmed prophets, perish." The crucial questions were where to draw the line between "legitimate cunning" and "immoral deceit," the force necessary to maintain peace and the evils of unchecked violence. These questions could not be answered abstractly, but only via a "casuistry of political morality," which considered matters of proportionality and gave greater weight to immediate and foreseeable consequences. Even if injustice ultimately defeated itself, this was little comfort for those who must choose in ignorance of the future—or those who suffer *now* for their strict adherence to morality: "the just person who has been [Machiavellianism's] first victim knows *both* his sufferings and defeat and the provisional victory of his vanquisher," but not whether the criminal nation that destroys him will ultimately fall. Aron concluded on a Weberian note: "what gives political life its somber grandeur is that statesmen come to do acts they detest because they believe themselves, in conscience and the depths of their soul, accountable for the common destiny."<sup>62</sup>

This pointed back to the role of ethos; Aron now emphasized the importance of opposing "to Machiavellianism a *radically different spirit*."<sup>63</sup> He did not directly specify this spirit's characteristics. But he delineated its opposite in another article for *France Libre*, "The Future of the Secular Religions," in which he returned to the problem of democracy's failure to inspire devotion among its defenders. The "secular religions"—Communism and Nazism—offered the sense of meaning and coherence amidst confusion and doubt that had previously been provided by the "spiritual" religions. Promising salvation through an apocalyptic final conflict between good and evil, they identified a "quasi-sacred goal" to be pursued at *all* costs—and thereby valorized and fostered dispositions of "intransigence" and "unconditional fervor."<sup>64</sup> In this way, fervent devotion to an ideal and the conviction of sanctity inspired a "ruthless Machiavellianism." However, the link between dogmatic faith and cynical authoritarianism could run in the other direction: ambitious would-be rulers cynically made use of secular religions to sanctify their power.<sup>65</sup> And sincere fanaticism itself might grow out of nihilism, which induced an "unbearable vertigo," from which it was tempting to escape into a dogmatic faith.<sup>66</sup> The combination of cynicism and fanaticism made the new faiths strong, because they were deaf to arguments or scruples, and impervious to evidence or doubt.

Yet their cynical betrayal of their professed ideals, and inability to defend those ideals rationally, *might* make them vulnerable, and open the way for the “re-awakening of . . . a kind of humane liberalism.”<sup>67</sup>

Aron carried forward this analysis in the postwar essay “History and Politics” (1949), where he contrasted “Machiavellian” and “millenarian” politics. The former adopted a static vision that attributed social conflict to unchanging facts of human nature and held that any political order that could contain these conflicts and constrain human sinfulness should be upheld. “[D]octrinal relativism” propelled Machiavellians into “practical dogmatism”: they came to regard existing political orders as necessary to protect against chaos—and defended those orders ruthlessly. Millenarian politics similarly endow an earthly political objective with “absolute value”; but *their* political objective lies in a future, yet-to-be-created order. The *revolutionary* millenarian sees final human fulfillment as historically imminent and adopts an absolutist consequentialism that takes the creation of the ideal society as the sole reference point for all evaluation. This effectively “eliminates all standards but that of efficiency,” so that millenarians use “with a good conscience any means, however abhorrent.” Thus, *both* Machiavellianism and millenarianism blended fanaticism and ruthlessness. Glorifying “the will to power,” Machiavellians sought “to achieve for themselves the advantages of millenarianism, just as millenarianism does not hesitate to resort to the ways of cynicism.” The millenarian declares that “All means are good since the end is sacred”; the Machiavellian concludes that the end must “appear sacred since we must convince the crowd to accept any sacrifice to attain it.”<sup>68</sup>

Against millenarian and Machiavellian politics, Aron posed a third alternative: “progressive politics,” which is forward-looking without being prophetic or eschatological, and flexible without being relativist. The progressive’s goal is “to lessen as much as possible the ills inseparable from the human condition,” by improving existing institutions and combating immediate dangers, rather than creating the world anew. Progressive politics orients itself by a regulative idea of justice or good order, which serves as a criterion for evaluating the present and object of aspiration at which to aim, but does not promise success, or dictate specific policies or immediate objectives. Such a perspective, Aron suggested, better serves human welfare than optimism that aspires to perfection, or pessimism that denies the possibility of improvement.<sup>69</sup>

One might expect Aron to champion the “progressive” alternative as superior—and see his essay as a defense of liberalism against conservative and Communist rivals. Yet Aron did not identify these perspectives with specific

ideologies. Liberals themselves might become dogmatically wedded either to existing institutions that failed to serve the values at which they aimed (the error of Machiavellianism), or to the vision of a future liberal utopia (the error of Millenarianism); they might become ruthless in defense of the former or pursuit of the latter. And each of the three outlooks had potential value. Millenarianism “teaches us never to be satisfied with what has been achieved”; Machiavellianism “reminds us that through all the upheavals there are needs common to all societies and traditions that must be safeguarded”; progressivism inspired a pragmatic activism. In times of calm, these perspectives might productively interact; in times of crisis, each tends to be taken to an extreme, which denies the value of the others and seeks to destroy them.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the primary ideological dangers varied with the circumstances. Preoccupied with liberal failures in the early 1930s, dedicated to combating Nazism before and during World War II, in the postwar period Aron’s fears and polemical focus shifted to the other “secular religion”: Communism.

### Marxism: Idolatry of History, Myth of Revolution, and Lure of Fanaticism

Immediately after the war, Aron was among the left-wing intellectuals (including Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty) constituting the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*. He soon broke decisively from these comrades and joined the center-right daily *Le Figaro* as a columnist in 1947 (in 1977 he would switch to the center-left weekly *L’Express*). Aron did not thereby embrace conservatism; indeed, he linked his critique of the *communisant* Left to anxiety for the “spirit of the eternal Left,” which, “opposed to all orthodoxies and moved by all human suffering,” was “surely dying” when pity became a “‘one-way’ virtue,” directed only toward victims who were ideologically correct.<sup>71</sup> Aron echoed Camus, declaring that the “concentration camps of Siberia do not excuse the slums of Billancourt.” Presenting his critique of Marxism to American readers, he added, “if I lived in the United States I would probably devote more time to denouncing the anti-Communist obsession” than to attacking Communist “illusions”; in his most famous anti-Communist polemic he warned that many in the West were as guilty of “fanaticism” as their Communist foes—as evidenced by the “frenzy” of McCarthyism.<sup>72</sup> Aron was undeniably a Cold Warrior, active in organizations such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) and other anti-Communist initiatives.<sup>73</sup> But his anti-Communism



remained tempered by his recognition that “all political battles are equivocal. Politics is never a conflict between good and evil, but always a choice between the preferable and the detestable.”<sup>74</sup>

Aron’s anti-Communism reflected his analysis of the dangers of Machiavellian and millenarian politics—of which Communism represented a synthesis. Recognizing that they inhabited a Machiavellian world “wherein violence, domination, and exploitation reign,” and seeing on the horizon a new world purged of evil, Communists put their faith in the modern Prince—the Party. For these Machiavellian-millenarians, the “grandeur of the distant goal” justified “the ruthless rigor of methods” used in its pursuit; while the iron-clad logic of an *ideological* mind-set “dissipates doubts, awakens enthusiasm, and sustains faith.”<sup>75</sup> For Aron, “ideology” involved both a type of belief system, and a manner of thinking that goes with it. Ideologies rest on a “formalization of facts, interpretations, desires and predictions” into a comprehensive, authoritative framework, which offers “the security provided by a closed system in which the whole of history as well as one’s own person find their place and their meaning.” This fostered a fanatical manner of thinking, characterized by impassioned, single-minded insistence on the sole validity of one’s own ideals and objectives. Going beyond the simplification and enthusiasm required by any political movement, the fanatic claims possession of an infallible truth, and rejects the very possibility that he may be wrong.<sup>76</sup>

Aron’s most famous anti-Communist polemic, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), focused on matters of doctrine, and particularly the Marxian philosophy of history. Aron attacked not only historical materialism, but “historical optimism and rationalism” more broadly: the assumption that “the future is better than the present and that the direction in which societies must move is fixed once and for all.” This faith was shared by liberals and progressives; Marxism was peculiar, and particularly prone to ruthlessness, in embracing a “*catastrophic* optimism,” which confidently foresaw historical salvation being achieved through cataclysmic, revolutionary conflict.<sup>77</sup> Aron also inveighed against Marxist “prophetism”: its claim to possess the “key to the future,” which guaranteed success and vindication. From a prophetic perspective, atrocities—the liquidation of the kulaks, the slaughter of heretics and laggards, the deportation of minorities—became “mere episodes, painful but unimportant,” within the “realization” of a larger historical mission.<sup>78</sup> Against the belief in historical “totality” at the heart of Marxian historical prophetism, he insisted that there was no reason to trust that “collective history” would ultimately reveal a single meaning: There would always remain an

inexhaustible plurality of meanings that could plausibly be imputed to historical events. Nor was there reason to assume that human history was moving toward a fulfilling culmination: "Humanity can be carried away by a cosmic catastrophe as can our child by illness."<sup>79</sup> This should foster not despair or resignation, but "an active pessimism," which denied that there would be some future moment of fulfillment that would render all of history meaningful, and insisted that there existed a "margin of uncertainty" in which human beings could freely exercise judgment and choice to make the world better—or worse. "Active pessimism," then, did not condemn humanity to failure, but "imposes on men tasks that are constantly being renewed."<sup>80</sup>

Aron's critique of historical optimism, prophetism, and "monism" thus carried clear ethical implications. For those who "do not claim to know history's last word sometimes hesitate before embarking on an enterprise, however attractive, the cost of which would be too high." True "historical awareness" teaches that every cause is imperfect, that morally good people can embrace opposing sides; it thus "recalls us to the duty of tolerance." Those who claim absolute knowledge of the meaning of history, in contrast, "ignore such scruples. The sublime end excuses the revolting means." Historical fanaticism sees in the opponent "an enemy to be eliminated, and a contemptible enemy at that since he is incapable of wanting the good or of recognizing it." This "carries the risk of setting up the victors as judges of the vanquished, the State as the sole witness of the truth." Against the serene ruthlessness fostered by historical prophecy, Aron pleaded "for the living, not against those who will come after them, but against the casualness with which intellectuals of good will agree to let the living suffer for the possible profit of those who are not yet born."<sup>81</sup>

*Opium's* critique of Marxism was also ethical in returning to the issue of the relationship between means and ends—particularly pertaining to the means of revolution (recalling Aron's doctoral thesis; it is striking how far the "Cold War" polemic reflected ideas developed in the 1930s). The "revolutionary myth" was premised on a faith that revolution could "produce benefits which are incompatible with its very essence." This was implausible: "anyone who counts on the dictatorship of the proletariat to accomplish freedom misjudges human nature and ignores the inevitable results of the concentration of power in a few hands," and the way in which the resort to violence "spreads the taste and the habit of forcible solutions."<sup>82</sup> This was not to say that violence was *never* justified. Sometimes the only viable alternatives were "a barren conservatism and violence"; in such circumstances a "man of feeling" might "prefer the risks of revolution, even a Communist revolution, to the intolerable vices

of the established order.” But violence must be *limited* in extent and duration; indefinite use of terror (as in the Soviet Union) could not be justified.<sup>83</sup> And while revolutionary violence might not be ruled out, a revolutionary *mentality*, which confidently assumes the inevitability of triumph “because the cause which embodies so much hope cannot possibly fail,” should be rejected. Not only did such a mentality breed excess; it “condemns” its adherents to disappointment. “[T]herapeutic methods” of incremental reform, consisting of “partial and *ad hoc* measures,” were preferable to violent revolution—even if the results of reform were “as boring as an English Sunday.”<sup>84</sup>

Such a prospect was particularly repulsive to the friend of Aron’s youth, Jean-Paul Sartre. Aron saw in Sartre’s thinking the reflection of a broader ethos common among leftist intellectuals. Sartrean existentialism’s insistence on the hypocrisy and injustice of existing society, the desirability of transformation, and the capacity of individuals to remake their world could support *either* reformist or revolutionary politics. Sartre’s choice of the latter reflected an “inverted moralism,” which viewed life in terms of clear-cut oppositions and sought simple solutions. This fueled disdain for reform, and a tendency to exalt action and admire righteous militants. When Sartre thought or spoke of motion, he tended to do so in terms of thrusts and leaps, not more gradual movement. He was “allergic to prosaic reforms: the proletariat must not be allowed to compromise with the ‘swine’”—i.e., bourgeois liberals.<sup>85</sup> These affective and characterological elements provided a more formidable motivation for the embrace of ruthlessness than did doctrine alone. Indeed, such features of the Communist militant ethos as the tendency to “see the world in black and white,” and reluctance to accept a complex, fragmented, pluralistic reality, were more attractive and durable than Marxist doctrine—and often continued to mark the outlooks and reactions of those who had ceased to believe in Marxist doctrine, whether they remained within the Communist fold or became ex-Communists with a Bolshevik spirit.<sup>86</sup>

Aron’s anti-Communism, in contrast, remained ethically liberal, guided by an insistence that the “free world would be guilty of a fatal error if it thought that it possessed a unique ideology comparable to Marxist-Leninism.” The difference between Communist and liberal regimes was not only institutional, but *ethical*—a difference in outlooks or dispositions. The “true Communist is the man who accepts the whole of the Soviet system in the terms dictated by the Party. The true ‘Westerner’ is the man who accepts nothing unreservedly in our civilization except the liberty it allows him to criticize it and the chance it offers him to improve it.”<sup>87</sup> Criticism of rulers and the status quo represented

not a betrayal of, but allegiance to, the animating ethos of liberal democracy. The Cold War itself was—or should be—not a competition between economic systems or political communities, but a contest between a spirit of dogmatism and fanaticism, and one of openness, tolerance, and skepticism.

At the same time, Aron, to a greater extent than Camus (or Niebuhr and Berlin, who inhabited more stable political orders), was aware of the potential tensions between fidelity to liberal principles and efficacy in defending liberalism. His mature account of politics grappled with “the liberal predicament,” and counseled a more hard-headed, “Machiavellian” response than that accepted by other “tempered liberals”—even as he continued to critique extreme “realism” and defend the importance of respect for liberal norms and scruples.

### Aron’s Mature Politics: “Moderate” Realism and the Ethic of Prudence

Aron’s analysis of politics, presented in academic lectures and writings during the 1950s and early ’60s, began from “realist” premises. All regimes use coercion; all are faced with “conflicting demands which, carried to extremes, would be totally incompatible,” between which they must “achieve a reasonable compromise.” None perfectly realizes the values it chooses to prioritize.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, regimes could still be comparatively evaluated. The main comparison on which Aron focused was between democracy and totalitarianism. Democratic and totalitarian societies differed fundamentally not in their social and economic conditions,<sup>89</sup> but in how they responded to conflict. Democracy legitimized differing conceptions of the common good, instantiated in competing parties; totalitarianism identified one party as legitimate, and one conception of the good as “obligatory for everyone.” The first was *constitutional*, constraining the rulers by a system of laws and rights; the latter was *revolutionary*, allowing rulers unconstrained power to pursue transformative goals.<sup>90</sup>

In evaluating regimes, Aron distinguished between “imperfections of fact,” which reflected contingent shortcomings in implementing a regime’s principles; and “essential” imperfections, which arose directly from those principles themselves.<sup>91</sup> If a regime’s essential imperfection seemed to present an insurmountable barrier to the attainment of its own stated goals, this was a strong reason to reject the regime. This recalls Weber’s understanding of purposive rationality, which focuses on the “fit” between avowed ends and available

means, in order to make a reasonable choice of means.<sup>92</sup> For Aron this was a telling point against “revolutionary” regimes that claimed to pursue the eradication of hierarchy and coercion, while adopting essentially coercive and hierarchical institutions and policies. Democracy, on the other hand—at least in Aron’s liberal conception of it—did not seek the impossible: it accepted the necessity of both allowing conflict (rather than seeking, futilely, to eliminate it, as totalitarian regimes did) and preventing it from degenerating into violence. It did so by dividing power, entrenching rights, and ensuring that competition for power remained constrained by fair, nondiscriminatory rules.<sup>93</sup> Democracy’s great merit lay in its very modesty: it was “the only regime that admits—what am I saying?—that proclaims that the history of states is and must be written not in verse but in prose.” Aron’s political thought was a defense of prosiness.<sup>94</sup>

This analysis strengthened, rather than substituting for, a defense of liberal values: above all, “respect for the individual and freedom of enquiry,” and “the autonomy of the human mind,” and opposition to religious or ideological conformity.<sup>95</sup> The ideal and practice of civic and moral equality were also central to Aron’s liberalism: even as he insisted on the need to accept a degree of socioeconomic inequality and political hierarchy, Aron remained “egalitarian in the moral sense of the term” (he particularly loathed the rigid hierarchies of French academia).<sup>96</sup> Liberalism required not just free institutions but “a spirit of openness and equality between men,” which sought to prevent inequalities from becoming too painful or humiliating, or disagreements too furious and violent.<sup>97</sup> It was commitment to this spirit, as much as his evaluation of the comparative efficacy of different institutional arrangements, that made Aron a liberal.

Yet Aron’s liberalism remained qualified by a pessimistic awareness of the constant “risk of brutality sweeping away the barriers raised by culture and animal fury stifling the sense of human community” among political opponents.<sup>98</sup> All political orders produce discontent, which is apt to intensify into enmity, and may erupt in violence; all are prone to “corruption” arising from the dysfunction of institutions or perversion of norms.<sup>99</sup> While generally depicting them as contingently rather than “essentially” corrupt, Aron acknowledged two *essential* weaknesses in liberal-democratic regimes. First, they particularly struggle to maintain a viable degree of *moral vitality*, which depends on cultivating the qualities of character that enable the regime to function and maintain belief in the regime’s ideals. This was difficult in liberal regimes: for “despotism drums up enthusiasm, democracy brings out dissatisfaction.”

Second, liberal democracies protect "freedom for the enemies of freedom"—so that, in drastic circumstances, they are faced with "the alternative either of a *coup d'état* or the accession to power" of parties that seek to destroy liberal democracy. This posed a fundamental question: "must freedom be allowed to the enemies of freedom?"<sup>100</sup>

These anxieties, born of the Nazis' success in undermining the Weimar Republic, abated, but never abandoned Aron. They pushed him toward a "Machiavellian" perspective, which insisted that, during crises when "an order has collapsed and must be built anew from nothing," the side most likely to prevail will be that with "the capacity for command, the aptitude for brutality and cunning, fanatic confidence in themselves and in their cause."<sup>101</sup> At such moments, democracy's survival depended on the ability of tough-minded elites to take drastic action, overriding both scruples and institutional constraints. Yet Aron also insisted that "in the long run, absolute power may finally exact a higher price than paralyzing anarchy." Liberal democracies must defend themselves. But they could destroy themselves as effectively by resorting to self-defensive terror, as by allowing themselves to be overthrown through laxity. When a country was divided over fundamental political questions, it was "often better to accept a state of semi-paralysis" than to eliminate opposition—even from revolutionary parties. Only when the regime was in danger of imminent collapse might more extreme measures be justified; even then, a *constitutional* regime must "act within the law," and set limits on the power of the authorities. For "[s]o long as the laws of the constitution are respected, something is salvaged. It is in abiding by the law in times in which men are carried away by their passions that civil peace is best preserved."<sup>102</sup>

Here we return to the importance of ethos to Aron's political science. This reflected two fundamental features of his outlook. The first was his belief that "words and character" were "powerful factors" in historical development, particularly at moments "when fate hangs in the balance"; and that individual action could not be fully comprehended without reference to character, understood as "[s]omething unique and irreplaceable" that is "discernible from one end of a human existence to the other."<sup>103</sup> The second was his identification of *regimes* as the crucial unit for political analysis. For Aron regimes were defined not only by institutions, but by "principles" (understood, following Montesquieu, as a mix of psychological dispositions and values), and the prevailing "style" of political life.<sup>104</sup> Liberal-democratic regimes were characterized by a *tempering* or *disciplining* of personal ambition and partisanship; forbearance toward opponents; and eschewal of "excessive claims." Such a

liberal-democratic ethos of moderation was a condition for freedom: “Freedom flourishes in temperate zones; it does not survive the burning faith of prophets and crowds.”<sup>105</sup>

His recognition of the connection between ethos and regimes prevented Aron from embracing a simplistic Machiavellianism—both by suggesting that the survival of liberal-democratic regimes required sustaining a liberal-democratic ethos; and by identifying the *value* of such a regime in part with the promotion of this ethos. The first point follows from Aron’s insistence that “the methods necessary to its preservation will resemble the regime”; and that regimes “must reflect the character of the men who make [them] work,” and will be threatened with collapse when political leaders and citizens “are no longer of the kind that such a regime demands.”<sup>106</sup> Aron thus called for the promotion of a liberal ethos for the sake of preserving liberal institutions. But at some moments he went further, suggesting that democracy’s superiority to despotism lay not in its greater economic productivity or creativity, but “because it comes up with better human beings.”<sup>107</sup> He thus decisively repudiated the anti-liberal charge, common in the interwar period, that liberal democracies were deservedly doomed because they produced inferior characters. To the contrary, democratic practices of open debate, protection of individual liberties and differences, and sharing of power between opponents *could* produce superior characters marked by tolerance, forbearance, openness, initiative, and courage.

Yet Aron never entirely exorcised Machiavellian fears about liberalism’s viability. His response to the liberal predicament reveals two interlinked tensions: between a “Machiavellian” call for a resolute, even ruthless, elite, wielding emergency powers in exceptional cases, and a “liberal” affirmation of legal restraints and scruples; and between his perception of the motivational weakness of a liberal ethos of skepticism and moderation, and his recognition that such a spirit was required for liberalism’s survival. These tensions are tellingly reflected in his reactions to political events. Thus, he responded equivocally to the military coup against Salvador Allende’s presidency—and constitutional democracy—in Chile in 1973. Aron declared that “I hate nothing so much as military coups.” He noted that right was on Allende’s side, and praised Allende’s character. And yet . . . he also asserted that the army (which was massacring leftists as he wrote) had long supported Chilean democracy, and only “broke with its tradition and principles” once Allende’s political failure was complete: it intervened “to prevent a civil war.” Aron credited the Chilean military with the belief that it had been necessary to destroy Chilean democracy in order to save it; he did



not condemn this view.<sup>108</sup> This suggests that Aron was not free from the tendency to project lessons learned from one situation onto another. Here, as Iain Stewart has argued, Aron's responses reflected both his anxieties about democracy's survival of the 1930s, and subsequent French domestic politics. While Stewart mentions the immediate political situation of 1973,<sup>109</sup> Aron's anxiety about civil unrest and willingness to defer to the forces of authority also reflect the impact of the "events" of May 1968, which shook his usually dispassionate poise. A distinguished member of the French academic establishment,<sup>110</sup> he was vocally critical of the impersonality and hierarchy of French higher education; his was a voice for reform. But when he felt the university—his professional and spiritual home—under threat, he reacted furiously, decrying student militants' "terrorism," and advocating an "intransigent attitude," which viewed "compromise" as "surrender of principle."<sup>111</sup> This response can be attributed partly to a fear of civil war—a not unreasonable fear, given the fragility of the Fifth Republic, which had emerged from the collapse of the Fourth Republic a decade earlier. Aron was also reacting to what he saw as an assault on "the liberal order, of which the University, with all its faults, was the best guarantor." This sense of catastrophe was exacerbated by his irritation with the sensibility—the rudeness, crudity, "pseudo-intellectual delirium," and exhilaration verging on madness—of the student radicals.<sup>112</sup> But his response also reflected a deeper, "Machiavellian" view, which insisted on the need to vigorously defend fragile social order—and took *success* as a crucial criterion. Thus, he excused President de Gaulle's procedural lapses in restoring order asserting that "politics has a cast-iron rule—you must succeed. There can be no pardon for violations of the Constitution by those who fail."<sup>113</sup>

Even at this point, however, Aron continued to function as a teacher, who urged the radicals toward a different path through reasoned argument, seeking to discourage them from embracing violence, which could only lead to the eventual triumph of the most ruthless and brutal: "anyone who adopts terrorism will always find someone more terrorist than he."<sup>114</sup> After the immediate crisis had passed, he rejected the "settling of old scores" against academics who had sided with the students;<sup>115</sup> unlike some of his disciples, he came to advocate a "liberal reclamation" of some of the demands of the student rebels, which would represent an "extension of liberalism" rather than its negation.<sup>116</sup> And even in his more Machiavellian moments, he did not spare France's Prince—de Gaulle—from criticism.

Although he was (briefly) a Gaullist "militant,"<sup>117</sup> throughout his long, complex relationship with the General Aron kept his distance and measured

his praise. His contributions to *France Libre* are largely silent on de Gaulle; he even offered a veiled warning against the General's potential authoritarianism, pointedly titled "In the Shadow of Bonapartes."<sup>118</sup> Aron subsequently did not shrink from criticizing de Gaulle's rule. His objections centered on matters of political *style*: He was worried by de Gaulle's emphasis on French *grandeur*, and his governing "technique" of "egoism, pride, aloofness, guile," of studied vagueness and disingenuous "bravura." While de Gaulle solved many of postwar France's problems, he left a dangerous legacy of irresponsible willingness to stir up dangerous passions, and "authoritarianism and arbitrariness."<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, Aron accepted that de Gaulle's "strong leadership" was necessary to raise France to "the heroic height of renunciation" of her Algerian colony.<sup>120</sup> Called upon to initiate a coup against the Fourth Republic by pro-colonialist elements within the army, De Gaulle refused to accept power unless it was "constitutionally" granted to him—and used the emergency to force through the adoption of a new constitution, granting significant powers to the executive. De Gaulle was almost immediately named prime minister and granted temporary emergency powers. This mix of insistence on preserving forms of legality with willingness to assume extraordinary powers conforms to (and perhaps shaped) Aron's conception of how to respond to the "liberal predicament." Aron accordingly accepted the Gaullist republic, writing that as long as it "remains liberal there is no reason to make a choice between support and opposition."<sup>121</sup>

May 1968, however, suggested that de Gaulle's approach had created a "liberal predicament" rather than solving it. De Gaulle was ill-suited to the demands of democratic pluralism. He claimed a monopoly on genuine patriotism and sought to make the country "100 per cent Gaullist." He acted not as a democratic leader, but as a "Prince who sought to change established habits and usages by decree."<sup>122</sup> The Gaullists emulated their leader in being capable only of command, not of listening. May '68 revealed Gaullism to be "too liberal for its authoritarian elements, too authoritarian for any liberalism," and confronted it with a choice: to "consent to change, or lose whatever liberalism it had." Aron urged the choice of liberalism—which required the government to "change its *style and its methods*."<sup>123</sup> An adequate response to the liberal predicament, then, required an ability to act resolutely, to undertake emergency measures when there appeared to be imminent danger of civil war. But it also required the maintenance or restoration of liberal means and a liberal style and spirit of political engagement, marked by commitment to legality, respect for disagreement and plurality, and sufficient modesty to listen, and seek to genuinely respond, to the complaints of critics.

This response reflected Aron's political ethics. The moral purist's tendency to "forbid the politician the means of success" was "intrinsically absurd." Yet it was equally unsatisfactory to allow politicians "to use methods in themselves execrable."<sup>124</sup> Politics was not, as "realists" claimed, "outside" ethics. Nobody could say, with categorical certainty, in what circumstances ethical considerations should prevail over political objectives, or vice versa. The "worst error" was not to confuse ethical with political standards, but to "surrender totally to nihilism or fanaticism," by denying the relevance of ethical ideals, or trusting in inexorable laws of history.<sup>125</sup>

Aron's effort to balance moral principle and political expediency is strikingly illustrated in his writings on the most "Machiavellian" sphere of politics: international relations. Aron declared it "shameful" *either* to resign oneself to an unending cycle of peace based on force, and outbreaks of violence; *or* to fly from harsh realities into Utopian dreams of perpetual peace. Those who contribute to shaping decisions on foreign policy have duties "not to fail either of the obligations ordained for each of us: not to run away from a belligerent history, not to betray the ideal: to think and to act with the firm intention that the absence of war will be prolonged until the day when peace has become possible—supposing it ever will."<sup>126</sup> He thus advocated maintaining moral aspirations, and tempering them by dispositional realism.

This led Aron to take a qualified view of "realist" theorists of international relations such as George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau. He praised IR realists for opposing the "simplifications or illusions of abstract idealism," including the dangerous tendencies to vilify enemies and idealize allies, to demand "total victory" and see in such victory a final overcoming of evil. The "selfishness of the national interest" was sometimes "more moral than the spirit of crusade: it teaches us to respect the other, to control our passions, to strive to settle quarrels with minimum cost, to appreciate national and ideological diversity," and encourages us to "keep our heads cool, to observe the world as it is and not imagine it as we would like it to be, to be wary of abstractions."<sup>127</sup> Yet, like all *systematic* analyses of politics, IR realism tended toward schematization, which "distorted," or "deformed" reality.<sup>128</sup> It relied on a simplistic conception of the "national interest"; it trusted too much in the wisdom of elites and the capacity of self-interest and the "balance of power" to promote rational conduct.<sup>129</sup> And it failed to recognize that international society was shaped by *both* self-interest and force, *and* ideals and "prohibitions arising out of the depths of the human conscience."<sup>130</sup> This latter dimension mattered all the more in an age of ideological struggle, in which "a great power weakens itself if it

refuses to serve an idea.”<sup>131</sup> It was not true that only “Machiavellians, in the vulgar sense of the term” were “assured success.” Indeed, the “Machiavellian” thesis of “the constant contradiction” between morality and national interest was “indefensible.” When nations violate norms that their subjects or citizens regard as valid, “they weaken the respect for law and morality, which is a source of strength.” A people that thereby comes to “despise” its own laws and leaders is hardly “a strong people”; a nation with a reputation for equity may be more effective in winning friends, and thus promoting its interests.<sup>132</sup>

For Aron not only ideals and norms, but styles of behavior and temperament (“*susceptibilités*” and “*humeurs*”) were crucial in shaping relations between states. He stressed friendship as a tie between nations; and friendly relations involved cultivating a particular style in addressing allies—one both friendly and frank, grateful but unsentimental, moderate but not cold. This called for the exercise of “virtues” of “reciprocity, sympathy, honesty, respect and generosity” by both leaders and citizens. Aron thus called upon his French readers to “embody” friendship in their “personal political attitudes and practical choices,” going so far as to suggest that friendship between France and America could be sustained if France acted “virtuously.”<sup>133</sup>

These remarks reflect a high-water mark of Aron’s optimism; at other times, he was more inclined to a certain “Machiavellianism” not only in his insistence on the ineradicable tension between personal morality and international politics, but also in the high value he placed on the strength of the polity. Aron was readier than many liberals to subordinate the claims of individual conscience to those of the community—or, at least, to recognize that the conflict between the two was a genuinely tragic one. He posed the “antinomy” between individual conscience and the exigencies of “reason of state,” using an example that is particularly striking coming from a French Jew: that of a German “of liberal conviction” under Nazism who had to choose between service or resistance to the state. This dilemma was “tragic” in “the true sense of the word”: for

he must betray his ideas or his country, contribute to the victory of a regime he detests or to the abasement of a collectivity to which he is attached. . . . if he wishes to be clear-sighted, he must admit that certain features of the regime which are odious to him are not necessarily contrary to the secular fortune of states. It is sometimes true that *this world* belongs to the violent.<sup>134</sup>

This passage testifies to Aron’s capacity for detachment and empathy. It also raises questions about his political-ethical stance. Can we identify as liberal a

position that does not allow us to condemn service to the Third Reich? Liberal or not, is such a stance ethically desirable?

Alertness to the possibility of tragic conflicts between conscience and political duty nonetheless ultimately reinforced, rather than undermined, Aron's commitment to liberalism—and added urgency to it. While tragic conflicts could never be wholly eliminated from politics, they were not always unavoidable; they arose out of particular situations, caused and often preventable by human action. The need for "dirty hands" may reflect the necessity of circumstances; but sometimes it reflects a failure of political creativity.<sup>135</sup> Aron's awareness, born of the experience of the 1930s, of how political life might be deranged by fanaticism and cynicism on one side, and passivity and incompetence on the other, led him to identify an overarching political responsibility to do everything to avoid or mitigate conflicts that "leave no choice except between two kinds of defeat: to win while losing the reasons for winning or to renounce victory" for the sake of moral integrity.<sup>136</sup>

The actions necessary to avert moral catastrophe would not always be in strict accordance with personal morality; but upholding certain ethical standards was a condition for avoiding the drastic choices imposed by a politics in which diabolical forces of violence have been unfettered. Aron's was a counsel of moderation, understood to involve respect for the claims of others, and the practice of self-limitation or forbearance; and a reflection of "the morality of prudence." This "morality" was not opposed to or independent of morality as such; rather, it reflected the recognition that within politics, the best conduct "with regard to *the values which the idealist himself wishes to achieve*" is discerned by "consider[ing] each case in its concrete particularities" rather than relying on general principles or rules.<sup>137</sup>

Prudence, or judgment, involves evaluations of the possibility of different results or desired goals, and the probability that different means will achieve these goals, within a particular situation.<sup>138</sup> This emphasis on responding to "concrete particularities," combined with an insistence that some situations involve tragic, rationally irresolvable conflicts, raises the question of whether the "morality of prudence" can serve as a *morality* at all: it may be unable to provide determinative guidance in judging actions. But if Aron's account of the "morality of prudence" fails to furnish determinative verdicts on how to act, it does offer a *characterological* model of how to approach political situations: it is less a "morality" than an ethos, one defined above all by the cultivation of the "supreme virtue" of prudence, understood as a disposition to be open and responsive to "the particular situation and the concrete data." This

requires qualities of “balanced character, *sang-froid*, a sharp eye, presence of mind in the face of crisis and uncertainty,” and a combination of flexibility with steadfastness.<sup>139</sup>

As an ethos, the “morality of prudence” is more amenable to exemplification than theoretical articulation. Three examples illustrate how Aron applied it—and illuminate how it differs from moral absolutism on the one hand, and sheer pragmatism on the other. First, in setting out the “morality of prudence” as a standard for international relations, Aron invoked the Allied use of incendiary bombs on civilian targets during World War II. He rejected a purely pragmatic approach, which judged the policy *only* on its efficacy in accomplishing immediate military objectives; and a purely moral approach, which considered *only* whether such bombing was *just* (that is, whether the victims of the bombing deserved to be targeted). Instead, he criticized terror bombing, first, because its use would “compromise the aftermath of the war” more than it would hasten victory; and second, because if it were employed by both sides (as it surely would be), it would increase the human cost of the war without (likely) bringing about a swifter conclusion.<sup>140</sup>

Another, exemplary case of Aron’s application of the morality of prudence was his response to the Algerian crisis. The reasoning that led Aron to conclude that France should withdraw from Algeria reflected considerations of both principle and practicality. It was motivated by a patriotic dedication to his country’s best interests, and disgust with colonial rule. In making his case, he sometimes deployed ethical categories: thus, he called for a “heroism of abandonment,” which reflected patriotism, courage, and fortitude. Nevertheless, he mostly utilized dispassionate analysis, in order to convince those who supported colonialism by appealing to considerations that they could accept as valid.<sup>141</sup> This did not mean leaving his opponents’ premises unchallenged. He began from the assumption (which he treated as beyond serious dispute<sup>142</sup>) that the present situation was intolerable and unsustainable; and that returning to the *status quo ante*—Algeria pacified under French rule—would require a degree of oppression and injustice that neither colonizer nor colonist could stomach. He then asked: given this, what practical courses of action were there? He identified two: independence, or integration of Algeria into France on genuinely equal footing (as advocated by “liberals” such as Camus). This would mean giving Algerians equal representation in the French national legislature; and bringing native Algerians’ standard of living up to parity with that of the metropolitan French—which would require heavy tax increases. Aron believed that neither of these would be acceptable to the majority of (metropolitan) French; and the

political and economic equality that would have to be established *within* Algeria would likely provoke resistance from the *pieds noirs*. While Algerian independence had its own potential horrors, given the unlikelihood of a democratic France doing what was required to make integration work, it was better to pursue a policy of granting independence sooner rather than later.<sup>143</sup>

Unlike other tempered liberals, Aron did not moralize on the inherent evils of revolutionary violence or government repression; thus, he did not condemn the FLN as categorically as Camus and Berlin did.<sup>144</sup> Yet he did ultimately reject both terrorism and brutal repression—for prudential reasons. Experience showed that terror, whether directed by militants at civilian targets, or deployed by the rulers of states, destroyed trust and community, isolating individuals and reducing them to "a common impotence." Algerian terrorism and French reprisals destroyed all trust between the two communities—and thus, the possibility of coexistence. "Subversion" and "repression" formed a "dialectic" in which each drove the other to more brutal lengths.<sup>145</sup>

Concern with the deadly "dialectic" of subversion and repression guided Aron's larger ruminations on Cold War policy. He suggested that "countersubversion" (directed against Communist forces) could be effective, "*provided it uses suitable means.*" What were these? Here Aron again struggled with the question of emulation—and the awareness that in the "dialectic" of conflict, opponents were driven to match each other's brutality. But it was important to resist the temptation to "model ourselves" on the enemy: for "countries with democratic regimes cannot use the same tactics as countries with totalitarian regimes, and when they deny their principles they pay dearly in the end for a temporary advantage." The West's goal should not be to "destroy the power that wants to destroy us," but rather to "convert that power to tolerance and peace"; it should not seek to convert all to the same ideology, but instead accept humanity's "natural bent toward diversity."<sup>146</sup>

Aron thus responded to "the liberal predicament" by rejecting absolutist adherence to liberal principles, while also insisting that emulation of anti-liberal opponents was self-defeating; and insisting on the importance of certain dispositions. Not only the "political" dispositions of prudence and sobriety, but the "liberal" dispositions of tolerance and magnanimity, were crucial to sustaining a decent political life. Preserving social order and liberty required being able to "fight without hatred and rancor."<sup>147</sup> Aron thus rejected both Carl Schmitt's conception of "the political" as defined by mortal enmity; and the view, shared by Schmitt and many other proponents of "realism," that "the political" represented the existential summit of human life.<sup>148</sup>



In staking out this position, Aron continued to grapple with Weber. He still endorsed Weber's view that political actors must be bound by a "morality of responsibility"; any politician "who obeys his heart without concerning himself with the consequences of his acts is failing the duties of his trust and is for this very reason immoral."<sup>149</sup> But he now criticized Weber as a "power-politician" of "the posterity of Machiavelli."<sup>150</sup> Even Weber's embrace of liberalism reflected power-political considerations: In defending individual freedom and parliamentary government as means to fostering a ruling class capable of engaging in the international struggle for power, he "devalued his own values of liberalism." Aron also thought Weber's assertion of an "antinomy" between morality and politics too extreme: it inflated a conflict between morality and prudence which presents itself in "the most extreme circumstances" into a normal, and normative, polarity. This ran "a double risk." It could serve as justification for "the false realists" who reject all moral constraint on action; or justify "the false idealists who condemn indiscriminately all policies which do not correspond" to their ideal, and refuse to make crucial distinctions between better and worse.<sup>151</sup> Finally, Aron charged that Weber was led toward "nihilism" by his conception of political judgment as involving a wholly arbitrary choice of an ultimate end, coupled with a morally neutral evaluation of means in terms of their efficacy; and by his identification of national power as the "ultimate goal, the god to whom one sacrifices everything." After seeing where this led, "we can never again recognize in a nation's power-interests the final goal and a sacred value." Yet Aron continued to admire Weber's character as superior to his theory. Weber retained a "sense of moderation and decency. He never lent his voice to the ravings of propaganda which were rife on both sides." His own avowals notwithstanding, "power was never his aim, neither for himself, nor for the nation. His thought and his life obeyed two values: truth and nobility. The man and the philosopher leave us an inheritance undiminished by the mistakes of the theoretician of *Machtpolitik*."<sup>152</sup>

This duality between a flawed theory of politics and a personal example of intellectual integrity may be seen in Aron's own thought. Even as he disavowed Weber's "Machiavellianism" and irrationalism, it is not clear that Aron entirely escaped the implications of Weber's position. The "morality of prudence," nuanced to a fault, does not resolve the question of when, and how far, moral (or liberal) scruples may be disregarded in pursuit of victory. Aron's reactions to political events display unresolved tensions between a "realist" view, emphasizing the paramount importance of preserving order at all costs; and a

recognition of such realism's dangers. But he also exemplified an *intellectual* ethos, which may mitigate some dangers of his avowed political ethic.

### Aron's Intellectual Virtue

Even as he sought to approach politics from the political actor's perspective, Aron remained a scholar and critic. His cultivation of the ethic of an engaged yet detached intellectual was central to his thought, identity, and influence. At the core of Aron's numerous writings lies not a "doctrine," but a "discipline" or "morality of thought," marked by a certain "manner," "style," and "method" of engagement.<sup>153</sup> His authority and impact derived from the personal qualities he displayed: a mixture of clarity and charity, stringency and generosity, rigor and modesty. Allan Bloom saw Aron as exemplifying a "spiritual asceticism, one of the most arduous of asceticisms, which consists in believing in the right of others to think as they please"; this reflected the "mutual respect of rights" which was "the essence of liberal conviction."<sup>154</sup>

These qualities are exemplified in Aron's response to the most searing political experience of his generation: France's armistice with Nazi Germany, and the Vichy regime. These events were traumatic for Aron, as a French patriot and a Jew; yet his response was measured. While his analyses of Vichy and Nazi-occupied France from exile in London were unsparing in indicting the treason of intellectuals who embraced the regime, he showed remarkable objectivity in his diagnoses of Vichy politics. In "On Treason" (1954) he argued that judgments of historical actors "can never be pure," because moral reality was complex: "Admirable men have been known to serve despicable causes, and contemptible individuals have supported noble movements." Not all members of the Resistance were "paragons of virtue," nor all collaborators motivated by base aims; some of them, loving their country, had chosen armistice as the least destructive option. This was not a counsel of moral indifference: a proud sense of personal integrity and honor were necessary to guide individuals in judging right and wrong. But, in the face of genuine moral uncertainty and agony, judgments should be careful, tentative, and made with humility.<sup>155</sup>

In enjoining modesty, searching self-examination, and skepticism of claims to certainty, Aron's intellectual ethic promoted liberalism. Liberalism, in turn, provided a natural home for the cultivation and pursuit of this intellectual ethic: with its protections of personal freedom, it provided the best institutional guarantee of the ideals at the heart of intellectual endeavor. Aron declared his primary values to be "truth and liberty," and added that "the two

concepts [are] indivisible for me . . . to be able to express the truth one must necessarily be free.”<sup>156</sup> And the pursuit of truth required not only the protection from restraint afforded by liberal institutions, but the cultivation of liberal virtues and practices. Foremost among these was dialogue, which Aron regarded as a crucial means to understanding oneself and others—whether or not this yielded resolution or agreement.<sup>157</sup> The practice of dialogue was a defining feature of liberalism: Aron referred to the effort to “understand the other from his point of view” as “liberal dialogue,”<sup>158</sup> and maintained that what distinguished liberal from totalitarian societies was whether dialogue was accepted as legitimate or not.<sup>159</sup> Sustaining dialogue, in turn, demanded the eminently liberal virtue of *tolerance*, understood as a practice of respect for others, expressed in an effort to understand them and to let them be heard.

While Aron’s intellectual ethic was closely connected to liberalism, he also recognized tensions between intellectual and political ethics, which were governed by different values, goals, and standards. Intellectuals should be unconditionally dedicated to the truth; the responsibilities of the politician do not always permit honesty.<sup>160</sup> The intellectual can afford to be an individualist; the politician works with and for, and accumulates responsibilities and debts to, others. Politics demands that one be *politic*; the intellectual’s role is to pose troubling questions and objections. Aron admitted that he had “never been able to stop myself writing what I think,” however alienating this was.<sup>161</sup> Not that he tried very hard: it was his “ambition” to “have my own viewpoint on every subject, regardless of the opinions of those in power.” This he considered the “only honorable position” for the intellectual pronouncing on political affairs.<sup>162</sup> Yet this intellectual ethic was in tension with what he saw as a necessary, and salutary, feature of democratic politics: party organization and partisan identification. For all their faults, parties allowed for peaceful competition for power; they made actual or potential participation possible for all citizens; they provided conduits for debate, serving as a vehicle for deliberation. There nevertheless remained a tension between “party discipline and doctrine” and intellectual integrity. No self-respecting scholar will accept the platform of any political party in its entirety. And in the course of political struggle, every party will deploy “unfair or deceitful arguments,” impose an ideology, distort the truth, and thus demand a compromise of intellectual integrity.<sup>163</sup> This was not a compromise that Aron could make. As he confessed, “loyalty to one party has never been a decision of fundamental importance” for him.<sup>164</sup>

In addition to the constraints of partisanship, the intellectual was free from the burden of responsibility—or liability—for making decisions that will

harm others; unlike the politician, the intellectual can keep his hands clean. This was part of the attraction of the intellectual's role for Aron, who was more morally squeamish than his public pose sometimes suggested. Dedicated to truth and constrained by decency, he doubted that he could have been counselor to a prince—even one whose fundamental preferences he accepted: he could not, for instance, have ordered or advised the bombing of Vietnam, and gone to sleep peacefully. These political limitations were closely tied to those of liberalism itself: thus Aron noted that his intellectual ethic often left him "isolated and an opponent" to the prevailing trends—"the usual destiny of an authentic liberal."<sup>165</sup> While this might be honorable, it was hardly a solution to the "liberal predicament."

If Aron's intellectual ethic imposed constraints that might interfere with the pursuit of political success, it did not absolve the intellectual of political responsibility: the responsibility to enter into political debate in defense of one's values, and conduct oneself in a way that advances rather than undermines those values. This involved a difficult balancing act: to recognize the demands of political responsibility and suit one's advice to them; to write in a way that was persuasive and not alienating in its self-righteousness or irrelevant in its failure to grapple with practical limitations; yet also to retain an unsparing lucidity and frankness that was needed, but could not be consistently practiced, by political decision makers. It also required a willingness to relinquish immediate efficacy, power, and gratification for a longer-term influence.<sup>166</sup> The intellectual's contribution is to bring to politics a tempering skepticism, to "communicate . . . a fertile spirit of doubt."<sup>167</sup>

The skeptic who seeks to live without illusions requires resilience and fortitude. Aron's liberal ethos contained three sources of the strength needed to sustain an intellectual ethic of skepticism. The first, perhaps surprisingly, is a degree of optimism—or, at least, hopefulness. Liberalism, he asserted, only appeared pessimistic "in the eyes of utopians who, ready to give their hearts and lives to a party, a leader, a revolution, reproach us for reminding them of the fatal fallout of mysticism in politics, and the risk of total tyranny in the name of integral liberation." Liberal opposition to ruthless utopianism actually rested on "an act of faith: we accept the risk of freedom and democracy, we bet that, despite everything, ongoing discussion" would be compatible with "civil peace," and that out of "the conflict of private interests" decisions might emerge that "are compatible with the good of the nation." This reflected "a fundamental optimism, or, in any case, a reasoned courage."<sup>168</sup> "Reasoned" is a key term here. To a greater extent than other tempered liberals, Aron

retained—and sought to vindicate, from his earliest work on the philosophy of history—a chastened but resilient faith in the power of reason.

The second element is an ethical sensibility that leads individuals to aspire toward a better world, and to feel a responsibility to act in pursuit of that goal. The individual who “no longer expects miraculous changes” and puts no trust in ideology or faith in history need not be resigned to injustice. No less than the fanatic, such an individual can be motivated by moral ideals. But the sensibility shaping those ideals and guiding how they are held will be very different: “It is because he likes individual human beings, participates in living communities, and respects the truth, that he refuses to surrender his soul to an abstract ideal of humanity, a tyrannical party, and an absurd scholasticism.”<sup>169</sup> Together, cautious faith in the viability of political freedom and reason, and hopeful commitment to effecting change for the sake of real human beings, foster a liberalism “without illusion but not without will, without the vision of paradise on earth, but not without hope of gradually improving, through the struggles of individuals and parties, the fate of the greatest number.”<sup>170</sup>

The sense of commitment to values, based firmly on attachment to actual human beings, was strengthened by a final moral resource, traceable back to Weber: a sense of personal honor, which required that one conduct oneself in a way consistent with one’s own values—particularly when these were endangered. This was a quality Aron often exemplified—including in his last act. He died of a heart attack immediately after testifying on behalf of his friend Bertrand de Jouvenel, who was suing the Israeli historian Ze’ev Sternhell for his depiction of Jouvenel as a fascist in the 1930s. Jouvenel *had* flirted with fascism, and had been on the opposite side from Aron in many political conflicts. But Aron regarded Sternhell’s book as ahistorical and overly prosecutorial—and he wanted to support a friend. After his testimony, Aron remarked (unconsciously echoing Camus’s statement on his break with the Communist Party), “I think I said what was needed” (“Je crois avoir dit l’essentiel”). This (tentative) declaration of duty done were his last words; he died of cardiac arrest shortly afterward.<sup>171</sup>

## Conclusion

While unresolved tensions remain between Aron’s intellectual and political ethics, each of these offers safeguards against faults in the other: the danger that the politics of responsible prudence will degenerate into cold moral indifference, and that an intellectual ethics marked by scruple for truth and

integrity will become self-righteous and politically ineffectual. They point to perspectives that are needed to supplement one another: that of the policy-makers who must decide what actions to undertake within the confines of their roles, and of the available alternatives; and that of the vulnerable individuals who must suffer the consequences of the politician's decision. A perspective that wholly excludes either is blind to the full moral reality of politics, and incapable of rising to meet politics' ethical demands. Aron himself sought to meet these demands by moving between stances of prudence and moral integrity, dispassionate advice and austere criticism—always seeking to temper the one with an element of the other.

Aron's political thought was driven by a keen awareness of the fragility of liberalism. Liberals who trusted that "the order of the world can reconcile our aspirations with reality" were deluded.<sup>172</sup> Liberalism did not reflect an eternal natural law and was not guaranteed success by the unimpeded operations of interest; it thrived "only in a favorable climate, thanks to a certain type of men, to a system of values, to *moeurs*"; its survival depended on a robust practice of both citizenship and statesmanship. Sustaining liberalism was a strenuous and hazardous task; Aron confessed that "I have been tempted, like so many over the course of the past forty years, by despair and scorn." He had been saved, in part, by the "lesson of courage" provided by the example of "a master and a friend"—Tocqueville.<sup>173</sup> In the same way, Aron sought to pass on the torch of disillusioned but resolute liberalism through his own example.

His sense of liberalism's vulnerability was the source of Aron's ambivalent response to the "liberal predicament." On the one hand, his anxiety that liberalism would prove too weak to withstand the attractive delusions or ruthless assaults of its opponents led him to entertain a "realist" or "moderate Machiavellian" acceptance of the need to employ violence, ruse, and authoritarianism at moments of crisis. On the other hand, he perceived the dangers of "contagion" by emulation of totalitarian techniques and ethos; and recognized that the survival of liberal institutions depended on the preservation of certain ethical standards and practices. Aron confronted the liberal predicament unsparingly—and in response advocated a resolute liberal integrity. The "warrior virtues" of the "armies of believers"—"their devotion, their discipline and self-sacrifice"—were "the kind that lead to victory." These militants, having overcome "all their doubts and scruples, are possessed by the faith which 'moves mountains.' The liberals are consumed with doubts and uncertainties and sometimes feel vaguely guilty." But it was wrong to conclude that the fanatical ethos of the militants should be embraced. For "what will remain

tomorrow of the motives that led them to fight?" Not much, Aron suggested. With irony and resolution, he declared: "Without a scintilla of doubt or guilt or regret, we can leave the fanatics their inevitable superiority." Skepticism and humility were justified epistemically and ethically; they were crucial to the defense of human decency against ruthlessness, and of peaceful political order against violence: "If tolerance is born of doubt let us teach everyone to doubt all the models and utopias, to challenge all the prophets of redemption and the heralds of catastrophe . . . If they alone can abolish fanaticism, let us pray for the advent of the skeptics."<sup>174</sup>

This was a message directed to both leaders and citizens in liberal democracies. But it carried the danger of emphasizing the need to preserve those regimes, to the demotion of concern with confronting their injustices and inhumanity. This tendency reflected Aron's experiences and temperament, and the conditions of a French society marked by political instability and intellectual extremism. Political conditions in the Anglo-American world allowed for the articulation of a tempered liberalism that, less sensitive to "Machiavellian" anxieties, was often able to achieve a more harmonious balance between Camus's practice of protest and Aron's counsels of caution.



# 5

## Against Cynicism and Sentimentality

### REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S CHASTENED LIBERAL REALISM

We use evil in every moment of our existence to hold evil in check.<sup>1</sup>

"Believe in virtue" he said. "Believe in virtue. But just be skeptical about its attainment."<sup>2</sup>

REINHOLD NIEBUHR (1892–1971) set the agenda, and voiced the concerns, of reform-minded liberal intellectuals during the Great Depression, World War II, and Cold War eras.<sup>3</sup> From pulpits in Detroit and New York (and visiting engagements around the world), from his academic post at the Union Theological Seminary, and in his role as political activist (which included running for Congress on the Socialist Party ticket in the 1930s, and helping to found the liberal activist group Union for Democratic Action in 1941<sup>4</sup>), Niebuhr's energy, charisma, and political acuity made him a leading voice for internationalist, social-democratic, anti-Communist liberalism in America. His intertwined accounts of history, moral psychology, and political ethics did much to shape the outlook of post-war liberalism; his emphasis on qualities of humility, responsibility, irony, and hope, and practices of contrition, discriminate judgment, open-ended dialogue, and modest striving offered a model for how liberals might avoid a complacent acceptance of injustice, without falling prey to utopianism. Yet in his youth Niebuhr had himself embraced many features of a radical and "realist" critique of liberalism. Understanding

the errors of radicalism and realism, while holding onto enough of their critical edge to resist complacency, was a major effort of his mature thought—and practice. His later thought reveals the way in which a sustained combination of moral scruples and a “realist” disposition was central to tempered liberalism—and represented a persistent tension within it.

Niebuhr also throws a persistent problem of tempered liberalism into sharp relief. His own reliance on the bedrock of Christian faith—with its postulation of absolute human values, insistence on immutable human limits, and promise of ultimate hope—poses the question of whether liberalism requires such firm foundations in faith, to avoid foundering on the shoals of either cynicism or hubris. Here I focus on Niebuhr’s relationship to liberalism and to political “realism,” and his views on political ethics—largely skirting the aspects of his theology that do not bear directly on these, despite Niebuhr’s own view of his thought as essentially Christian and theologically-grounded; I return to the question of how far Niebuhr’s brand of “tempered liberalism,” with its emphasis on categories of sin, contrition, hope and love, can be reconciled with, or appropriated for, a less theological outlook, at the conclusion of the chapter.

Niebuhr’s criticisms of liberalism should be read in light of his observation that he tended “to be most critical of that in other men to which he is most tempted himself.”<sup>5</sup> His political ethics can best be understood as an effort to learn from the wisdom, and understand and expose the errors and dangers, of four ethical-psychological tendencies by which he was, at different moments, attracted and repelled: (1) an attitude of complacency and compromise, born of a combination of selfishness and facile optimism (which he identified with earlier liberalism); (2) a “purist” conception of the relationship between morality and politics (which he found exemplified in some strains of pacifism); (3) a self-righteous fanaticism (which reached its nadir in Russian Communism); and (4) a cynical or despairing “realism” which abandoned moral commitments for the service of power (which he attacked in postwar American thought). In seeking to steer among these shoals, Niebuhr offered arguments about the practices and institutional arrangements appropriate to a “realistic,” democratic politics; and expounded and exemplified a political ethos well suited to a sober, self-critical liberalism.

## Niebuhr's Critiques of Liberalism and Purism: Against Sentimentalism and Complacency

Niebuhr's youthful reaction against the political and theological principles and practices that he associated with liberalism reflected his experiences as a congregational minister of the German Evangelical Synod in Detroit from 1915 to 1928. During this time, Niebuhr "underwent a fairly complete conversion of thought," in which he rejected the liberal theology he had previously embraced.<sup>6</sup> Two phenomena contributed to this transformation. The first was the battlefield carnage, and postwar vindictiveness, that marked World War I; these induced in Niebuhr a cynical perception of liberal internationalist idealism as an ideological screen for imperialism and vengeance.<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr turned against the "incurable optimists who feel called upon to find a saving virtue in every evil and in every loss a compensation." It was obscene to celebrate the war as morally purifying for the nations that had engaged in it. To the contrary, "if we have any sense of proportion," it was impossible to ignore "what the individual is paying for a possible ultimate gain" to the larger community: "We cannot help but think of the thousands of graves on the countrysides of Europe that are mute testimonies to the tragedy of individual life as revealed in this war, when we are asked to accept these optimistic assurances. The heroes and victims will not arise from their graves, though Europe may rise from its destruction." This attack on optimism set the tone for Niebuhr's later work. It also points to the moral impulse behind Niebuhr's political thought and action: an assertion of the value of each individual against and above the demands of amoral societies.<sup>8</sup>

The other experience that contributed to Niebuhr's radicalization was witnessing the human costs of industrial labor in Detroit. Of a visit to one of Henry Ford's factories—supposedly models of enlightened, humane industrial practice—Niebuhr reported:

Here manual labor is a drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work. . . . Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run. And most of us run the cars without knowing what price is being paid for them. . . . We are all responsible. We all want the things which the factory produces and none of us is sensitive enough to care how much in human values the efficiency of the modern factory costs.<sup>9</sup>

Ford's factories presented a picture of proletarian misery that made Niebuhr a radical; Ford's complacent customers made Niebuhr critical of liberal

complicity and evasion. Ford himself revealed the workings of pride and the dangers of unaccountable power. He was a man whose idealism was so pure and naïve that it was akin to cynicism; his moral pretensions made a mockery of the misery he inflicted on, and veiled the absolute power he exercised over, his employees. His combination of “sentimentality and shrewdness” constituted a warning, as well as a target: it was an extreme form of the vices of liberal Protestantism, to which Niebuhr himself had previously adhered.<sup>10</sup> These early experiences turned Niebuhr against liberalism as he understood it: a doctrine defined by economic laissez-faire and faith in progress through the workings of human reason and benevolence. Liberal faith—whether in the market, historical progress, or social improvement through the moral suasion of the Social Gospel—depended on an optimistic belief that human nature was both rational and plastic and human conflicts could be overcome by reason or love. Such belief was blind to the insurmountable gap between human aspirations and achievements, and the conflictual character of human history.<sup>11</sup>

Even before his turn against liberal doctrine, Niebuhr had reacted against the *ethos* of liberalism. His critique of liberalism was “ethical” in the sense of being focused on the sort of ethos that marked liberalism, and the sort of political action that adherence to liberalism fostered. Niebuhr did not go as far as many anti-liberals in embracing an ethos of hardness, single-mindedness, and fanaticism. But he did suggest that the injection of some degree of this spirit into politics would better serve the causes of democracy and justice, than would an ethos of moderation, tolerance, and compromise. Following the stock market crash of 1929, he moved closer to Marxian socialism—and continued his earlier attacks on the liberal penchant for compromise as a means of resolving conflicts. Such an approach, he charged, reflected a “constitutional weakness in the liberal approach to politics”: namely, its blindness to “the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism,” which lead those possessing power and privilege to obstinately uphold injustice.<sup>12</sup>

*Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) set out the foundations of much of Niebuhr’s political thought. It also constituted an assault on liberal “moralists” who were unable to comprehend the complexity of human motivations and ambiguity of human achievements.<sup>13</sup> As Niebuhr later wrote, human self-love and self-deception made “the simple distinctions between good and evil, between selfishness and altruism, with which liberal idealism has tried to estimate moral and political facts, invalid.”<sup>14</sup> Human beings possess freedom,

through their capacity for imagination and reasoning, which allows them to rise above the simple demands of physical nature. This freedom makes morality and creativity possible; it is also a source of human pride, vanity, and will-to-power.<sup>15</sup> The moral possibilities of human beings are limited by inherent self-centeredness: no degree of reason, imagination, or “intelligence” can make an individual see the needs of others as vividly as he sees his own.<sup>16</sup> Inherently self-centered and competitive, individuals are also fundamentally anxious: both because they realize that their lives are limited, dependent, and fragile, and because they do not know just *how* limited their power is.<sup>17</sup> To overcome anxiety, we seek to bring the world under our power. This belief that we can, and may, subject the world around us—including other human beings—to our own controlling power is the sin of pride. Yet pride exacerbates rather than relieves anxiety: we live in fear that our attempts to conquer others will fail. Even when we do obtain power, we find ourselves in a position of “perilous eminence so that security is possible only by the extension of power.” Thus, “every desperate effort to establish security will lead to heightened insecurity.”<sup>18</sup>

Liberalism, Niebuhr charged, failed to acknowledge the “perennial sources of conflict between life and life.”<sup>19</sup> As “rationalists,” liberals believed that once those in power were enlightened about the injustice of their practices, they would willingly mend their ways. This was naïve, as well as patronizing toward those who were struggling for justice. Niebuhr was acute in puncturing the ways in which ruling groups rationalized their domination, whether they did so in the name of preserving peace (even though such “peace” was based on force),<sup>20</sup> or by paternalist claims to rule in the best interests of those dominated. Thus, in the “long agitation” preceding the granting of women’s suffrage, men “insisted that women were not capable of exercising the rights to which they aspired, just as dominant classes have always tried to withhold the opportunity for the exercise of rational functions from underprivileged classes and then accused them of lacking capacities which can be developed only by exercise.”<sup>21</sup> Liberal faith in rationality and social “technics” also betrayed an assumption that human misery arose from a lack of human power. In fact, misery arose from the perversion of the will; increases in power only increased the human capacity to inflict destruction and suffering.<sup>22</sup> Liberals saw society as progressively transcending egoism and ignorance; whereas modern society amplified individual egoism and subsumed it into the even more virulent egoism of groups.<sup>23</sup> It was also delusive to believe that political order could be fully consensual. All communities require some element of coercion to

maintain unity among conflicting elements. Whatever peace is achieved is “gained by force and is always an uneasy and an unjust one”; indeed, it is uneasy because it is unjust. Power, as Henry Adams had observed, is a “poison”; and “[t]he man of power, though humane impulse may awaken in him, always remains something of a beast of prey.”<sup>24</sup>

The dynamics of modern social life both perpetuated innate sinfulness and supplemented it with a distinctively social sinfulness.<sup>25</sup> It was difficult, but possible, to persuade individuals to act more justly; but collectives were too morally “obtuse” and unimaginative to attain such moral standards. Relations between groups must be “political” rather than “ethical,” governed by relations of power rather than considerations of justice. Hostility toward others was “a seemingly unavoidable prerequisite of group solidarity”; this had become that much truer as societies had become more impersonal, internally diverse, and complex. National communities, in particular, tended to reproduce—and amplify—the quarrelsomeness of individuals. This was linked to the power of tribalism—the divide between a “we group” and a “they group,” the former of which commands loyalty, the latter of which is “outside the pale of humanity.”<sup>26</sup> Such tribalism does not check, but aids, individual will-to-power, enabling individuals and juntas to pursue wars of conquest to gratify their personal “ambition and vanity” while appealing to the ideals of democracy.<sup>27</sup>

His awareness of the evils of power both fueled and modified Niebuhr’s radicalism. On the one hand, he insisted on the necessity of using coercive means in the pursuit of justice: since “[p]ower in juxtaposition with weakness is bound to cause exploitation.”<sup>28</sup> Whenever “collective power” exploits weakness, it “can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it”; those who seek justice must be ready to dirty their hands by utilizing coercive power.<sup>29</sup> But Niebuhr also recognized the importance of ethical and institutional limits on political contestation, insisting on the necessity of “reducing power to a minimum, of bringing the remainder under the strongest measure of social control.”<sup>30</sup> Liberalism underestimated the strength of the lust for power as a factor in political life. Yet the liberal project of setting up protections against power was one Niebuhr embraced—while warning against liberals’ optimism about its prospects for success.

Niebuhr not only doubted liberals’ hopes; he suspected their motivations. If his perception of injustice and the temptations of power made him favor reform, his analysis of the psychology of domination made him suspicious of reformers. Most of us have a vested interest in the status quo, and so desire change less than we think we do. This self-deception about the degree to which

they desired change was particularly marked among liberals. Political opinions were “inevitably rooted in economic interests”; liberal reformism exhibited “the typical timidity of the middle-class intellectual,” whose fear of anarchy and violence prompted a defense of existing privilege and injustice. The proletariat, on the other hand, possessed an insight that the privileged classes lacked: those who suffered had a better sense of what was really going on—though they were also more susceptible to illusions about what could be expected from social change. The will of the proletariat was not pure; but it was no more corrupt than that of any group, and its motives were certainly no less moral than the motives of those who defended privilege. Indeed, Niebuhr found reasons to prefer the vices of the proletariat. In the “contest between hypocrisy and brutality, and between sentimentality and cynicism,” young Niebuhr preferred the latter. This reflected a deeper moral judgment: justice was a higher goal than peace; violence would therefore be justified, if justice could not be achieved without resort to violence.<sup>31</sup>

Given the imperative of justice, and the inevitability of force in politics, Niebuhr concluded that “[i]f a season of violence can establish a just social system and can create the possibilities of its preservation, there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution can be ruled out.” There could be no absolute distinction between nonviolent and violent coercion, or between coercion by government and that used by revolutionaries. The crucial question was, “what are the political possibilities of establishing justice through violence?”<sup>32</sup> Answering this question required asking not only how effective violence would be in toppling the present order, but how likely it was to create a more egalitarian society. This did not mean, as one recent critic has alleged, that Niebuhr’s argument issued a “blank check for violence.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, following an approach very much like Aron’s “morality of prudence,” he concluded that circumstances made it unlikely that an egalitarian society could be achieved in the Western world through revolution; and that the risk of revolution installing a new regime of oppression was considerable.<sup>34</sup> An approach at once more moderate and creative was needed.

At the same time, Niebuhr rejected any *categorical* condemnation of violence; and pointed to the self-deception, escapism, and hypocrisy of liberals who condemned radicals for countenancing violence, even as they defended an order that rested on “subtler types of coercion.” Like Aron, Niebuhr had embraced pacifism in reaction to the horrors of the Great War. But he too came to extend his critique of liberalism to encompass absolute pacifism (or, as he called it, “non-resistance”).<sup>35</sup> He contrasted such nonresistance with



“non-violent resistance,” which represented a middle ground between the perils of revolutionary violence and the impotence of puristic nonresistance. It sought to economize on the coercion necessary to pursuing justice and reduce the amount of suffering arising from this pursuit, without unrealistically eschewing the use of coercion, or irresponsibly abandoning the pursuit of justice. At the same time, insofar as it deployed potentially coercive force (through tactics such as boycotts), nonviolence risked the infliction of suffering on the innocent. It therefore could not claim complete moral purity.<sup>36</sup>

His concern with dispelling the self-exalting confusions around nonviolence led Niebuhr to offer a qualified critique of Gandhi. Gandhi’s attempts to combine “the insights of a saint with the necessities of statecraft” qualified the purity of his ethical and religious ideals.<sup>37</sup> But its impurity actually made Gandhi’s practice *more* admirable, as a *political* approach, than his more puristic rhetoric.<sup>38</sup> Gandhi was both realistic and ethically sensitive in recognizing that nonviolence was not merely a matter of actions but of the *spirit* in which actions are undertaken. At its best, Gandhian nonviolent resistance was a *technique* that expressed a broader *temper* of goodwill; and an internal *discipline* that protected this temper from being eroded by the bitterness bred by participation in conflict. The expression of the temper of goodwill through appropriate action was an effective tactic in the struggle for justice, since it lessened the resentment felt by those against whom moral protest was directed: “In every social conflict each party is so obsessed with the wrongs which the other party commits against it, that it is unable to see its own wrongdoing. A non-violent temper reduces these animosities to a minimum.”<sup>39</sup> As a feature of conduct and disposition, nonviolence deprives opponents of the “moral conceit” of identifying the preservation of their own power with the peace of the community as a whole. Nonviolent resistance is therefore the form of political force that best reconciles the demands of politics and those of morality. Yet whether violent or nonviolent methods are preferable is a pragmatic question, dependent on circumstances. The superiority of nonviolent methods is general, not absolute.<sup>40</sup> In denying the purity of nonviolent resistance, Niebuhr both advanced an argument for nonviolence as an effective strategy for pursuing reform, which was compatible with a “realist” approach to politics; and sought to undermine absolute distinctions between nonviolent and violent action, and thus challenge the view that nonviolence was *always* morally superior. In this, he echoed Aron; but while Aron’s nearly contemporaneous consideration of “conscientious objection” was more purely critical and motivated by a concern with the danger conscientious objection posed to political

order, Niebuhr's consideration of pacifism was motivated by a concern to identify the most creative, effective means for combating injustices.

Niebuhr's reflections on the question of violence led him to confront the relationship between ends and means. Like Weber (and against Gandhi), he insisted that it was simply not the case that "the character of immediate consequences guarantees the character of the ultimate end."<sup>41</sup> He accepted the inescapability of "dirty hands" for the political actor, insisting (perhaps somewhat melodramatically) that "We use evil in every moment of our existence to hold evil in check."<sup>42</sup> But—with not only Weber, but Camus and Aron (and, for that matter, Gandhi), Niebuhr also recognized that, even if coercion or injustice is sometimes necessary for success, certain sorts of coercion and injustice so infect political and moral life as to undermine the ends at which they aim, while fostering "the very evils" they sought to extirpate.<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr thus trod a path between a consequentialism focused on ultimate outcomes, and something more nuanced. He held that "[a] political policy cannot be intrinsically evil if it can be proved to be an efficacious instrument for the achievement of a morally approved end." On the other hand, a policy could not be said to be "*wholly* good merely because it seems to make for ultimately good consequences. Immediate consequences must be weighed against the ultimate consequences." Whether the ultimate outcome justified violation of moral goods depended on the value of the end it aimed to achieve, the intrinsic value of the immediate goods sacrificed for the ultimate one, and the likelihood of attainment of the ultimate goal.<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr thus echoed other tempered liberals in warning against a tendency to discount immediate consequences in pursuit of a more distant goal—but also insisted that the ultimate goal should be taken into account as well, to guard against the myopia attendant in purely short-term thinking.

In short, during his early, "realist" phase Niebuhr attacked liberalism's blindness to forms of coercion that sustained existing injustices, and its sentimental fantasy that justice could be attained without coercion. He accused liberalism, and later pacifism, of *purism*: a strict adherence to an absolutist moral standpoint, and consequent refusal to dirty one's hands. Such purism was delusive: moral purity is not humanly possible; each individual and group is inwardly divided between striving toward good and the pull of evil. This was important to remember, to avoid falling into complacent self-righteousness. But it should not be taken as a reason for refraining from action. An individual's or nation's inability to attain purity need not undermine that individual's or nation's standing in condemning greater evils, or seeking to protect victims against malefactors—or responsibility to do so. Indeed, moral purism was an

obstacle to realizing moral goals in politics, which required balancing, compromise, and discrimination in order to preserve “some relative decency and justice in society against the tyranny and injustice into which society may fall.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, Niebuhr attacked the tendency among pacifists to morally equate the tyranny of fascist regimes with the tyranny practiced in the “so-called democratic nations.” To whatever extent the latter fall short of their ideals, it was “sheer moral perversity” to equate these “inconsistencies” with “the brutalities which modern tyrannical States practice.” Like Camus and Aron, Niebuhr insisted on the importance of making distinctions; and added that all the “distinctions upon which the fate of civilization has turned in the history of mankind have been just such relative distinctions” between lesser and greater evils. To refuse to make such distinctions was willful “blindness to obvious facts of human experience.”<sup>46</sup> Not only was purity unattainable; the longing to escape from the impurity of political life was an expression of self-absorption, which led to an evasion of responsibilities to others. And the (false) belief that one had attained some measure of purity—that one’s hands were clean—represented moral vanity, which was all the more dangerous for being clothed in pretenses to virtue.

As this suggests, Niebuhr’s attack on purism was an expression of a larger aversion to self-righteousness—particularly that ultimate self-righteousness that consists in “the identification of our relative political and moral perspectives with the absolute will of God.” This was “sin in its quintessential form,” combining pride with *idolatry*—the confusion of worldly authorities with ultimate authority, worldly ends with the ultimate end.<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr detected tendencies toward such self-righteousness not only in pacifism, but also among defenders of just war. Having spoken tirelessly on behalf of American intervention in World War II, he found himself ambivalent about the rhetoric and ethos of the war effort. He feared that conviction of the righteousness of their cause would blind supporters of the war to the horror—some of it necessary, some not—that attends all war. Thus, even as he renounced pacifism, he warned that those who were willing to wage war for the sake of justice needed the prophetic testimony of moral absolutists, “lest we become callous to the horror of war, and lest we forget the ambiguity of our own actions and motives.”<sup>48</sup> He also blanched at the portrayal of the struggle against Nazism as a crusade of good against evil. Nazism was certainly evil; but the Allies did not represent an ultimate good—as was made painfully clear by America’s institutionalized racism, evidenced in its treatment of African Americans and its internment of Japanese Americans (which Niebuhr outspokenly denounced). The mentality of crusading also fostered an over-ambitious—indeed, millenarian—vision for postwar

reconstruction, which could fuel both easily disappointed hopes and political ruthlessness (as it had, briefly, in Camus's case).<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Niebuhr's warnings against self-righteousness did not amount to a rejection of moral criticism as a political mode. Precisely because self-righteousness could be a particularly dangerous disposition in those who wield political power, moral condemnation of political leaders is often valid, and valuable, in puncturing their pretensions and exposing their crimes and errors.<sup>50</sup> But moral critics should eschew unrealistic demands and sentimental gestures that gratify their moral self-esteem but make little positive difference. Furthermore, while political leaders require scrutiny, they also merit charity: for they must contend with practical limitations from which the social critic or "prophet" is free.<sup>51</sup> The recognition that we are all involved in sin should encourage a critical attitude toward those who profess to represent virtue, *and* an awareness that even as we are critical of them, we too are likely guilty of moral pretension. Niebuhr accordingly guarded against the tendency of the prophetic moral critic to become self-righteous in his critiques of the self-righteousness of others.

Niebuhr identified two faces of purism: one self-exalting, the other self-abasing. Sin may lie either in the prideful denial of, or despairing acquiescence to, human limitation. Outward pride often masks inner despair; despair inspires desperate self-assertion.<sup>52</sup> Those idealists who do not fall into despair, but remain dedicated to an ideal of purity in the face of an impure world, are tempted to become either "irresponsibles" (in Archibald MacLeish's term) who prefer to refrain from action until they can act purely; or "pharisees" who convince themselves that they are pure (and so can act with a clear conscience), and identify their own cause with absolute righteousness.<sup>53</sup> The latter course was not unknown among liberals, who were too quick to defend the unjust and ineffective Western democracies in absolute terms. But its most dangerous expression in the contemporary world, Niebuhr came to believe, was in anti-liberal creeds of the Left and the Right. Niebuhr thus found himself drawn back to liberalism—but of a sterner, more "realistic" sort.

### A Return to Liberalism: Niebuhr's Critiques of Utopianism and Fanaticism

Events from the mid-1930s on confirmed many of Niebuhr's objections to liberalism, and mitigated his rejection of it. The ultimate refutation of liberal naïveté came from Communism, which "transmuted ideals and hopes, which we most deeply cherish, into cruel realities which we most fervently abhor," so

that the “evils against which we contend are frequently the fruit of illusions which are similar to our own.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, a proper understanding of the causes and consequences of Communism’s crimes offered a vindication of many of the central elements of liberal-democratic practice—and revealed dangers within the radicalism to which Niebuhr had been drawn.

Even during the 1930s, when he gravitated toward Marxism and contemplated revolution, Niebuhr had attacked Communist claims that dictatorship was a merely transitory stage. Experience suggested that Communist elites would not relinquish power—and that the proletariat’s impulse to vengeance was likely to give rise to a “relentless vindictiveness” toward surviving “class enemies.”<sup>55</sup> Visiting Moscow in 1930, Niebuhr perceived the Soviets embracing a technocratic authoritarianism which left ordinary people politically ignorant and powerless; behind the self-sacrifice of individual Russians he detected a collective “lust for power” akin in spirit to the individual greed of capitalism. Russian dynamism, however impressive, was “shot through with brutality.” In 1934 he criticized Communism’s single-minded pursuit of political success, which fostered a “consistent inhumanity”; by the next year, he had concluded that the Marxist “illusion” had “endow[ed] a group of oligarchs with . . . religious sanctity.”<sup>56</sup>

For Niebuhr, the enormities of Stalinist rule were not unique to Communism, but characteristic of “all forms of government which rely on indiscriminate formulae” and “absolute distinctions between friend and enemy.”<sup>57</sup> Yet the “ethos of the communist society” also reflected the particular “illusions” of Marxism, which were at once Manichean and utopian: the belief that conflict was the result of particular social relations, so that harmony could be achieved through social transformation—of which the Communists were, naturally, the agents. This identification with the cause of history, and the wronged, messianic proletariat, obscured Communist leaders’ own power lust, and led them to regard themselves as “innocent of any evil.” These illusions were the basis of Communism’s moral appeal, and its danger. They provided a “moral façade for the most unscrupulous political policy,” which was ultimately both “more dangerous and more evil” than mere cynicism, since it fed a “fierce self-righteousness” that made compromise and reform impossible.<sup>58</sup>

Even at the height of the Cold War, Niebuhr continued to warn that *both* liberalism and communism rested on “utopian” faiths. The difference between them was between a “soft” and a “hard” utopianism. “Hard utopians” believe that they have *achieved* perfection, that they “embody the perfect community”; they therefore “feel themselves morally justified in using every instrument of

guile or force against those who oppose their assumed perfection.” “Soft utopians” “expect perfection to emerge out of the ongoing process of history,” but do not claim to have achieved it themselves. Belief in their own innocence and in the attainability of utopia nourished self-assured fury on the part of “hard” utopians, and sanguine passivity on the part of “soft” utopians.<sup>59</sup> In the 1930s, ranking justice over peace, and frustrated with the impotence or complacency of American liberals, Niebuhr had taken pains to balance attacks on one type of utopianism with attacks on the other; he had also voiced a preference for the toughness and vigor of Communism, despite its dangers. In the face of totalitarian horrors, he changed his mind about the relative danger of liberal complacency and the “fanaticism” of the Communists, who believed that serving an “unambiguously ideal end” justified using “any means without scruple.”<sup>60</sup> Continuing to oppose both “hard” and “soft” utopianism, he came to see the former as the greater danger.<sup>61</sup>

His increasing sensitivity to the dangers of “hard utopianism” led Niebuhr to affirm the “*values of liberalism*,” which he now identified with the belief that political communities should be ruled with the consent of the governed; that individuals are ends in themselves; that liberty and equality are both norms of political and social life, and given this, the use of force in human affairs should be reduced as much as is possible; that toleration is a virtue; and that politics should aim to reduce material inequality through economic regulation. Niebuhr thus went from identifying liberalism with complacent defense of the status quo to (re)defining it as committed to the cause of *victims* of the status quo.<sup>62</sup> He also came to appreciate liberalism’s recognition that “irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice.” The “perils of uncontrolled power”—demonstrated, above all, by the totalitarian regimes—were “perennial reminders of the virtues” of liberal democracy, which should make us reluctant to “lightly sacrifice the virtues of democracy for the sake of escaping its defects.”<sup>63</sup>

Niebuhr’s growing identification with a distinctly liberal conception of democracy partly reflected a recalibration of his priorities, in which the values of peace and justice were held in a pluralistic tension, rather than justice being ranked above peace. But his return to liberalism was also made possible by a change in the nature of American liberalism itself. Liberalism had come to be associated neither with economic laissez-faire nor belief in spontaneous progress, but with a hard-headed pragmatism and embrace of conflictual, interest-group politics as a means to reform; and with a rejection of pacifism in favor of a “tougher”—though still temperate, rather than hastily bellicose—stance

in foreign policy. The shift was articulated by Niebuhr's disciple Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who contrasted the "progressives," whose naïve meliorism had blinded them to both the difficulties of internal reform and the evils of Communism, with the "liberals" of the New Deal and the postwar period, with their psychological "realism," wariness of power, sense of "responsibility," and awareness of the difficulties and frustrations, as well as the importance, of political struggle. If during and after the war Niebuhr (re)turned to liberalism, American liberalism had moved to meet him.<sup>64</sup>

His reconciliation with liberalism has promoted a widespread perception that between the early 1930s and the start of the Cold War, Niebuhr underwent a transformation from radical critic to defender of the domestic and international status quo of American empire.<sup>65</sup> This picture neglects the affinities between Niebuhr's earlier radicalism and later liberalism, and the continuing radical edge of his political stance during the Cold War. Niebuhr viewed the Cold War as a competition between two would-be millennial utopias, both of which presumed to be "world savers." Surveying the terrors of Communism, Niebuhr had the "uneasy feeling" that "*our* dreams of managing history might have resulted in similar cruelties," had they not been limited by democratic practice. Even with democratic procedures in place, Americans must vigilantly guard against the temptation to meet the "foe's self-righteousness with a corresponding fury of our own." There was a danger that "a frantic anti-communism" might become "so similar in its temper of hatefulness to communism itself, the difference in the respective creeds being unable to prevent the similarity in spirit." Indeed, "if we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle" because of its "hatred and vainglory," "pride and self-righteousness." To protect against disaster, defenders of democracy must cultivate a "sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us," and a "sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities."<sup>66</sup> Much of Niebuhr's postwar work was accordingly concerned, not with Communist wickedness, but with combating the "mood of self-congratulation and complacency to which a rich and powerful nation is tempted."<sup>67</sup>

Beyond complacency over the justness of their own intentions and domestic practices, Niebuhr warned Americans against two sorts of folly in international affairs: isolationism and imperialism.<sup>68</sup> Both reflected a desire to have everything under one's control, and a prideful assumption that this control



would be benevolent and wise. This led to a denial of responsibility by isolationists and pacifists, who preferred to keep their hands clean (as if America would be “innocent” if it did not continue to engage with the rest of the world); and a denial of limits by crusading anti-communists (as if America could remain “innocent” while exercising power). The intentions and aims of the “contrasting idealists”—bellicose anti-communist moralists, and pacifists or advocates of reconciliation with communism—“may be purer than ours. We cannot claim greater moral purity; but perhaps we may claim to possess a wisdom which is more relevant to our two-pronged predicament” of guarding against irresponsibility and hubris, external dangers and internal corruptions.<sup>69</sup> In order to take up the global role that events had thrust upon them, Americans had to learn to recognize the moral complexity of the choices which they faced—and to accept the likelihood, frustrating to a nation used to getting its way, that there would often be no happy outcome.

While in his interwar and wartime debates with pacifists and isolationists Niebuhr had been more concerned with the dangers of an irresponsible flight from engagement in global affairs, he now came to concentrate on the opposite error, warning that the identification of isolation with “innocence” had been replaced by “an even simpler moralism” which identified the power of the “so-called ‘free nations’” with the cause of righteousness. This conveniently obscured those nations’ “rather ruthless power politics of the nineteenth century,” and the fact that they had only just emancipated their colonies—and had done so not out of noble idealism, but because “post-war weakness and weariness had made continued rule impossible.”<sup>70</sup> Americans were prone to the delusion that they simply could not be “imperialistic”—that in Woodrow Wilson’s words, America was “the most unselfish of all nations.” This “obviously absurd” myth had been refuted by American history in the nineteenth century, which showed how democratic ideals could be used to justify the impulse to increase dominion and power.<sup>71</sup> Even leaving aside their dubious record, Americans had to remember that, in the “third world,” the conflict with Communism took place “against the background of previous ‘imperialism’ by the white nations.” The credibility and appeal of the United States was thus “gravely imperiled by residual resentments against . . . the white man’s arrogance”; any policy that “corrects and expiates past evils” was therefore *both* “morally and politically correct and better than undue reliance on military force.”<sup>72</sup>

His awareness of the complications introduced into Cold War policy by the legacy of colonialism, and the dangers of arrogance and desire for control, informed Niebuhr’s response to the Vietnam War. He had initially been

ambivalent about American involvement in Vietnam. The balance between his doubts about American intervention (and his recognition of the authoritarianism and moral iniquity of the Diem regime) and his fear that Vietnam (and, potentially, the rest of Southeast Asia) would fall to Communist rule began to tip against the war in 1965. By 1967, he was seeking to organize broad-based opposition to “this rather horrible and futile war.”<sup>73</sup> His criticisms were *ethical*, based on judgments concerning the relationship between ends and means, and the conduct and character of those actually responsible for policy, rather than the policy’s merits considered in abstraction from the human conduct around it. Thus, he highlighted the incongruity between these goals and their actions (especially the use of chemical warfare); and attacked the Johnson administration for its dishonesty and its vanity in believing that its policies and personnel represented a “conjunction of power and virtues.”<sup>74</sup>

Niebuhr did not restrict his criticisms of Cold War America to Vietnam. While he condemned violent protest by student radicals who acted out of a “combination of self-righteous perfectionism and a sense of impotence,” and whose behavior could only “complicate rather than cure the problems” that provoked it,<sup>75</sup> he also expressed sympathy for their anger as a reaction against a “culture which boasts only of affluence and technical efficiency, but has failed to achieve moral integrity and humanness.”<sup>76</sup> He acknowledged that America’s wealth made “our religious anti-Communism particularly odious. Perhaps there is not much to choose between Communist and anti-Communist fanaticism, particularly when the latter, combined with our wealth, has caused us to stumble into the most pointless, costly, and bloody war in our history.”<sup>77</sup> Such statements reveal a greater ability to overcome the anxious anger that marred Aron’s composure, or the mix of irritation, irony, guilt, and resignation that inflected Berlin’s responses, when confronted with the New Left. They also reflect Niebuhr’s continuing preoccupation with “the indifference and callousness with which we treat the sufferings and the insecurity of the poor.”<sup>78</sup> Niebuhr was particularly critical of Christian leaders who abandoned their prophetic duty to warn victorious nations and powerful classes against the dangers of vanity. Thus in 1969 he attacked President Nixon, Billy Graham, and J Edgar Hoover as “high priests in the cult of complacency.” Against their “conforming religion,” Niebuhr invoked the model of the biblical prophets, and the late Martin Luther King, Jr., whose favorite biblical passage he quoted against the clerical servants of American power: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”<sup>79</sup>

This late-life adoption of a prophetic voice might appear to represent a departure from Niebuhr's "Christian realist" mission of dispelling "moralistic illusions."<sup>80</sup> Some contemporaries thought so: his fellow theologian Paul Ramsey lamented that in his criticisms of the Vietnam War Niebuhr was acting "as if Reinhold Niebuhr never existed." This was unfair—and not merely because the war represented not a "realistic" foreign policy, but the sort of crusading hubris against which Niebuhr had long warned. For Niebuhr had also warned against a "too consistent political realism" (or, as he sometimes termed it, "pessimism"—"pessimist," it seems, being what a self-described realist calls another self-described realist with whom he disagrees). Such "too-consistent realism," like too-consistent idealism, denied the complexity of reality, and escaped into simplicity at the cost of neglecting the limited but persistent human capacity to transcend sheer self-interest and recognize moral obligations to others.<sup>81</sup> Like Aron, Niebuhr (who is frequently identified with the "realist" school in international relations) warned that contemporary "realist" theorists were too one-sided: they knew "the power of collective self-interest . . . but they do not understand its blindness,"<sup>82</sup> and accordingly assigned insufficient weight to morality.<sup>83</sup> Excessive "realism" encouraged authoritarianism by suggesting that most men needed to be ruled by unquestionable political authority in order to prevent society from falling into chaos.<sup>84</sup> In doing so, "realists" *unrealistically* placed their hopes in the ability of the rulers, whose own fallibility they tended to ignore. This critique of faith in the adequacy of an enlightened elite set Niebuhr apart from other postwar American "realists," such as Walter Lipmann, George F. Kennan, and Hans Morgenthau.<sup>85</sup>

This reflected a larger philosophical difference between Niebuhr and many "realists" concerning the relation between politics and morality. Niebuhr did not regard politics as "autonomous" from morality; the relationship between politics and morality was one of complex and ambiguous intertwining, rather than tidy separation.<sup>86</sup> "Social morality" must take into account both the fundamental, immutable claims of all human beings to freedom and equality (which can never be achieved perfectly, but remain important "regulative principles of justice"); and the realities of power and interest which, though irrelevant to considerations of "pure morality," are inescapable in political morality. There were two wrong ways of connecting politics and morality: to regard moral commitments as irrelevant to political action, or to regard every political decision as "simply derived" from morality, thus ignoring the moral ambiguity of all political positions and actions. In politics, "forces which are morally dangerous must be used despite their peril"; but that peril must be recognized—and

it could only be recognized by assuming the perspective of a morality that transcended power relations.<sup>87</sup>

An adequate political ethics required a balance of “realism” about the limits of human virtue, and “idealism” about the importance and possibility of pursuing a greater, if still imperfect, justice.<sup>88</sup> The peace of the world must be gained by strife, as Augustine noted. It must therefore always be an imperfect peace. But it need not be as imperfect as it is. If the “realist” “children of darkness” were right, justice would be impossible; if the idealist “children of light” were right, it would (given certain attainable conditions) be inevitable. But it is neither: it is (as Aron’s “progressive” view of history held) a standard that can be approximated, but never perfectly attained. Both moral sentimentality and moral pessimism threaten political liberty, the one because it convinces people that there is no need to check the power of government, the second because it believes that only absolute political authority can restrain the anarchy that arises from conflicting interests. Against both tendencies, Niebuhr famously asserted that “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”<sup>89</sup> This inclination toward injustice necessitated not only a democratic limitation and balance of power, but the exercise of an *ethos* that preserved both sober realism and prophetic criticism.

### Niebuhr as Ethicist and Ethoist of Chastened Democratic Liberalism

Niebuhr’s return to liberalism reflected a growing appreciation not only of the structure and procedures of constitutional government, but of what he had earlier identified as the “spirit” of liberalism, and the “inner moral checks” that it imposed on impulses to use power intolerantly and unjustly.<sup>90</sup> The “disciplining” of power was advanced, not just by institutional checks, but by a “sense of justice”—the “inclination to give each man his due”—and by a “sense of humility,” which protected against the tendency of a “too confident sense of justice” to lead to injustice. These senses were “of greater importance in our nation today than abstract constitutional schemes.”<sup>91</sup> Individual and group egoism tends to corrupt even the best institutional structures; whereas individual moral effort has the power to partly redeem even the worst institutions.

In the 1930s, Niebuhr had stressed the importance of institutional balancing of power rather than individual character or conscience. “Realism” seemed to

dictate that individual virtue could not be relied upon. In the postwar years, however, he came to believe that a *truly* realistic estimation of political experience showed that institutional arrangements in themselves were insufficient. The “middle ground” between Communism and Fascism on which democracy rested was preserved “not so much by particular policies as by *discrimination in judgment* and by *integrity in observing basic standards of justice*.” Indeed, the fact that Nazism and Communism, “so different in ostensible policy yet so *similar in temper*,” had produced such “identical fruits of cruelty and terror” was a sign that “the temper and the integrity with which the political fight is waged is more important for the health of a society than any particular policy, however necessary it is to fight for political policies which seem to us to embody the best hope of justice.” Not only Fascism and Communism, but the “psychosis” of McCarthyism, shared a “similarity in technique and temper” and “spirit,” marked by “indiscriminate accusation, the identification of any hated foe with any feared treason, the lack of meticulous standards of justice.”<sup>92</sup> McCarthyism, sharing as it did in the spirit and method of the totalitarian ideologies, threatened “the destruction of the spirit of democratic liberty in the name of devotion to it.”<sup>93</sup>

The main ethical pathology revealed by McCarthyism was that of Manicheanism—a tendency that posed a particularly dangerous threat to democracy. Manicheans “add the fury of moral pride to the sin of selfishness,” forgetting that “political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners,” and that in “tragic” situations, where all alternatives are hazardous and tinged by sin, “equally sincere men will choose courses that will seem abhorrent one to the other.” This tendency, in addition to making them intolerant and irresponsible (insofar as they tended to assign responsibility for error to others), led Manicheans to a premature complacency about their own virtue—which hampered them in the pursuit of genuine improvement.<sup>94</sup> Manicheanism was generally an obstacle to living a moral life well, for both societies and individuals. But it was particularly disruptive to parliamentary democracy, undermining the mutual respect—and recognition of political rights—between opposed partisans on which such a system depends. It also hampered political efficacy. Democratic politics requires a capacity for “discriminating judgment,” which recognized that “an opponent on one issue is not necessarily an opponent on every other issue.” At the same time, Niebuhr warned against the tendency to ally oneself with any potential partner, however reprehensible, in opposition to some supposedly ultimate evil. *Both* this folly—characteristic of collaborators with Nazism, Communist

fellow-travelers, and liberal anti-communists who made excuses for McCarthyism—and a puristic refusal to work with any “strange bedfellows” reflected a failure of discrimination, a lack of sense of proportion.<sup>95</sup>

Niebuhr’s heightened concern with the spirit and culture of democratic politics also reflected his increased appreciation of the moral claims of peace and stability, and of the need to balance these against the pursuit of justice. Like Aron, he saw democratic polities as perpetually faced with the challenge of finding a path between the dangers of dissolution and dogmatism, instability and stultification.<sup>96</sup> There was a need for some element of “organic” unity in a society. Yet a “too uncritical devotion” to existing institutions, norms, and traditions exacerbates their vices, making them incapable of adjusting to changing conditions. A degree of individual integrity—an ability to “defy social authority” when it violated the individual’s conscience—was necessary to preserve democratic society against both paralysis and injustice.<sup>97</sup> Burkean sociology had to be balanced with prophetic moral criticism—and with a democratic impulse of skepticism and irreverence. The “ethos of a free society” encompassed suspicion and scrutiny of every public power, and “a high degree of empiricism,” which eschewed all “sweeping generalizations and assumptions.” A “healthy democracy” will never give all power to “proponents of any one dogma; it holds all claims to truth under critical review.”<sup>98</sup> A critical spirit, and “the weapons of both scorn and laughter,” were needed to defend against both “demagogues” and “technocratic illusions.”<sup>99</sup>

This emphasis on democracy’s need for a critical and self-critical citizenry was linked to Niebuhr’s defense of “realism,” not as a (partial, fallible) doctrine, but a “disposition,” or feature of “temper and viewpoint.”<sup>100</sup> Dispositional realism involves, first, a tendency to “take *everything* into account,”<sup>101</sup> to study the available evidence carefully, to strive to see *all* sides of a complex phenomenon, and to balance or integrate them in consideration, eschewing more easily grasped, intellectually gratifying conceptions that prove untenable in the face of experience. Second, dispositional realism is sensitive to the nonrational elements of passion and will in human history, which idealists are all too quick to ignore, or treat with condescension or hostility. Niebuhr echoed Weber and agreed with Aron in holding that dispositional realism depended on disciplining the proclivity toward wishful thinking, and particularly the tendency to assume that success will follow as the reward for virtuous action.<sup>102</sup> But in contrast to Weber and Aron, Niebuhr brought this dispositional realism together with commitment to a “prophetic” ethic, which furnished an impetus toward advancing the cause of *justice*—of equal respect for all—lacking in Weber’s and

Aron's perspectives. This prophetic ethic was also more resistant to subjectivism and emotion than Camus's appeal to sentiments of loyalty and love.

For Niebuhr, then, sustaining liberal democracy demanded the cultivation of a political ethos that could combine dispositional realism with prophetic witness. This was a difficult balance to effect. But the ethos that Niebuhr envisioned was no idealization born of theory. It was shaped by the example of extraordinary individuals, ranging from the historical figure of Abraham Lincoln, to the civic activists Niebuhr had encountered as a young minister in Detroit. Foremost among these was the Jewish lawyer and activist Fred M. Butzel, "the most remarkable man I have ever encountered." Butzel was a philanthropist who could analyze the workings of power with complete dispassion; he combined a tough-minded but non-malicious cynicism about the political process with an unsentimental compassion that was "free of condescension," and "an ethical creed in which charity and integrity were the prime components."<sup>103</sup> Butzel broadened Niebuhr's moral horizons, offering a model of "magnanimity and social shrewdness"<sup>104</sup>—of how to appreciate humanity while recognizing its shortcomings—and of the virtue contained in a sense of humor.

Despite the portentousness into which his writing could fall, Niebuhr's personal power drew on his wry, self-deprecating sense of humor. This humor was part of his accessibility, his capacity to challenge his students intellectually while making clear his love for them; it was also the means through which he was able to remind himself, and others, that he did not stand outside of, but was implicated in, much of what he criticized.<sup>105</sup> Humor, Niebuhr explained, is "indispensable" in public life, because it reduces frictions and "makes the foibles of men tolerable." Humor is wise, because it contains a "nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance" toward the foibles of others—and because it allows us to acknowledge our own, without despair or bitterness. Indeed, humor provided a better affective basis for the "objectivity" called for by Weber than that thinker's own solemn, somewhat masochistic asceticism. People with a sense of humor "are able to 'stand off' from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves," because we are all "a little funny" in our "conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously." And the less we are able to laugh at ourselves, "the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us." Laughter at the "disappointments and frustrations" of life can be a source of strength; laughter at oneself can serve as a "prelude to the sense of contrition." But laughter may also reflect an



“irresponsible” mood that does not take life seriously enough. Humorlessness is dangerous, but humor in itself is not enough. It protects against our pretenses, but cannot deal with the “ultimate” problems of evil and death.<sup>106</sup>

Niebuhr would refine his praise of humor in his account of irony. “Irony” referred to situations and dynamics that arise in history: “apparently fortuitous incongruities” which, on inspection, prove to have a hidden meaning, as when “virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect,” or strength becomes weakness through vanity, or “wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits.”<sup>107</sup> We may distinguish such irony as a feature of situations from a *sense* of irony, which consists in *awareness* of such incongruities, and appreciation of the limits of human action. Cultivating a sense of irony usually requires a detachment impossible for participants in the heat of the struggle, and thus more often characterizes observers than activists. Yet Niebuhr suggested that it is not solely available, or useful, to intellectuals or critics. Some sense or perception of irony is often needed by actors, to avoid folly. Political participants—and, in a democracy, everyone is potentially a political participant—must strive to combine engagement with an element of inner detachment, to be “both in the battle and above it”: they must be ready to “defend a cause against its peril, to protect a nation against its enemies,” while also understanding “how imperfect the cause is which we defend,” acknowledging the sins of one’s own nation or party, and recognizing “the common humanity”—and need of “grace and forgiveness”—which “binds us to even the most terrible foes.”<sup>108</sup> Such a *standpoint* of irony protects against myopia and complacency, by recognizing that there might always be a larger, more penetrating perspective beyond our own.<sup>109</sup>

Niebuhr thus echoed Weber’s call for an ethos that combined distance (particularly a distanced perspective on oneself), judgment, and passion. Where he departed from Weber was in his embrace of an attitude of humorous irony, which resisted the tendency to take oneself too seriously—a tendency that, as in Weber’s case, could promote an extremism of sobriety, a tragic vision that could encourage a grim surrender to disaster and a tendency to see political leaders as heroic martyrs to their responsibilities, or criminals needing to be punished. Against this tendency, Niebuhr suggested that, in reconciling themselves to a darker vision of human society, liberals should also lighten up.

A sense of humor and an ironic perspective were, for Niebuhr, paths to humility. Like Camus, Niebuhr closely linked the “spirit of humility” to democratic politics, which on his (later) account required dispositions, or practices, of fallibilism—the recognition of the need “to question the validity of any

claim, *including our own*”—and toleration.<sup>110</sup> In championing humility, Niebuhr resembled other tempered liberals. But he stressed something more: a *practice of contrition*, the cultivation of an actively “uneasy conscience” as a necessary response to the “guilt” that “unrighteous men and nations” accrue, including the guilt of “doing so much evil while we tried to do good.”<sup>111</sup> This required not mere self-deprecating modesty, but active self-criticism—and attempts to overcome the faults of the self, even while recognizing the self’s insurmountable limitations.

Niebuhr not only preached, but exemplified, active self-criticism.<sup>112</sup> Throughout his life he was quick to publicly criticize what he regarded as mistakes in his earlier positions.<sup>113</sup> The freedom with which he admitted, indeed highlighted, his mistakes and changes of opinion was his way of giving living force to his declaration that “[w]e must make our judgment from day to day,” recognizing that “political and moral judgments are provisional and tentative,” and that an “apoplectic rigidity” bred injustice and folly. At the same time, while he was ready to revise his own views in response to experience, and repent of his errors, he did not engage in the narcissism of self-castigation: his concern was with the extent and limitations of humanity’s possibilities, not merely his own.<sup>114</sup> And he spiced humility and charity with irreverence toward others—particularly those who claimed authority.<sup>115</sup> The combination of self-criticism and humility with irreverence was an important ingredient in the ethos of liberal democracy, which required both moderation and tolerance, and a vigilant guarding against the arrogance and encroachment of power.

This picture of humble yet determinedly engaged, questioning citizens seems to undercut the worry that Niebuhr’s emphasis on the sinfulness and irony of political life encouraged anti-political withdrawal and resignation.<sup>116</sup> Such quietism runs counter to what Niebuhr identified as “the guiding principle” of his politics: that of “religious responsibility to political affairs”<sup>117</sup>—the responsibility to seek to realize moral ideals of justice in a necessarily imperfect world, even as we know we will fall short. While insisting on the need for self-searching and contrition, Niebuhr warned against excessive self-castigation—which reflected both unrealistic aspirations toward purity and perfection, and a preoccupation with the self that was ultimately a form of vanity; and which clouded the ability to distinguish between greater and lesser evils, between the height of moral excellence and more modest, but necessary, moral standards. Correct moral judgment requires careful, fine-grained perception and evaluation, which are precluded by the blunt instruments of the absolutist.

Niebuhr thus advocated, against a purism that fostered withdrawal and an extremism that fostered folly, what Robin Lovin terms a “responsible attitude”—a “settled disposition to view situations in a certain way, and to choose and to act in ways appropriate to that view.” This attitude expects human beings and situations to be complex, flawed, and not wholly knowable; it is suspicious of vaunting aspirations and simple solutions. But the responsible attitude avoids paralysis; it grapples with concrete choices of political action, which make “small differences in daily life—a little more or a little less justice, a little more or a little less freedom.”<sup>118</sup> It subjects choices to constant scrutiny and is prepared to revise them. But it also accepts that choices must be made—and the consequences of those choices, which human power cannot completely control nor human wisdom confidently predict, must be confronted as they come.

Niebuhr’s conception of responsibility as one of the most essential political virtues went back to the searing experience of World War I, which had led him to conclude that the sin of those who led their nations into war arose not from malice, but irresponsibility: they had behaved as children playing with dangerous toys.<sup>119</sup> But he also identified irresponsibility in many of those who had reacted to the war by embracing pacifism—and who failed to alter their stance in the face of new and different evils. Facing—and advocating participation in—another war, Niebuhr went so far as to declare the “evasion of responsibility” to be the essence of immorality.<sup>120</sup> This immorality was a temptation both to those who embraced power but failed to live up to the moral demands it imposes; and to those who renounced power, and thus the capacity to resist evil. Like Camus, Niebuhr thus confronted the impossibility—and futility, and delusion—of “innocence”; but while he acknowledged the anguish this caused, he counseled a calmer acceptance (one aided, in his case, by sorrowful acceptance of original sin as a fact of human existence).

The emphasis on original sin (the only Christian dogma, Niebuhr asserted, that was verified by experience) was one of several specifically Christian elements that set Niebuhr’s “Christian realism” apart from—but not necessarily at variance with—the outlook of other “tempered liberals.” While Christian realism and tempered liberalism share affirmation of skepticism, humility, clear-eyed perception, moderation, and political responsibility, the former adopts a different standpoint toward self and others, defined by the foundational fact of original sin. This standpoint fosters self-questioning, even self-mistrust, as well as humble acceptance of the need to ask for, and hope for, forgiveness for inevitable failings, toward oneself; and an unsentimental, undeceived sympathy toward others, whom we recognize as our fellow sinners.

It thus guards against self-righteousness, and an either overly trusting or adulatory, or overly harsh and furious, attitude toward others. While this moral-psychological pessimism went beyond that of other tempered liberals, it was, like theirs, still moderate: Recognizing the universality of sinfulness should lead us, Niebuhr held, to avoid undue obsession with it, and the illusion that purity or innocence is a possibility. Sinfulness must be accepted as a fundamental part of our nature and destiny—but not the whole of it.

While free of optimistic illusions, Niebuhr's Christian realism is also leavened by a stress on *hope*—viewed not merely as a useful psychological resource, but an actual *virtue*—which can sustain the struggle for justice in the face of inevitable adversity, but without an unrealistic certainty of (worldly) success. Niebuhr also advocated an ethic of *love* understood not as the ideal, super-human, heedless self-giving exemplified by Jesus, but as a dedication to accepting responsibilities toward others—and cultivating the virtues of imaginative insight into and concern for the lives of others, and forgiveness of others' inevitable shortcomings. As motive and orientation, love inspires a focus on concrete human needs, which should take priority over theoretical constructs, or dreams that are more productive of comfort for the dreamer than succor for the suffering. Finally, Christian realism was buoyed by a spirit of *gratitude*, which protected against self-congratulation by accepting good fortune as “mercies” rather than a sign of virtue.<sup>121</sup>

Maintaining the combination and balance of these elements, while steering between “hope” and “disillusionment,”<sup>122</sup> required a “heroic courage,” one that could sustain a modulated pessimism, which recognized that human virtue will always be fragmentary, human achievements tentative and fragile, and human happiness incomplete. To avoid defeatism and abdication, it was necessary to have not only a “measure of historic hope,” but a courage that transcended hope. Rejecting the millenarian faith of Marxism as well as the meliorist assumptions of progressivism, Niebuhr praised “those heroes who resisted evil at the risk or price of fortune and life without too much hope of success. Sometimes their very indifference to the issue of success or failure provided the stamina which made success possible.” Such heroism required a “patience” and a fortitude that made it possible to withstand disappointment and anxiety, and “sustain endeavors without complete certainty of success.”<sup>123</sup>

All of this may seem to add up to an assembly of attractive but incoherent bromides suspended in unresolved tension. There is some truth to this impression—though I have sought to suggest that Niebuhr was able to exhibit many of the qualities he prescribed in his own practice as a politically engaged

intellectual. In any case, his lack of theoretical systematization is not necessarily a fault. Niebuhr was, like other tempered liberals, suspicious of the project of systematic theory. Indeed, he went so far as to declare that he “abhor[red] consistency as a matter of general principle.” Attempts to unify experience into a “system of rational coherence” ultimately led to “absurdity,” because they are “untrue to the facts of existence,” with its cross-purposes, inconsistencies, contradictions, and “lacunae.”<sup>124</sup> Fidelity to the messiness of experience was a better guide to living than the attainment of a contrived coherence: “We preserve our sanity more surely if we do not try to reduce the whole crazy-quilt of events in which we move to a premature and illusory order.”<sup>125</sup> Indeed, “too-strict identification of goodness with coherence” threatens to lead to a condemnation of existence itself, which is marked by conflict: “The only complete harmony in life is in death.”<sup>126</sup> Acceptance of contradiction and incompleteness was also politically beneficial: the health of modern society, which was marked by a diversity of opposed ideas and interests, depended on the debates and conflicts between these opposed positions remaining “inconclusive.”<sup>127</sup> This required *both* partisans who could struggle for opposed position—and a greater or more influential number of participants who, while they might align with one side or the other in a dispute, maintained an ability to recognize the partial validity of both.

Niebuhr accordingly strove for *bifocality*: to widen and complicate his own and his readers’ range of vision, and to recognize both fixity and mutability in their complex interaction.<sup>128</sup> He adopted an approach to thinking and writing that was “dialectical”: starting by identifying inadequate and mistaken views, coming to understand what inspired them and where they went wrong, and moving beyond them. This was in keeping with his view of the self as developing through a set of ongoing dialogues with itself and others; and his picture of moral judgment as involving a “perpetual internal dialogue.”<sup>129</sup> Niebuhr drew on both introspection and conversation with others—particularly those who saw things differently—as antidotes to stagnation or one-sidedness: the “scrutiny” of others was the best way to discern the limitations and errors of one’s own perspective.<sup>130</sup> Such dialogue would often be conflictual, and yield no consensus or final certainty; but it was important to remain open to it, and prevent it from erupting into furious conflict, or lapsing into the mere simulation of listening and thought, as participants remained inwardly closed off and immovable.

Niebuhr’s rejection of systematic coherence, and embrace of continuous dialogue, had implications for the content, as well as the manner, of his

political thought. The fact that any intellectual position or outlook was unable to “do justice to the tang and flavor of individual uniqueness” was reason to be wary of rule by “philosopher kings” and technocratic experts.<sup>131</sup> More positively, awareness of the limits of theory and the unpredictability of events could improve political judgment. Rigid consistency was self-defeating; a suppler approach was necessary to keep myriad complex commitments in view. A combination of opposed insights might be beyond attainment by any individual. And so it was important to preserve an ongoing, self-correcting dialogue, which it was the “wisdom of democracy” to institutionalize.<sup>132</sup> But not just (liberal-)democratic institutions were needed: a dialogic ethos of courage, sensitivity, and openness was required to ensure that the confrontation of conflicting perspectives in public life yielded a dialogue, rather than a shouting match among the deaf.

## Conclusion

Niebuhr’s contribution to postwar liberalism was considerable. But the appropriation of his thought for liberal theory has always been problematic. This is partly because his position was so protean and expressed with greater regard for rhetorical resonance than theoretical precision. It is also partly because his thought rested on a theological foundation that many of his admirers did not share. As the philosopher Morton White wryly suggested, there was something incongruous in the postwar proliferation of “atheists for Niebuhr.”<sup>133</sup> The theological substructure of Niebuhr’s thought provided, in his own eyes, the underlying unity that kept the various elements of his position from flying off in opposite directions—and that justified his affirmation of hope and moral obligation in the face of limitation, corruption, ambiguity, and tragedy. There was a danger that “Christian realism,” shorn of Christianity, would be merely “realism”—and so open to the errors of despair or cynicism with which Niebuhr associated “too-consistent” realism. In any case, not sharing his theological foundations meant that Niebuhr’s fellow “anti-utopian” liberals had to find other bases for their commitment to a liberal morality in the face of the amorality of power politics, and to an ethic of responsibility in the face of an absolutist ideal of purity.<sup>134</sup>

While his theological premises separated Niebuhr from other tempered liberals, they did not prevent him from articulating much the same political project—and a similar sensibility or ethos. Even the more overtly “Christian” elements of this ethos as identified above—hope, an idea of higher justice as

a regulative ideal, an emphasis on love understood as imaginative sensitivity or openness to the particularity of others, a sense of responsibility combined with deep humility—can be found, as we have seen, in either (or both) Aron's and Camus's versions of tempered liberalism. But Niebuhr's tempering of political realism with Christian faith—and vice versa—did allow him, at a theoretical level, to more easily reconcile, or at least bridge, discordant elements in the thought of other tempered liberals. He could analyze the workings of power as unsentimentally as Aron and acknowledge the tragedy of human life as vividly as Weber or Camus—without being prone to Aron's inclination toward a “realist” identification with the practitioners of power politics, or Camus's inclination toward quixotic moral gestures (or Weber's tendency to alternate between those two modes). His Christian emphasis on human finitude and errancy finds echoes or counterparts in the tragic and ironic conception of history and human nature (or the human condition) articulated by Weber, Camus, and Aron. But Niebuhr was operating in a different register, with a different set of ideals of human character and conduct available to him, when he famously wrote:

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.<sup>135</sup>

This insistence on the imperative of striving, the inevitability of error and failure, and the need for forgiveness informed his articulation of an ethic of contrition, which may constitute the most distinctive strand in Niebuhr's contribution to the ethos of tempered liberalism. The practice of contrition—active, searching self-criticism which aimed at moral improvement and growth, even as it accepted the difficulty of such achievements—combined with Niebuhr's insistence on social responsibility, prophetic commitment to justice, and hope, offer a protection against the potential of humility and skepticism to promote complacency, defeatism, or pusillanimity; of scrupulousness to promote an excessive squeamishness and self-involvement; and of unsentimental “realism” to foster cynicism, or a romanticism of dirty hands. Attuned to, and willing to deeply excavate, the mysteries and ambiguities of the self, Niebuhr was also able to point to responsibilities and hopes that lay



beyond the self—thus promoting the critical “distance from self” that Weber had advocated as crucial to the politician.

Niebuhr’s migration toward liberalism was motivated partly by a recognition that furious self-righteousness was at least as dangerous as smug self-satisfaction—and by the recognition that the latter, as well as the former, often marked adherents of radical politics. But he did not forget the dangers of complacency—or the capacity of liberals for *both* self-satisfied smugness and self-righteous fury. His retention of a “prophetic” assertion of moral ideals and skepticism toward worldly power allowed him to maintain a sharp critical edge, without succumbing to cynicism or reflexive nay-saying.<sup>136</sup> Niebuhr’s “Christian realist” balance of prophetic moral critique with a worldly skepticism of human pretensions gave his work a persistently critical edge, which he often deployed against his own side, be it socialism, liberalism, or Christianity. His thought and practice reveal the power of a liberal ethos marked by both searching realism and ethical integrity to remain at once sober and critically reformist in the face of the competing temptations of purism, sentimentality, resignation, and power. For all his influence on and embrace by political leaders and cultural elites, Niebuhr chafed at the role of court theologian of liberalism, in which critics and admirers alike cast him. This refusal to become a comfortable standard-bearer for liberalism—or to ever rest satisfied with the existing achievements of any liberal movement or regime—may constitute his greatest contribution to liberalism’s cause.

## 6

# “The Courage of . . . Our Doubts and Uncertainties”

ISAIAH BERLIN, ETHICAL MODERATION,  
AND LIBERAL ETHOS

Herzen is free from any desire to prostrate himself before the mere spectacle of irresistible power . . . from contempt for or hatred of weakness as such. . . . In his discussion of what men live by, there occurs the smallest proportion of abstraction and generalization, and the highest proportion of vivid, three-dimensional, “rounded” perception of actual character, authentic human beings with real needs, seeking attainable human ends.<sup>1</sup>

Trampling is what I have most strongly objected to all my life.<sup>2</sup>

ISAIAH BERLIN (1909–1997) is among the best-known liberal thinkers of the twentieth century, familiar to political theorists for his analysis of liberty and his linkage of liberalism to ethical pluralism. Less noted is the centrality to Berlin’s thought of questions of political ethics. His first surviving piece of writing, written at the age of twelve, is a story of political ruthlessness and revenge in the Russian Revolution; his last written words authorized publication of a call for toleration and compromise—and condemnation of “bigots” on both sides—in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>3</sup> The opposition between ruthlessness and humanity, extremism and moderation, infused his writing from first to last. At the height of his career, Berlin gave voice to the values and anxieties, embodied the sensibilities, and lived through the tensions of tempered liberalism. His theoretical pluralism, along with his capacity for empathetic insight and resistance to finality, allowed him to appreciate conflicting

elements within the commitments, demands, and dispositions within the liberalism of his time; while the cultivation of a liberal ethos offered him a way of living with the reality of pluralism. Concurrently, his pluralism—as a feature of both theory and temperament—allowed him to recognize, but not to overcome, difficulties within tempered liberalism.

Berlin's work also offers a rich resource for considering the role of ethos. His accounts of political judgment and leadership, and his portraits of individual thinkers, are informed by an appreciation of the importance of "pattern qualities" of character—individuals' "habits of thought and emotion, ways of looking at, reacting to, talking about experiences"; and by an almost novelistic sensitivity to the interplay of beliefs with "style of life" and "cast of mind or heart."<sup>4</sup> Other "tempered liberals" wrote perceptively about the importance of character and temperament; but few of them so excelled at the evocation of character and temperament as an intellectual mode. Berlin conveys, as few philosophers do, not only the doctrinal roots of philosophical and ideological tendencies, but the interaction of these beliefs with the quirks of individual personality, and the influence of environment, tradition, and events. His writings also vividly communicate his own distinctive temperament and vision. In both respects, he contributes to an appreciation of the importance of ethos to understanding politics as an ethical experience, and to the reconstruction of liberalism in opposition to anti-liberalism.<sup>5</sup>

### Political Ethics, the "Liberal Predicament," and the Challenge of Machiavellianism

It is unlikely that Berlin would have gravitated toward political theory had it not been for the revulsion provoked in him by the politics of his day. There was more to his thought than fear; but it was with his apprehensions that his political thought began. Foremost among these was the compound of intoxication with doctrine and political violence—the "torture of innocent men" by "monomaniacs in pursuit of the millennium."<sup>6</sup> Berlin was confronted with this phenomenon at a younger age, and in a more naked way, than the other tempered liberals discussed here. As a child in Petrograd he observed the euphoria of the Revolution's early days—the restless migration from meeting to meeting, the excited reports of speeches and events. He also witnessed the turmoil of an urban revolution—and early signs of what was to come: Bolsheviks (then known as "Maximalists") tearing down the electoral lists of other

parties, replacing them with posters of the hammer and sickle. Walking down the street with his nurse, the eight-year-old Berlin saw a Tsarist policeman being dragged off by a mob to probable lynching. The incident occurred during the early, liberal phase of the Revolution; the victim was part of a brutal agency of autocratic oppression. But while he could reflectively recognize in the incident a manifestation of an enslaved people seizing liberty from their rulers, Berlin was left with the immediate image of “a pale faced man being dragged off to his death . . . by a savage crowd, screaming.”<sup>7</sup> For the rest of his life, his attraction to political ideals would be tempered by the reality of political violence and individual human suffering; his own political vision was guided by (as he wrote of Mill) “hatred of the human pack in full cry against a victim.”<sup>8</sup>

Within a year of arriving in England, whence the Berlin family fled from Bolshevik (and Latvian anti-Semitic) persecution, the twelve-year-old Berlin wrote a melodramatic tale of revenge in post-Revolutionary Russia, inspired by the assassination of M. S. Uritsky, the sometime head of the Petrograd Cheka. In the fictionalized Uritsky we have Berlin’s first portrait of the fanatical mind: “He signed death verdicts without moving his eyebrow. His leading motto in life was ‘The purpose justifies the ways.’ He did not stop before anything for bringing out his plans.” Uritsky divided humanity into those who stood in his way, and those who obeyed him; the former “did not deserve to live at all.”<sup>9</sup> This early portrait anticipates Berlin’s mature preoccupation with fanaticism, dehumanization, and ruthlessness. It also reflects the importance of Russian sources in forming his political-ethical imagination.<sup>10</sup> Berlin’s defense of a conventionally “British” ethos of moderation and tolerance derived its peculiar tonality and urgency from the very different conditions of Russian life; his beliefs, he wrote, “really spring from the heart of the Russian *intelligentsia*,”<sup>11</sup> whose moral passion inspired him—even as his recognition of the disastrous consequences of their longing for certainty inoculated him against similar cravings.<sup>12</sup>

Berlin’s perspective also reflected the experiences of the generation who came of age in the 1930s: the crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy across much of the world; the complacency, callousness, or dithering of Britain’s rulers; and the rejection by many, on both right and left, of “humanistic values as such,” the worship of brute strength, and the belief that “the conquest and retention of political power” required total dedication and self-abnegation to “some ruthless ideology, or the practice of despotism.”<sup>13</sup> This dark time left Berlin with a lasting sense of both the value and vulnerability of liberal democracy; the moral purchase of Communism on liberal and humanitarian sentiment in this period, and many liberal politicians’ apparent ineffectuality, made

him sensitive to indictments of liberalism as morally compromised and politically impotent.<sup>14</sup>

If the 1930s were formative, so was World War II.<sup>15</sup> As a British diplomat in America, Berlin was privy to the inner workings of foreign diplomacy and American politics. Exposure to the highest levels of government fostered appreciation of the murkiness and ironies of politics—what we might call the *politically realist* pole in Berlin's political sensibility. Later, confrontation with the evil of totalitarianism (during a brief diplomatic posting to Moscow) left him with a perspective of *moral realism*, according to which *some* political conflicts reflected alternatives of (relative) good and (real) evil. These experiences also fostered a tendency to view politics from the perspectives both of officials preoccupied with momentous decisions affecting the lives of their subjects; and of artists and intellectuals grappling with the claims of political movements and ideologies. The tension between these perspectives—one shaped by awareness of political responsibility and the moral compromises it involves, the other committed to the preservation of personal integrity—runs through Berlin's work.

His brush with Soviet life left Berlin with a sharp perception of political terror, which aimed to crush the inner lives of those in its grip, and to leech away their sense of dignity and integrity, by subjecting them to the constant, psychologically pulverizing force of fear.<sup>16</sup> This penetration of the victim's last lines of defense was, to Berlin, the worst of political evils;<sup>17</sup> among the worst of political sins was the "denial of common humanity," the division of mankind into "men proper, and some other, lower, order of beings, inferior races, inferior cultures, subhuman species, nations or classes condemned by history," which allowed men "to look on many millions of their fellow men as not quite human, to slaughter them without a qualm of conscience, without the need to try to save them or warn them."<sup>18</sup> Berlin was aghast at the calm, self-congratulatory ruthlessness of benevolent ideologues who confidently believed that they knew the truth and were acting for the best.<sup>19</sup> His political thought was directed less against particular policies or, indeed, institutional arrangements, than the sort of mentality, conduct, and treatment of human beings embodied by the totalitarian regimes.

At the same time, Berlin was acutely aware of "the liberal predicament" (a term he, in fact, coined) of being caught between opposing extremists on the right and left. He did not view these extremes as equivalent, or equidistant from liberalism. Liberalism—at least the liberalism with which Berlin identified—was a left-leaning (or center-left) position (even if his thought also

had affinities with certain elements of conservative thought<sup>20</sup>). Liberals were, on his account, drawn to the left by admiration for the “selfless dedication” and “purity” of those who “offered their lives for the violent overthrow of the *status quo*.” They accordingly questioned the validity of their own position: “they doubted, they wondered, they felt tempted” to “stretch themselves upon a comfortable bed of dogma,” which would “save them from being plagued by their own uncertainties.” Berlin understood the attractions of such submission, but urged his fellow liberals against it. He also warned them against the lure of embracing a liberal fundamentalism of their own.<sup>21</sup>

The liberal predicament, caught between hatred of existing injustice backed by ruthless repression, and fear of radicals’ proclivity for fanaticism, represented one of two ambivalences that structured Berlin’s thinking about political ethics. The second concerned the conflicting claims of “realism” and “idealism” as dispositions, and political responsibility and personal decency as ethical ideals. Both exerted a pull on Berlin; at the same time, he saw both as reflecting a futile and dangerous longing for certainty, born of the experience of dissatisfaction with the world as it is, and the frustration of attempts to improve it.<sup>22</sup> One of the main messages of his work was the futility of the longing for perfection, and one of its main purposes was to combat this longing by encouraging an acceptance, and appreciation, of uncertainty and untidiness. This dictated his intellectual persona, one marked by self-deprecation and modesty, typified by his declaration that “I can guarantee nothing; guarantees are a way of denying experience as the only measure.”<sup>23</sup> It also drew—or condemned—Berlin to an often uncomfortably ambiguous position between engagement and detachment, moral response and political judgment, indignation and acceptance.

Berlin’s opposition to ruthlessness was deep-seated, emotional; but it inspired, and came to be primarily expressed through, his critique of several linked intellectual tendencies. These were “utopianism” (the longing for, and tendency to measure reality against, a perfect society<sup>24</sup>); ethical monism (the belief in a coherent, well-ordered moral universe, structured by some ultimate value or ideal ordering of values); and the “fanaticism of ideas,” which arose from “the confusion of words with facts, the construction of theories employing abstract terms which are not founded in discovered real needs,” and resulted in a willingness to sacrifice reality to doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Berlin lumped these tendencies together; we may refine his account by distinguishing between *monism*, *maximalism*, *fanaticism*, and *extremism*. Berlin tended to present monism as a doctrine; it is more plausibly understood as an outlook, composed

of several distinct assumptions, the connections between which are as psychological as logical. In addition to assuming that "there is one truth and one only," it maintains that (1) one's whole life should be devoted to the service of this truth; (2) there is "one method, and one only, for arriving at" this truth, and that there exists "one body of experts alone qualified to discover and interpret it"; and (3) whatever agent possesses the one ultimate truth has "a right to invade everything": the innermost recesses of the self must be open to "penetration" and direction by the single, ultimate truth. Monism thus justifies theoretically what terror effects practically: a breach of those boundaries protecting the integrity of the self against domination by larger forces.<sup>26</sup>

While monism promotes a tendency to devalue, neglect, or reject all but some single value or goal, maximalism ordains the rejection of any condition short of perfection; it is the translation of monism into an approach to practical politics. Fanaticism identifies a sensibility that perceives and judges everything "in the light of a single goal," which is taken to be all-embracing and all-important. Fanaticism is passionate, domineering monomania. Finally, extremism refers to a particular way of thinking about how to pursue one's goals, which sees issues in terms of all-or-nothing, and rejects compromise and half-measures as so much "liberal fiddling, escape from the radical task."<sup>27</sup>

His critiques of these tendencies have fostered a picture of Berlin as a critic of utopianism.<sup>28</sup> But, like other tempered liberals, Berlin saw dispositions to fanaticism and extremism at work in utopianism's apparent opposite, "realism." He decried the influence of such realism as a characteristic, and malignant, feature of his time—declaring, in 1951, that "Surely there never was a time when more homage was paid to bullies as such: and the weaker the victim the louder (and sincerer) his paeans";<sup>29</sup> this tendency, he added, could be found among figures on both the right and left. Resistance to such "realism" was a recurrent theme, and motivation, of his work.

It is important to distinguish between three senses of "realism" employed by Berlin: (1) a proclivity to perceive reality accurately; (2) a view that holds that "What ought to be done must be defined in terms of what is practicable, not imaginary";<sup>30</sup> and (3) a "more sinister" sense, meaning a tendency to be "harsh and brutal, not shrinking from what is usually considered immoral, not swayed by soft sentimental moral considerations."<sup>31</sup> This last reflected, not a clear-eyed, rigorous freedom from illusions, but the same longing to escape doubt and moral anguish that fueled utopianism. Many tied themselves to the mast of "realism" to resist the torturous calls of their own consciences and muffle debilitating doubts. Such intellectual self-insulation came at the price



of an anesthetizing of moral sentiments, and abdication of a basic human practice of moral judgment.<sup>32</sup>

Berlin was not entirely opposed to (or repulsed by) the spirit of “realism.” He admired *intellectual* toughness, marked by unsentimental skepticism, a rigorous demand for clarity, and unsparing exposure of illusions, evasions, and muddle. He also, as we shall see, admired *some* sorts of political toughness. But “on balance” he thought “unscrupulous trampling” worse than sentimentalism, and esteemed “defiance for its own sake . . . sincerity, purity of motive, resistance in the face of all odds, noble failure” and “integrity as such,” and was gladdened when “men were prepared to defend their principles” against the “irresistible power” of historical inevitability. Such “dedication to ideals” was often needed to motivate resistance to evil, and to inspire men and women to reassert, and by reasserting, redeem, human dignity.<sup>33</sup>

This sympathy for idealism was manifest in Berlin’s response to his visit to the USSR in 1945. This experience is commonly (and correctly) seen as confirming Berlin’s opposition to Soviet totalitarianism and terror.<sup>34</sup> But he himself attributed a different significance to the visit. The conduct of Pasternak, Akhmatova, and other Russian *intelligents* “vividly transform[ed]” his “notions about moral freedom and dignity.” The revelation of his visit was not “the ‘massive evil’” of Soviet rule—this was clear enough to anyone with eyes to see—but rather, the moral grandeur of those who maintained their ideals and independence in the face of persecution. The “moral effect” of seeing these individuals “rising above the world in which they lived” was, he recalled, “literally indescribable.”<sup>35</sup> That it was this that so affected Berlin and stayed with him as the lesson of his experience reveals a great deal about his sensibility. Skeptical of the longing for perfection, he had his own passionate desire to believe in the capacity of human beings to preserve moral nobility amid tragic circumstances. Dedication to ideals, however, needed a chastening dose of “‘real’ realism.”<sup>36</sup> And, as Berlin acknowledged, “the line between cynicism . . . and an unflinching realism is at times not easy to draw.”<sup>37</sup>

Opposed to both utopianism and (a certain sort of) realism, Berlin (like Aron) was particularly concerned by the combination of the two in ruthless political fanaticism. This convergence was most manifest in Communism, with its “mixture of Utopian faith and brutal disregard for civilised morality.”<sup>38</sup> There was a cautionary lesson in this for liberals tempted by the attraction of toughness, which is missed if Communism is regarded simply as liberalism’s opposite or “other.” Contrary to a common impression, Berlin did not depict

it as such. On his account (as on Niebuhr's), Communism started out from many of the same general assumptions and impulses as earlier liberalism: a belief in "human perfectibility, the possibility of creating a harmonious society," and the "compatibility (indeed the inseparability) of liberty and equality," combined with a rejection of "utopian" failures to think realistically about the connection between ends and means.<sup>39</sup> Communism was indeed more realistic about the means necessary to achieve its aims than earlier, optimistic liberalism had been; this was a key to its appeal. After the disappointment of dreamy liberal hopes in the revolutions of 1848, those who opposed the reign of reaction sought "drier light, realistic plans, an assessment of what the facts were, and what could be done by real men rather than angels." Many were drawn to Marx's work by its "very harshness," its "anti-heroic realism."<sup>40</sup> A similar pattern had repeated itself in the 1930s.

The goal of combining "realism" about human possibilities with commitment to idealistic goals was a worthy one; where had Communists gone wrong? A hint of the answer is contained in Berlin's characterization of Communism as "doctrinaire humanitarianism driven to an extreme in the pursuit of effective offensive and defensive methods." The two elements here are both important: the doctrinaire spirit in which humanitarian goals were embraced, and a view of politics as a life-and-death struggle in which winning was paramount. This framework shaped how Communists thought about means. For Lenin and his followers, contribution to the success of the revolution became the *sole* and *sufficient* criterion for judging actions: "if the revolution demanded it, everything—democracy, liberty, the rights of the individual—must be sacrificed to it." This promoted a revolutionary ethos marked by consistency, resolution, and hardness. A Communist revolution could not be achieved by "men obsessed by scrupulous regard for the principles of bourgeois liberals." Indeed, such scruples revealed "a lack of seriousness."<sup>41</sup>

Berlin's political perceptions and principles reflected not only his revulsion at the political currents of his time, but his personal preoccupation with the competing claims of political responsibility and personal integrity. As a young man, he had resisted his peers' tendency toward activism, without quite being politically indifferent. In the postwar period his passionate opposition to Soviet Communism led him to join in some activities of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and other anti-Communist ventures, while maintaining an ironic distance.<sup>42</sup> The strongest pull, however, was probably from the Zionist movement and the newly created State of Israel—particularly from Chaim

Weizmann, the British Zionist leader and Israel's first President, who insistently entreated (or commanded) Berlin to enter the service of the new state. There is a heavy autobiographical subtext to Berlin's characterization of Weizmann's ethic of political responsibility as deeming it "an absolute duty" to "take part in the world's affairs." Weizmann condemned withdrawal from politics by those for whom "personal integrity, or peace of mind, or purity of ideal, mattered more than the work . . . to which they were committed." In praising Weizmann, Berlin somewhat equivocally endorses this view as "superior to its opposite."<sup>43</sup> Yet he persisted, against Weizmann's cajoling, in withdrawing from a political world for which he had no stomach, and a movement that he found increasingly difficult to embrace without reservation.<sup>44</sup>

It is possible that in his praise of Weizmann, Berlin gave voice to a view of the priority of political responsibility which he either did not share, or shared but could not act on. There is, however, a more interesting reading of what Berlin was doing. This starts by noting that, in his characterization of Weizmann's attack on political withdrawal, Berlin invokes two different sorts of "purists": those who make a frank choice in favor of personal purity, and thus withdraw from public life; and those who placed purity or peace of mind above "the work upon which they were engaged and to which they were committed." In the latter case, withdrawal looks like a failure to recognize what one's own commitments really demand—which, in turn, reflects a refusal to face up to the conflicts between values. "Purity" is the wrong way to think of the moral state of those who rejected the compromises of politics: they, too, choose to serve some values to the detriment of others.

Here we might see Berlin confronting what his friend Stuart Hampshire called "Machiavelli's problem."<sup>45</sup> Machiavelli suggested that one can either "save one's soul" (or serve ideals of personal goodness or decency), or "serve a great and glorious state."<sup>46</sup> To seek to do both was intellectually muddled and politically crippling. Recognizing this, Machiavelli had rejected the attempt to find a middle path that would allow one to navigate between the two opposed moralities. Yet Berlin, while affirming the existence of a genuine and (theoretically) insurmountable conflict between the moral demands of political responsibility and moral purity, did not embrace so drastic a position. Berlin's work is often structured by stark dichotomies—positive and negative liberty, monism and pluralism, idealism and realism, personal and political morality. But the substance of his views—and his sensitivity to subtleties and possibilities—is to be found in his portraits of individuals, to which political theorists, intent on the examination of concepts, too rarely turn.<sup>47</sup>

## Political Ethics and Ethical Exemplars: Berlin's Portraits of Realism and Idealism

Berlin's accounts of individual ideological extremists reveal the interplay of dispositions of character, political doctrine, and ethical outlook in inspiring political ruthlessness. A prime example is the Russian anarchist and serial revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin. For Berlin, Bakunin was of interest in presenting, not a doctrine, but "an outlook and a temperament," that revealed the dangers of infatuation with speculative theories, and a readiness to sacrifice principles and persons to the realization of these theories. Bakunin's "hatred of slavery, oppression, hypocrisy, poverty, *in the abstract*" was unaccompanied by "actual revulsion against their manifestations in concrete instances." The lives and fates of individuals "did not greatly concern him; his units were too vague and too large." Berlin's depiction of Bakunin recalls Camus's account of the transformation of the "rebel" into a terrorist or tyrant. But where Camus (the gifted novelist aspiring to philosophical distinction) had stressed Hegelian and Marxian doctrine in his story of rebellion's perversion, Berlin (the philosopher who was something of a novelist *manque*) stressed how Bakunin, who vehemently (and presciently) rejected Marx's doctrine, shared in a dangerously extremist *mind-set*. This was marked not only by ideological intoxication, but by an innate moral levity—an inability to pay sustained, conscientious attention to the claims or concerns of others—which fostered a "cynical indifference to the fate of individual human beings, a childish enthusiasm for playing with human lives for the sake of social experiment, a lust for revolution for revolution's sake." He found political upheaval and violence "boundlessly exhilarating"; and he gave this feeling of exhilaration greater weight than political consequences.<sup>48</sup> In his personal life and political practice Bakunin was always ready to spend profusely, recklessly—leaving others to pay the bill.

For all his palpable disapproval, Berlin admitted that Bakunin was, in his own abstracted way, inspired by generous ideals. And there were worse forms of political extremism. The anti-liberals of Berlin's day combined the intoxication with violence and conspiracy exhibited by Bakunin with a grimmer "realism." Less reckless, they were even more ruthless. Marx, with his dogmatism, "sardonic, gloating joy"<sup>49</sup> at the prospect of vast destruction, and cynical amusement at moral sentiment, had in Berlin's eyes anticipated some of these developments; but while Berlin felt personal distaste toward Marx, he recognized that there remained a distance between the overbearing German *savant* who transformed socialism, and the men who transmuted Marx's theories into

terror. The real characterological model for the homicidal idealists of Berlin's day was Lenin. While Lenin's goals were "oddly Utopian," his practice was "strangely like that of those irrationalist reactionaries"—Pareto, Nietzsche, Maistre—whose low estimation of human nature led them to embrace authoritarianism and the propagation of doctrine and myth. The revolutionary movement, Lenin believed, was faced with a choice between a strategy of education, which "might lead to a vast deal of discussion and controversy," dividing and enfeebling the radical cause; or the conversion of the proletariat into "an obedient force held together by a military discipline and a set of perpetually ingeminated formulae . . . to shut out independent thought." Believing the masses "too stupid and too blind to be allowed to proceed in the direction of their own choosing," Lenin rejected the path of education as irresponsible.<sup>50</sup>

The approach typified by Lenin and other Bolsheviks expressed not just strategic considerations, but a particular mind-set: a *doctrinaire* ethos of rigid consistency, which quashed countervailing considerations and sentiments. Berlin defined a doctrinaire as "a man who is liable to suppress what he may, if he comes across it, suspect to be true" if it conflicts with his doctrine, which serves him as an authoritative guide to what "to think and feel and do." Thus, in applying to everything "a rigorous Marxist scale of values," Trotsky believed that "the more (in terms of factual truth or personal inclinations) it cost him to do it, the more serious and true to his principles," and the more admirable, he was. The willful subordination of sentiment and judgment to the dictates of doctrine encouraged "lack of interest in people, arrogant contempt for most of them," and "terrific blindness to the smaller, more delicate elements of human social texture." These qualities left Trotsky morally blinkered—and politically vulnerable.<sup>51</sup>

Bakunin represented a failure of responsibility and realism; Lenin, Trotsky, and other Communists exhibited the wrong way to seek to combine humanist ideals with political hard-headedness. But attempts at such a combination need not result in maximalist ruthlessness or doctrinaire fanaticism—as Berlin sought to show in his portraits of the man he identified as his hero: Alexander Herzen. Herzen was, at first sight, a strange exemplar for Berlin. A Russian aristocrat who idealized the peasant commune, he despised bourgeois liberals as "feeble, unrealistic, and cowardly," and liberal regimes as "traps called oases of liberty," behind whose vaunted protection of rights lay the ever-present threat of state violence.<sup>52</sup> He spent most of his adult life in exile—and involved in the revolutionary international of mid-nineteenth-century Europe, becoming in exile one of Russia's leading radical publicists. But if Herzen was a revolutionary, he was a

"revolutionary without fanaticism," opposed to the ruthlessness and complacency of conservatives, liberals, and radicals alike, and alert to the blind spots of both "realists" (such as Bismark and Marx) and "idealists."

Before Berlin sought to retrieve his work and transform his reputation, Herzen had been appropriated by Communists, and dismissed by others as a quixotic romantic. He was seldom taken seriously as a thinker—not surprisingly, given that most of his mature works are a mix of polemic, journalism, and memoir, with little that looks like conventional political theory. Berlin acknowledged this, insisting that what Herzen offered was not a system, but the model of a "liberal attitude"<sup>53</sup>—a combination of *moral sentiments and values, ethical tastes*, and an *intellectual sensibility* and related *sense of reality*—which exemplified a way of engaging in morally-inspired social reform markedly different from, and superior to, Bakunin's irresponsible romanticism, and Bolshevism's grim fanaticism and cynical power politics.<sup>54</sup> Herzen's *moral sentiments* centered on a defense of human dignity and agency, and a rejection of calls to sacrifice living individuals for the sake of distant goals. Like later tempered liberals, Herzen stressed *epistemic* limits—our inability to foretell the future, to predict what problems would arise and what political and social arrangements would be best suited to deal with those problems. But he laid greater stress on the *moral* argument against sacrificing living individuals for "the felicity of future generations": namely, that doing so treated human beings as mere instruments, "caryatids supporting a floor for others some day to dance on." To justify such sufferings with the promise that "after their death all will be beautiful on earth" was to mock their efforts and devalue their lives. Far better to work for short-term, achievable goals, formulated based on knowledge of immediate circumstances, and to strive for the benefit of the human beings we know.<sup>55</sup>

Herzen's *intellectual sensibility* was marked, above all, by suspicion of ideal theories and abstractions. He saw something not only dangerous, but absurd, in the very formulation of general questions about *the* meaning of life, or *the* goal or meaning of history: "such questions made sense only if they were made specific." Human beings and their relationships were "too complex for standard formulae and neat solutions, and attempts to adapt individuals and fit them into a rational schema . . . always lead in the end to a terrible maiming."<sup>56</sup> Against the idolatry of abstractions or "fanaticism of ideas," Herzen advocated not only political and social freedom, but a practice of *seeing freely*, rather than seeking to force experience into preconceived theories or agendas. This demanded not only skepticism, but *irreverence*. Such irreverence was not tantamount to cynicism or lack of seriousness; quite the contrary. To resort to

solemn worship of abstractions was intellectually un-serious, an evasion of intellectual responsibility. No one and nothing should be exempt from “criticism and denial”: “no ideal at which one was forbidden to smile was worth anything at all.”<sup>57</sup>

This call for irreverence is reminiscent of Niebuhr’s praise of the wisdom of humor; and, like Niebuhr, Herzen linked the proclivity toward skeptical questioning to a sense of humility—and an open-minded curiosity about the world. This made him an opponent of paternalistic and elitist approaches to political rule and reform: he warned that the “pedagogic method of our civilising reformers is a bad one” because it started from the assumption that “we know everything and the people know nothing.” This was dangerous, both for the people, and the project of humanitarian reform. For “[w]ithout knowing the people we may oppress . . . [them,] we may enslave them, we may conquer them, but we cannot set them free.”<sup>58</sup> This opposition to not only outright tyranny, but also tutelary paternalism and technocratic condescension, lay at the heart of Berlin’s own liberalism.<sup>59</sup>

Alongside humility, Herzen exhibited a proud independence, which reflected his *ethical tastes*—the sort of character and way of life that he valued. Herzen delighted in “the free play of individual temperament,” “spontaneity, directness, distinction, pride, passion, sincerity, the style and colour of free individuals,” and the “very irregularity” of human psychology; he “detested conformism, cowardice, . . . and anxious submissiveness”; and was moved to “moral fury” by “the humiliation of the weak by the strong,” “insult by one side, and groveling by the other.”<sup>60</sup> Such negative reactions reflected the *positive* ethical content of liberalism: an affirmation of individuality and variety—and a vision of a good (if imperfect) society of free human beings. He also admired idealism, sincerity, and generosity, and “never amused himself at its expense.”<sup>61</sup> Yet he was aware of the danger of being guided by *blind* passion: thus he recalled that among his fellow revolutionaries, in 1848 “there was more heroism, more youthful self-sacrifice, than good judgment; and the pure, noble victims fell, not knowing for what.”<sup>62</sup> Herzen was acutely sensitive to the way in which good intentions and noble sentiments could become oppressive, stifling all that was errant, unruly, impure—and vitally alive—in human character and behavior. While he never scorned idealism, he resisted giving himself over completely to emotion, however noble; and regarded sanctimoniousness as ludicrous and dangerous.

Herzen’s blending of idealism and irreverence reflected the “ambivalent, contradictory play of his nature.”<sup>63</sup> Berlin cherished both of these sides. But



he particularly admired Herzen for his freedom from "prostration before the . . . spectacle of triumphant power and violence, from contempt for weakness as such, and from the romantic pessimism which is at the heart of the nihilism and fascism." Herzen denied that to change the world one must be "brutal and violent, and trample with hob-nailed boots on civilisation and the rights of men." He insisted, to the contrary, that unless distinctions between "good and bad, noble and ignoble, worthy and unworthy" were upheld, unless there are some who are "fastidious and fearless, and free," there was no point to pursuing revolutionary change: a revolutionary or, indeed, reformist movement dominated by cynicism and ruthlessness would undermine the only goals that could justify it in the first place.<sup>64</sup> These convictions formed the core of Berlin's own sense of political ethics—of the kind of outlook, conduct, and policy that should be adopted if a decent politics is to be maintained, and desirable political outcomes attained.

For all of his admiration for Herzen, Berlin's politics and temperament clearly differed from those of the nomadic radical agitator. His response to political affairs often seemed closer to that of Herzen's friend, the novelist Ivan Turgenev. For Berlin, Turgenev embodied the predicament of "the well-meaning, troubled, self-questioning liberal," unable to commit fully either to defending the status quo or to overthrowing it. Turgenev wished to march with "the party of liberty and protest," however "wrong-headed, barbarous, contemptuous of liberals like himself" they were: for "the evils that they wished to fight were evils; their enemies were, to some degree, his enemies too." But he could not accept the dogmatism, arrogance, destructiveness, or insensitivity to human complexity of militant radicals.<sup>65</sup> In this characterization of Turgenev, Berlin was clearly voicing his own responses to the radicalism of the late 1960s. This has led Berlin's biographer to conclude that "it was not Herzen but Turgenev . . . who became a lifelong mirror" and "hero" for Berlin.<sup>66</sup> Others prefer to identify Herzen as the true hero of Berlin's work<sup>67</sup> (or insist that he should have been<sup>68</sup>). Both views are plausible. What each misses is that, by making the case for *both* Herzen and Turgenev, Berlin was confronting ambiguities and conflicts within a liberal ethos—and showing two overlapping but divergent variations of that ethos which, put into critical dialogue, might correct or temper one another.

Turgenev's "sober realism," "tolerant scepticism," and "inveterate habit of doing justice to the full complexity and diversity of goals, attitudes, beliefs," were artistically and ethically admirable. But they often left him politically adrift. Furthermore, his cultivated ambivalence could appear "somewhat

complacent": he "seemed to enjoy his very doubts."<sup>69</sup> Berlin was ambivalent about Turgenev's ambivalence. The "emotional neutrality" to which Turgenev aspired seemed impossible, irresponsible, and even intolerable in the face of the atrocities and agonies through which Berlin's generation had lived. Yet he also perceived in Turgenev something beyond mere aestheticism. Circumstances forced Turgenev to recognize the responsibility of the artist—of all morally serious members of society—to come to grips with politics. While he dissented from the simplistic utilitarianism of younger Russian radicals (the so-called nihilists), who treated everything as merely instrumental to social change, he also rejected the fastidious, apolitical aestheticism preached by the young Tolstoy, to whom he wrote, "'you loathe this political morass; true, it is a dirty, dusty, vulgar business. But there is dirt and dust in the streets, and yet we cannot, after all, do without towns.'"<sup>70</sup> Turgenev, no less than Herzen, identified "with the victims, never the oppressors." But, unlike Herzen, he balanced the impulse of indignation with an appreciation of the precariousness and difficulty of maintaining the "minimum of decency" without which life was intolerable. He acknowledged the need for change; but held that it should take the form of "slow progress," not radical upheaval, which left too little remaining to build a new society—and too little worth living for. His more temperate outlook also allowed him to take a more dispassionate, objective view of the demands of politics. Not himself a practical social reformer, he articulated a *reformist ethos* of "active patience" and ingenuity. In moments of crisis, when "the incompetent come up against the unscrupulous," the responsible, humane reformist must have the will to resist the latter and the skill—even the "cunning"—to avoid being among the former. He must renounce both moral sentimentality and political brutality; he must possess both a moral compass and "practical good sense."<sup>71</sup>

Here we must distinguish, more clearly than did Berlin, between Turgenev's own example, and his prescription—a distinction illustrated by his last novel, *Virgin Soil* (1877). Nezhdanov, a would-be revolutionary whose efforts end in failure and suicide, is shown to be temperamentally unsuited to both the "harsh discipline" of the revolutionary politics he embraces, and the "slow and solid work" undertaken by the practical reformer Solomin. Berlin suggested that, despite the political distance between them, Turgenev identified with Nezhdanov, whose tragedy lay in the fact that he was "unable to simplify himself."<sup>72</sup> To do well in politics, one must be a solid, practical Solomin rather than a Nezhdanov—or a Turgenev. But Turgenev's vision and temper can nevertheless contribute to the political imagination, and ethos, of practical reformers,

in a way that revolutionary romanticism cannot: by reminding them of the complexity and losses of even the most carefully, skillfully executed social program, and the need for sensitivity and empathic imagination. It can also serve as a warning to the Nezhdanovs of the world: to eschew the romance of revolutionary agitation and conspiracy, and seek either to learn the modest way of Solomin—or to devote themselves to awakening citizens' consciences, expanding their imagination, and cultivating their understanding of complexity, through some other means. Direct political action is not the only way to serve the cause of political reform.

Both Turgenev's political ineffectuality *and* his politically useful insights can be traced back to one of his most noteworthy qualities: his skill at entering into outlooks "alien and at times acutely antipathetic" to his own. This empathy was partly a matter of perceptual gifts, partly of motivation: it came from Turgenev's driving *curiosity*, which "was always stronger than his fears."<sup>73</sup> This claim reflects a major concern of Berlin's treatment of Turgenev: his confrontation with the problem of courage—a problem that frequently plagued liberals, and certainly haunted Berlin. Turgenev appeared "an equivocating old maid in politics"; similar charges were leveled against Berlin, and other liberals who lacked "the existential courage to stand and be counted."<sup>74</sup> To this, Berlin replied that there was an integrity, even a courage, in Turgenev's very refusal to "rest comfortably in any doctrine or ideological system." As Turgenev admonished Herzen (in response to the latter's romanticizing of the Russian peasant), "you must have the courage to look the devil in *both* eyes." There may be something ironic, even outrageous, in the timorous Turgenev accusing the outspoken exile Herzen of lack of courage. But Berlin seems to have agreed that Turgenev showed a brave lucidity in relinquishing illusions by which Herzen remained enthralled, because the latter "could not live long without faith."<sup>75</sup>

Berlin did not solely identify with either Turgenev or Herzen, nor regard one or the other as simply superior. He saw both the former's scrupulous truthfulness and distance, and the latter's ironical but passionate idealism, as valuable—and as contributing to a humane politics. Their different perspectives also shared crucial ethical common ground. Each refused to believe that he was "under a sacred obligation to suppress the truth, or pretend to think that it was simpler than it was, or that certain solutions would work although it seemed patently improbable that they could, simply because to speak otherwise might give aid and comfort to the enemy." Both rejected the "brutality" and "fanatical belief in terrorist methods" of the younger radicals, while remaining committed to relieving human misery and oppression through

political action.<sup>76</sup> Each also had shortcomings. Herzen was an effective publicist, but too independent and frank to lead anything more than a movement of one for long. Turgenev's awareness of every side of every issue made him unsuited to politics; he could offer portraits of the sort of character appropriate to effective, humane political action, but not an example of it. Both Herzen and Turgenev thus offered models of an ethos of integrity, honesty, and humanity that was appropriate for (liberal) intellectuals and social critics—but not well-suited to the role of politician. Berlin had to look elsewhere for models of how commitment to liberal values, and a liberal sensibility, might be successfully translated into effective political action.

### Political Judgment and the Ethical Demands of Politics

Berlin's work furnishes no easy answer to the question posed by Herzen's and Turgenev's insights and limitations: whether the personal qualities that contribute to sustaining an ethically scrupulous, liberal stance can be reconciled with the personal characteristics and conduct that conduce to political success. But Berlin did devote considerable attention to both the nature of good political judgment broadly, and the interplay between the personal qualities and political actions of political leaders of his day. His accounts of such leaders—Winston Churchill, Chaim Weizmann, and Franklin Roosevelt—offer explorations of how political greatness and moral goodness could be balanced, in ways that could serve to sustain a liberal politics.

Berlin structured his account of political judgment around a contrast between the virtuoso politician, who possesses good judgment; and the visionary politician, who lacks it.<sup>77</sup> His account of the perceptual gifts of the former is strikingly similar to his characterization of Turgenev's artistic vision. Skillful politicians possess, first, an "exceptional sensitiveness" to the "unique flavors" and "combination of characteristics" that distinguish each situation. These perceptual skills allow the virtuoso politician to gauge the relative significance of different factors within a given situation, and to distinguish those conditions that are alterable from those that must be accepted as essentially fixed; and to predict what sorts of responses different actions are likely to evoke from others. Effective politicians also possess an empathetic "sensitiveness to the needs and capacities of human beings" (which is distinct from compassion or concern for their well-being); and a capacity for improvisation.<sup>78</sup>

The relationship of such political skills to morality is unclear. The political figures Berlin cites as exemplars of good judgment or political virtuosity are a

morally mixed bunch, as he acknowledged; those he identifies as examples of poor judgment include sympathetic humanitarian reformers and murderous fanatics.<sup>79</sup> Political judgment thus seems a morally neutral quality; Berlin's account of it would seem to be a morally neutral description—or to count as prescriptive only if one adopts a "realistic" perspective according to which success serves as the sole criterion. Yet Berlin suggested that the cultivation of political judgment might indeed be connected to the promotion of a more humane politics—and that the dispositions that contributed to failures of political judgment also tended to produce inhumanity. Political judgment involves a sense of the actual needs and potential of human beings; this discourages the tendency to demand too much of people, to fail to make allowances for their vulnerabilities and shortcomings. While political visionaries often acted from humane impulses, their lack of responsiveness to reality paved the way for a slide into inhumanity. There was reason to fear "bold reformers who are too obsessed by their vision to pay attention to the medium in which they work"; for such people, "there is a literal sense in which they know not what they do (and do not care either)." Political visionaries are given to the folly of "Procrusteanism"—the impulse to force reality to fit the confines of their doctrines. If the behavior of actual human beings fails to fit his model, or to respond "correctly" to his actions, the "Procrustean" "becomes annoyed, and tries to alter the facts to fit the theory"; this means, in practice, a "vivisection" of persons and societies "until they become what the theory originally declared them to be. The theory is 'saved,' indeed, but at too high a cost in useless human suffering."<sup>80</sup>

While he sometimes suggested that "Procrusteanism" was generally self-defeating, Berlin also acknowledged that fanatical passion and pig-headed determination could sometimes be all too effective: "Human lives *are* radically alterable, human beings can be re-educated and conditioned and turned topsy-turvy—that is the principal lesson of the violent times in which we live."<sup>81</sup> But the results of such ruthless drive to realize political visions were seldom what the actors intended. Pragmatic political judgment could serve petty ends and cynical motives; but it was also indispensable, in all but a very few, exceptional circumstances, to achieve anything morally desirable. The alternative approach of bludgeoning one's way through obstacles might produce "success"—the seizure of power, the eradication of opposition, the (short-term) alteration of society's scale of values. But it could not achieve the genuine realization of ideals—or at least, not of humane ideals.

Although political greatness is, on Berlin's account, different from moral goodness, there are parallels in the qualities of mind that conduce to or

undermine each. Simplistic one-sidedness, whether in the form of “visionary” blindness to reality, or the small-minded blindness to higher values and aspirations of mere opportunists, both foster *moral* blindness or insensitivity and discourage the achievement of truly great political undertakings. On the other hand, while distinct from it, a clear-eyed “sense of reality” has some affinity with a personal disposition of *decency*, insofar as both require a capacity for attention to and understanding of other human beings, and resistance to obsession with goals or visions that are detached from the immediate lives of those human beings.

To combine political astuteness with ethical decency requires not just a “sense of reality”—a perceptual gift that allows one to comprehend and respond effectively to situations—but adherence to a personal *ethic*, which draws *some* lines around what is acceptable to do in pursuit of political efficacy. Berlin evoked the way that political acuity and pragmatism, and ethical scruples, could be combined to define an effective yet humane political ethos in his portrait of the politician he personally knew best, Chaim Weizmann. Weizmann was no saint; he was apt to use his followers for his own ends, and was willing to “conceal facts” and “work in secret.” But there were lines he would not cross. He was “not in the least Machiavellian”: he “committed none of those enormities for which men of action . . . claim justification, on the ground of what is called *raison d'état*.” Weizmann was the opposite of—and his practice represented a rebuke to—the fanatical and ruthless politicians of his day:

He was not prepared to justify wrongdoing by appeals to historical or political necessity. He did not attempt to save his people by violence or cunning—to beat them into shape, if need be with the utmost brutality, like Lenin, or to deceive them for their own good, like Bismarck . . . He never called upon the Jews to make terrible sacrifices, or offer their lives, or commit crimes, or condone the crimes of others, for the sake of some felicity to be realised at some unspecified date, as the Marxists did; nor did he play upon their feelings unscrupulously, or try deliberately to exacerbate them against this or that real, or imaginary, enemy, as extremists in his own movement have frequently tried to do. He wished to make his nation free and happy, but not at the price of sinning against any human value in which he and they believed.<sup>82</sup>

These ethical scruples were not opposed to or detached from Weizmann’s political effectiveness; they were indeed ingredients in it. His personal integrity and humane sensibility were the basis of his appeal both to large numbers

of the Jewish people and to gentile statesmen, whom he inspired or embarrassed into sympathetic action. His model of effective leadership through ethical inspiration—and those of Roosevelt and Churchill, who also achieved their desired effects through the invocation and communication of ethical values—stood as a rebuttal to the “realist” contention that political efficacy required ruthless amorality, by showing how a leader’s moral character and sensibility could contribute to his political authority over others, and thereby his efficacy in achieving his goals.

On Berlin’s (sometimes dubious) accounts,<sup>83</sup> Churchill, Roosevelt, and Weizmann were significant not only in combining political greatness with respect for standards of moral decency, but in showing how this could be done in the context of political crises of liberalism. They found themselves having to act as leaders, either of a more-or-less stable democratic nation confronting internal crisis (Roosevelt); or of democracies confronting ruthless anti-democratic forces from without (Churchill and Roosevelt); or of a movement that lacked the resources of a stable state and political culture, and had to create these conditions for itself, against both the infliction and the temptations of violence (Weizmann). All can be interpreted as encountering, and finding effective responses to, one or another variant of the liberal predicament. Yet their examples can hardly serve as models for liberal-democratic *citizens*—or, indeed, for liberal-democratic politicians facing different circumstances. And they were, Berlin acknowledged, not paragons. While they held back from (some) extremes of ruthlessness, each exhibited characteristics that were morally troubling. They used followers and subordinates to their own ends and enjoyed the exercise of power and political maneuver. By virtue of their roles, they felt the demands of political life to an overwhelming degree; by virtue of their temperaments, they found political power, with all its moral hazards, exhilarating. They do not offer models for how best to navigate between the conflicting demands of private life and politics—both because they themselves did not feel the pull of private life keenly, and because the political situations they faced made their bias toward the demands of public life appropriate. Those of us who do feel an acute conflict between the demands of political efficacy and moral decency, and are in search of advice or models of how to navigate between these demands, must turn not to Berlin’s accounts of political leaders, but to his own prescriptions and practice, which lie somewhere between the service or testimony (whether to moral ideals or apprehensions of reality) represented by Herzen and Turgenev, and the practical efficacy exemplified by Churchill, Roosevelt, and Weizmann.



Berlin would certainly not have presented himself as any sort of exemplar of political ethics. Like Aron, he consciously adopted the stance of intellectual and critic because he recognized that he did not have the stomach for the sort of hard moral choices, and hand-dirtying, required of political actors. Unlike Aron, his modesty and scruples also prevented him from taking many public stances. Thus, declining to sign a petition in praise of Castro (in retrospect, a sound move), he wrote, “if I were a statesman or even a Member of Parliament I should feel obliged to make up my mind about which was the necessary evil in terms of omelettes and eggs, and plump; as a private citizen I do not feel obliged to declare myself.” Yet he did feel impelled to take a public stand on matters where he perceived important moral values to be clearly at stake; when he felt “that unmistakable feeling of outrage . . . a real sense of horror at thorough wickedness,” he recognized a need to speak up, and to act based on moral conviction rather than calculation.<sup>84</sup> And, as a “public moralist,” he sought to offer counsel, and in some cases a personal example, of how to respond to the ethical challenges of political action in a way that was not irresponsibly, arrogantly, or glibly self-righteous, blindly naïve, or brutally cynical. This *did* include taking a stance on the omelette-and-egg problem: while he did not reject *all* calls for drastic action, he repeatedly warned that, typically, “eggs are broken, but the omelette is not in sight, there is only an infinite number of eggs, human lives, ready for the breaking. And in the end the passionate idealists forget the omelette, and just go on breaking eggs.”<sup>85</sup>

Both Berlin’s hesitations and reservations, and his occasional public pronouncements, reflected his belief in the importance of considering not only likely consequences, but the *fit* between courses of action and temperament. One should not seek to fulfill a role—revolutionary, statesman, saint—for which one is not suited (or at a time when fulfilling the role will demand qualities or resources one lacks): “If the shoe does not fit it is no use saying that time and wear will make it less uncomfortable, or that the shape of the foot should be altered, or that the pain is an illusion.”<sup>86</sup> Nor should one deceive oneself into thinking it possible to serve all the goods by which one is drawn: any role, any action, will involve the sacrifice of some values. Berlin thus advocated “realism” about oneself—an honest and accurate estimation of one’s weaknesses and possibilities—as well as about the immediate and likely moral costs of particular choices, as crucial for navigating ethical life. This sort of “realism” both demanded and aided personal *integrity*. For Berlin, integrity stood opposed to subservience to a “total creed,” doctrine or movement, which required adherents to “squeeze the facts into iron frameworks of

doctrine, against all that their hearts or consciences tell them."<sup>87</sup> True integrity—honesty, seriousness, and responsibility in thinking about the demands and limits of one's commitments—offers an ethical bulwark against fanaticism and falsification. As one friend summed up Berlin's view, "one should be honest about one's choices and shortcomings, and not seek probably specious justifications for them. Associated or consequent inconsistencies did not trouble him": for such inconsistencies indicated, not "moral carelessness," but responsiveness to the morally relevant particulars of diverse cases, and a recognition that there are no firm rules for deciding (for instance) when compromise becomes capitulation or betrayal, or when discretion shades into deception or hypocrisy.<sup>88</sup>

Berlin identified this ethic of honesty and independence from dogma not only with integrity, but courage. Where others identified integrity with adherence to fixed positions, and saw courage as depending on a bedrock of certainty, Berlin turned the tables. Thus, he wrote that the "search for general principles of permanent reliability" was a "great weakness and vanity." One should "have the courage . . . to die for undemonstrated & unself-evident positions, not bolstered up by absolute faith."<sup>89</sup> In moments of sharp conflict, it required "a good deal of courage" to maintain moderation, balance, independence, and openness to doubt, against the pressure of "magnetization" to one or another extreme position. This sort of courage involved both firmness in the face of pressure from others; and fortitude in resisting the emotional satisfactions of certainty and simplicity.<sup>90</sup>

Such a position, Berlin acknowledged, was difficult; the alternatives—monism, utopianism, a belief in inevitable historical progress or triumph—were far more attractive, inspiring, and gratifying. Against such satisfactions, he offered a view of political struggle as never-ending, and political goals as imperfect and temporary. Every solution creates new, unforeseeable problems. While the worst evils may be fought, the problems that arise from the gap between human aspirations and longings on the one hand, and the capacities of human beings and their societies on the other, "are perhaps not soluble at all." The goal of political action should be not the eradication of difficulty and loss, but the maintenance of an "unstable equilibrium" between conflicting interests and wills, which is "constantly threatened and in constant need of repair." And the path to achieving even proximate, precarious goals is uncertain: "There are no guaranteed methods, no sure paths to social welfare. We must try to do our best; and it is always possible that we shall fail." This, Berlin recognized, was not an appropriate perspective for all seasons: as his

discussions of Churchill and Weizmann stress, “heroic” moments, in which politics must be created, or saved from destruction, require a different approach. And, as he ruefully admitted, the call for political modesty was not likely “to inspire men to sacrifice and martyrdom and heroic feats.” It ran counter to the desire, shared by most human beings, for a “bold, universal, once-and-for-all panacea”: “It may be that men cannot face too much reality, or an open future, without a guarantee of a happy ending.” Hence the need for a courage of doubt.<sup>91</sup>

This disenchanted conception of the possibilities of political action demanded its own set of virtues: in Turgenev’s words, “industry, patience, self-sacrifice, without glitter, without noise.”<sup>92</sup> These virtues were hard to attain and sustain, and did not offer the satisfactions of more conventionally, ostentatiously “heroic” qualities. Gradual improvement cannot offer the emotional highs of dramatic moments of transformation, when the normal doubts and divisions of social life fall away. Foregoing such gratifications—as well as the satisfaction of impulses toward anger, vengeance, and righteous intransigence—requires a heroic *fortitude*. Perhaps Berlin’s sharpest statement on this point arose in the course of his relationship with Weizmann. In late 1946, Weizmann sent Berlin the draft of an address he would deliver to the 22nd Zionist Congress in Basel, in which he attacked the resort to terrorism against the British Mandate as an insult to “the ideals for which a Jewish society must stand” and a threat to Zionism’s hope to “appeal to the world’s liberal conscience.” Berlin added a further paragraph, which appeared in the speech Weizmann delivered. Here Berlin took aim at the ethos of romantic heroism, which glorified desperate action and martyrdom:

It is not our purpose or our right to plunge to destruction in order to bequeath a legend of martyrdom to posterity . . . Against the “heroics” of suicidal violence I urge *the courage of endurance, the heroism of superhuman restraint*. I admit that it requires stronger character, more virile nerves, than are needed for acts of violence. Whether they can rise to that genuine courage, above the moral cowardice of terrorism, is the challenge which history issues to our youth.<sup>93</sup>

These words (down to the rather un-Berlinian emphasis on “virile nerves”) could have been written by Weber; they would surely have been endorsed by Niebuhr, Aron, and Camus (who would echo the sentiment in the context of another revolt against a colonial power a little more than a decade later). Berlin’s approach to the dilemmas facing Zionists—and his similar counsel of

determination and restraint in responding to Soviet Russia<sup>94</sup>—pointed to a perception he shared with other tempered liberals: in politics, the means used and the results achieved could not be drastically divorced. As Herzen had warned, to cut off the heads of the current rulers could only lead to "a new tyranny and a new slavery": "Houses for free men cannot be built by specialists in prison architecture."<sup>95</sup>

This thought found echo in Berlin's resistance to calls for a "new faith" and greater social and ideological cohesion by his fellow defenders of liberal democracy. Identified as a potential "philosopher" of anti-Communism, he was often approached with requests to articulate a statement of the basic principles of liberal democracy for use in Cold War propaganda. While some of his work can be read as filling that role,<sup>96</sup> he resisted such calls. The "answer to Communism" was not "a counter faith, equally fervent, militant, etc. because one must fight the devil with the devil's weapons." On the contrary, there was "no point in defeating the other side if our beliefs at the end of the war are simply the inverse of theirs, just as irrational, despotic, etc." The world of the Cold War suffered from too much, not little, faith; it needed "*less* Messianic ardour," more of "the inestimably precious gifts of scepticism and irony."<sup>97</sup> Against calls for an anti-Communist crusade, Berlin warned against crusades—and the ruthless, intolerant crusader spirit—as such.

Berlin's liberal ethos was above all founded on a disposition of modesty, based on awareness of the limitations of our knowledge and wisdom. Not having possession of absolute truth about how to live, with no certainty about the course of history, all we can—or should—do is to seek to "discover what others . . . require, by taking off the spectacles of tradition, prejudice, dogma, and making it possible for ourselves to know men as they truly are, by listening to them carefully and sympathetically, and understanding them and their lives and their needs, one by one individually." We should "at least try to provide them with what they ask for, and leave them as free as possible." Above all, we should "stop torturing others in the name of what we do not know."<sup>98</sup>

## Pluralism as an Ethos, and the Ethos of Liberalism

As we have seen, an assertion of what Berlin called value pluralism was a common thread connecting Weber, Niebuhr, Camus, and Aron—though each articulated pluralism somewhat differently, and gave it differing degrees of prominence. It was Berlin, however, who expounded pluralism most fully and prominently; his work has played a major role in promoting the idea of

pluralism and raising questions about its implications for political and ethical theory generally, and liberalism in particular.<sup>99</sup> Pluralism holds that there are many genuine human values, which are not all derived from a single source, or compatible in a single whole; and which impose real, non-overridable demands on human beings. Moral life is marked by complexity and loss; it is also a serious matter, for values are not mere preferences, or disguises for interest or will. At the same time, the fact of complexity and loss, of disagreement and divergence, should not simply be lamented; for these troubling, sometimes painful features of life are necessary consequences of, and testaments to, the genuine importance and pull of those higher ideals that ennoble human life.

Berlin presented pluralism as a descriptive theory about the nature of human values, and this is generally how it has been treated. But pluralism may also be seen as involving an ethos that guides the way in which we understand and inhabit our moral lives, and particularly our political activities. From this perspective, the much-debated connection between liberalism and pluralism may not be so much logical or justificatory, as phenomenological-psychological and ethical-educative:<sup>100</sup> to accept *and internalize* pluralism as an ethos is to develop a certain relationship to the moral life, and a particular political temperament. The ethos of pluralism is marked by certain dispositional proclivities: a reflexive suspicion of absolutism, zeal, and hastiness, and a reflective tendency to see as many sides of an issue, and to calculate the costs of a proposed course of action in terms of different genuine values as accurately, as possible.<sup>101</sup>

A central element in Berlin's pluralist ethos is an affirmation of variety and openness, friction and conflict, as features that should be not only tolerated, but encouraged; and revulsion at the vision of a "fanatically tidy world of human beings joyfully engaged in fulfilling their functions" within a "rationally ordered, totally unalterable hierarchy."<sup>102</sup> Berlin held that open-endedness and choice are basic ingredients in a truly human existence, and affirmed the value of preserving "the widest variety of human life and character."<sup>103</sup> He linked this affirmation to the recognition that "it is *possible* to lead lives different from one's own, & yet to be fully human, worthy of love, respect or at least *curiosity*." Such insight into and acceptance of the difference of others undermined the arrogant illusion that one had a monopoly on virtue or wisdom, and the desire to fit others into one's own image, which lay at the root of intolerance.<sup>104</sup>

A pluralist ethos thus understood conduces to ethical *moderation*. We may understand such moderation—whether as a feature of personal disposition, or political positions—as involving a sustained effort to give fair consideration to multiple principles, interests, or parties; and to preserve some minimum of

competing values, as well as the conditions necessary for a range of different values to receive their due. Moderation is founded on a striving for balance and inclusion, and an attempt to settle conflicts through trade-offs and compromises rather than opting for (or surrendering to) one side or another. Such moderation is a plausible (though not the only) response to pluralism, which suggests that we have reason to minimize, even though we cannot altogether prevent, the loss of values, rather than wholly embracing some and disregarding others.<sup>105</sup> Such "moderation" is not indiscriminate, it does not always seek to split the difference, and it does not require compromise on all issues. It may be (as Camus had suggested) intransigent in resisting attempts to deny freedom, recognition, or a hearing to others, and in defending institutional arrangements and ethical norms that make the preservation of a free, open society possible.

Pluralism also encourages moderation, or modesty, in the extent of aspirations, since it holds perfection to be impossible and incoherent. There can be no moral life without compromise and loss; improvement with regard to some value or values will often entail loss with regard to others. Moderate expectations, in turn, will tend to encourage moderation in the conduct of politics—a wariness of promising or demanding too much. And the ability to accept the implications of this outlook requires a disposition to discipline one's own expectations, demands, and responses to disappointment.<sup>106</sup> This tendency is matched by a disposition to engage in "trimming," seeking a balance between competing extremes, which Berlin stressed throughout his writings, particularly in his recurrent use of the trope of steering between Scylla and Charybdis.<sup>107</sup>

Pluralist moderation requires or promotes several further dispositional capacities. One is *attentiveness* to the particulars of a situation—the facts of the case, the "distinctive character[s]" of the values at play and the individuals involved—as well as a capacity to appreciate the value of different activities, ways of life, ideals.<sup>108</sup> This fosters *respect* for, and *receptivity* to, different ways of life, temperaments, accomplishments—as well as a certain appraising distance from each, which is recognized as only one direction of value among many. This manner of perception encourages a *modesty* about one's choices, an openness to revision, and a picture of oneself as an agent who chooses among values, none of which is final or all-defining.<sup>109</sup> It also fosters a disposition of irony—a recognition of both the value of different ideals, beliefs, ways of life, and of their partial nature; and an attendant ability to be dedicated to ideals, while also entertaining reservations about, and being open to recognizing limits to, them. This can inflect both one's practice of intellectual life (as it

did in the case of Berlin, who would typically punctuate his arguments with asides, “like those characters in Roman comedy who, without withdrawing from the action, interpret it in oblique remarks addressed to the audience”<sup>110</sup>), and one’s approach to politics. The tendency to see the value of many different ends, and to regard these ends as possible but not obligatory choices, tends to foster a live-and-let-live attitude, and a desire to be left free to come and go, to withdraw and recommit (or not commit) oneself to a given project. This attitude is linked to a dispositional pluralism about membership and engagement—a tendency to live life across multiple spheres, none of them total or all-embracing. The propensity to withdraw, or to hold oneself slightly aloof, becomes natural; the ability to do so becomes valuable, both in political engagement and in navigating the demands and irritants of social life. The pluralist will recognize the value of being “left alone”—even if that individual sometimes chooses a life of passionate commitment and ardent membership.<sup>111</sup>

This element of detachment, critical distance, capacity for withdrawal, and inclination to be left alone may be thought to encourage political apathy and moral indifference—something of which Berlin has been accused.<sup>112</sup> There are two resources for resisting this tendency within Berlin’s thought—one internal to pluralism, the other supplementary to it. First, to internalize pluralism is not only to cultivate a particular way of thinking, and certain dispositions and preferences; it is also to recognize that other, very different, ways of being and thinking have value (even if they carry with them dangers and are less true to human moral reality). The pluralist whose outlook militates against all-consuming commitment to one ideal or project will nevertheless recognize the intrinsic nobility of such commitment—and the need, in certain circumstances, for a character marked by passionate, whole-hearted commitment, in order to sustain the humane practices that make the preservation of the plurality of human values possible.<sup>113</sup> Pluralists can recognize what nonpluralists cannot—that both a pluralistic political temper, and very nonpluralistic ones, have their place. The fox knows many things, including the virtues of the hedgehog, but not vice versa.

This seems to save pluralists from wholly embracing a stance of detachment and moderation by preventing them from wholly embracing *any* stance. Pluralism may then seem too open-ended to be action-guiding at all. This is true, to an extent. Pluralism can shape action, but only as one element in a larger moral outlook. In Berlin’s case, it was combined with an ethical outlook of “humanism.”<sup>114</sup> This “humanism” involved three distinct, but related, elements. The first is recognition<sup>115</sup> of “actual individuals” as being of paramount value, above



abstract principles and institutions, that exist to serve human beings, and not *vice versa*. Therefore, to "trample" on the "particular persons" and their "particular purposes" is "a crime because there is, and can be, no principle or value higher than the ends of the individual, and therefore no principle in the name of which one could be permitted to do violence to or degrade or destroy individuals—the sole authors of all principles and all values."<sup>116</sup> This conception of the moral claims of human beings has two facets, which we might term "humanitarian" and "romantic." The first aspires to reduce human suffering;<sup>117</sup> the second to promote "free human personalities" marked by variety and independence.<sup>118</sup> Berlin did not assign general priority to either; each acted as a break on a potentially excessive concern for the other. Nevertheless, his was a distinctively defensive rather than perfectionist humanism.

Berlin's humanism is, second, empiricist and this-worldly, holding that the purpose of life is "life itself, the purpose of the struggle for liberty is the liberty here, today, of living individuals, each with his own individual ends."<sup>119</sup> This is tied to a particular conception of time, one oriented toward the present and immediate future rather than a "long-term" perspective—and therefore unwilling to incur drastic costs in human suffering in the present and near future for the sake of some far-off, dazzling goal (such as the vision of utopia that buoyed Lukács).<sup>120</sup> Such sacrificial faith in the future was "a pernicious delusion . . . the distant ends may not be realised, while the agonies and sufferings and crimes justified by appeals to them in the present remain only too real"; to "condone the effects of our brutal acts" by appeal to the "hollow promises" of future felicity is "either lunacy or fraud."<sup>121</sup>

Third, humanism prizes and promotes a disposition of "humanity"—understood as empathetic insight into, recognition of the worth of, and concern for, other human beings—as a guide to moral deliberation. "Humanity" is what allows us to recognize another as similar to us in crucial ways, and as having claims on us; and, beyond this, to feel concern for that person's well-being. The sense of humanity is what was awakened in George Orwell when, serving in a Republican militia unit during the Spanish Civil War, he saw a Nationalist soldier trying to keep his trousers up as he ran; it is what was awakened in the young Berlin when he saw the tsarist policeman being dragged off by the mob. And it is what failed to awaken in Communist jailers and Nazi execution squads as they went about eliminating those they regarded as enemies and vermin.<sup>122</sup> This puts matters in stark terms. But Berlin's defense of humanism was also directed against milder failures of humanity in the political realm, such as tutelary paternalism, or a cost-benefit analysis approach to

governance,<sup>123</sup> or even an impersonal, ethically neutral approach in scholarship. Against the tendency toward impersonality and dehumanization, Berlin advocated not only ethical humanism, but also what one might call “perspectival” humanism—an orientation concerned with and sensitive to matters of personal character, temperament, and outlook.

For Berlin, perspectival humanism was linked to a characteristically liberal outlook.<sup>124</sup> And a capacity for humanity was both a basis and goal of liberal politics, which should aim not only at preventing human beings from “attempting to exterminate one another,” but also, “so far as possible . . . to promote the maximum practicable degree of sympathy and understanding . . . between them.”<sup>125</sup> Berlin’s liberalism was also tied to his “humanism” in its commitment to *decency*. Decency involves concern for others, as well as an instinctive respect for limits in one’s conduct. It is expressed primarily through personal behavior; but it is also linked to a political impulse of minimalistic, negative humanitarianism—the view that politics should aim at promoting a situation in which there is “the least degree of injustice,” the “least suffering, least humiliation, least misery and squalor.”<sup>126</sup>

If pluralism is allied to humanism, neither implacable commitment (which “bear[s] down too cruelly on actual human beings in actual situations too often”)<sup>127</sup> nor passive withdrawal (which fails to respond to the valid claims of others) appears an adequate response to the demands of conflicting values and the challenge of political conflict. Instead, pluralistic appreciation for different political approaches encourages a recognition of the importance of contextual practical judgment. Whether a moderate, pacific political disposition, or a more militant attitude, is desirable will depend on circumstances. In some cases, the best thing for a pluralist to do is to step aside to make way for others whose tempers are better-suited to the political task of the day or moment—while remaining on hand to offer cautions (and, if need be, protest and obstruction) against one-sidedness, intolerance, haste, and blindness. Pluralism thus valorizes engaged *flexibility*—a disposition to respond to different situations without relying on or trying to impose a general rule or formula. Dispositional flexibility allows one to revise previous commitments and judgments, and to weigh considerations differently in response to the demands of different cases. Life should be envisioned not as a rigid plan, but as a course one must navigate as one goes along; each situation should be approached freshly, on its own merits. And political projects should take the form, not of “campaigns for general principles,” but rather as the quest for “liberation from specific wrongs & then for liberation from the defects of the remedy, & so on.”<sup>128</sup>

## Conclusion: Individuality, Exemplification, and the Liberal Response to Pluralism

Berlin shared with other tempered liberals an insistence that means and ends cannot be wholly separated, that individual human beings, concrete situations, and the immediately foreseeable future should be given greater weight than general principles, grand theories, and distant goals, and that character and judgment are of crucial importance to politics; opposition to ruthlessness, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and cynical "realism" (and perception of the connections between them); and an embrace of an ethos marked by tolerance, modesty, moderation, irony, and a heroism of forbearance. However, Berlin laid greater stress on the value, indeed the urgency, of receptive curiosity about the views of others, and delight in the play of imagination and intelligence; and stressed more strongly the dangers not only of ruthlessness, cruelty, and dogmatism, but of intellectual narrowness, timidity, and conformism. His perspective thus linked the concerns and tonality typical of tempered liberalism back to the liberal anxieties of Tocqueville and Mill. Berlin's anxious liberalism was defined by the intertwining of a visceral opposition to, or a nightmare vision of, two related but distinct evils. One was physical violence, terror, suffering, as exemplified in the lynching of the tsarist policeman, or the Nazi and Stalinist terrors. The other was of *any* attempt to force individuals into some pattern, way of life, behavior, or action to which they strongly objected or that violated their own deeply cherished values—what he referred to as "Procrusteanism," or the "vivisection" of human beings. This had implications for the ethos of Berlin's liberalism—both the ethos he himself exemplified, and the ethos (or range of ethe) he saw as compatible with liberalism. It was important to avoid not just fanaticism and ruthlessness but dogmatism and rigidity, and to cultivate not just vigilance but receptive generosity.

This points to a problem, or at least tension, in Berlin's thought—and in a "tempered liberal" approach to liberalism more broadly. Liberals, on Berlin's view, should be concerned with questions of moral character; but must also refrain from programs of moral indoctrination, out of respect for human freedom.<sup>129</sup> Berlin's focus on the dangers that arise when the means used are antithetical to the ends at which they aim should make us wary of attempts to use coercion or enforced tutelage to foster the development of "liberal" types of character: the formation of characters appropriate to a society marked by freedom and variety require the free and various formation of character. And liberals who are also pluralists should refrain from seeking to foster uniformity of

character through *any* means, because they recognize value in the existence of a variety of characters and ways of life, the reduction of which would be a genuine ethical loss. Berlin thus points to liberalism's affinity with, or reliance upon, particular types of character and outlook, while suggesting that liberals should neither enforce, nor even hope for the prevalence of, these types of character.

One response to this dilemma lies in Tolstoy's conviction that true education, understood as the development of free, self-directing individuals, could only be brought about through "the example of our own lives"—and his favoring of a "pedagogic mode of exemplification," rather than "attempts to mold character and impose belief."<sup>130</sup> Berlin's pluralism prevented him from proposing a programmatic picture of a single good life or ideal character; but through evoking various others, he was able to display a variety of good and bad ways of living, thinking, and engaging in politics. His "exemplary" method—his technique of moral-intellectual portraiture—was likely a spontaneous expression of personal inclinations, rather than an intentional choice.<sup>131</sup> But it was also in keeping with his recognition of the importance of ethos to deciding the course and quality of individual action and political life, and his understanding of the particular difficulties of liberalism.

Exemplification may also offer a response to another difficulty of Berlin's position, which he repeatedly acknowledged: that a politics of moderation, circumspection, and decency was likely to be insufficiently inspiring, and too emotionally demanding, to win wide adherence or motivate arduous action. There was a need to render a humane, skeptical, liberal politics inspiring, without making unrealistic promises, or exciting passions for certainty, finality, or transcendence, which fueled the fanaticism to which liberal politics is (or should be) opposed. Hence, in part, Berlin's glowing depictions of exemplars of decency and humanity, whose stirring words and insights could furnish inspiration—and whose characters, as sketched by Berlin, could evoke admiration. Such sentiments might provide motivation to adhere to the arduous, unglamorous path of liberalism, against the blandishments and reproaches of those who promised salvation and demanded human sacrifice.

A focus on ethos and method of "exemplification," both in his depiction of others and his cultivation of a particular intellectual and authorial self, thus constitute one of Berlin's most significant contributions as a liberal political educator. While his writings have much to teach about the moral psychology of liberalism and its antagonists, the sensibility that they exhibit, and the personal ethos that Berlin projected throughout his life, offer something more: an example of how one might keep one's head, without becoming heartless, as a humanist in an inhumane time.

## CONCLUSION

# Good Characters for Good Liberals?

## ETHOS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LIBERALISM

One should just as little strive to defend one's principles by surrendering them, as to defend one's life by sacrificing what gives that life content and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

THIS BOOK has presented a historical argument: that the clash between liberals and radically anti-liberal political movements in the twentieth century was ethical as well as ideological and institutional. To be sure, anti-liberal movements challenged liberalism on the ground of policy and political structure. Liberals had to show that they could successfully compete with these rivals in improving the quality of life and offering protection against corruption and domination. This response focused on institutions and policies; it was tailored to immediate practical conditions. But anti-liberal movements also presented ethical challenges, attacking, and offering radical alternatives to, the character, outlook, and conduct typical of liberal political actors. In the preceding chapters, I have shown how individual thinkers articulated a tempered liberalism in response to the ethical challenges posed by an anti-liberal ethos of ruthlessness. Varying in intellectual temperament and political positions, they converged in rejecting the ruthlessness fostered by both “realist” and “absolutist” conceptions of politics—and affirming an ethos that was politically responsible and ethically scrupulous, one that refused to accept or inflict certain sorts of degradation in pursuit of political goals, while recognizing that in politics it is impossible to remain wholly pure.

In this conclusion, I take stock of tempered liberalism as both a historical phenomenon and a perspective from which to think about politics today. (I thus use “tempered liberalism” in two ways: to refer to the historical position I have reconstructed, and to name a normative position I propose. I hope the difference will be apparent from the context, and the tense used.) I first offer an overview of the tempered liberal ethos; I then locate tempered liberalism within the “landscape” of liberalism and suggest how its recovery might lead us to revise our perceptions of liberalism. Finally, I offer a defense of the advantages of thinking of liberalism in relation to an ethos; and present a case for how the tempered liberal ethos might guide our practice of liberalism.

### Probity without Purity, Realism without Ruthlessness: An Overview of Tempered Liberalism

Tempered liberalism is defined by concern with questions of political ethics that arise from commitment to liberalism and confrontation with the grim political realities of “dark times”; and an emphasis on matters of ethos. Tempered liberals believed that ethos—“psychological conditions of individuals,” “attitudes,” and “character” (Aron), “style of life,” “sensibility,” and “ways of feeling” (Camus), “spirit,” “technique and temper” (Niebuhr), “outlook” and “temperament” (Berlin)—was decisive in shaping how individuals engage in politics, and defining the difference between liberalism and anti-liberalism. Appreciation for ethos shaped their intellectual approach, which was opposed to systematization, insistently independent of doctrine, and reliant on discriminating judgment. They typically thought in terms of, and addressed themselves to, individual experience and character. Their style was essayistic: exploratory, tentative, open to continuous revision and qualification, not aiming to offer a comprehensive, systematic ordering of experience or prescription for political life.<sup>2</sup>

This style reflected a settled skepticism of abstract formulae, ambitious programs, and claims to purity, infallibility, or omnipotence. This skepticism is turned both inward and outward, fostering not only suspicion of grand programs and dogmas, but fallibilism about beliefs, and tentativeness in making grand claims. This is linked to an ironic and irreverent disposition, which recognizes human pretension and frailty—and accepts that we must judge and act based on beliefs about which we remain uncertain. An ironic sensibility—which does not fail to affirm beliefs and values, but simultaneously acknowledges that one may be mistaken in doing so—imposes a practice of self-limitation; but it also frees us from a crushing sense of inadequacy. Irreverence

helps to maintain independence of judgment, *and* reconciles individuals to (chastened) authority, allowing them to regard authority with amused tolerance rather than with an awe that is both debasing and easily disappointed.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside skepticism and modesty, tempered liberals invoked a sense of responsibility—and the courage needed to accept responsibility, risk, and uncertainty. They called for fortitude in tolerating others—which means mastering tendencies toward disapproval, irritation, and the desire to step in and take control when others are making a mess of things. Liberal fortitude is often a matter of exercising forbearance—a disposition, posture, and practice that refrains from exercising power, or exploiting one's advantage, over others.

Fortitude may take anti-liberal forms, if it is identified with overcoming scruples in pursuit of some higher goal. Sustaining a truly liberal posture requires both a sense of integrity and a sensibility of *humanity*—the perception of others' humanity, and the sense that those others are fellow creatures who call forth sympathy and a basic degree of respect. Humanity urges us to attend to actual human beings, and our relations with them. It is closely tied to a sense of decency—of what sorts of conduct are demanded by recognition of the humanity of others.<sup>4</sup> The importance of combining such a sense of humanity focused on actual individuals, and a sense of responsibility that rejects both venal self-interest and moral self-involvement, is illustrated in Tzvetan Todorov's examination of the moral-psychological dynamics of Nazi-occupied France. Todorov shows the inhumanity exhibited by both the Vichy militias *and* the Resistance to have been inspired by a combination of moral pride, rigid adherence to doctrine, and blindness to actual human suffering, with selfish concern for personal power and repute. This contrasts with those who attempted to mediate between the authorities and the Resistance in the midst of a hostage situation: They did not demand sacrifice from others but stuck their own necks out to prevent bloodshed—and placed “the dignity and lives of human beings” above ideological slogans.<sup>5</sup>

The sense of humanity is needed to prevent political actors from falling into callousness and committing atrocity. But it cannot in itself guide judgment about political action: it may inspire actions that are admirable in their intentions, but disastrous in their consequences. Unrestrained by prudence, and an “ethic of parsing” (in Kevin Mattson's phrase),<sup>6</sup> which insists on drawing fine distinctions and interrogating sweeping assumptions, a sense of humanity can lead us astray. Camus, the most inclined toward “idealism” of the tempered liberals discussed here, nevertheless insisted on the importance of attention to details in order to avoid idealistic illusion; Aron, the most inclined toward “realism,” called for political actors (and critics) to resist being guided by



emotion, however noble—but also insisted that commitment to values always also mattered. Tempered liberalism embraces ethical moderation, seeking to maintain balance between competing demands and opposed extremes. This involves, in Aurelian Crăiuțu’s term, a practice of “trimming”: constant self-correction in response to changing circumstances and resistance to passions that may throw one off balance.<sup>7</sup> The idea of trimming is evoked in the image of Scylla and Charybdis—the opposite and equal dangers menacing on either side. Sometimes the path between them is wide and clear; sometimes it is narrow. And sometimes Scylla and Charybdis join together. Amorality and cynicism about means can be inspired by absolutism about ends. “Idealism” can be used to justify the brutal pursuit of power; appeals to “realism” can serve as screens for dogmatism and fanaticism. Perhaps the most important sort of “realism” to cultivate is sensitivity to the ways in which such disguises work—whether consciously or unconsciously, in the minds and mouths of our rulers or our own perceptions and judgments.<sup>8</sup>

Tempered liberals identified moderation with a sense of limits: both institutional limits on the ability of any agent to exercise power over others, and ethical limits on what could be done in pursuit of political goals. This was not a call for purity. As Bernard Williams remarked, those who seek to inhabit the space of decency between cynicism and irresponsible idealism need not “be as pure as all that”—indeed, they will do better if they abandon the notion of purity—“so long as they retain some active sense of moral costs and moral limits.”<sup>9</sup> Against aspirations to moral purity, and vaunting political ambitions, tempered liberals enjoined an ethos marked by modesty—and offered a modest account of human agency and political possibility, which stressed the insurmountable limitations of human knowledge, power, and virtue.

These dispositional features reflected an underlying pluralism. Tempered liberals (like their ambiguous precursor, Weber) perceived moral life as composed of distinct, genuine obligations, ideals, and virtues, which may (and often do) conflict; in such cases, the conflicting values, virtues, or obligations may prove equally impossible to discount, or to reconcile harmoniously or rank neatly in order of priority. They attacked moral monism, or insistence on some “one thing needful,” the service of which superseded all other obligations or scruples and justified any sacrifice. They did not, however, follow Weber—or later “realists”—in seeing political life as ethically walled-off from private life, subject to a wholly different set of ethical demands and criteria, so that the standards of personal morality no longer apply (and are false, dangerous guideposts in making political choices). Even Aron, the most “realist” of the

tempered liberals discussed here, insisted that considerations of morality—a morality, that is, which goes beyond a purely instrumental focus on the achievement of desirable ends through politically effective means—mattered in politics. Ethical pluralism as conceived of by tempered liberals applied within and across, as well as between, political and personal realms; while politics does involve a distinct set of conditions and demands, it also remains subject to some of the same duties—and conflicts—that we encounter in other facets of life.<sup>10</sup> This complex ethical pluralism was connected to existential and epistemological/methodological pluralism. The latter denies that there is one infallible method or intellectual framework that can be applied to correctly make sense of human experience; and insists that all knowledge is partial and provisional. Existential pluralism denies that life can be rendered meaningful by reference to some single ultimate good. *The* meaning of life is elusive or illusory; life can be rendered meaningful in many ways—and doing so requires making choices among divergent possibilities and ideals.

The divergence of values leads to disagreement and conflict, even in the absence of pride, intolerance, and scarcity. And tempered liberals saw some or all of these other sources of conflict as endemic to human life. They concluded that enmity, partiality, competition, and intolerance will always be with us. But, in part because they were so familiar with conflict run ruthlessly amok, they denied that nothing can be done to meaningfully alleviate the sources of human enmity and brutality; or that all forms of conflict are legitimate. Tempered liberalism affirms, but seeks to constrain, conflict. Its “Sisyphean” historical imagination rejects the hope of steady movement toward, let alone achievement of, some ultimate goal—while remaining aware that we do have some power to change our circumstances, for good or ill. Tempered liberals believed that we can never eliminate the suffering we inflict upon ourselves and one another. But laws, distributive policies, political norms, and sentiments can be made more humane, so that the incidence and intensity of suffering are lessened. This temporal perspective both connected tempered liberalism to, and distinguished it from, other forms of liberalism.

### Tempered Liberalism in a Liberal Landscape

Tempered liberalism overlaps with other forms of liberalism, yet is also something of an outlier from many recent versions of liberal theory. In contrast to the highly influential theories of John Rawls and his followers, it is *phenomenological*, *therapeutic*, and *prophylactic*, rather than *justificatory* or *architectonic*: it

seeks, not to establish principles of justice or legitimacy, but to better understand “the dispositions, passions, and experiences that recur” in moral and political life, and to diagnose, and suggest ways of guarding against, the pathologies to which moral and political action are prone.<sup>11</sup> It also departs from the tendency to conceive of liberalism in terms of principles that specify institutional arrangements and can be implemented through them, which has typified both liberal-egalitarian “ideal theory,” and the work of liberal “realists” who, as Nancy Rosenblum writes, prefer “institutional constraints,” established by “[e]numerating, delegating, and balancing power,” to “personal virtue as a guarantee of liberty.”<sup>12</sup> This reflects a mix of optimism and pessimism—pessimism about virtue and optimism about our ability to “outwit and outflank” human vices.<sup>13</sup> Tempered liberals recognized the dangers of relying on virtue; but they also saw that one can fail to be a liberal—or can be a liberal *badly*—if one affirms the institutions of liberalism, and not its spirit. They based their commitment to, and defense of, liberalism in an analysis of human passions and motives and a diagnosis of the relationship between ends and means—that is, in arguments about moral psychology and political ethics—informed by the experience of seeing noble ends inspire, and be subverted by, ruthless means. In this, they arguably returned to some of liberalism’s deepest roots<sup>14</sup>—but departed from many more recent forms of liberalism.

One recent variant of liberalism that tempered liberalism *does* resemble is Judith Shklar’s “liberalism of fear.” Both are oriented toward “damage control”; both seek to render “a human verdict upon human conduct.”<sup>15</sup> Like tempered liberals, Shklar was preoccupied with questions of political ethics, and matters of sensibility and disposition: in her best-known contributions to liberal theory, she delineated a “liberal character.” The liberal character sketched by Shklar in *Ordinary Vices* and “The Liberalism of Fear” shares many features of the tempered liberal ethos—including, above all, the hatred of cruelty, especially cruelty inspired by moral self-righteousness, ideological certitude, partisan commitment, or obsession with the ideal. But not all tempered liberals were as stringent as Shklar in regarding cruelty and the fear of cruelty as *the* greatest evil, prevention of which should always be prioritized; the tempered liberal ethos thus involves a richer set of features than abhorrence of cruelty and refusal to engage in or acquiesce to it (important as these are). Tempered liberals were also typically more under the spell of ideals of heroism than was Shklar, who rejected the focus on political leaders that marked the outlooks of Weber, Niebuhr, Aron, and Berlin, and was more skeptical of appeals to honor or nobility of spirit.<sup>16</sup> Fearful of putting too much faith in human virtue, she

placed more emphasis on institutional factors, embracing the Madisonian project of constitutional protections and political limits—even as she recognized that liberalism involves both ethical demands and an “ethos.”<sup>17</sup>

Tempered liberalism is, however, at one with Shklar’s “barebones liberalism” which, having abandoned the theory of progress and every specific scheme of economics, is committed only to the belief that tolerance is a primary virtue.<sup>18</sup> Tempered liberals thus diverged from those forms of liberalism that rest on historical optimism. Such optimism may be robust, or qualified and tentative (it may, indeed, turn out to be no more than a “reasonable faith”); it may rest on a sanguine view of human nature, or on the hopeful perception that human beings have grown and continue to grow increasingly benevolent and enlightened over time.<sup>19</sup> Another sort of liberal optimism sees human beings as motivated by rational self-interest to act in ways that ultimately reduce social unrest and unreason.<sup>20</sup> Experience made tempered liberals keenly aware of the limits of human reason, and the power—particularly in situations of instability and anxiety—of destructive human passions. They saw liberalism as contingently ascendant, inherently vulnerable, and frequently threatened. Not even liberalism’s greatest successes would render it self-sustaining: any satisfactions provided by liberal institutions and policies would quickly give way to dissatisfaction.<sup>21</sup>

This influenced the way that tempered liberals approached earlier forms of liberalism. They did not join in the celebration of Locke that was common in accounts of the “liberal tradition” at the time;<sup>22</sup> they were drawn to more anxious, historically minded liberal or quasi-liberal thinkers—Montesquieu, Constant, Tocqueville. Niebuhr and his disciple Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., made the repudiation of the “shallow,” “sentimental belief in progress” of earlier liberals central to their politics, defining themselves against a sort of “folk-liberalism”—which Schlesinger labeled “progressivism”—founded on faith in human reason and progressive improvement; Aron made a similar move in contrasting his views with those of his Durkheimian elders.<sup>23</sup> This allowed tempered liberals to disassociate themselves from both the naïve liberalism that had been the target of “realist” attacks, and those who had embraced Communism in the hope that temporary brutality would produce a future of brotherhood.

Tempered liberalism is also far removed from the cluster of ideas and policies labeled “neoliberalism.” This term may refer to (among other things): an intellectual-political movement, which self-consciously sought to revive *laissez-faire* economic liberalism through theoretical innovation and institution-building; a political agenda and approach that applies the logic of the market to all areas of life; the view that the market is not natural or

spontaneously emergent, but must (and should) be promoted by government; a perspective that treats economic growth as the primary end of policy; and a collection of policies—deregulation, free trade, privatization, cuts to public spending, and monetarism—that have defined economic governance in the West (and, increasingly, globally) since the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Tempered liberals were not involved in—and often opposed to—the neoliberal movement; their pluralism, opposition to the single-minded imposition of any program regardless of the human misery it causes, preoccupation with questions of ethics and character, and sense of political life as inherently tragic all stand in contrast to the political disposition(s) and agendas often identified with neoliberalism.<sup>25</sup>

Its distance from neoliberalism and Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism (as well as earlier liberal optimism) makes tempered liberalism exempt from many of the criticisms of liberalism that have defined the recent revival of “realism” in political theory.<sup>26</sup> Recent realists are (generally) milder in their critique of liberalism than the “realism” against which tempered liberals reacted;<sup>27</sup> their visions of politics are more clamorous than ruthless.<sup>28</sup> They share the tempered liberal apprehension that viewing politics as an instrument for realizing moral imperatives can foster not only naïve folly, but benevolent authoritarianism or ruthless zealotry. But tempered liberals emphasized that the greatest horrors tended to arise from a combination of certain sorts of “moralism” with a “realist” view of politics as an arena of amoral struggle, and rejection of moral squeamishness. This is one respect in which the recovery of tempered liberalism can offer a useful corrective to shortcomings of the realist revival. Another is by offering a different understanding of what a desirable form of political realism might involve. In casting “realism” as a response to Rawlsian liberalism, some “realist” theorists have come to mirror that which they attack, making “realism” doctrinal, methodological, and/or programmatic. Tempered liberals’ distinction between dispositional and doctrinal realism (and defense of the former and critique of the latter) offer the possibility of “another realism,”<sup>29</sup> understood not as a set of propositions about the relationship of politics to morality, or the ethics of violence and compulsion, but as an ethos marked by dispositions and practices, which help us to see the world clearly in its complexity while acknowledging the limits of our insight; and to see *ourselves* clearly, to recognize our aspirations and vanity—including the vanity that we are beyond illusion and sentimentality, and that our all-too-human inclinations to callousness, cynicism, and contempt represent some sort of wisdom.

Their somber, defensive orientation has encouraged the identification of tempered liberals with a conservative turn in postwar liberalism which stymied

reform, fostered a mix of despair and complacency, and promoted liberal dogmatism under the false slogan of openness.<sup>30</sup> I have sought to show that this description does not adequately capture the intentions of, or the resources offered by, tempered liberals; and, more broadly, that far from a thinning of a once robust liberalism, the postwar period saw a “thickening of modern liberalism,” undertaken so as to better comprehend and promote “the requisite conditions for fashioning and sustaining,” not merely a functional political apparatus, but a “humane culture”—one that would not descend into barbarism.<sup>31</sup> This was closely tied to intellectual openness: a readiness to stray from the path of safe, enlightened opinion and learn from liberalism’s critics—but a vigilant openness, which sought both to draw valuable insights from liberalism’s critics and to understand their errors. The insights and errors were connected. The former (whether drawn from Marxist critiques of ideological justification for self-interest and reminders of material misery, or conservative warnings about the fragility of civilization and persistence of irrationality and sin) chastened liberal optimism. But the terror at complexity and uncertainty, the intolerance of difference and errancy, the fury for order and simplification, and the impulse to ignore the limits imposed by respect for others in order to transform the world (whether by leaping forward, or turning back the clock) that they found in their ideological opponents also taught tempered liberals the need for forbearance, humility, toleration, and rejection of all utopias, whether revolutionary or reactionary. Liberals had to be fleet to meet challenges that earlier liberal theory could scarcely comprehend—while steadfastly defending the true treasure of liberalism, which lay not merely in its institutions or policies (some of which appeared to have withstood the test of time, others not), but in core liberal values—and the ethos needed to sustain them in action.

The overlooked critical edge contained in what are now often perceived as celebrations of Western virtue—and the connection between these critical resources and focus on ethos—can be seen in the well-known discourse of “totalitarianism.” The contrast between totalitarianism and democracy was often deployed to vilify the Soviet (or Soviet-allied) opponent and cast America and its allies as more pristine than they were. But, for tempered liberals, the idea of totalitarianism served as an argument *against* illiberal practices by the West. If the Cold War represented no mere power rivalry, but a contest between democratic and totalitarian ideals, to engage in practices that resembled totalitarianism—to crush dissent, deny individual rights, ban political competition and opposition, impose loyalty oaths, turn media into outlets of state propaganda, impose parties or programs on other countries by installing puppet

governments—would be self-defeating: it would represent a triumph for the true enemy, which was not a particular nation, but totalitarianism itself. The use of the democracy/totalitarianism dichotomy as an argument in favor of a truly *liberal* practice of democracy—which meant, in some cases, pursuing far-reaching reforms<sup>32</sup>—thus rested on *political-ethical* arguments about the dangers of emulation, and the importance of consistency with principles.

Liberalism has never been, as Helena Rosenblatt reminds us, “a fixed and unified creed.”<sup>33</sup> “Totalizing” accounts of liberalism get the history wrong; they are also politically impoverishing, closing off alternatives and imposing false choices. We should strive for a multifaceted, multifocal history of liberalism. We should also be attentive to the political or ideological work being done by narratives of historical development—the politics that they serve to promote or attack, render more attractive or repulsive, and the resources they close off. Critical histories of postwar liberalism offer to liberate us from inherited blinders, and reawaken awareness of more robustly republican, bracingly radical, or hopefully democratic visions. But they may also serve as means of evading challenging or painful features of the past; inspired by disappointment or frustration at liberalism’s failures, they risk taking its achievements for granted—and forgetting the danger or ugliness of what it combated. Tempered liberalism reminds us of the evils of excessive ambition and overweening conviction, of self-righteousness, intolerance, and haste. This is a reminder of which liberalism’s critics—and some of its defenders—may be in need, precisely to the extent that they are reluctant to heed it.

The overshadowing of tempered liberalism by Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism, neoliberalism, and other forms of liberalism is understandable. The reasons are partly historical, reflecting shifting political conditions. For all their prominence, tempered liberals were in crucial ways out of step with the focus on social and economic issues that marked other precincts of postwar thought (including the increasingly influential social sciences). They were also caught in the middle of a Manichean divide between those who celebrated capitalist liberal democracy (and sought to uphold or spread it by force) and those who radically rejected it. They were also hampered by their refusal to offer a systematic doctrine or comprehensive program. Defined by ethos as much as (or more than) doctrine—one marked, furthermore, by appreciation for complexity, and indeed ambivalence, and an effort at balancing, discriminating, and self-correction—tempered liberalism is difficult to pin down or “operationalize.” To consider the place and value of tempered liberalism is thus to consider the advantages and disadvantages of both an ethos-centered approach and the particular ethos of tempered liberalism.



## Liberalism: Ethical or Institutional?

Many liberals will think it unwise to rely on the prevalence of a desirable ethos, given the limits of human virtue; and paradoxical or misguided to identify liberalism with a particular ethos, given liberalism's commitment to individual freedom and variety. Experience does show that we cannot depend on political actors living up to the demands of any ethic. But it also suggests that, absent a significant body of political actors who can exhibit a liberal ethos at crucial moments, liberal institutions will be faced with dangers they are unable to withstand on their own. As Niebuhr noted, America's liberal constitutional structure was not enough to guard against McCarthyism; recent events have confirmed how fragile American constitutionalism is, in the face of the diffusion of an anti-liberal spirit within, and its encouragement from, the upper echelons of power. Political actors cannot navigate the challenges of politics without some internal bearings, anchors, and buoys; those who become unmoored from moral scruples and constraints—who, in Arthur Koestler's term, sail without moral "ballast"<sup>34</sup>—aren't likely to steer in ways that preserve liberal institutions. If liberal theory is to engage usefully with practical politics—if it is to be "*political* political theory"—it must recognize liberalism's moral and psychological demandingness; and attend to extra-institutional matters of character, disposition, and judgment. As Shklar recognized, liberal constitutionalism is not just "a set of political procedures," but an ethical project and "ethos." Liberal politics "imposes extraordinary ethical difficulties," which are far too demanding "for those who cannot endure contradiction, complexity, diversity, and the risks of freedom"; it depends for its success on the existence of individuals possessing certain dispositions.<sup>35</sup> These will be needed to guide the translation of commitments into action, in circumstances where general principles prove too unresponsive to particularities to provide sufficient guidance; and to inspire actions for which neither rational self-interest nor disinterested adherence to principles offers sufficient motivation.

Of course, it is misleading to distinguish sharply between ethos and institutions. Institutions demand a particular sort of ethos if they are not to be used in ways that subvert the purposes for which they are designed. If institutions meant to secure broad equity between different groups in society, and protect individuals against domination, predation, and exploitation, are not to be perverted into instruments that enable these very abuses, certain types of conduct and character must be affirmed and cultivated, others condemned and sanctioned.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, institutions shape ethos. Institutional arrangements that subject individuals to scrutiny and hold them responsible for their

actions; that demonstrate that leaders are as subject to the law as anyone else; that force those wielding power to offer justifications for their actions, and listen to opposition; that bring citizens into debate with one another; and that in myriad ways limit power and de-sanctify authority—these are necessary (though not always sufficient) to inculcate liberal dispositions, sentiments, and values.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the capacity to foster a desirable ethos is one criterion to apply in designing or evaluating institutions. To embrace an ethos that enjoins modesty and responsibility and rejects ruthlessness, self-righteousness, and intolerance is to prefer not only conduct, but institutional arrangements, that protect against ruthless, reckless, and arrogant uses of power, or the concentration of power in ways that allow some to dominate and crush others. On the other hand, institutions not only foster, but define the requirements of, ethos. By dividing rule among different offices with distinct roles, modern liberal-democratic institutions make the requirements of political ethics pluralistic, requiring varying types of character and practice.

This brings us back to the worry that defining liberalism in relation to an ethos clashes with the resistance to imposing a single set of values or type of character that typify (most) liberalism. Even if some forms of liberal theory have been more wedded to an ideal of civic virtue or individual self-development than more recent versions,<sup>38</sup> most of these “perfectionist” or “civic” variants have still been defined by an affirmation of variety, and an insistence that virtue or development should be pursued freely by individuals, who can indeed only develop the requisite capacities of character *through* free (that is, self-chosen) action. As Andrew Sabl writes, “Surely one thing liberalism means is a deliberate refusal to aspire to . . . mass conversions and mass indoctrination”: “good liberals” value “diversity of behaviors, motivations, and human characters,” and resist “the temptation to buy moral reform at the cost of uniformity.”<sup>39</sup>

### Force of Example: Pluralism, the Problem of Character Formation, and Exemplarity

There are actually two problems here. The first is the *problem of pluralism*: how can one reconcile affirmation of the plurality of valid and worthwhile ways of being with advocacy of a single ethos? To this one can respond that the ethos of tempered liberalism is not a comprehensive ideal, but a specifically *political* ethos, a sort of “ethical price of entry” for political action—a set of features demanded of those who seek to “put their hands to the wheel of history” in

Weber's phrase, on behalf of and in accordance with liberal ideals. Its purpose is not to attain a fully flourishing human life, but to maintain a decent political existence, which will protect individuals against acute forms of injustice, misery, fear, humiliation, violence, oppression. Even within politics, tempered liberalism does not affirm a single type of character, but a range of them, appropriate to different situations and roles. Berlin praised Turgenev and Herzen, Roosevelt and Churchill; Niebuhr and Aron made room for the prudence of the statesman and the intransigence of the critic or prophet. Broad and flexible, this ethos guides political action not by identifying a single recipe for behavior, but by recommending a certain palette of dispositions and practices; how to deploy these is up to the judgment of the actor, just as how to mix and apply colors is up to the judgment of the painter. The dispositions, sensibilities, and practices that make up the tempered liberal ethos are, in Andrew Sabl's terms, both "pluralistic" and "episodic": not everyone needs to exhibit or enact all of them, in all cases.<sup>40</sup> The ethos of tempered liberalism should be understood as encompassing a number of different variations, appropriate to different roles—and an approach to thinking about how to navigate, or move between, those roles.

Moving between roles is, in fact, what people do in modern democracies. Political actors are (usually) not always engaged in politics; their perspective, role, and experience shift between those they may bear as office-holders, those they bear as citizens, and those relevant to other facets of their lives.<sup>41</sup> This recognition highlights the importance of resistance to one-sidedness or monomania, which leads individuals to dedicate themselves single-mindedly to perfecting the characteristics demanded by their particular "role." Against this, tempered liberals cultivate habits of flexibility and care in judging what types of behavior and qualities of character are most appropriate to or needed in particular circumstances. The morally inspired prophet should maintain a modicum of hard-headed practical sense and forgiving tolerance of human frailty; the humane philanthropist should retain a degree of skepticism, irony, and acceptance of limitations; the tough, pragmatic politician should cultivate the voice of moral sensitivity and scruple.

The second problem may be termed the *liberal problem of pedagogy*. As Shklar noted, while liberalism's success may depend on the prevalence of certain dispositions and sorts of conduct, liberal theory refuses to foster these features "as models of human perfection"—and liberal policy refrains from imposing them through coercion or systematic conditioning. All liberalism can do is affirm "that if we want to promote political freedom, then this is appropriate

behavior.”<sup>42</sup> This is an uneasy, but not unintelligible, position. And, if one trusts in the functioning of liberal institutions to serve as a school of liberal political virtue or culture, one might not be too troubled by it.

Tempered liberals were not so sanguine. They could not take proclivities for “appropriate behavior” for granted. While they did not offer a wholly satisfactory response to the liberal problem of pedagogy, their work does suggest one way to address it: through a pedagogy of *exemplification* rather than indoctrination. Pedagogic exemplification encourages others to cultivate certain qualities, and adopt certain goals and perspectives, by exhibiting these through one’s own character, conduct, and style of living. Exemplification also helps those who already share certain values (e.g., liberal values) to think through *how* to go about living in accordance with these values, by showing how these values have been translated into conduct by individual exemplars. As Linda T. Zagzebski writes, exemplars “make us want to be moral and they show us how to do it.”<sup>43</sup> They thereby offer, in Nancy Rosenblum’s words, “a public education in liberty,” “exhibit[ing] power” rather than imposing or institutionalizing it.<sup>44</sup>

Pedagogic exemplification involves two elements: exemplification itself, and emulation. The latter consists not of slavish imitation, but a conscious, critical attempt to identify what is admirable and applicable in the exemplar, and to adapt this to the situation—and the already-partially-shaped character—of the emulator. Exemplification respects liberty and individuality because the selection of an exemplar reflects the judgment and the needs of the “student,” rather than the exemplar’s will or ability to use force. This means that success is never fully in the hands of the exemplar. As a form of persuasion and guidance, rather than conditioning or compulsion, exemplification relies more on conscious human action—and requires less comprehensive control over background conditions and the experiences of the learner—than a program of *habituation*. At the same time, since it employs the force of example rather than (or in addition to) purely rational persuasion, it can appeal to the emotions, and promote skills of judgment that are not rule-based.<sup>45</sup>

Exemplars are admirable, but not perfect. (And not all who are admirable are exemplars: what makes them admirable may be beyond our capacity to emulate, or we may not wish to emulate them, because the ways in which they are admirable are not ways *we* wish to be admirable.) This is fitting insofar as tempered liberalism recognizes that striving for perfection is likely to produce pathologies of intolerance and impatience toward human frailty, blindness to complexity, and ultimately, a ruthless fury for moral transformation. Not only do most of us, as Orwell insisted, “genuinely . . . not wish to be saints”; the quest

for sainthood may divert us from being well-functioning human beings.<sup>46</sup> Tempered liberals certainly did not present themselves as models to be imitated; this would have been inconsistent with the modesty and self-subverting irony that were important features both of the ethos they advocated and their own ways of being in the world. But they did seek to exemplify a liberal ethos by putting it into practice—in their personal interactions with others, their manner of thinking through problems, and the authorial persona or voice that each cultivated—and by depicting it in earlier thinkers, fictional characters, or political leaders. At their best, they show us, by the force of example, how to cultivate these qualities, and how to urge them gracefully upon others.<sup>47</sup>

The practice of exemplification and emulation is a deeply imperfect response to the liberal problem of character formation. Relying on some to rise to the challenge of exemplariness, and leaving others free to emulate them or not, presupposes that most individuals already have significant ethical resources. This will often not be the case. It may not be possible to have a *decent* politics without a degree of both personal goodness and political skill that is beyond what most people are mostly able to attain. And the effort to make people better may lead to more suffering and horror. Introspection, self-cultivation, and exemplification—frail reeds though these may be—may also be the best (least bad) means to foster elusive but indispensable virtues. Reflection on exemplars may help to replenish the moral foundations of liberal democracy—habits and ideals of civility, empathy, fortitude, self-restraint, solidarity, circumspection, respect for nuance and for others—by reminding us of why we need them, as well as displaying how admirable they can be.

### Is the Tempered Liberal Ethos Liberal?

But is the ethos of tempered liberalism a desirable one for liberalism to embrace? It may seem too grim and demanding for those who regard liberalism as easy-going, permissive, and optimistic, and too skeptical, modest, and ambivalent to foster the radical and robust liberalism needed to fight for improvement against forces of injustice and reaction. I have sought to show, first, that the view of liberalism as morally lax or complacent is, at best, only partly accurate; and that tempered liberals' alert skepticism and resistance to the closed-mindedness of ideology offer guards against the embrace of any order—whether that of the present, that of the past imagined by reactionary fantasists, or that envisioned by radicals whose hopes for the future outstrip what can responsibly be expected based on experience. This rejection, at once,

of radicalism, reaction, and a complacent acceptance of the status quo points to a liberalism of not only “permanent minorities,”<sup>48</sup> but incorrigible inquirers and resolute, even restless, reformers.

Tempered liberals’ preoccupation with honor and heroism will strike many as a dubious aristocratic holdover, too menacingly martial, macho, and elitist to be appropriate for good liberals. This reaction neglects the extent to which earlier liberalism extolled an “individualism for the strong,” which “requires ‘heroic’ action, the throwing off of priestly and political authorities and striving for personal independence.”<sup>49</sup> And the history of the left suggests that macho and elitist elements of heroism are easily combined with advocacy of egalitarian principles. Indeed, tempered liberals’ focus on heroism reflected an effort to (re-)appropriate heroic exemplification, claimed as the province of anti-liberalism, for liberal values. The current attraction of political strongmen speaking the language of “greatness,” as well as vestiges of hero worship and posturing of toughness among even more enlightened observers, suggests that the allure of heroism—of a certain image of strength, energy, courage, forcefulness, and mastery—has abiding political power, with which defenders of liberalism must reckon. Brecht famously has Galileo declare “unhappy is the land that needs a hero!”<sup>50</sup> This is a good egalitarian sentiment; and it is true that the land that needs a hero is less happy than that which has no need of one. But unhappiest is the land that needs heroes—and lacks them.

Not only lands, but individuals, may need heroes. Those of us who cannot (or refuse to) fall back on an iron-clad philosophy of history or political ideology may find heroes particularly necessary. And their very human-ness—the fact that they are not perfect, and cannot be completely authoritative—strikes me as a reason to prefer heroes to ideology as a source of inspiration and guidance. Nor is recognition of heroes inherently inegalitarian, undemocratic, or illiberal. Indeed, heroism appears integral to struggles for liberty, equality, democracy, and justice. I am not sure what word to use to describe Irena Sendler, Raoul Wallenberg, Chiune Sugihara, Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Nelson Mandela, Andrei Sakharov, or Elena Bonner, besides hero. And I’m not sure how I would have developed a clear conception of what integrity, compassion, dignity, courage, endurance, or magnanimity are, or what they look like in actual practice, if I had not learned from the examples of these individuals.

But to speak of heroism abstractly is not to say very much. The proper question is not whether heroism is desirable to sustain a liberal politics, but what sort of heroism is or is not. Tempered liberals’ conceptions of heroism are marked

by three common elements. First, heroism involves overcoming obstacles in a way that requires self-discipline. Second, heroes exemplify certain values that they hold to be worthy of respect and adherence—and which are in fact worthy. Heroism thus involves conscious adherence to ethical standards (but not moral purism or absolutism). Finally, to be a hero is to offer an example that inspires others—even if it is not one that can or should be directly imitated.

Some or all of these features characterize more familiar conceptions of heroism—but are inflected very differently. For example, the stress on a capacity for endurance, and fidelity to oneself, resembles ancient Greek visions of heroism. But in classical Greek literature, endurance and fidelity to self are linked to obstinacy and deafness to entreaty by others, which contrasts with the capacity to entertain self-doubt and criticism of the tempered liberal hero.<sup>51</sup> Tempered liberal heroism is also far removed from romantic heroism, which stresses willful self-assertion, and has a “masculine aura” akin to militarism.<sup>52</sup> And tempered liberal heroism was defined in opposition to an anti-liberal conception of heroism which emphasized singleness of purpose (to the exclusion of ambivalence and idiosyncrasy), imperviousness to entreaty and doubt, and even brutality.

This anti-liberal conception shared the three features of heroism identified above: endurance and self-discipline, a conscious adherence to ideals, and an effort at exemplification. Tempered liberals therefore had to re-value these features to support a very different ethos. Whereas anti-liberal “heroes” strove to be “superhumanly inhuman,”<sup>53</sup> tempered liberals sought to teach heroic ambitions to “respect the virtues of mere humanity.”<sup>54</sup> This included an emphasis on honor, identified not with aristocratic hauteur and sensitivity to insult, but a sense of obligation to uphold one’s own ideals and to defend the weak, the unpopular, the reviled, against the mighty;<sup>55</sup> and a celebration, and redefinition, of courage, which Shklar (who was hardly moved by martial nostalgia) asserted “is to be prized, since it both prevents us from being cruel, as cowards so often are, and fortifies us against fear from threats, both physical and moral.” The courage to be prized is “not the courage of the armed, but that of their likely victims.” Tempered liberals would agree, but add that there is also a need for a particular courage of the armed: a courage to refrain from using their arms when they can, but should not.<sup>56</sup>

This is a heroism of forbearance, defined above all by the refusal to emulate illiberal opponents. Such heroism was evoked by Indalecio Prieto, Minister of National Defense of the Spanish Republic, who urged those fighting against totalitarian nationalism not to “imitate” their opponents, but to *surpass* them



in moral conduct. The sort of heroes the Republic needed possessed *both* “steely breasts for combat” *and* “sensitive hearts, capable of shuddering at human pain, able to shelter mercy and tender feelings”; without this latter quality, “that which is most essential to human greatness is lost.”<sup>57</sup> Tempered liberalism redefined heroic “greatness” in this way; and recognized that, sometimes, the survival of liberalism would depend on such greatness, and require some individuals to be “extraordinarily good if they are to be adequate.”<sup>58</sup>

### “Too Liberal to Fight”—or Fighting Liberally?

Even if liberal heroism is sometimes essential, it is not sufficient. One also needs to be able to fight effectively—as the example of Prieto and the doomed Spanish Republic shows. This brings us back to “the liberal predicament,” and Frost’s charge of being “too liberal to fight.” Tempered liberalism, with its insistence on modesty, skepticism, prudence, and non-emulation, might seem especially vulnerable to this charge—and to Alan Brinkley’s warning that, in the “rush to certainty,” liberalism “quakes and at times collapses, its adherents unable and unwilling to embrace fundamental dogmas of their own and incapable of effectively challenging those who do.”<sup>59</sup> If liberals lack all conviction, while anti-liberals are filled with passionate intensity, the former can hardly hope to win, either on the battlefield or at the ballot box. Surely the tempered liberal spirit is not the stuff of which fighting heroes are made—it is too, well, *temperate*. Some liberals have accordingly suggested that a certain amount of utopian optimism and ambition,<sup>60</sup> or fervent belief, is necessary—since, as Alison McQueen has suggested, “surely one of the primary ways in which political actors become capable of moral courage is by shoring up their epistemic confidence—by generating some assurance that they are embarking on the right path for the right reasons.”<sup>61</sup> Others have called for liberals to toughen up and adopt some of the militancy and ruthlessness of those who oppose them.

Liberals should indeed toughen up. But “toughening up” should not be understood to mean becoming unscrupulous or doctrinaire. Rather, it should be identified with cultivating a resolve and fortitude that can bear uncertainty, defeat, and the malevolence and irrationality of others—the sort of toughness counseled by Weber in the concluding pages of “Politics as a Vocation.” Illiberal liberals, who embrace ruthlessness and dogmatism in the service of liberalism, are in the same position as those commissars who sought to “lie their way to truth” or oppress their way to freedom. In 1930, Hermann Müller, the Chancellor of Germany, warned of the dangers faced by a “democracy without

democrats.”<sup>62</sup> We should, similarly, beware of the possibility of a liberalism without liberals. The battle for the ideals, goals, principles, and broader political culture of liberalism will be imperiled, if the spirit in which the battle is waged becomes an illiberal one.

This has, historically, been the case often enough. The record of anti-Communism (a form of anti-anti-liberalism) makes this all too clear. To take one exemplar of a larger phenomenon: William Colby was the CIA official responsible for overseeing the “Phoenix Program” designed to “neutralize” the Viet Cong. He was also “a romantic idealist, a liberal internationalist who wanted to replace fascist or Communist tyranny with freedom and democracy.” Against his own upright principles, he was drawn into abetting bribery, deception, and—according to critics of the Phoenix Program—abduction, torture, and murder, in defense of freedom.<sup>63</sup> Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, some liberals were won over by the combination of missionary zeal for democracy with ruthless deployment of military power and misinformation embraced by American and British leaders, whose liberal-democratic evangelism reflected the Manicheanism and millenarianism that tempered liberals had analyzed and attacked in their anti-liberal opponents. In recent decades, economic policies identified with liberalism have been undertaken—via support for pro-free market authoritarians, or imposition of economic programs of “austerity”—with ruthless disregard for the political instability and human misery they produced.<sup>64</sup>

Tempered liberals themselves sometimes succumbed to the temptation to defend ruthless acts in pursuit of liberal objectives, or to turn a blind eye to injustices committed by “liberal” regimes. Yet they were (mostly) able to recognize and renounce their errors, and learn from them. And whatever their personal failings of judgment, self-control, or integrity, in their work they championed a liberal ethos centered on the insight that it would be fatally self-defeating to “fight the devil with the devil’s weapons,” because “the temper and the integrity with which the political fight is waged” was crucial in promoting the “health” of a liberal polity.<sup>65</sup> They thus called for *liberal integrity*: a practice of remaining true to liberal principles, even when it is costly.

But not infinitely costly: integrity must be tempered with responsibility. Tempered liberals perceived that cultivating and maintaining an ethos marked by qualities of courage and compassion will sometimes be more effective than exhibiting ruthlessness in winning support and achieving political goals.<sup>66</sup> But their awareness of human weakness, the harshness of politics, and the tragedy of life prevented them from assuming that desirable results would invariably

follow from virtuous conduct. They recognized that there will be cases where ruthless actions prove effective—or necessary—in preventing the worst evils. But to this they added the caution that one must always fight the tendency to succumb to ruthlessness as an ethos.

In making sense of this response, it is useful to return to the relationship between ethos and action. While ethos shapes action, action also shapes ethos: the actions that we undertake can, over time, transform how we perceive and relate to the world—and, ultimately, who we are. Tempered liberal vigilance against ruthlessness reflects a perception that actions can have psychologically transforming, or deforming, effects on the agent. So can adopting a particular attitude toward one's actions—or making a habit of acting in particular ways. Acting ruthlessly, even if it is an isolated incident, tends to leave an agent changed; determining to commit to ruthlessness as a policy will have effects on character that the agent will find hard to shake off. For this reason, it is important both to abjure ruthless conduct when doing so does not lead to disaster; and to recognize that ruthless actions remain “morally disagreeable” even when “politically justified.” Ruthlessness as an ethos involves not just engaging in actions that violate moral prohibitions, but dismissing such inner repugnance and resistance. Liberal integrity as a feature of ethos maintains the disposition to care about the moral quality of actions, to make efforts to eschew actions that violate the rights of others, to minimize the damage when one must engage in such action in order to avert greater evils, and to acknowledge the evil of what one has done. This is a vital safeguard, for “[o]nly those who are reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary . . . a habit of reluctance is an essential obstacle against the happy acceptance of the intolerable.”<sup>67</sup>

To this, skeptics of tempered liberalism's focus on ethos and its aversion to ruthlessness may object that ruthlessness is a necessary part of political life, to be judged good or bad based on the goals at which it is aimed, and its success in achieving these. Tempered liberalism may appear anti-political or “depoliticizing”: favoring the displacement of political by ethical standards, or treating politics as an intellectual exercise rather than a battle between clashing passions and interests, or focusing on matters of personality and dodging properly political questions—who has power, who is ruling over whom, who wins and loses. Such a charge was directed at tempered liberals by C. Wright Mills, who alleged that their tendency to treat politics as a matter of “style,” “posture,” “mood,” or “tone of voice” distracted from the “structural” dimensions of politics and society.<sup>68</sup>

This would be a valid worry—if concern with ethical matters leads to neglecting other aspects of politics. But there is no reason why it should. The tempered liberals discussed here were hardly political naïfs. It was engagement with politics—and their observation of how political striving could go terribly wrong—that convinced them of the importance of the interplay of conduct, attitudes, values, and character in shaping political action. It also convinced them that there is nothing particularly “realistic” in rejecting the wisdom contained in the core of liberalism: the awareness that, in the ardent, angry, or alarmed battle for justice, or the passionate pursuit of ideals, to disregard scruples and constraints that guard against ruthless abuses of power is a recipe for tyranny. Experience seems to bear this out; it also suggests that those who take pride in being politically hard-headed and equate this with discounting ethical concerns (broadly understood to encompass matters of the morality of action and the style of conduct), are not necessarily the best models of political judgment.

In any case, charges of “depoliticization” beg the questions of just what counts as “political”; of how far “political” considerations should guide our actions; and of what role politics should play in the overall living of a life. Liberalism regards politics as important, but not all-important. Politics should be pursued in a way that allows participants to do other things; indeed, the goals of politics include securing conditions that allow most people to do other things. And the activity of politics itself is plural in its forms, standards, and ends. Part of liberal exemplarity is showing how one might be politically responsible without giving oneself wholly to politics, or letting the demands of politics dominate one’s character or vision. Critics of liberalism often reject this deflationary view of politics; they seek a more inspiring, fulfilling sort of politics. But, in the modern world, most people don’t seem to *want* politics to be so all-consuming. Attempts to restore the grandeur of politics—to bestow on people a lost treasure that they do not really want—have been costly.<sup>69</sup>

Politics does not have absolute priority over other facets of life; nor is it hermetically separate from them. Tempered liberals were mindful of the particular demands facing political actors—who, as Weber stressed, must be fighters, and bear responsibility for and to others. But they held that *both* politics and other facets of life are subject to conflicts between divergent values and ideals. Politics and other fields of life share both an *ethical structure*, marked by pluralistic value conflict; and many of the same *ethical standards*: loyalty, compassion, integrity, honor—and for that matter, responsibility, objectivity, and prudence—are relevant values both in politics and in other aspects of life. In

politics, as in private life, one must sometimes confront and accept tragedy; but one should never consent to brutality or cease to judge, or struggle against, it.

Solutions to the liberal predicament ultimately cannot be arrived at programmatically or a priori; they depend on responses by many separate individuals to circumstances which can only be navigated through the exercise of judgment. The tempered liberal ethos cannot guarantee correct judgment or effective action: but it does offer a guard against ideological and characterological tendencies that promote disastrous responses to the liberal predicament—rigidity or capitulation, abandonment either of principle or of responsibilities for outcomes. That tempered liberalism offers no surefire solution to the liberal predicament by which it was formed may seem a decisive refutation of it . . . if, following Marx, one expects history, or politics, to only set tasks that are capable of being solved. If, however, one thinks that there are problems—including some of the most crucial challenges that arise in politics—that admit of only partial, imperfect solutions, which require both strenuous effort and good luck, the failure to simply “solve” this problem does not count conclusively against tempered liberalism. In politics, our choices often come down to which insoluble problems we are best able to live with—or think most worth living with.

### The Tempered Liberal Testament

The central claim with which I began this book was that political-ethical ruthlessness was a central feature of twentieth-century political thought and action. Ruthlessness is a matter of ethos; it has been inspired and justified by appeals to an ideal of character, or conception of the appropriate ethos of political actors. An embrace of ruthless practice, in turn, has shaped the identities and judgment of political thinkers and activists. I have also suggested, through my tempered liberal protagonists, that the antidote to ruthlessness, and the horrors it motivates and sanctifies, is to be found in the cultivation of a particular ethos. This turn to ethos reflects a perception that the tendency to think about politics in terms of *theories*—of legitimacy, power, order, justice, constitutionalism, procedure—can breed blindness to reality, causing terrible harm, and making the infliction of this harm appear justified, even virtuous. The tempered liberals discussed here were acutely aware of the ease with which high-flown rhetoric, moral ambition, and ideological certainty can inspire the bombing of the old woman on the tram, the lynching of the policeman by the mob, the torture and execution of the political prisoner, the

starvation of the peasants. They stressed the importance of cultivating an ethos that would enable us to recognize suffering and its evil, and resist the tendency to excuse or extol it.

In this, they are currently, perhaps perpetually, relevant. Ruthlessness is a central problem in politics. It remains our problem. We have of late seen a resurgence of increasingly naked, cynical ruthlessness, which makes ever fewer concessions to liberal norms—and the embrace of such ruthlessness among leaders (and the rank-and-file) of mainstream parties in supposedly stable liberal democracies.<sup>70</sup> It is again fashionable to cheer the “shipwreck” of liberalism—and profitable to join in looting the wreckage.<sup>71</sup> In 2020, as in 1950, “excess is always a comfort, and sometimes a career.”<sup>72</sup> The appeal of strongmen and bullies is still potent, as is the lure of all-encompassing, supposedly infallible ideologies, and the pressure to take sides, and prosecute the struggle furiously. We again suffocate among those who believe they are absolutely right; we again stand by as humanity is outraged. We again find many tempted to “lie their way to truth,” oppress in the name of freedom, countenance and shield blatant immorality (whether of venal corruption or cruelty) in the supposed service of a greater moral good.

The brutalities of an increasingly authoritarian, overtly nativist and racist right have provoked righteous, energizing fury on the left. As in the past, much of this fury has been directed against a “liberal” establishment that has proven ineffectual and feckless in the face of injustice, misery, and hate. Contemporary left-wing critics of liberalism identify real failures. Many of these are of the kind that tempered liberals warned against: failures of *imagination* in comprehending the suffering of others (those far away, or without political or economic clout or voice), recognizing the dangers these unaddressed sufferings pose, and conceiving of new solutions; and failures of scruple and resolve, in seeking to steal their opponents’ thunder—as if anti-liberal policies and sentiments, appropriated and manipulated by wisely liberal elites, could serve as an inoculation against anti-liberalism, rather than an incubator for it.<sup>73</sup>

The example of tempered liberals suggests that there are considerable resources for attacking such liberal failures from within a liberal framework and in a liberal spirit. Some on the left, however, show signs of falling prey to the errors of their forbears. Too often, they swing between postures of hard-boiled toughness and displays of implausible optimism and precious righteousness. Too often, they seem to confuse emotionally satisfying action with politically effective action, to treat anger as not only psychologically valid but politically wise, to conclude that repaying ruthlessness in kind is both justified and

effective—and to ignore or extoll the suffering that such ruthlessness inflicts.<sup>74</sup> Our moment holds promise for a revitalization of liberalism through the infusion of a more radically egalitarian, fighting spirit. But this revitalization will only be constructive if this fighting spirit, animated by indignation at inequality and injustice, can be tempered by a liberal spirit of prudence, forbearance, and openness to doubt. If it cannot find ways to reconcile itself to, and learn from, this liberal spirit, I fear that the left will not realize its promise. Alienating potential allies, condemning itself to factionalism and ineffectuality, it may accelerate the wreckage of those hard-won, fragile achievements of liberalism that offer the world's "permanent minorities" what protection, and potential for protest and power, they have. This is not a matter of cosmetics, or niceness. It concerns the quality of the politics, of the society, we seek to create—and may determine whether we succeed or fail in creating it.

At the same time, simply reaffirming liberal values and abiding by liberal norms is not enough. Creative and hard-headed thinking about policy and politicking is crucial. But so is the exemplification of a liberal ethos, which sustains the will to fight for liberalism and maintains awareness of the reasons it is worth fighting for—and of the dangers inherent both in anti-liberalism and an illiberal liberalism. Defenders of liberalism must be ready to respond to events, and not cling to the programs and institutions of the past half-century; they must also remember what is worth preserving. They must recognize that the defense of liberalism requires the practice of an ethical project, as demanding and potentially as heroic as any dreamed of by anti-liberals—but far more responsible, humble, and humane than their calls to greatness or purity. As we confront this task, the tempered liberals discussed here offer not only caution, but hope. Through their enactment of a liberalism at once skeptical, generous, modest, and determined, they suggest that it is possible to be politically committed, honorable, and (sometimes) effective, without disavowing liberal practices or scruples.<sup>75</sup>

The need for ethical resilience and resistance to ruthlessness is great. As I write this, the government of a country whose institutions purport to be liberal-democratic—my country—has ripped young children away from their parents and put them in cages; citizens exercising the right of protest have been murdered in the streets, in view of the police and the world. These things are being justified with appeal (however disingenuous) to democratic, even liberal, principles: the rule of law, the people's authority to determine who may cross the country's borders and claim the rights of citizenship, the defense of property rights. They are being done, and defended, because people in



positions of power are gratified by appearing tough and, yes, ruthless, and because others are willing to applaud them—or at least shrug, mutter regretfully, and look the other way (and, perhaps, look for excuses).

I do not know if something like this will be happening in your society when you read this. But I am fairly confident that your government will also be pursuing policies that impose lasting pain, disadvantage, and subjection on vulnerable human beings under its power; and that many of those who do this will applaud themselves, and be applauded by their supporters. If you have been persuaded, or moved, by the arguments of this book, I hope that you will be careful that you do not applaud.

Tempered liberals saw much, understood much, and achieved much. Contending with infernal problems and conflicting commitments, they held firm to a liberal ethos and upheld standards of intellectual honor and decency. Their achievements were imperfect; their legacy is contested. Their virtues and their limitations may provide lessons both sobering and inspiring. Whether we regard them as exemplars pointing the way forward, or seek to go beyond the limits that they set, their example poses a question and a challenge to us:

Can we do any better?



## NOTES

### Introduction. The Vices of Virtue: Liberalism and the Problem of Ruthlessness

1. Montesquieu, *L'esprit des lois*, XI:4.
2. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, libretto to Richard Strauss, *Der Rosenkavalier*, Act I.
3. Quotes from Donald J. Trump in conversation with US Governors, June 1, 2020; transcript accessed at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/politics/wh-governors-call-protests/index.html>. Some might question whether this example counts as *ethically inspired* ruthlessness. (It probably does not, given the source.) But its appeal surely rests both on a conception of the sort of character and bearing that makes a political leader or nation “great” and on the belief that upholding “law and public order” is imperative and praiseworthy.
4. See Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands.”
5. Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 407, 528.
6. See Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror*; K. Steven Vincent, *Benjamin Constant and the Birth of French Liberalism*; Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, 41–87.
7. Duncan Bell advocates a “summative” approach: liberalism consists in the sum total of arguments advanced by those recognized as liberals by (a significant number of) self-described liberals, at any point in time (Bell, “What Is Liberalism?”). This is useful for some scholarly purposes, but not all. For my purposes, it is both too inclusive, potentially admitting sharply contradictory and unrelated positions into the same category; and too narrow, in focusing solely on arguments as the content of liberalism. I have begun with the actual positions of those who self-identified as liberals, or were widely identified as liberals in their time, or have had a significant influence in shaping liberalism. However, my approach is not purely inductive, but interpretive: I have sought significant common threads in the positions of these “liberals,” where “significance” is a matter both of what motivated those who held the views under consideration, and what they and their contemporaries took to be distinctively “liberal” about these views. It should be added that the characterization of liberalism offered here reflects the historical period on which I focus, even if much of what I say can also (I believe) be applied to earlier liberals.
8. In this, I differ from Stephen Holmes’s *The Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism*, where anti-liberalism is defined by rejection of modernity, Enlightenment rationalism, and individualism, and defense of community, tradition, and sentiment. The label of “anti-liberalism” is admittedly somewhat unfair, in seemingly reducing complex political positions, formed by numerous positive commitments, to mere negations of liberalism. But it is with their rejection of

liberalism—and their ethical reasons for rejecting it—that I, and my liberal subjects, are primarily concerned. And as I show in chapter 1, rejection of liberalism as defined here was central to their political-ethical approach and, in many cases, motivation.

9. Michael Walzer, “What It Means to Be Liberal.”

10. Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” 21. Bell argues that this identification of liberalism with a commitment to individual liberty protected through constitutionalism is itself an artifact of the early- to mid-twentieth century, arising out of liberalism’s struggles with its ideological opponents (though, as he notes, this development began earlier, at least shortly before World War I). Bell, “What Is Liberalism,” 699–700.

11. Thus, Pankaj Mishra refers to liberalism as “parasitic on varying evils—communism, Islamofascism, Trumpism—for its self-definition.” Mishra, “The Mask It Wears.”

12. Judith N. Shklar, *Legalism*, 5–6.

13. Ortega y Gasset, “Sencillos reflexiones” (1910), 381.

14. Cf. Nomi Claire Lazar, *States of Emergency in Liberal Democracies*, on apparent trade-offs between preserving the “existence” and the “essence” of liberal democracy.

15. Frost used variations on the phrase “too liberal to fight” in the 1960s (Stewart L. Udall, “Robert Frost’s Last Adventure”); Berlin wrote “Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament” (reprinted in RT, 299–352) in 1970.

16. In their accounts of the role of ideas concerning institutions and policies in twentieth-century political conflicts, Sheri Berman (*The Social Democratic Moment; The Primacy of Politics*) and Jan-Werner Müller (*Contesting Democracy*) approach recognition of the importance of “ethical” themes. Neither however focuses on problems of political ethics or the concept of ethos; nor are they primarily concerned with liberalism. Following Müller, Duncan Bell has shown that interwar and postwar debates over and involving liberalism were marked, and to some degree driven, by a struggle over the mantle of democracy—and from these debates the concept of “liberal democracy” emerged (Bell, “What Is Liberalism?,” 703–4). As I show in the next chapter, this institutional argument was intertwined with an ethical one: the merits of “liberal” versus “collectivist” or “totalitarian” forms of democracy were debated at least partly in ethical terms, concerning the ethical qualities of the sorts of individuals each system produced or presupposed.

17. Michael Walzer, *Obligations*, 122.

18. Shalini Satkunanandan, *Extraordinary Responsibility*, 15.

19. Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, 8–9, 124; Diana Trilling, *The Beginning of the Journey*, 403.

20. Examples of this turn to ethos include G. A. Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*; William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*; Connolly, *Pluralism*; Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*; Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics*; Shalini Satkunanandan, *Extraordinary Responsibility*; Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*. Without promoting the language of “ethos” in the same way, Richard Flathman has advocated “virtuosity liberalism,” which is more character- or disposition-oriented, in contrast to forms of liberalism (notably both utilitarian and Rawlsian/neo-Kantian ones), which are more rationalist/deliberative and more “mechanical”/institutional. See Flathman, *Reflections of a Would-Be Anarchist*.

21. Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 3. A deliberately inclusive account of the subject matter of political theory lists “laws, policies, institutions, norms, practices, imaginaries, and discourses”—but not

character, sensibility, or temperament. Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka, *Political Theory and Architecture*, 1.

22. Connolly, *Pluralism*, 4.

23. Amanda Anderson, "Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism," 209.

24. Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 25.

25. Sabl, "A Decent Party of Privilege?"

26. Cf. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*.

27. For accounts of liberalism similar to that presented here, see Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom"; Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*.

28. The adjective "tempered" may seem to be a synonym for "moderate." The label of moderate, however, carries with it a connotation of an attempt to define one's position as a middle ground between opposite extremes. Moderation need not, and perhaps should not, be understood in this way (for powerful arguments against this reductive understanding of moderation, and a rich alternative to it, see Aurelian Crăiuțu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*; Crăiuțu, *Faces of Moderation*). Nevertheless, to speak of "moderate liberalism" or "moderate liberals" may give the impression of a liberalism that is only weakly, irresolutely, or mildly committed to core liberal principles. As we shall see, this would be a mistake with respect to the liberals discussed here. Moderation was one value or virtue invoked by many of them—but not their sole or master value or virtue.

29. Müller, "Fear and Freedom," 46.

30. See, e.g., the characterization of "conservative liberalism" in Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia*; Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, 268–71.

31. See, e.g., Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*; Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform*; Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*; K. Sabeel Rahman, *Democracy Against Domination*.

32. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*; David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*.

33. See, e.g., R. Booth Fowler, *Believing Skeptics*. A more nuanced version of this picture is presented in Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*; Anne M. Kornhauser, *Debating the American State*.

34. E. P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale" (1960), 222–3, 228, 232, 241.

35. C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," 18–24.

36. See Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia* Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect*.

37. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 192.

38. The identification of some of these figures as liberals will be controversial. I offer defenses of this classification in the chapters devoted to each. In general, we should distinguish between classifying a thinker as liberal and drawing on a thinker's work for liberal theory. To identify a thinker as liberal, one must ask how far they (1) endorse the principles and practices prescribed by liberalism; and (2) share perceptions, aspirations, and anxieties that have characterized liberalism over time. A thinker may be useful to liberalism by (1) correcting mistaken features of liberalism; (2) contributing to or improving on liberal responses to problems or predicaments facing it; or (3) deepening or illuminating the value, importance, or meaning of liberal values, practices, and responses. The thinkers I discuss satisfy, I believe, all of these desiderata, to varying extents.

39. The absence of one or another of these features has led me to omit other significant thinkers of this period (e.g., Hannah Arendt, F. A. Hayek, Michael Oakeshott, Karl Popper, Leo Strauss, the Frankfurt School). I have regretfully omitted Norberto Bobbio (on whom see Crăiuțu, *Faces of Moderation*, 112–47) and his “liberal socialist” predecessors, since delving into the intricacies of twentieth-century Italian politics would make for too sprawling an account.

40. Michnik, *The Trouble with History*, 59.

41. On the newness of these challenges, see David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends*.

42. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 34.

## Chapter 1. “Squeamishness Is the Crime”: Ruthlessness, Ethos, and the Critique of Liberalism

1. Jenny Holzer, “Inflammatory Essays 1978–9.” Holzer’s text incorporates quotes from twentieth-century figures such as Lenin, Trotsky, Hitler, and Mao.

2. These words are attributed to Trotsky (but have yet to be found in any of Trotsky’s writings available in English) by Isaiah Berlin, “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” in *Liberty*, 55.

3. Kopelev, *No Jail for Thought*, 12.

4. Quotes from Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 1–2.

5. Study of twentieth-century atrocities has yielded powerful accounts of moral psychology; see, e.g., Jonathan Glover, *Humanity*; Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*; Lifton, *Revolutionary Immortality*; Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*; Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*; Todorov, *Hope and Memory*.

6. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 151.

7. Cf. Bernard Williams’s description of “The politician who just could not see that [the victims of a policy for which the politician is responsible] had a complaint, and who, after he had explained the situation to them, genuinely thought that their complaint was based on misunderstanding and that they were unreasonable to make it.” Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” 61.

8. Few of the militants I discuss were ruthless all the time. Some were fitfully and uneasily ruthless, and eventually left their ruthlessness behind. Some subscribed to ruthlessness as an ethical ideal, without becoming personally ruthless. Others rejected doctrinal ruthlessness, while retaining elements of a ruthless disposition.

9. Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 235.

10. Kopelev, *No Jail for Thought*, 11–12, emphasis added.

11. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

12. Isaiah Berlin, “Alexander Herzen,” in *Russian Thinkers*, 229.

13. Spender in Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed*, 235.

14. Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, 117.

15. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*. This should be distinguished from “historicism” understood as historical relativism; see Melissa Lane, “Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?”

16. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 153.

17. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, 129.

18. See Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. McQueen notes, and indeed emphasizes, apocalyptic tendencies in liberalism, particularly Wilsonian liberal foreign policy.

While liberalism has had its apocalyptic moments, apocalypticism seems more typical of other ideologies, which find liberal reformism antipathetic and favor something more spectacular and cataclysmic.

19. Strasser quoted in *ibid.*, 150.

20. Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 63. Both Strasser and Trotsky were murdered by their victorious intra-party rivals—proof that there is almost always someone more ruthless than oneself.

21. See, e.g., Shklar, *Legalism*, 123–6.

22. My use reflects only some of the ways that “[political] realism” was understood in the period under discussion. For contextualization of the development of “realism,” see Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment*; on the vicissitudes of a concept closely tied to “realism,” see John Bew, *Realpolitik*.

23. Thus Shklar noted realism’s “tough sneer at all ‘cant’” (*Legalism*, 124). For examples, see the discussions of Friedrich Meinecke, George Bernard Shaw, and E. H. Carr in Bew, *Realpolitik* 102–6, 178–9.

24. On the traditional notion of Realpolitik and its development in the West, see Bew, *Realpolitik*. For an account of the development of “revolutionary realist” thought, see E. A. Rees, *Political Thought from Machiavelli to Stalin*.

25. Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 61–2, 22. Hitler declared, more graphically, that “in this contest there are only two possibilities: Either the enemy will walk over our corpses, or we will walk over his.” For Himmler, “we had the moral right, we had the duty to our people, to destroy this people [the Jews] which wanted to destroy us.” Quotes from McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 151.

26. *Humanism and Terror*, 32, 34.

27. *Ibid.*, 180.

28. The most influential example is probably Carl Schmitt, who presented his conception of “the political” as providing a guard against moral-ideological ruthlessness. A properly political view of conflict, utterly divorced from morality, would regard opponents as threats to be dealt with, not as morally wicked; this would remove the motivation for moral crusading, which fostered the most ruthless politics of all. The plausibility of this argument is undermined by Schmitt’s embrace of one of the most brutal ideological crusades of his time, and the ease with which both his allies and opponents interwove the language of ideological crusading with that of a coldly realistic project of self-defense. See Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.

29. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, 152. Koestler’s protagonist notes that “No. 1” (Stalin) reputedly “has Machiavelli’s Prince lying permanently by his bedside. So he should: since then, nothing really important has been said about the rules of political ethics.” *Ibid.*, 98.

30. Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, 32–3, 10.

31. *Ibid.*, 25–6.

32. Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 45.

33. Quotes from Toller, *Masses and Man*, 20–21, 23, 28, 30–31, 34–5, 49.

34. *Ibid.*, 23.

35. *Ibid.*, 48–9.

36. Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, 25.

37. Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 165, 170.



38. Bell, "What Is Liberalism?" argues that liberalism was redefined—and a "liberal" tradition reified—as part of an "ideological war of position" against opponents (mainly Fascist / Nazi and Communist). The "war of position" went the other way as well: many authoritarian or "totalitarian" movements defined themselves against liberalism—and identified liberalism with the social, political, and ethical tendencies they opposed.

39. Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism."

40. Quotes from Eugen Weber, "The Right: An Introduction," 8. Ascoli and Feiler were refugees from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, respectively.

41. Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 10–11; see also Glover, *Humanity*, 1–7; Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 7–8; J. M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs," 447.

42. Berlin, "The Lessons of History," 270.

43. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center*, xxii–xxiii.

44. Shklar, *After Utopia*, vii, 3.

45. Ascoli identified liberalism with "the party of brakes" and Communism with "the party of inevitability." Ascoli, *The Power of Freedom*, 8. Cf. Shklar, *After Utopia*, viii, 226–30.

46. See Richard Bellamy, "The Advent of the Masses and the Making of the Modern Theory of Democracy"; Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 7–48; Joseph V. Femia, *Against the Masses*. For accounts of the older liberal view of enlightened parliamentary rule, see William Selinger, *Parliamentarism*; Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation*.

47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, section 38, at 74.

48. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, xiii, xxiv, 127, 168; see also *ibid.*, 174–7.

49. See Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, 171–2; Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 58–9; V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 81, 104; Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 77–8. There have been many more recent versions of this critique; see, e.g., Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*.

50. See Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 5–11.

51. Sartre quoted in Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, 125–6.

52. Auden and Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (1938), 243.

53. J. Salwyn Schapiro, "The Revolutionary Intellectual," 321. The French novelist and Nazi collaborationist Henri de Montherlant contrasted the "haggard gaze" of the bourgeois with the "physical vigor of the disciplined young authoritarian" (Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 22); Ernst Jünger stressed the physiological-characterological contrast between the decayed (liberal) bourgeoisie and the proto-totalitarian strength and ruthlessness of "the worker." See Jünger, *The Worker*.

54. See Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, 1, 21, 27, 133–5, 139–40; *Political Theology*, 63; *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 5, 36, 48, 76; *The Concept of the Political*, 28, 71–2, 89.

55. Trotsky, *Democracy vs. Dictatorship*, 35–6, 55.

56. Quotes from Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 12, 35, 33.

57. Toller, *Masses and Man*, 47.

58. This has bearing on the oft-debated issue of the similarity and difference between totalitarian regimes of Left and Right. For what strikes me as constituting as close to the final word on this matter as we are likely to get, see Vladimir Tismăneanu, *The Devil in History*.

59. Berlin, RT, 343; Berlin, "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," *Liberty* 60. While this held true of many of the tempered liberals discussed here, some liberals (including, as we shall see, Weber and, more cautiously, Aron) shared more "right-wing" commitments to nationalism, and a belief in the need for ruthless force to maintain order in moments of crisis.

60. Here my historical and normative concerns overlap. It is historically the case that many liberals were more troubled by ethical critiques from the “left.” And such critiques should, I believe, be particularly troubling to liberalism’s conscience, insofar as they call into question the moral coherence of liberalism. In making this point, I do not mean to suggest that left-wing anti-liberalism is more dangerous or more evil than right-wing anti-liberalism. To award moral points based simply on whether a movement, ideology, or thinker is identified as “Left” or “Right” strikes me as unconvincing and unhelpful: The Weather Underground seems to me morally superior to the Sturmabteilung; the Khmer Rouge worse than Salazar’s dictatorship.

61. See, e.g., Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism*; Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*; Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed*; Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*.

62. Wells, *After Democracy*, 3, 8, 11–12, 15, 23–4, 26, 28.

63. Here I follow Shklar, *Legalism*, 64–110, and Müller, “Fear and Freedom,” 49–51. As examples of this “quest for certainty” (Müller, 49) and the search for a “political truth” (Shklar, 89), Müller discusses social science positivism and behaviorism, and the retrieval of “classical political science” by Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin; Shklar detects surprising affinities between natural law theory and legal “realism”—both of which, she alleges, denied pluralism, evaded the burden of judgment, and empowered an elite of “wise men.”

64. Ascoli, *The Power of Freedom*, 9.

65. Burnham, *Suicide of the West*, 140, 228–9, 280–81, 292, 297–8. This work, and Burnham’s analyses of “the managerial revolution,” have lately enjoyed a revival of interest among conservative intellectuals; see, e.g., Julius Krein, “James Burnham’s Managerial Elite”; Daniel McCarthy, “Why the West Is Suicidal,” and, for commentary, Thomas Meaney, “Trumpism After Trump”; Andrew Gibson, “James Burnham’s Machiavellians.”

66. Hannah Arendt, “The Eggs Speak,” 282.

67. Such moves were central to both Hayek’s and Rawls’s highly influential defenses of liberalism; see Stefan Eich, “The Theodicy of Growth,” for an interpretation of Rawls in this frame.

68. Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment*, 16. See Karl Loewenstein, “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, I” and “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, II”; Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Reason of State*; for Friedrich’s and Loewenstein’s backgrounds, see Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century*. The idea of “militant democracy” is developed in a way that shows affinities with “tempered liberalism” in Alexander S. Kirshner, *A Theory of Militant Democracy*.

69. Loewenstein, “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights II,” 656, 658.

70. The version of this critique advanced by Catholic critics of liberalism is emphasized by Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*, 22–4 and Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, 268–71 (which mistakenly identifies Burnham and John H. Hallowell as Catholics).

71. Carl J. Friedrich, *The New Belief in the Common Man*, 40–41.

72. On these developments within American thought, see Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*; John G. Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory*, ch. 6–8.

73. S. M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy*.

74. Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, 6, 39–40, 69–70; Andrew Jewett, “Naturalizing Liberalism in the 1950’s,” 191–216.

75. See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*; Eich, “The Theodicy of Growth.”

76. Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, and Kornhauser, *Debating the American State*, both characterize Rawlsian liberalism in these terms.

77. Shklar, *Legalism*, 86–110.

78. In *After the Enlightenment*, Nicolas Guilhot exaggerates the affinity of “tempered liberals” with “realism,” by virtue of conflating several distinct elements: (1) rejection of “scientific” rationality, (2) skepticism about human reason and rejection of “the Enlightenment’s” putative historical optimism, (3) wariness of democracy and hope for rule by a prudent elite, and (4) rejection of liberal-democratic norms and procedures. “Tempered liberals” shared the first two, and some of them shared the third (though cautiously); they rejected the fourth. Furthermore, they tended to associate “scientism” not with democracy, but elitist managerialism. Both tempered liberals and Cold War “realists” were navigating within a *Zeitgeist* in which scientific optimism contended with pessimism and anti-rationalism, hopes for rebirth with fears of catastrophe, and in which the Enlightenment and its (putative) legacies were major topics of contention. But they navigated this terrain in different ways.

79. Waldemar Gurian, “Totalitarian Religions,” 3–14, at 14.

80. Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” 64, 68.

81. One can speak of the “ethos” of social or political movements, or other smaller organizations. The more internally diverse and difficult to analogize to an individual an entity is, the harder it is to apply my conception of ethos to it.

82. Cf. Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*, 2–4; Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 3; Shalini Satkunanandan, *Extraordinary Responsibility*, 53.

83. Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 6.

84. See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.13, 1103a; 2.1, 1103a11–1103b25.

85. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1356a.

86. See *ibid.*, 1.8.1366a8–16; 2.1.1377b20–24, 2.1.1378a6–15.

87. Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *idem.*, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 286; see also 298–9, 281–2 (where Foucault notes the debt of his discovery of “ethics” to Weber).

88. As understood here, “action,” encompasses both the decision to undertake a particular course of action and the performance (or attempted performance) of that action.

89. Satkunanandan, *Extraordinary Responsibility*, 76.

90. Cohen, *If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, 128, 3.

91. Adam Smith, *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, 7.1.2, 391.

92. How far an ethos may be restricted to a particular area of life is a question I leave open. Certainly, some people seem able to sustain very different dispositions and patterns of behavior, and are guided by different ideals and attitudes, in different facets of their lives. The figure of the coldly remorseless soldier (police officer, revolutionary, administrator) who is gentle and affectionate in private life, or the gangster who was “always good to his mother,” is familiar enough.

93. Thus, Anderson repeatedly refers to “ethos, or character.” *Bleak Liberalism*, 20.

94. Not all versions of virtue ethics assume such a conception of character; see, e.g., Maria Merritt, “Virtue Ethics and Situationist Personality Psychology”; Rachana Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character.” I have nevertheless eschewed the framework of virtue ethics as being largely foreign to the authors I discuss and raising a number of theoretical questions tangential to their concerns. In the conclusion, I link the idea of ethos to a practice, or pedagogy, of exemplification. This may be thought of in broadly virtue-ethics terms (e.g., Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*); but what I outline may have more

affinity with an early-modern approach to ethics which focuses on exemplary lives, but is neither strictly virtue-ethical, consequentialist, or deontic. On this see Aaron Garrett, “The Lives of the Philosophers.”

95. This understanding of dispositions is, in John Doris’s terminology, mildly robust (Doris, *Lack of Character*). That is, a person characterized by a disposition will have a tendency to behave in accordance with that disposition much of the time, and in situations that exert some contrary pressure; but this tendency is not indefeasible. It should be added that different individuals will be more or less susceptible to the same pressures. One person may be persistently kind regardless of various quotidian irritants, only for that kindness to wither in the face of extraordinary pressure. Another may be diverted from kindness by minor pressures (irritation over a rough commute, an excessive workload, the chance of career advancement in exchange for greater efficiency), but resist strong pressures to be unkind (say, direct commands or bullying pressure from peers or superiors). These differences reflect the fact that kindness is not a disposition independent of all others, but is tied to dispositions of, say, buoyancy, resilience, self-discipline, or defiance, which themselves may be strengthened or weakened by circumstances.

96. Irving Howe, “American Moderns,” 314–15.

97. Mantena, “Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence.”

98. Russell, *Unpopular Essays*, 15. Cf. Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism*.

99. On what the ideal and norm of civility is (and isn’t), see Richard Boyd, “The Value of Civility?”

100. Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom*, 91–2.

101. Niebuhr, “The Twilight of Liberalism” (1919), 218.

102. Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History*, 164.

103. See Müller, *Contesting Democracy*.

104. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, 163; see also 165, 173.

105. Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 474, 476, 478, 602–3 (translation modified).

106. S. G. Nechayev, “The Catechism of a Revolutionist.”

107. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 45, 106; Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates*, 112.

108. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 133.

109. Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, 235.

110. Isaiah Berlin used this phrase to characterize both the pro-Nazi German journalist F. F. Zimmermann, and E. H. Carr, who, after being attracted to totalitarianisms of both Right and Left in the 1930s, settled into a pro-Soviet stance. Berlin to Geoffrey Faber, January 4, 1932, in Berlin, *Flourishing*, 640; Berlin, “Soviet Beginnings,” 3.

111. Lionel Trilling, “Sermon on a Text from Whitman” (1945), 210.

112. Trilling, *E. M. Forster*, 13, 11–12, 23.

## Chapter 2. Between Tragedy and Utopia: Weber and Lukács on Ethics and Politics

1. Goethe, *Faust* Part I.

2. Sung Ho Kim, *Max Weber’s Politics of Civil Society*, 110–11. Kim is here presenting the opinions of others, not his own, far more sympathetic view.

3. Habermas declared that, if Weber was a liberal, his was a “militant” liberalism marked by “Caesar-like leadership democracy” and “national-state imperialism.” Otto Stammer, ed., *Max Weber and Sociology Today*, 66. For Strauss, Weber was a crucial figure in the rise of nihilism, leading ultimately to Nazism. See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 36–78.

4. See Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Political and Social Theory of Max Weber*, 86.

5. E.g., Daniel Bell, “First Love, Early Sorrows.” 532–51.

6. See Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920*, ch. 9; Nick O'Donovan, “Causes and Consequences”; Shalini Satkunanandan, *Extraordinary Responsibility*, ch. 6.

7. See Weber, “Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order,” PW 159.

8. Weber to Friedrich Naumann December 14, 1906, quoted in Lawrence Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage*, 161; the term “ethos” is Scaff's.

9. “Parliament and Government,” PW 268. The mention of “carapace” (*Gehäuse*) echoes Weber's famous image of the “steely casing” (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) in which modern man is trapped in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

10. See “The Meaning of ‘Ethical Neutrality’” in Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 28–39, 44–5; Karl Löwith, *Karl Marx and Max Weber*, 61, 76–7; Paul Honigsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber*, 185; Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, 166–97; Kim, *Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society*, 103–7.

11. “The Nation State and Economic Policy,” PW 15.

12. Weber, speech before the 1894 Evangelisch-Sozialer Kongress, quoted MWB 159.

13. “The Prospects of Pseudo-Constitutionalism in Russia,” in Weber, *The Russian Revolutions*, 232.

14. “Constitutional Democracy in Russia,” PW 71, 67–8 (translation modified).

15. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

16. Troeltsch, “The Ideas of Natural Law and Humanity in World Politics,” 214.

17. Weber quoted H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, “Introduction,” FMW 4.

18. All quotes in this paragraph taken from MWB 86–90.

19. *Ibid.*, 216. For the text see PW, 1–28.

20. E&S, 1414.

21. Weber quoted Wolfgang Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 278n.17. Weber's recurrent emphasis on the need for “steady nerves” is striking, coming from one who suffered from recurrent nervous illness.

22. See “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science,” *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 57; “Between Two Laws,” PW 79; “Science as a Vocation,” FMW 152; “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 364–5.

23. See E&S 903; “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 310, 316, 357, 360.

24. While Weber often used the term “ethics,” I here use the term “morality” to avoid confusion with the idea of an “ethic.”

25. See, e.g., “Constitutional Democracy in Russia,” PW 42. Panmoralism may rest on either (1) a denial of the validity of any considerations other than morality, or (2) a denial of the gap or discontinuity between acting in conformity with morality and serving other values.

26. See Weber, “The Nation State and Economic Policy,” PW 14–28; “Religious Rejections of the World,” FMW 354–5; “Science as a Vocation,” FMW 147–8.

27. “Parliament and Government,” PW 205, emphasis added.

28. “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 357.

29. "Suffrage and Democracy in Germany," PW 83.
30. "Russia's Transition to Pseudo-Constitutionalism," *The Russian Revolutions*, 232. On Weber's admiration for Russian emigres, see MWB 466–7.
31. For Weber's views on the war effort, see Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 190–244.
32. Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber*, 496.
33. "Parliament and Government," PW 232.
34. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 312–14, 425.
35. "Constitutional Democracy in Russia," PW 60.
36. "Socialism," PW 275.
37. MWB120, quoting a letter of Weber's to Hermann Baumgarten, April 25, 1887.
38. "Constitutional Democracy in Russia," PW 60.
39. "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality,'" *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 23, 25.
40. *Ibid.*, 24, translation emended.
41. "Parliament and Government," PW 216; "The Russian Revolution and the Peace," *The Russian Revolutions*, 265. Elsewhere Weber argued for universal suffrage as "an elementary obligation of decency." "Suffrage and Democracy," PW 106.
42. See Regina Titunik, "Status, Vanity and Equal Dignity in Max Weber's Political Thought." This rejection of both moralism and "realism" recalls Nietzsche; see Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche's Great Politics*. Weber regarded even Nietzsche as succumbing to the "German philistine" worship of "domination and brute force" (the latter phrase comes from Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*; the former is from Weber's marginalia in this book; both are quoted in Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 282n.36). For Weber's theoretical dissents from Nietzsche, see "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," FMW 271–7. For interpretations stressing Weber's affinity to Nietzsche, see Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*; David Owen, *Maturity and Modernity*; Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision*; for skepticism regarding the Weber-Nietzsche connection, see Radkau, *Max Weber*, 167.
43. Quoted MWB 673, and Mommsen, *Political and Social Theory*, 7.
44. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 357.
45. E.g., Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 144.
46. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 359–60.
47. See *ibid.*, 367–8.
48. Thus, Weber refers to the "ethos" [*Ethos*] of politics as a cause. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 355.
49. Both terms, along with "spirit" (*Geist*), are prominently used, and not clearly or consistently distinguished, in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (*Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*). In their edition, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells treat "ethos" and "spirit" as interchangeable; Talcott Parsons translated "*Wirtschaftsethos*" as "economic ethic" (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 179–80).
50. "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," FMW 267–8 (the essay's title is better translated as "The Economic Ethics of the World Religions"). In *The Protestant Ethic*, an "ethic" involves *beliefs* and *judgments* that consciously guide action, while an *ethos* is a matter of a "way of life." Weber stresses that the *spirit* of capitalism is marked by a *peculiar 'ethic'* [*Ethik*] defined

by an “ethically colored *maxim* for the conduct of life” (Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Parsons translation, 51, translation revised). At the same time, an ethic may be detached from the *doctrine* from which it arose: the “Protestant ethic” outlasted the “body of ideas,” from which it grew, surviving as a feature of an “ethos.”

51. Cf. Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 50.

52. “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 352.

53. See Peter Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, 151–2; Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 37–8. This theme is explored in Harvey Goldman, *Max Weber and Thomas Mann: Calling and the Shaping of Self*; Goldman, *Politics, Death and the Devil*.

54. “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 368.

55. MWB 682.

56. Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 8.

57. MWB 642.

58. See Weber, *Gesamtausgabe* 1/17, 50ff.

59. MWB 628; Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 25–7.

60. The use of the term “political romanticism” here is my own. It differs from that of Carl Schmitt in *Political Romanticism*, though there is overlap insofar as Schmitt stresses the “political romantic’s” tendency to treat politics as a vehicle for aesthetic self-expression and gratification—the same tendency that Weber attacked, in the same year (1919). On the relationship between Weber and Schmitt, see Dana Villa, “The Legacy of Max Weber in Weimar Political and Social Theory,” 73–99.

61. In attacking syndicalists’ “purely emotional ‘radicalism,’” Weber wrote that “the *romanticism* of the general strike and the *romanticism* of the hope for revolution . . . enchants these intellectuals,” who hungered for “the great revolutionary miracle—and the opportunity of feeling that even they will be in power one day.” “Parliament and Government,” PW 231; “Socialism,” PW 298.

62. Toller has been identified as an inspiration of “Politics as a Vocation” (Wolfgang Schluchter and Guenther Roth, *Max Weber’s Vision of History*, 115–16; Daniel Bell, “First Love and Early Sorrows”). When participants at a political meeting in Berlin in December 1918 sought to silence Toller for his radical statements, Weber stepped onto the rostrum, and, protectively laying his hand on the diminutive Toller’s shoulder, demanded, “Let him speak. He is a man to be taken seriously. He has something to say.” Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 47. At his trial, Weber testified to Toller’s “entirely upright character”—but added that “God in his anger” had made Toller a politician. MWB 661; Dittmar Dahlmann, “Max Weber’s Relation to Anarchism and Anarchists: The Case of Ernst Toller,” 374.

63. MWB 598–9, 601; Radkau, *Max Weber*, 484–5.

64. “Suffrage and Democracy,” PW 88–90, 100.

65. “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 358, 360–2, 364–5.

66. See O’Donovan, “Causes and Consequences,” 86–7.

67. “Politics as a Vocation,” PW 361.

68. “Constitutional Democracy in Russia,” PW 42.

69. See “Religious Rejections of the World,” FMW 323–59; E&S 541–6.

70. Radkau, *Max Weber*, 509.

71. Mommsen, *Political and Social Theory*, 83.



72. "Constitutional Democracy in Russia," PW 62.
73. "Bourgeois Democracy in Russia," *The Russian Revolutions*, 69.
74. See MWB 632–5.
75. Weber quoted Radkau, *Max Weber*, 136.
76. "Constitutional Democracy in Russia," PW 65, emphasis added.
77. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 352–3.
78. O'Donovan, "Causes and Consequences," 97, 104, emphasis added.
79. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 353; "Suffrage and Democracy," PW 122.
80. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 360.
81. See, e.g., Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, 169–71; Löwith, *Karl Marx and Max Weber*, 46–7.
82. E&S 24–5.
83. E&S 26; "'Objectivity' in Social Science," 52–3 (italics added).
84. Schluchter and Roth, *Max Weber's Vision of History*, 65–116; Breiner, *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, 41.
85. Weber's commitment to this model of ethical reasoning can be traced back to his youth. To live well, the young Weber reflected, required acting in such a way that one incurred "the least possible losses of human dignity, of the ability to be good and to love, of the ability to fulfill obligations": to do this often involved "difficult calculation," which could not be reduced to appeal to absolute principles. Weber, quoted Schluchter, *Paradoxes of Modernity*, 283n.40.
86. Weber, quoted Breiner *Max Weber and Democratic Politics*, 175.
87. Honigsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber*, 115.
88. Ida Baumgarten, quoted Radkau, *Max Weber*, 429; Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 18; Jaspers, *Three Essays*, 263.
89. "Parliament and Democracy," PW 131. See also MWB 408–412.
90. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 355–6.
91. E&S 534; "Parliament and Government," PW 231–2.
92. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 356.
93. "Parliament and Government," PW 270.
94. "The Nation State and Economic Policy," PW 19, 14.
95. "Constitutional Democracy in Russia," PW 55.
96. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 369.
97. Weber to Friedrich Crusius, November 24, 1918 and December 26, 1918, quoted MWB 636, 638 (translation modified).
98. "Politics as a Vocation," PW 367–8, translation emended.
99. Árpád Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 205.
100. Lukács, interviewed 1971, quoted in Eva Fekete and Eva Karádi, eds., *György Lukács: A Life in Pictures and Documents*, 100.
101. Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 223.
102. I am grateful to Prof. Janos Kis for this information.
103. Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation*, 24–5; quoting Anna Lesznai.
104. Honigsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber*, 147–8, 151.
105. Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation*, 27.
106. Lukács, "On Poverty of Spirit," 380, 385.

107. Quoted in Lee Congdon, *The Young Lukács*, 140.
108. "On Poverty of Spirit," 374–6.
109. Max Beiersdoerfer, *Max Weber und Georg Lukács*.
110. "On Poverty of Spirit," 377–8 (translation modified).
111. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 153.
112. See Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 56–69, 97–132, 144–54.
113. "On Poverty of Spirit," 375; Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation*, 192–3.
114. Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation*, 201.
115. Lukács later recanted the "abstract and philistine arguments" of this "misguided" "apologia." Lukács, "Preface" (1967), HCC xi.
116. Lukács, "Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem," 217–18.
117. Ibid., 218–20, translation modified and emphasis added.
118. Ibid., 220, translation modified.
119. Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, 174–6n1.
120. Congdon, *The Young Lukács*, 142, quoting the memoirs of Anna Lesznai.
121. Kun, quoted in Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács*, 140.
122. See "Tactics and Ethics," TE, 6, 8–9.
123. "Opportunism and Putschism," TE 76. "Tactics and Ethics," TE 9; "The Moral Mission of the Communist Party," TE 66, 68–9.
124. "Tactics and Ethics," 8, 10–11; Lukács quoted Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 186.
125. József Lengyel's report of Lukács's speech to his troops, quoted Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 222.
126. Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 383.
127. "The Moral Mission of the Communist Party," TE 68; HCC 339, 319.
128. Lukács, *The Culture of People's Democracy*, 71.
129. HCC 315–16, 337, 290, 292.
130. See Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 325, 345.
131. Lukács, "Postscript" to *My Road to Marx* (1957), quoted in Fekete and Karádi, *György Lukács: A Life in Pictures and Documents*. Even after Khrushchev's "secret speech," Lukács maintained that victims of Stalin should be absolved of crimes of which they had been falsely accused (such as espionage)—but not of their "political errors," for which they were justly condemned. "Reflections on the Cult of Stalin," in Lukács, *Marxism and Human Liberation*, 64.
132. HCC 269.
133. Quoted Congdon, *The Young Lukács*, 149.
134. Lukács, "Tagore's Gandhi Novel," 10.
135. Quoted Löwy, *Georg Lukács*, 172.
136. Lukács, "Moses Hess and the Problem of Idealist Dialectics," TE 191–2, 222.
137. Lukács, "Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Poetry," quoted Löwy, *Georg Lukács*, 194.
138. Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought*, 97, 72.
139. HCC 292 (emphasis added), 68.
140. Lukács, "Tactics and Ethics," 7.
141. Weber to Lukács, [March?] 1920, in *Lukács: Selected Correspondence*, 281–2. Weber added, "let me know *how* one *can* be of help to you."
142. Eva Karádi, "Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács in Max Weber's Heidelberg," 509.

143. “The thought terrifies me that the distance . . . erected between us in the last years cannot be removed anymore . . . I knew that one could remove all that separates us with a few words . . . and now one can never speak those words anymore. It has always been among the few hopeful thoughts which nurtured my human existence that the day would come when I’ll sit down and talk with Max Weber.” Lukács to Marianne Weber, *Selected Correspondence*, 283.

144. Quoted Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács*, 345.

145. Karádi, “Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács in Max Weber’s Heidelberg,” 510.

146. Cf. Radkau, *Max Weber*, 513, 517–18.

147. Cf. Mommsen, *The Age of Bureaucracy*, 93.

148. Löwith, *My Life in Germany*, 16–17.

149. Quoted in Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 40.

### Chapter 3. A Just Man: Albert Camus and the Search for a Decent Heroism

1. Camus, *Combat*, November 4, 1944, CaC 102.

2. Camus, *Combat*, October 4, 1944, CaC 58.

3. Sartre, “Albert Camus” (1960), *Situations*, 110.

4. Thus, in his responses to the Algerian crisis he wrote of “we French liberals.” *Algerian Chronicles*, 116, 134.

5. Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Camus, Arendt, and Modern Rebellion*, 143.

6. See *ibid.*, 148–9; Fred Rosen, “Marxism, Mysticism, and Liberty.”

7. CaC, 242–8.

8. R 132, 94.

9. N1 197; N2 244; see also Isaac, *Camus, Arendt, and Modern Rebellion*, 142, 293n10.

10. R 302.

11. CaC 55, 108.

12. Camus, RRD 90–91, 161. See also *ibid.*, 93–4, 161–2, 248; CaC 74, 268; N2 104–5; R 290–91. Camus recognized *The Rebel’s* message as essentially liberal and reformist; see N2 214.

13. CaC 55, 97; N1 3.

14. Thus, Saint-Just “set the example” of revolutionary extremism through his style: “That cascade of peremptory affirmatives, that axiomatic and sententious style,” the sentences that “drone on,” the definitions that “follow one another with the coldness and precision of commandments . . . It is the style of the guillotine.” R 125. See also *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 90, 102–3 (on “styles of life”); CaC 91, 161, 281.

15. CaC 252, 63, 163.

16. CaC 58 (emphasis added); LCE 216–17.

17. LCE 13; N1, 32. On the “cult of heroism” in mid-century French thought, see H. Stuart Hughes, *The Obstructed Path*, 102–52.

18. Camus, “Preface” (1946), to Georges Bataille, ed., *L’Espagne Libre*, 9

19. N1 78–9; see also *ibid.*, 162–3. Camus continued to evince a longing for purity, as in his complaint: “Nothing is pure, nothing is pure—this is the cry that has poisoned our century.” N2 159.

20. Camus to Jean Grenier, August 21, 1935, *Albert Camus and Jean Grenier: Correspondence*, 16, 11.

21. See Isaac, *Camus, Arendt, and Modern Rebellion*, 30.
22. Camus to Grenier, September 18, 1951, *Correspondence* 152–3 (emphasis added).
23. LCE 14.
24. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.
25. R 94.
26. CTOP 9–10, 72.
27. The play underwent a series of changes from first conception in 1938 to the final version of 1944, as Camus moved from greater sympathy to greater opposition toward Caligula.
28. CTOP 42.
29. CTOP 20, 50–53, 56.
30. CTOP 51–2.
31. CTOP 69.
32. RRD 105.
33. See, e.g., RRD 162; CaC 37–8, 109.
34. CaC 7.
35. RRD 27, 7.
36. CaC 82.
37. RRD 6–7, 24, 31.
38. RRD 7, 30–31, emphasis added. These principles informed Camus’s prescriptions for how to deal with the defeated Germans after the war; see CaC 78–9, 291. Camus would continue to speak out against reciprocal atrocity: thus, in condemning the French response to terrorism in Algeria, he asserted that “the cowardly crimes of our adversaries do not excuse our becoming cowardly and criminal in turn. I haven’t heard that we were building crematory ovens to avenge ourselves on the Nazis.” CaC 291.
39. RRD 29–30.
40. LCE 14.
41. RRD 240. In “The Just Assassins,” the proto-Bolshevik Stepan sneers that honor is “a luxury reserved for people who have carriages-and-pairs”—to which Kalyayev retorts that honor is “the one wealth left to the poor man.” CTOP 260–61.
42. RRD 163.
43. RRD 62–3.
44. CaC 34.
45. CaC 28, 83.
46. CaC 110, 93, 242, 111.
47. CaC 80, 89–90.
48. See Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility*, 110–11.
49. CaC 250–51.
50. See CaC 21, 61, 169, 233, 250.
51. LCE 168.
52. Camus, forward to Simone Weil, *L’Enracinement*, in Camus, *Essais*, 1700.
53. RRD 221–2, 231.
54. Cf. CaC 28.
55. CaC 102.
56. See CaC 267, 272.

57. CaC 262, 141.
58. CaC 258–9, 275, translation modified.
59. CaC 262, 273, 268.
60. CaC 275. Thus, during the war Camus wrote: “True, dictatorships can move into action more quickly, but on occasion they pay dearly for it. There is a choice to be made between economizing on ideas and economizing on blood.” CaC 154.
61. CaC 274–6, translation modified; CaC 289.
62. CaC 259, 260.
63. See CaC 16, 52, 82, 196.
64. N2 147–8.
65. R 168–9, 292.
66. R 176.
67. CTOP 257, translation modified, emphasis added; 258.
68. LCE 302. This “tragic” wisdom was, as we shall see, at the heart of Camus’s treatise *The Rebel*.
69. See CTOP 243–4, 256–9, 273–4.
70. CTOP 258–60.
71. CTOP 248.
72. CTOP 269.
73. CTOP 246–7, emphasis added.
74. Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies*, 39–40.
75. N2 156.
76. CTOP 286–8.
77. CTOP 282–3.
78. CaC 260.
79. CTOP 281.
80. N2 148.
81. CTOP 261.
82. R 184.
83. Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, 54, 56.
84. Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility*, 96.
85. My thanks to Cheryl Welch for help in articulating this point.
86. R 4.
87. CaC 301; see also 299, 306.
88. See RRD 160, 168; Isaac, *Camus, Arendt, and Modern Rebellion*, 182.
89. RRD 106; see also *ibid.*, 92–3.
90. RRD 264.
91. Sartre, *Situations*, 287.
92. See David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven, eds., *Sartre and Camus*.
93. R 4–5.
94. R 13, 281; N2, 61.
95. R 287.
96. R 14–15, 167.
97. R 255.

98. R 103, 124–6.
99. R 213, 239–40.
100. R 3.
101. For a defense of which see Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 136–52.
102. RRD 103.
103. See R 134–6, 142–4, 150–51, 166, 289, 294.
104. N2, 127.
105. R 207, 210.
106. R 222–3, 233.
107. R 289.
108. R 137, 192, 226–7.
109. R 298, 289.
110. RRD 262, 161.
111. R 290, 292.
112. R 286–7.
113. R 292.
114. N2, 45–6; R 290.
115. R 288–9. Camus derived these figures from the titular essay of Arthur Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar*.
116. R 296–7.
117. CaC 153; R 303. Cf. the account of moderation in Aurelian Crăiuțu, *Faces of Moderation*.
118. R 283, 294–5.
119. Here the archeology of Camus's thinking is illuminating. In his thesis written at the University of Algiers, published when he was twenty-three, Camus excavated the Gnostic idea of *Horos*, or limit, which he connected to the story of Promethean rebellion. It is only by rediscovering the wisdom contained in limit that the Promethean rebel can (like Sophia/Wisdom in the Gnostic creation myth) be saved from a destructive despair. Camus connected the idea of limit to the Plotinian idea of form imposed on a formless void, which in turn was connected to the *ascetic* project (shades of Weber) of work-on-the-self—the imposition of a discipline of style. See Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, 77–92; cf. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 49. I am indebted to Nicholas Barden for calling these points to my attention.
120. R 301.
121. *Carnets II*, 68.
122. Zaretsky, *Camus: Elements of a Life*, 85.
123. Camus, introduction to Chamfort, *Maximes et Anecdotes* (1944), quoted Zaretsky, *Camus: Elements of a Life*, 76.
124. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 101.
125. De Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstances*, 138.
126. Cf. Susan Tarrow, *Exile from the Kingdom: A Political Rereading of Albert Camus*.
127. P 214–15.
128. See P 1–4.
129. P 35. Camus had long been fascinated with the classical figure of Nemesis, which features prominently in the final section of *The Rebel*; Camus envisioned a third, never-completed

“stage” of his work as revolving around Nemesis, just as his earlier works had revolved around Sisyphus and Prometheus. I thank Nicholas Barden for reminding me, and helping me appreciate the significance, of these points.

130. P 240.
131. P 235, 237–40.
132. P 240–42.
133. P 243–4.
134. RDD 177, 187.
135. P 36, 134.
136. See P 200.
137. P 280, 259, 250.
138. P 188.
139. P 128, 199.
140. CaC 169.
141. P 157–8, 200.
142. P 245.
143. P 133.
144. P 296–7, emphasis added.
145. P 10, 122–3, 208.
146. P 121, 135, 123.
147. P 242–4.
148. CaC 46.
149. N1 144.
150. P 128.
151. P 133, 129–30, 44.
152. P 158, 245, 297.
153. P 124.
154. P 272–3.
155. P 297.
156. See *Algerian Chronicles*, 41–5, 77–9.
157. RDD 134–5.
158. *Algerian Chronicles*, 128; RDD 143.
159. See RDD 136–8; *Algerian Chronicles*, 112, 123–4, 147.
160. RDD 113–14.
161. *Algerian Chronicles*, 18, emphasis added.
162. Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 136ff.
163. A point stressed in Isaac, *Camus, Arendt and Modern Rebellion*, 194.
164. LCE 109, emphasis added.
165. *Algerian Chronicles*, 126, 141.
166. RDD 111–13.
167. See RDD 112.
168. Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility*, 127. Cf. Shklar, *After Utopia*, 150–52. For association of Camus with a (characteristically “Cold War”) turn to “antipolitics,” see Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other*, 220–37.



169. See N1 143–4.
170. RRD 267.
171. Thus he wrote of his “utter disgust for all society. Temptation to flee and to accept the decadence of one’s era.” N2, 103.
172. CaC 287.
173. RRD 230.
174. N2 216.
175. CaC 303–4, 307.
176. CaC 42.
177. RRD 106, 28; CaC 122.
178. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121.
179. RRD 73.
180. R 301.
181. R 100, 268.
182. RRD 105.

#### Chapter 4. The “Morality of Prudence” and the Fertility of Doubt: Raymond Aron’s Defense of a Realist Liberalism

1. Raymond Aron, *Le spectateur engagé*, 58–9.
2. *Ibid.*, 104.
3. Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: Une Vie*, 386.
4. There has been a recent growth of interest in Aron’s place in French history. See Serge Audier, *Raymond Aron: La démocratie conflictuelle*; Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic*; Gwendal Châton, “Taking Anti-Totalitarianism Seriously: The Emergence of the Aronian Circle in the 1970s”; Châton, *Introduction à Raymond Aron*; Iain Stewart, *Raymond Aron and Liberal Political Thought in the Twentieth Century*. For Aron’s life, see Robert Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Philosopher in History, 1905–1955*; Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Sociologist in Society, 1955–1983*; Nicolas Baverez, *Raymond Aron: Un moraliste au temps des idéologies*.
5. Hoffmann, “Raymond Aron and the Theory of International Relations,” 13.
6. Aron, “L’Ère des tyrannes d’Élie Halévy,” 294.
7. CO 52.
8. Aron to Alfred Fabre-Luce, May 1, 1938, in “Correspondance entre Raymond Aron et Alfred Fabre-Luce (1935–1981),” 596–7.
9. Aron, quoted in Stuart L. Campbell, “Raymond Aron During the Interwar Period,” 59.
10. Aron, “A propos de la trahison des clercs” (1928), quoted in Iain Stewart, “From Petain to Pinochet,” 20–21, emphasis added. Aron would become a staunch critic of the intellectual “treason” of subservience to the “realist” Soviet Union; Benda, convinced that Communism presented the only practical means of serving the cause of universalism and progress, would defend the Stalinist coup in Czechoslovakia and show trials in Hungary. See Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 50–51, 142–3, 157; Jan-Werner Müller, “Julien Benda’s Anti-Passionate Europe.”
11. CO 53, 45.
12. Aron, “L’Ère des tyrannes d’Élie Halévy,” 285–6, 287.

13. Aron, *Memoirs* 55, 106–7; CO 64–5; ME 3–4. For Aron, one of the “decisive questions” of the day was: “Will France continue to slip down the path that, from demagoguery to anarchy, leads to decadence, or will it be possible, *either within a constitutional framework or going beyond it by means of revolution*, to restore strong authority?” “Réflexions sur les problèmes économiques français,” 815, emphasis added.
14. *Memoirs*, 93.
15. CO 49, 26.
16. “On the Historical Condition of the Sociologist,” PH 65.
17. See Roy Pierce, *Contemporary French Political Thought*, 4–5; H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 276–7.
18. Aron, *Memoirs*, 30, 42.
19. Aron, *L’Homme contre les tyrans*, 128.
20. *Ibid.*, 129–30, 136, 140–41, 143, 145–6.
21. Aron, “Alain et le Politique” [1952], in Aron, *Études Politiques*, 77–8, 84; “Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” HTL 367.
22. *Memoirs*, 221.
23. *Memoirs*, 41–2. This raises the question of how applicable Aron’s personal ethic or example is for those who are not in positions to personally brief government officials.
24. “On the Historical Condition of the Sociologist,” PH 66; CO 34.
25. “Max Weber and Modern Social Science,” HTL 336, 340, translation modified.
26. *Memoirs*, 46. see also “On the Historical Condition of the Sociologist,” PH 65–70.
27. Aron, “De l’objection de conscience,” 139, 143, 136. Aron thus anticipated the value pluralism later espoused by Isaiah Berlin.
28. *Ibid.*, 136; see *ibid.*, 144–5 for Aron’s defense of leniency toward conscientious objectors.
29. CO 251; see also P&W 93, 781, 787.
30. Aron, “Lettre ouverte d’un jeune Française à l’Allemagne,” 738–40, 742–3.
31. The fact that the English edition is neither as idiomatic nor as accurate as one would wish does not help matters; I have emended the translation for the sake of accuracy or clarity.
32. Aron’s remarks at his doctoral thesis defense, quoted in Gaston Fessard, *La philosophie historique de Raymond Aron*, 42–4.
33. See “On the Historical Condition of the Sociologist,” PH 64–5, 81.
34. Paul Fauconnet quoted in Fessard, *La philosophie historique de Raymond Aron*, 40–41.
35. *Ibid.*, 45.
36. “History and Politics,” PH 248.
37. IPH 187–225 *passim*.
38. IPH 47–8, 118, 288–90, 301–5.
39. IPH 301.
40. IPH 326.
41. OI 43.
42. IPH 326, 330–31.
43. IPH 328; *La philosophie critique de l’histoire*, 260.
44. IPH 331–3, 345; see also 322–6.
45. IPH 296, 256; see further 254–7, 301–6, 318.

46. IPH 305, emphasis added; see also 338.
47. "Le machiavelisme, doctrine des tyrannies modernes," (1940), MTM 192, 189.
48. "Democratic and Totalitarian States," in Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History*, 165, italics added. The analysis was *quasi*-Paretian because it did not adopt Pareto's physiological account of the character of elites. On Aron's varying but important engagement with Pareto, see Stuart L. Campbell, "The Four Paretos of Raymond Aron"; Serge Audier, *Raymond Aron: La démocratie conflictuelle*; Hugo Drochon, "Raymond Aron's Machiavellian Liberalism."
49. "Democratic and Totalitarian States," 170, 163, 169.
50. "Machiavelisme et Tyrannies" (c. 1940), MTM 129–30, 156.
51. "Democratic and Totalitarian States," 175; Aron, "Democracy and Totalitarianism," 46, 42.
52. "Democratic and Totalitarian States," 164, 172. This resembled the argument of Karl Loewenstein's article, "Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, I"; Loewenstein focused on questions of "technique," while Aron stressed the importance of a more "ethical" response.
53. "Le Machiavelisme de Machiavel," MTM 76–7, 82.
54. DT 24, 27.
55. IPH 316.
56. On Aron as a "moderate Machiavellian" see Serge Audier, "A Machiavellian Conception of Democracy?"; Diogo Pires Aurelio, "Moderate Machiavellianism"; Drochon, "Raymond Aron's Machiavellian Liberalism."
57. "Democracy and Totalitarianism," 40.
58. "Democratic and Totalitarian States," 173.
59. "Democracy and Totalitarianism," 46; "Democratic and Totalitarian States," 175–6 (translation modified).
60. "Democracy and Totalitarianism," 41.
61. "The End of Machiavellianism" (1942) in Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, 135–6, 142–5, 148–9.
62. Aron, "French Thought in Exile: Jacques Maritain and Machiavellianism" (1943) in Aron, *In Defense of Political Reason*, 58, 60–63.
63. *Ibid.*, 60, emphasis added.
64. Aron, "The Future of the Secular Religions," *The Dawn of Universal History*, 178–9, 184–5.
65. "Machiavelli and Marx," PH 95.
66. "On the Historical Condition of the Sociologist," PH 78.
67. "The Future of the Secular Religions," 198–200.
68. "History and Politics," PH 239, 242–3, 245–6.
69. *Ibid.*, 245–7.
70. *Ibid.*, 248.
71. OI 33–4.
72. ME 52–3, 12–13; OI 193–4.
73. Aron—who was a member of the CCF's Executive Committee—claimed to have been unaware of the CIA's covert funding of the CCF; following the exposure of this fact, he did less to distance himself from the CCF than others (including Isaiah Berlin). The degree of knowledge of CIA involvement possessed by Aron, Berlin, and others remains disputed. Jennifer

Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War* intimates that they knew more than they acknowledged; yet the evidence she cites is often inconclusive, and sometimes inaccurate. More reliable accounts are offered by Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture*; Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer*; and Sarah Miller Harris, *The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War*.

74. CO 246. On Aron's involvement in the Cold War, see Carlos Gaspar, "Aron and the Cold War"; Matthias Oppermann, "In the 'Era of Tyrannies.'"

75. "Machiavelli and Marx," 95.

76. OI 307, 323.

77. OI xv, 94; ME 2. See also OI 106, 133–4.

78. OI 135–6.

79. "Three Forms of Historical Intelligibility," PH 58, 61. This was poignantly (if obliquely) self-revealing: Aron's daughter Emmanuelle had died of leukemia in 1950.

80. ME 14; OI 163; "Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith" (1956), HTL 132.

81. OI 156, 159, 193–4.

82. OI 96, 159, 97.

83. DT 238; OI 130–31.

84. OI 190, 98, 40, 75, 90.

85. See Aron, *History and the Dialectic of Violence*, 154; OI 318. For illustration of these tendencies, see Sartre, *The Ghost of Stalin*.

86. See OI 289–90.

87. OI 316, 58.

88. OI 21. See also DT 24–26; P&W 605; "Three Forms of Historical Intelligibility," 60–61.

89. Aron was hardly unconcerned with debates over economic policy. His extensive analysis of industrial society led him to embrace Keynesian economics; in the 1950s he declared that, if there were a Socialist party in France analogous to the Labour Party, he might belong to it (ME 54); in the early 1960s, he professed sympathy for the sentiments that inspired redistributionist policies, though he denied that such policies were uniquely rational (P&W 89). He moved somewhat rightward in the '70s, but continued to support a mixed economy, and was critical of Hayek's championing of laissez-faire, judging fear of the "tutelary despotism of the welfare state" to be both "premature" and "somewhat unpleasant." *An Essay on Freedom*, 97–8.

90. DT 233–6.

91. DT 237.

92. Aron returned to this understanding of the means-end relationship in his study of Clausewitz, to whom he attributed a theory of "goal-oriented rationality" (*Zweckrationalität*) analogous to Weber's; see Aron, "Reason, Passion and Power in the Thought of Clausewitz," 601–2. When asked whether his objection to the French Left in the early 1970s was based on its goals or its means, he replied that it was to "the contradiction between the goals and the means." CO 225.

93. DT 118, 85–6.

94. "Max Weber and Modern Social Science," 348, translation emended.

95. OI 259, 322.

96. *Memoirs*, 474, 480. Aron added: "The arrogance or authoritarianism toward their students of a number of my colleagues, often on the left, shocks me."

97. "Raymond Aron: Interview" (December 1973), 82.
98. P&W 770.
99. DT 109–11, 116–17.
100. Aron, *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, 205, 200, 207.
101. "Machiavelli and Marx," PH 90; P&W 783–4. Cf. DT, 95–6, 103–4, 106–7.
102. DT 132, 153.
103. Aron, *The Elusive Revolution*, 159; OI 148.
104. "Thucydides and the Historical Narrative," PH 45.
105. "Machiavelli and Marx," PH101; cf. DT 98–101.
106. DT 16, 108, 115.
107. Adelbert Reif, "An Interview with Raymond Aron," 64.
108. Aron, "La tragédie chilienne." Aron wrote three days after the coup, before the worst horrors of the Pinochet regime occurred; but by the time his column was published the *junta* had dissolved parliament and outlawed all political parties that had supported the Allende regime. As Iain Stewart notes, in public Aron ignored speculation about CIA involvement (since proven to be true) in the French press, presenting the coup as entirely an initiative of the Chilean military; in private he questioned America's funding of Allende's opponents in his correspondence with Henry Kissinger. Stewart, "From Petain to Pinochet," 25–6.
109. Stewart, "From Petain to Pinochet," 26.
110. Following the war, Aron taught sociology successively at the newly created École Nationale d'Administration and Sciences Po (1945–55) and the Sorbonne (1955–1968); in 1970 he became a professor at the Collège de France.
111. Aron, *The Elusive Revolution*, 172–3 (article of June 13, 1968). This volume consists of reflections by Aron following the crisis, and columns he wrote for *Le Figaro* during it.
112. *Ibid.*, 7, 4, 21.
113. *Ibid.*, 93, 95.
114. *Ibid.*, 170 (article of June 13, 1968).
115. *Ibid.*, 184 (article of June 19, 1968).
116. Aron, "Liberté, libéral ou libertaire?" (1969), quoted in Châton, "Taking Anti-Totalitarianism Seriously," 24. This response reflected Aron's perception of three possible consequences of the "contestation" of '68: victory for communism; a fascist reaction; or a revival of reformism. His immediate, primary goal was to encourage the third outcome, which required "integrat[ing] the reasonable aspects of the libertarian program" advanced by the New Left (*ibid.* 26).
117. See *Memoirs*, 164–73; CO 138–44.
118. On Aron's wartime relations with Gaullism, see Michael Curtis, "Raymond Aron and *La France Libre*," 147–74.
119. Aron, "The Gaullist Republic," 10–11; DT xii; see also Aron, *De Gaulle, Israel, and the Jews*, 16, 19–20, 23, 26–7.
120. DT x.
121. Aron, "The General and the Tragedy," 24–26.
122. *The Elusive Revolution*, 84–5, 141.
123. *Ibid.*, 165; 160 (emphasis added).
124. "History and Politics," PH 237.

125. ME 16.
126. P&W 703, 787.
127. P&W 132; "En quête d'une philosophie de la politique étrangère," 87.
128. Aron, "A propos de la theorie politique," 7–8.
129. Aron, "En quête d'une philosophie de la politique etrangère," 82, 90–91; P&W 581–2.
130. "The Anarchical Order of Power," HTL 269. See also Pierre Hassner, "Raymond Aron: Too Realistic to Be a Realist?"
131. "En quête d'une philosophie de la politique etrangère," 88. Cf. Aron's assertion—in response to complaints about his criticism of US policy from his self-styled disciple Henry Kissinger—that a "dominant power" such as the United States must "incarnate ideals" (a statement he strikingly characterized as a "realist demand"). Aron to Kissinger, September 19, 1974, quoted in Stewart, "From Petain to Pinochet," 23.
132. P&W 24, 782–4.
133. Or Rosenboim, "America, Amica," 39, 47, 43.
134. P&W 782–3.
135. See Aron, "On Treason," 288–9.
136. "Machiavelli and Marx," PH 100.
137. P&W 584–5, 608–9, 611; emphasis added.
138. See "History and Politics," PH 238.
139. P&W 585; Aron, "Reason, Power and Passion in Clausewitz," 615–16; OI 41.
140. P&W 612–13. Aron added that the "morality of prudence" cannot rule out brutality a priori, but counsels avoiding it when possible, and minimizing it when it must be used.
141. CO 164–6.
142. In fact, racial supremacists, or those who relished the energizing effects of colonial rule, *did* dispute it: Aron seems to have considered such people not worth engaging.
143. See "The Algerian Tragedy" and "Algeria and the Republic," in Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History*, 423–60.
144. See Aron, "The General and the Tragedy." For Berlin's views on the FLN, see Berlin to Ignazio Silone, November 3, 1960, in Berlin, *Building*, 14–15 (where Berlin draws an analogy between the FLN and Jewish terrorism in British Mandate Palestine).
145. P&W 170–73.
146. P&W 698–9. Concretely, this meant that Western policy should "isolate the enemy by recognizing as such only the Communist party"; "accept any socialist party or regime . . . prefer rulers effective in their own countries to those repeating declarations of allegiance . . . [and] aid development because such is our human obligation and in the long run our political interest." *Ibid.*, 696–7.
147. OI xi.
148. Aron had drawn on Schmitt's writings in his analyses of Nazism in the 1930s. After the war, he engaged with Schmitt's ideas—while retaining a wary distance toward the man and insisting (against Schmitt) that not only enmity, but friendship, was central to politics. Late in life he strangely (given the evidence, and his own earlier knowledge) insisted that Schmitt was too cultured and intelligent to have been a true Nazi. On Aron and Schmitt, see Jan-Werner Mueller, *A Dangerous Mind*, 87–103; Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Why Did Raymond Aron Write That Carl Schmitt Was Not a Nazi?"; Stewart, *Raymond Aron*, 99–100, 107, 113–14, 156–9.

149. P&W 634.
150. "Max Weber and Power Politics" (1964) in Aron, *In Defense of Political Reason*, 32–3.
151. *Ibid.*, 44–5.
152. *Ibid.*, 45–6.
153. Alain Besançon, "Pourquoi nous aimions tant Raymond Aron," 476; François George, "Un trop bref dialogue," 111.
154. Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs*, 262–3.
155. Aron, "On Treason," 288, 291, 283; see also Aron, "Anatomy of a Provocation."
156. CO 265.
157. At the end of a series of dialogues with two younger, left-wing intellectuals, Aron expressed satisfaction that, even if he had not convinced them, "I have gained two friends." CO 282.
158. *History and the Dialectic of Violence*, 161.
159. E.g., OI 188, 194; "Max Weber and Modern Social Science," HTL 345–8; CO 255–6.
160. "Max Weber and Modern Social Science," HTL 352.
161. "Raymond Aron: Interview," 81.
162. CO 261–2. Aron was aware of the price of this practice: as he told his audience at the contentious meeting at which he presented "Democratic and Totalitarian States," "I respect the feelings you have experienced, but I will not hesitate to tell you painful things, and saddening things, because I think they are true." "Democracy and Totalitarianism," 44.
163. "Max Weber and Modern Social Science," HTL 352; "History and Politics," PH 240–41.
164. "Fanaticism, Prudence, and Faith," HTL 126.
165. CO 265, 282.
166. *Memoirs*, 42.
167. CO 282.
168. Aron, "Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme?," 945.
169. OI 323.
170. "Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme?," 945.
171. Colquhoun, *Raymond Aron: The Sociologist in Society*, 591.
172. "The Liberal Definition of Liberty," in Aron, *In Defense of Political Reason*, 90.
173. "Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme?," 943–4; Aron, "Discours de Raymond Aron lors de réception du Prix Tocqueville," 121.
174. OI 319, 323–4.

### Chapter 5. Against Cynicism and Sentimentality: Reinhold Niebuhr's Chastened Liberal Realism

1. Niebuhr quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Hope*, 136.
2. Edmund Fuller, *Brothers Divided*, 134–5. These words are spoken by Raymond Unwin, a faithful fictionalization of Niebuhr.
3. On Niebuhr's centrality to postwar liberalism, see Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*; Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*; Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great*; Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*. For an excellent effort to both reconstruct



Niebuhr's thought and bring it to bear on current politics, see Peter B. Josephson and R. Ward Holder, *Reinhold Niebuhr in Theory and Practice*; for attempts to connect Niebuhr to (then-) contemporary politics, see Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics*.

4. The UDA became Americans for Democratic Action in 1947 and exists to this day—as does another organization which Niebuhr participated in founding: the International Rescue Committee.

5. Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 13.

6. Niebuhr, "Ten Years that Shook My World," 542. For a detailed exposition of Niebuhr's "liberal phase," see Ernest F. Dibble, *Young Prophet Niebuhr*.

7. Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind"; Ronald Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century*, 26–9; Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 21–6.

8. Niebuhr, "The Nation's Crime Against the Individual."

9. Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 99–100.

10. Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 95, 99, 109.

11. See Schlesinger, *The Politics of Hope*, 130–36; John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," 127. For Niebuhr's own statements, see PSA 4, 9; Niebuhr, "The Blindness of Liberalism."

12. Niebuhr, "The Pathos of Liberalism," 303; MMIS xx.

13. Recognizing the radicalism of the work, John Middleton Murry likened *Moral Man and Immoral Society* to *The Social Contract* and *The Communist Manifesto*, praising it as "a book for those revolutionary Socialists who have the intellectual courage to be realists and the spiritual faith to remain revolutionary." Quoted Eyal Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Anti-Utopian Liberalism*, 29.

14. CLCD 21.

15. See, e.g., MMIS 1–3; Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism." For later statements of the same view, see NDM I, 1–17, 114, 124–5, 281; NDM II, 74; CLCD, 18–20; Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, 25; MNHC, 30–31.

16. "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," TPL 237.

17. NDM I, 182–3.

18. MMIS 42–3; IAH 159.

19. "The Blindness of Liberalism." Niebuhr continued to reiterate these criticisms of the "serene confidence" in the possibility of social harmony of liberal (or "bourgeois") ideology even after he had become a "Cold War liberal": see, e.g., IAH, 92–4, 145.

20. MMIS 129–41.

21. MMIS 46–7. The case of women's subjection also illustrated the inextricability of political and economic power, and the need to use these coercively to achieve emancipation: the only effective remedy for autocratic rule within the family was for women to secure economic independence—which, in turn, required securing political power in order to remove legal disabilities (*ibid.*). Niebuhr noted similar dynamics in the cases of class and racial oppression. MMIS 118–23.

22. MMIS xviii–ix; CRPP 106.

23. MMIS xii, xx.

24. MMIS 19, 6, 13.

25. Niebuhr subsequently conceded the validity of a colleague's remark that a better title would have been "The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities." MNHC 22.

26. MMIS 110, xxiii, 48; MNHC 85.

27. MMIS 18; see also 88–9, 93, 272.

28. Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, 41.

29. MMIS xii.

30. MMIS 164.

31. MMIS 134, 170, 177, 234–5.

32. MMIS 179.

33. T. J. Jackson Lears, "Pragmatic Realism versus the American Century," 104–6; see also Anon., "Putting Just Enough Poison in the Baby's Porridge."

34. See MMIS 180–91, 206–11.

35. Niebuhr had begun moving away from it with his advocacy of nonviolent coercion by the late 1920s; see, e.g., "A Critique of Pacifism" (1927) in Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, 241–7). He resigned from the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1934 but continued to write for the pacifist-leaning *The Christian Century* until breaking with it over its opposition to World War II in 1940 (Niebuhr, "Why I Leave the F.O.R.," *Love and Justice*, 254–9; "To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny," *Love and Justice*, 272–8; Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 98–102). On Niebuhr's views on pacifism see Colm McKeogh, *The Political Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 19–37.

36. MMIS 172, 241; "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," TPL 241–2; *Love and Justice*, 249–51.

37. MMIS 242–4, 269.

38. For a more recent depiction of Gandhi as a political "realist," see Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence."

39. MMIS 247–8.

40. MMIS 250–52. His advocacy of a strategy of nonviolence purged of pretensions to purity may count as Niebuhr's most significant contribution to the politics of his time, through its influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. It was, Niebuhr wrote, "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." But it was "equally hopeless to attempt emancipation through violent rebellion," which could only result in bloodshed, of which the African American community would bear the brunt, and a backlash of repression. While "the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so," the *most practical* means of *forcing* the white majority to recognize the rights of their black co-citizens was a prudently measured combination of moral and economic pressure, which could simultaneously assert the moral authority of the oppressed and push the unjust majority toward change (MMIS 252–4). King was struck by, and shared, both this insistence on the need for African Americans to claim equal citizenship through force—and the insistence that this force should take the form of non-violent strategies of moral and economic pressure.

41. MMIS 175; cf. Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?"

42. Niebuhr quoted Schlesinger, *The Politics of Hope*, 136.

43. MMIS 238.

44. MMIS 171.

45. Niebuhr, "Idealists as Cynics," 72–3; *Love and Justice*, 261, 267, 270.
46. Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 245, 248–9, 252; PSA 39. This suggests a refinement of Niebuhr's own earlier accusation that all members of capitalist society were guilty of the miseries suffered by workers and the poor: while all might bear responsibility and thus blame, it was important to discriminate between different degrees of guilt and blameworthiness.
47. *Love and Justice*, 286–7; cf. NDM I, 192.
48. "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 253.
49. See Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Anti-Utopian Liberalism*, 80–83.
50. See, e.g., Niebuhr, "Roosevelt and Johnson: A Contrast in Foreign Policy," 7.
51. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, xii–iv. Cf. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 23.
52. MNHC 118; cf. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 62–70; Daniel Malotky, *Reinhold Niebuhr's Paradox*, 59–60.
53. *Love and Justice*, 294; "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 252.
54. IAH 11, 16; see also xxiv, 1–3.
55. MMIS 157–8; see also 167, 192–8; Niebuhr, "The Religion of Communism."
56. Niebuhr, "The Land of Extremes," 1243; Niebuhr, "Russia Makes the Machine Its God," 1080–81; Niebuhr, "The Church in Russia," 1145–6; Niebuhr, "The Problem of Communist Religion," 379. Niebuhr nevertheless remained committed to the Popular Front, and even defended Stalin's geopolitical "realism." It was the Nazi-Soviet Pact that made Niebuhr an unambivalent anti-Communist (Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 184–90).
57. Niebuhr, "Beria and McCarthy," 3.
58. IAH 20–22; CRPP 36–8.
59. "Two Forms of Utopianism" (1947), excerpted, with additional material, in Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, 12–13.
60. IAH 5–6.
61. Niebuhr remained critical of classical liberalism, complaining that one of the deleterious effects of Communism was that its obvious evils gave complacent classical liberals "good pretexts for not repenting of their own sins." CRPP 107.
62. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr*, 75. This list of liberal "values" is my paraphrase of Stone's paraphrase of Niebuhr's lecture notes.
63. CLCD xiii–xiv; "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 250–51.
64. See Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*. On this shift in liberalism, see Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great*; Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy*, 56–144.
65. Thus, Cornel West called Niebuhr an "organic intellectual of the corporate liberal establishment" whose ideas were "skillfully deployed in the service of an Europeanist ideology that promoted U.S. hegemony in the world." West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 163; West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 144. See also Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America*, 289–90, 299–303.
66. IAH 3, 11, 170, 174.
67. Niebuhr, "'Favorable' Environments," 6.
68. Niebuhr's preoccupation with international relations—both with the dangers of Communism and of American arrogance—led him to be insufficiently critical in one crucial area: the treatment of African Americans in the United States. While he ultimately supported the

Civil Rights Movement, he was hesitant in doing so, fearing the political costs that liberals would incur for supporting such a controversial cause—costs to the reformist, anti-Communist coalition embodied by the Democratic Party. This was a major case of moral myopia, which Niebuhr recognized and for which he repented.

69. Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Moral Law,” 1388; see also Niebuhr, “For Peace We Must Risk War”; Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 204.

70. PSA 51, 55–6, 58–9.

71. MNHC 69–70.

72. *Love and Justice*, 299.

73. Niebuhr, letter to Joe Rauh, November 6, 1967, quoted Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 213; see also Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 17–18.

74. Niebuhr, “Roosevelt and Johnson: A Contrast in Foreign Policy,” 7; see also Ronald H. Stone, “An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr,” 50.

75. Quoted Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 238.

76. Niebuhr, “Indicting Two Generations,” 13–14.

77. Niebuhr, “Toward New Intra-Christian Endeavors,” quoted Bennett, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Social Ethics,” 136.

78. “Prayer,” TERN 73.

79. “The King’s Chapel and the King’s Court,” TPL 269–70, 272.

80. MMIS xxv.

81. Thus, Niebuhr remarked, in response to James Burnham, that “One may question whether a cynical reaction to the moral sentimentality of our culture is much more mature than the sentimentality.” Niebuhr, “Study in Cynicism,” 637.

82. CRPP 146.

83. See Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*, 199–200; Robert C. Good, “The National Interest and Political Realism: Niebuhr’s ‘Debate’ with Morgenthau and Kennan.”

84. Niebuhr was here thinking of Hobbes’s and Luther’s views on political authority, as well as contemporary elitist and authoritarian thought.

85. See CLCD, 43–6; MNHC, 56–8. It should be acknowledged that Niebuhr, like many other mid-century American liberals, had a soft spot for the political elite of Britain; such a *traditional* elite, he seems to have believed, was less inclined to hubris than an elite of “experts.” Nevertheless, his sensitivity to the complacency of elites tempered this “Burkean” element in his thought, on which see Emile Lester, “British Conservatism and American Liberalism in Mid-Twentieth Century.”

86. See, e.g., MMIS 237–8.

87. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, 327–8; “Idealism, Realism, and Christian Responsibility,” TPL 126–7.

88. Niebuhr distinguished between perfect justice, which was identical with love, or a complete lack of selfishness or partiality; and human or political justice, understood as the greatest realization of liberty and equality that can be achieved within a society at a given historical moment. Love inspires the pursuit of justice, but always goes beyond it; human justice reaches toward the ideal of love, but always falls short. See “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” 240–41, 247–50; NDM II, 246–7, 253; CRPP 146–8, 160–61, 167, 171, 173; PSA 92–4; *Faith and Politics*, 30–31; *Love and Justice*, 283; Stone, *Prophet*, 231–3.

89. CLCD, viii.
90. Niebuhr, "Optimism and Utopianism," 180.
91. IAH 138–9.
92. "Beria and McCarthy," 4 (*italics added*); *Love and Justice*, 299; IAH 170.
93. Niebuhr, contribution to Niebuhr et al., "Our Country, Our Culture," 302–3.
94. *Love and Justice*, 292, 296; "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," 248; NDM I, 205.
95. Niebuhr, "Democracy and the Party Spirit," 3; "Beria and McCarthy," 4.
96. See Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 167–80.
97. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, 191–2; IAH 125–6.
98. CRPP 50–51, 98–99.
99. Niebuhr, contribution to "Our Country and Our Culture," 302–3; "The World I Would Like to Live In," quoted Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 179.
100. Niebuhr, "The Relevance of Christian Realism," TPL, 121–2; cf. CRPP 119–20, where Niebuhr remarks that "Realism" and "idealism" were "dispositions, rather than doctrines."
101. Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 128.
102. CRPP 163–4.
103. PSA 91; Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 92–3, 109.
104. MNHC 19.
105. See Ronald Stone, "The Responsibility of the Saints," 881.
106. "Humour and Faith," TERN 51–7, 60.
107. IAH xxiv, 154. This phenomenon of historical irony could be discerned in the empirical study of history—although Niebuhr held that the ironic *pattern* of history could only be fully appreciated through a theological conception of history as the unfolding of an unknown divine plan. Niebuhr's account of irony nevertheless provides resources for those who do not share his theological framework.
108. Niebuhr, "In the Battle and Above It."
109. See IAH 153, 168, 170–72.
110. CLCD 151–2; Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," 443 (*italics added*).
111. Niebuhr, "Editorial Notes," 2.
112. Thus, Niebuhr broke off in his criticism of the "naivete" of the Christian pacifist E. Stanley Jones, asking "But who am I to pass judgment on Stanley Jones? He's one of the great Christian saints of our time." Robert McAfee Brown, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Study in Humanity and Humility," 1.
113. See, e.g., MNHC 21–2.
114. Kenneth W. Thompson, "Reinhold Niebuhr as Thinker and Doer," 100.
115. This included suspicion of theologians, professional prophets, and indeed the ministry itself ("The professional ministry is at best a necessary evil and our Quaker friends may not be wholly wrong in regarding it as an unnecessary evil"), which was perhaps surprising in one who spent much of his life training ministers. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 110.
116. See, e.g., Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey*, 122–3.
117. MNHC 24–5.
118. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 6–7, 95.
119. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 62.
120. Niebuhr, "Is Neutrality Immoral?," 1399–1400.

121. MMIS 255; CRPP 13, 166, 168; *Love and Justice*, 242; cf. Stone, *Prophet*, 234–5.
122. The theme of steering between disillusionment and hope runs from Niebuhr's dissertation as a student at Yale Divinity School (1914), throughout his career; see Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 41.
123. IAH, 144–5.
124. *Love and Justice*, 248; *Faith and History*, 170; “The Validity and Certainty of Religious Knowledge,” (1914), Niebuhr Papers, box 24, 21, quoted Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 36. See also “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” TERN 218–36.
125. “Humour and Faith,” TERN 57.
126. “Coherence, Incoherence, and Christian Faith,” TERN 224; “The Jew and the World,” 27.
127. “Democracy and the Party Spirit,” 4.
128. Cf. Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 59.
129. IAH 83. On this point see also *The Self and the Dramas of History*, passim.
130. Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 10–11, 91.
131. IAH 8–9; see also 80–85, 100, 106–8, for Niebuhr's attacks on technocracy.
132. IAH 107.
133. Morton White, *Religion, Politics, and the Higher Learning*, 89, 117.
134. It should be stressed that, while Niebuhr regarded the theological elements of his thought as crucial to its coherence, he was also quite ready to make common cause with—and draw on, and praise the wisdom of—others whose political, ethical, and psychological perceptions coincided with his own, despite their lack of religious faith. In doing so, he cited religious justification: “By their fruits shall ye know them.”
135. IAH 68.
136. Here, too, Niebuhr's religious faith contributed to his position, allowing for a hope that saved him from despair, and a perspective on the earthly world that saved him from excessive attachment to particular orders.

## Chapter 6. “The Courage of . . . Our Doubts and Uncertainties”: Isaiah Berlin, Ethical Moderation, and Liberal Ethos

Chapter title is from Berlin, “Tolstoy and Enlightenment,” RT 296.

1. “A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism,” POI 118, 122.
2. Berlin, interview with Michael Ignatieff, May 15–17, 1995; transcript courtesy of Henry Hardy.
3. Berlin, “Israel and the Palestinians” (1997), in Berlin, *Affirming*, 568.
4. “The Sense of Reality,” SR 28.
5. The significance of Berlin's work as presenting a liberal *Weltanschauung*—and modeling a liberal temperament and capacities of empathic perception—has been noted by a number of interpreters, though it has seldom been given sufficient prominence in evaluating his work's contributions. For commentary that does assign it more weight, see Alan Ryan, “Isaiah Berlin: Political Theory and Liberal Culture”; Alex Zakaras, “A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill.” Berlin's focus on practical judgment has been discussed by Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Political Science and Political Understanding”; Ella Myers, “From Pluralism to Liberalism:

Rereading Isaiah Berlin"; and Edward Hall, *Value, Conflict, and Order*, 52–7, see also Joshua L. Cherniss, "The Sense of Reality: Berlin on Political Judgment, Political Ethics, and Leadership," which develops arguments from the third section of this chapter.

6. Berlin, "Political Judgement," SR 62. Here and elsewhere, Berlin objects to the torture of the innocent. But we should surely object to torture as such.

7. Berlin, interview with Michael Ignatieff, October 20, 1988, transcribed by Esther Johnson, Isaiah Berlin Archive, Wolfson College, Oxford; Berlin and Steven Lukes, "Isaiah Berlin: In Conversation with Steven Lukes," 57, 60–61.

8. Berlin, "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty*, 238–9.

9. Berlin, "The Purpose Justifies the Ways," *Liberty*, 334.

10. Berlin himself noted that "when I really have something that I want to say it can only occur in the Russian context." Berlin to Anna Kallin, November 17, 1970, Berlin, *Building*, 437.

11. Berlin to Nicolas Nabokov, June 25, 1970, *Building*, 426.

12. See, e.g., Berlin, "A Sense of Impending Doom" [1935]. See also Andrzej Walicki, "Berlin and the Russian Intelligentsia"; Gary M. Hamburg, "Closed Societies, Open Minds"; Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 30–39; and Kathleen Parthe, "Privileged Access: Berlin and Russian Thought."

13. "European Unity and Its Vicissitudes," CTH 218; "President Franklin Delano Roosevelt," PI 48.

14. Berlin later wrote of "the conversions of idealistic young liberals and radicals to Communism, or strong sympathy with it, often for no better reason than that it seemed the only force firm enough and strong enough to resist the Fascist enemy effectively." "President Franklin Delano Roosevelt," PI 25. For testimony from Berlin's circle, see Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism*; Jenifer Hart, *Ask Me No More*. See also Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*.

15. On Berlin's wartime experiences see Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters 1928–1946*, 309–630; Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 8–11; Joshua L. Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, ch. 2.

16. See "Russia and 1848," RT 15, 17, 20; Berlin, "Soviet Russian Culture," *The Soviet Mind*, 148–150.

17. Berlin to George Kennan, February 13, 1951, in *Liberty*, 339.

18. "European Unity and Its Vicissitudes," CTH 190–91.

19. See HBIL 101; "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Liberty*, 214; "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH 16–17; "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty*, 230 (where Berlin also notes the role of mere taste for imposing power on others, and the desire for conformity and aversion to difference, as sources of the human proclivity toward domination and terror).

20. See Steven B. Smith, "Conservatism and Its Discontents." While he was interested in certain reactionary thinkers (notably Joseph de Maistre), Berlin evinced relatively little interest in or affection for a more moderate sort of conservatism, as represented by Edmund Burke or, in his own day, by such thinkers as Michael Oakeshott or Aurel Kolnai.

21. "Fathers and Children," RT 344; Berlin to Jacob Talmon, November 21, 1972; to Robert Joyce, April 16, 1973; to Aubrey Morgan, February 4, 1974, *Building*, 514, 531, 560.

22. "Fathers and Children," RT 304.

23. Berlin, interview with Göran Rosenberg, February 3, 1997, transcript courtesy of Henry Hardy.



24. See, e.g., “The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West,” CTH 21–3; “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” CTH 223–4.

25. HBIL 101.

26. Berlin, “Soviet Russian Culture,” *The Soviet Mind*, 134.

27. “Fathers and Children,” RT 312–14.

28. See, e.g., Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect*; Michael Walzer, “Should We Reclaim Utopianism?”

29. Berlin to Kennan, *Liberty*, 343–4. Here Berlin attributed this brutal realism to E. H. Carr and Harold Laski (both formidable leftist intellectuals) and James Burnham and Arthur Koestler, both ex-Communists turned militant anti-Communists. Elsewhere he identified such “realism” with Treitschke, Pareto, and Fascism. Research notebook on political theory, Isaiah Berlin Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, box 630 folio 2.

30. “The Originality of Machiavelli,” AC 57.

31. “Realism in Politics,” POI 163; Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, 104.

32. On this, see Berlin, “Historical Inevitability,” *Liberty*, 94–165.

33. Berlin to Marion Frankfurter, August 17, 1950, *Enlightening*, 188; “European Unity and Its Vicissitudes,” CTH 204–5, 211–12.

34. See, e.g., Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, ch. 10–11.

35. Berlin to Judith Shklar, December 31, 1980, *Affirming*, 146–7.

36. Berlin to unknown correspondent, Berlin Papers Box 228, folio 250.

37. “The Originality of Machiavelli,” AC 61.

38. PITC 71.

39. PITC 69.

40. “Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century,” SR 188.

41. PITC 68–71.

42. On Berlin’s involvement in Cold War politics, see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, ch. 3; Jan-Werner Müller, “Fear and Freedom,” Müller, ed., *Isaiah Berlin’s Cold War Liberalism*.

43. “Chaim Weizmann,” PI 82–3.

44. On Berlin’s evolving Zionism, see Arie Dubnov, *Isaiah Berlin: The Journey of a Jewish Liberal*.

45. Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, 162–8.

46. “The Originality of Machiavelli,” AC 62.

47. In his excellent discussion in *Value, Conflict, and Order*, Edward Hall stresses Berlin’s emphasis on the limitations of theoretical reason and the importance of judgment in responding to the challenges of politics; he nevertheless focuses his discussion mostly on theoretical questions (of the relationship between pluralism and relativism, pluralism and liberalism, or liberalism and “realism”), rather than on Berlin’s depictions, or practice, of political judgment.

48. HBIL 117, 127.

49. HBIL 112. For Berlin’s portrait of Marx, see Berlin, *Karl Marx*; see also Berlin and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, 122–5; Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 70–71, 251; Terrell Carver, “Berlin’s Karl Marx”; Aurelian Crăiuțu, “Isaiah Berlin on Marx and Marxism.”

50. PITC 72–4.

51. “Marxism and the International,” SR 161; Berlin to David Astor, May 14, 1958; to Elena Levin, November 30, 1954, *Enlightening*, 455, 624.

52. HBIL109–110.
53. HBIL 99. This attribution of a “liberal attitude” to the revolutionary, socialist Herzen indicates how far Berlin saw the dispositions, sensibility, and spirit of liberalism as detachable from (classical) liberal political positions.
54. Here I discuss Herzen as Berlin saw him, and draw on elements of Herzen’s thought that illuminate Berlin’s. There was more to Herzen than what Berlin appropriated.
55. “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” CTH 16–17.
56. HBIL127–8; “Alexander Herzen,” RT 220.
57. HBIL 103–4; “A Revolutionary without Fanaticism,” POI 120.
58. Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 649–50.
59. See Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 88–110, 190–95, 207–9, 222–4.
60. “Alexander Herzen,” RT 234; HBIL 99.
61. “Alexander Herzen,” 217.
62. Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 384.
63. “Alexander Herzen,” RT 217.
64. HBIL 112; “Alexander Herzen,” 236.
65. “Fathers and Children,” RT 348, 334, 316.
66. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 71, 258.
67. See Aileen Kelly, “A Complex Vision.”
68. Alan Ryan, “Isaiah Berlin: The History of Ideas as Psychodrama.”
69. “Fathers and Children,” 310, 338.
70. Turgenev to Tolstoy, April 7, 1858, quoted in “Fathers and Children,” 307.
71. Berlin, “The Gentle Genius”; “Fathers and Children,” 337–9.
72. “Fathers and Children,” 335, 341.
73. *Ibid.*, 301, 315.
74. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, 257–8, 333n41.
75. “Fathers and Children,” 310 (quoting from Turgenev’s letter to Herzen, November 8, 1862), 308.
76. Berlin, “The Gentle Genius.”
77. Berlin presents his dichotomy as applying to and characterizing individuals. This distinction is however best seen as involving ideal types, which real individuals will seldom fit perfectly: many actual political leaders will combine elements of the “virtuoso” and “visionary” models.
78. Quotes from “The Sense of Reality” and “Political Judgment,” SR 56–7, 30, 41.
79. Among “virtuoso” politicians, Berlin lists not only such heroes of his as Lincoln, Cavour, Masaryk, and Franklin Roosevelt, but also Augustus, Richelieu, Peter the Great, Talleyrand, Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and Bismarck. Lenin is cited as an ambiguous case: his capacity for political judgment was ultimately overwhelmed by fanaticism. See SR 40, 46, 54, 58–9, 63–4.
80. “Political Judgment,” SR 63, 65.
81. “The Sense of Reality,” SR 17.
82. “Chaim Weizmann,” PI 75–6, 80.
83. It is hard to accept Berlin’s depiction of Churchill and Roosevelt as guarded against ruthlessness by firm standards of decency, in light of the former’s colonial policies and use of terror bombing during World War II, and the latter’s policy of Japanese internment—among

other acts of ruthlessness. Berlin's own attachment to the goals they were pursuing (the preservation of Britain and of liberal democracy in the face of Nazi attacks, the creation of a Jewish homeland) seems to have led him to underplay the elements of ruthlessness in the characters and actions of these figures.

84. Quotes from Berlin to Kenneth Tynan, April 26, 1961, and May 1, 1961, *Building*, 35–6.
85. Berlin, "A Message to the Twenty-First Century" (1994), *Affirming*, 581.
86. "Einstein and Israel," PI 203.
87. Berlin to David Astor, May 14, 1958, *Enlightening*, 624.
88. Peter Oppenheimer, "Run Over by Isaiah," 84.
89. Berlin to Myron Gilmore, December 26, 1949, *Enlightening*, 152.
90. "Fathers and Children," RT 342.
91. "Alexander Herzen," RT 230; "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will," CTH 250; "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH 20; "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," CTH 50.
92. "Fathers and Children," RT 346.
93. Quoted in Henry Hardy, "A Deep Understanding"; emphasis added.
94. See Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 82–4.
95. "Alexander Herzen," RT 227–8.
96. Thus, Leo Strauss called "Two Concepts of Liberty" an "anticommunist manifesto designed to rally all anticommunists." Strauss, "Relativism," 138. Berlin disputed this view of his intentions, insisting that, when he wrote the lecture, "I was thinking, to begin with, of Europe in, let us say, 1938–9, the Europe of Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Salazar, dictators in the Balkans and the Baltics and some parts of Asia . . . my lecture was not an exercise in cold-war rhetoric—it replied to despotisms in the remoter past and in our present," on both right and left. Berlin to Frederick Rosen, July 17, 1991, *Affirming*, 425–6.
97. Berlin to Herbert Elliston, December 30, 1952, *Enlightening*, 349–51; PITS 83, 92; "The Intellectual Life of American Universities," *Enlightening*, 750. Berlin's stance thus resembled Aron's and Niebuhr's. But he was warier of joining in the activities of organizations such as the CCF, or writing as an anti-communist polemicist; he kept his distance from, and did not much like, more militantly anti-Communist figures (Burnham, Koestler, Michael Polanyi) and liberal anti-Communists with suspect ideological backgrounds (Bertrand de Jouvenel) whom Aron befriended. On the other hand, Berlin was friendly with, and even sought to promote the careers of, Marxist scholars (including E. H. Carr, with whom he engaged in fierce public polemics; see Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, 115). There were exceptions—notoriously, Berlin's role in blocking the appointment of the Marxist publicist Isaac Deutscher as Professor of Politics at the University of Sussex (see David Caute, *Isaac and Isaiah*). This itself reflected Berlin's aversion to ruthlessness: Deutscher was a Communist "realist," who justified Stalin's actions as reflecting the truth of Lenin's dictum that "barbarous methods" were needed to combat the barbarism of Russian life. Deutscher, *Russia After Stalin*, 33–4, 54–5.
98. "Tolstoy and Enlightenment," RT 296.
99. On the historical context of the emergence of value pluralism, and Berlin's contribution, see Jan-Werner Müller, "Value Pluralism in Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Thought." On liberalism and pluralism see John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*; George Crowder, "Pluralism and Liberalism"; John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*; Steven Lukes, "The Singular and the Plural"; Jonathan Riley, "Interpreting Berlin's Liberalism"; Riley, "Defending Cultural Pluralism Within Liberal

Limits”; Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*; Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin*; William Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*; Robert Talisse, “Does Value Pluralism Entail Liberalism?”; Matthew Moore, “Pluralism, Relativism, and Liberalism”; Jason Ferrell, “Isaiah Berlin: Liberalism and Pluralism in Theory and Practice”; Myers, “From Pluralism to Liberalism”; Crowder, *The Problem of Value Pluralism*.

100. Similar points have been made in Berlin and Bernard Williams, “Pluralism and Liberalism: A Reply”; Michael Walzer, “Are There Limits to Liberalism?”; and Zakaras, “A Liberal Pluralism: Isaiah Berlin and John Stuart Mill.”

101. The idea of pluralism as an ethos is developed in Richard E. Flathman, *Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, and William E. Connolly, *Pluralism*. This raises the question of the relationship between Berlin’s pluralist ethos and the “ethos of pluralization” advocated by Connolly. Connolly appears more optimistic than Berlin that a disposition toward pluralism is natural to human beings, and will conduce to democratic vibrancy, open-hearted cosmopolitanism, and greater equality; his is a pluralism that is not fundamentally *tragic*, as Berlin’s is. On the other hand, Berlin (and other tempered liberals) remained more attached to some form (albeit a chastened one) of “Enlightenment rationalism”—the assertion that there are some universal, objective truths that can be known and shared across subject positions. Berlin and other tempered liberals also, as a matter of disposition, embraced what we might call the “pathos of limits”: a recognition of the need for ethical restraints, for a practice of self-denial and fortitude, to guard against hubris. This is connected to the affirmation of the liberal view of liberty as a matter of restraining the ability of human beings to interfere with others, which requires maintaining some limits, in order to ensure that individuals are freed from other limits. The idea of freedom as the overcoming of limits—a leap into mutual recognition and self-realization in which all are free together—that figures importantly in radical thought from the young Marx to the libertarian rebels of the 1960s, is foreign to Berlin.

102. “Historical Inevitability,” *Liberty*, 112. Berlin thus shared Weber’s fear of a society dominated by “organization men” (“John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” *Liberty*, 228).

103. “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life,” 228–9.

104. “Notes on Prejudice,” *Liberty*, 346.

105. Cf. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 136–9.

106. Cf. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 194; William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes*, 224–6.

107. See, e.g., “Historical Inevitability,” *Liberty*, 106 n1, 151; “Georges Sorel,” AC, 382; “Meincke and Historicism,” POI 257; On “trimming” and moderation, see Crăiuțu, *Faces of Moderation*.

108. Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 188–9, 191; Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 219.

109. Cf. Macedo, *Liberal Virtues*, 238–9; Crowder, *Liberalism and Value Pluralism*, 195–6, 198–9, 207–11.

110. David Pears, “Philosophy and the History of Philosophy,” 32.

111. Cf. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 59–151; Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals*, passim, especially 47–70, 349–62; Connolly, *Pluralism*; Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic*, 68–70; Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*. There are costs to such proclivities: the anomie, disconnection, and shallowness of which “communitarian” critics of “modernity” have warned.

Without dismissing these, I want to follow the authors cited above in stressing the compensating value and promise of a pluralistic ethos and practice.

112. See, e.g., Strauss, "Relativism."

113. Thus, Berlin recognized the merits of both the "dynamism and falsifying influence of passionate, one-sided faith" and "the clear-eyed sense of the complex facts and inevitable weakness in action which flows from enlightened skepticism." "Tolstoy and Enlightenment," RT 298.

114. For an alternative exposition of Berlinian "humanism," see Joshua L. Cherniss and Henry Hardy, "The Life and Opinions of Isaiah Berlin," 24–9.

115. Such "recognition" involves perceiving a postulate (in this case, the paramount value of human beings) to be true and internalizing this perception so that it shapes one's perceptions of alternative courses of action, and one's evaluations of those possibilities.

116. HBIL 128.

117. See "The Pursuit of the Ideal," CTH 17–18.

118. See HBIL 108; "Vissarion Belinsky," RT 192; "Tolstoy and Enlightenment," RT 292. As these references suggest, the strain of "romantic" humanism in Berlin's worldview was particularly connected to his Russian intellectual heritage.

119. HBIL 107.

120. Berlin to Robert Silvers, March 19, 1970, *Building*, 418.

121. "A Revolutionary Without Fanaticism," POI 117.

122. Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," 149. Cf. Glover, *Humanity*.

123. E.g., Berlin's attack on "the calm moral arithmetic of cost-effectiveness which liberates decent men from qualms, because they no longer think of the entities to which they apply their scientific computations as actual human beings who live the lives and suffer the deaths of concrete individuals." "Fathers and Children," RT 346.

124. Thus, Berlin asserted that "Turgenev, and liberals generally" saw political tendencies as "functions of human beings, not human beings as functions of social tendencies." "Fathers and Children," 340.

125. "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," CTH 50.

126. Berlin to Noam Chomsky, December 18, 1969; to Omar Haliq, April 17, 1972. *Building*, 405, 488.

127. Berlin to Herbert Elliston, December 30, 1952, *Enlightening*, 350.

128. Berlin to Myron Gilmore, December 26, 1949, *Enlightening*, 152.

129. "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life," *Liberty*, 237.

130. "Tolstoy and Enlightenment," RT 296.

131. Cf. Aaron Garrett, "The Lives of the Philosophers."

### Conclusion. Good Characters for Good Liberals?: Ethos and the Reconstruction of Liberalism

1. Karl Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, 210.

2. This was truest of Berlin, who only wrote one full-length book (revealingly, a biography); see Jason Ferrell, "Isaiah Berlin as Essayist." Camus's effort at more systematic political thought, *The Rebel*, was essayistic in style and sensibility. Aron and Niebuhr had more systematic ambitions and wrote major treatises; but their most politically influential works were essays (whether brief or book length), and each embraced an essayistic spirit of questioning.

3. On the value of irreverence to liberal democracy, see Jason Scorza, *Strong Liberalism*, 134–61.

4. For a discussion of the history and meaning of “humanity” as deployed here, see Ryan Patrick Hanley, “David Hume and the ‘Politics of Humanity’”; for a rich exposition, see Glover, *Humanity*.

5. Todorov, *A French Tragedy*, 72.

6. Mattson, *When America Was Great*, 67–71.

7. See Crăiuțu, *Faces of Moderation*.

8. On the importance of resistance to self-deception, see Aaron Garrett, “Courage, Political Resistance, and Self-Deceit.”

9. Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” 68–9.

10. It is thus mistaken to identify tempered liberals *either* with postwar “realism” (see, e.g., Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment*) or with the purported tendency of “cold war” (anti-Communist) intellectuals to reject or supplant “politics” with “ethics” (see, e.g., Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other*, 220–36). Edward Hall links the ethical pluralism of Stuart Hampshire and Bernard Williams—friends and philosophical fellow-travelers of Berlin’s—to the “realist” recognition of the ethical “autonomy” or distinctiveness of politics, while acknowledging that for them, as for Berlin, political judgments and criteria are not wholly free-standing from “ethical” ones (Hall, *Value, Conflict, and Order*). For Hall, this distinguishes Hampshire’s and Williams’ position from Berlin’s, which is less straightforwardly “realist.” As I read them, all three men agree in seeing political ethics as continuous with ethics more broadly, insofar as both are marked by conflicts of values, and subject to many of the same values and demands, while also acknowledging that some circumstances are particularly characteristic of politics. It should be added that these circumstances, while characteristic of the “political” sphere, are not unique to it; as we tacitly recognize when we speak of “office politics” or “academic politics.” Family life, too, is not so beyond politics as some might like to believe (on which see Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, especially ch. 2).

11. Jonathan Allen, “The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory.”

12. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals*, 290.

13. Jeremy Waldron, “Political Political Theory,” 1.

14. Thus, attacks on the futility and perversity of seeking to achieve liberty through despotic means were central to Benjamin Constant’s argument for liberalism. Thus, in *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*, he wrote: “They [the French Revolutionaries] won apparent victories, but those victories were contrary to the spirit of the institutions which they wished to establish . . . In order to prepare men for liberty, they surrounded them with the horrors of executions . . . They declaimed against tyrannical governments, while setting up the most tyrannical of all . . . Violent measures, adopted dictatorially in advance of a public spirit, prevent that spirit from coming into being. It is a vicious circle. People look ahead to a time which is certain never to be reached, because the means chosen militates against its being reached.” (Constant, *Political Writings*, 111; see also the discussion in *ibid.*, 134–8). Against this, Constant insisted on the importance of cultivating a certain ethos, marked by “gentle forms,” “the habit of subtle nuances,” “gentle sentiment,” and “elegant form” (*ibid.*, 112). It is small wonder that tempered liberals such as Berlin and Camus recognized in Constant a kindred spirit.

15. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” 27; Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 9.

16. See “The Liberalism of Fear,” 9–11.

17. See *Ordinary Vices*, 233–7, 242–5; Shklar, *Montesquieu*, 51–2.
18. Shklar, *Legalism*, 5.
19. Classic statements include L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, and John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*.
20. On this tendency, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*; Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 5–15, 45–57, 168–9, 288–9, 322–3. This view has been derived from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and Kant's "Perpetual Peace" and "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (though Smith and Kant's thought is more complex than this picture). A combination of hope that reasonable self-interest will foster acceptance of just institutions, and that moral learning over time will foster greater solidarity and mutuality, can be found in the moral psychology underlying Rawls's "political liberalism," which owes much to the Kantian project of offering a theodicy based in "reasonable faith." See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lx; Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 128; Paul J. Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?*; Weithman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*; Stefan Eich, "The Theodicy of Growth."
21. See, e.g., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center*, xix–xx; for perceptive commentary, Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*. In this regard, tempered liberals shared the darker outlook of both the Frankfurt School and what Ira Katznelson labels the "political studies Enlightenment" (Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*). Commitment to liberalism separated them from the former; focus on ethics and ethos distinguished them from the latter.
22. See Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?"
23. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center*, 40, 38. This use of the term "progressive" had both philosophical and political resonance: it identified faith in progress as the core weakness of alternative forms of liberalism; and it connected the philosophical disavowal of progressive faith with opposition to Henry Wallace's Progressive Party, who at the time constituted the major competitor to the left of Harry Truman's anti-Communist Democratic Party.
24. On the varied usage and ambiguity of the "neoliberal" label, see Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan." For more detailed accounts of the genesis of neoliberalism see Serge Audier, *Neoliberalisme(s)*; Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pelerin*; Ben Jackson, "At the Origins of Neo-Liberalism"; Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists*.
25. Cf. Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 39–45; Samuel Moyn, "Neoliberalism, Not Liberalism, Has Failed." Aron is a partial exception: he was engaged with many of the thinkers who contributed to the emergence of neoliberalism, starting with his participation in the now-(in) famous "Colloque Walter Lippmann" in 1938. See Jurgen Reinholdt and Serge Audier, eds., *The Walter Lippmann Colloquium*; Stewart, *Raymond Aron*, ch. 4. But for Aron serious engagement did not imply agreement—as his deep absorption in Marxist theory shows.
26. See (among many other works) Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*; Glen Newey, *After Politics*; Marc Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion"; Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*. For surveys of the new realism, see William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory"; and the essays in Matt Sleat, ed., *Politics Recovered* and Rahul Sagar and Andrew Sabl, eds. *Realism in Political Theory*.
27. A possible exception is Raymond Geuss, who describes his position as "neo-Leninist" (*Philosophy and Real Politics*, 99). Other recent, influential versions of "realism" are essentially liberal, even if they take aim at prominent versions of liberalism; see, e.g., Bernard Williams, *In*



*the Beginning Was the Deed*. For reconstructions of liberalism in a “realist” vein, see Sleat, *Liberal Realism*; Edward Hall, *Value, Conflict, and Order*.

28. Thus, when Marc Stears writes that the American Civil Rights movement involved “forms of protest and incivility that stand at the opposite end of the political spectrum from the modes of engagement proposed by advocates of public reason,” he reveals a happily constrained conception of the “political spectrum” (Stears, “Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion,” 551, emphasis added). If this spectrum is taken to run from an ideal speech situation to the practice of A. Philip Randolph, Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, or James Lawson (or, for that matter, Saul Alinsky), then the tempered liberal’s job is largely done. Sadly, this is not the world in which we live.

29. Cf. Karuna Mantena, “Another Realism.” I thank an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion on how to develop my discussion of tempered liberalism and realism.

30. See the works cited in the Introduction, notes 30–36.

31. Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, xiv.

32. As Mary Dudziak shows in *Cold War Civil Rights*, embarrassment over America’s failure to live up to its avowed liberal-democratic principles in its treatment of its non-white citizens pushed political elites to heed the demands of the Civil Rights Movement.

33. Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, 265.

34. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, 78, 88–9.

35. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 248–9; “The Liberalism of Fear,” 15.

36. This is a conclusion offered in Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, which furnishes empirical support for tempered liberals’ conviction that sustaining liberal democracy requires a self-limiting forbearance in the use of power.

37. Cf. George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 36–76; Mark E. Button, *Contract, Cultivation, and Citizenship*.

38. See Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*; Fawcett, *Liberalism*; Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*; Moyn, “Neoliberalism, Not Liberalism, Has Failed”; Moyn, “The Left’s Due—and Responsibility.”

39. Sabl, “If You’re Such a Liberal, How Come You Love Conformity?,” 81. On the pluralistic demands of liberal-democratic institutions and roles, see Sabl, *Ruling Passions*.

40. Sabl, “Virtue for Pluralists.”

41. For this account of the process of shifting between roles and identities, I am indebted to Nancy Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 103–14, 125–51; Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals*, 349–63.

42. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” 34; cf. Button, *Contract, Cultivation, and Citizenship*, 16–17.

43. Linda T. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 129, 127. Zagzebski suggests that exemplars also serve a morally epistemic function: we come to know what virtues such as courage or kindness are by observing qualities of exemplary individuals; we may also come to apprehend virtues that prior theoretical accounts had not identified or expressed. *Ibid.*, 9–20, 60–61.

44. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 17.

45. Cf. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 205; Melissa Lane, “Constraint, Freedom, and Exemplar: History and Theory Without Teleology.”

46. Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi”; cf. Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints”; Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 25–6, 65–6.

47. For empirical evidence of the efficacy of exemplification see Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, 131–8.
48. Shklar, *Legalism*, 6, 224.
49. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 21.
50. Brecht, *Galileo*, 115. That Brecht recognized the need for heroism is suggested by the fulsome panegyrics to Lenin he composed in the years before he wrote *Galileo*.
51. See Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper*.
52. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 19–21, 103, 114.
53. Quoted in Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 105.
54. Aron, “The Future of the Secular Religions,” *The Dawn of Universal History*, 201.
55. On honor as a resource for liberalism and humanitarianism, see Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*; K. Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code*.
56. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 5.
57. Prieto, radio address of August 8, 1936, reprinted in *El Socialista*, August 9, 1936, 1.
58. George Kateb, “The Political Thought of Herbert Marcuse,” 55.
59. Brinkley, “Liberalism and Belief,” 75, 76–7. Berlin, extending his characteristic rueful self-deprecation to his worldview, acknowledged that his liberal vision was uninspiring, and the political conduct for which it called was “a very difficult and a very undramatic thing to do; it can be tedious and the tension is not good for the nerves.” Berlin, “The Lessons of History,” 276.
60. E.g., George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies*; Michael Walzer, “Should We Reclaim Political Utopianism?”
61. McQueen, “Political Realism and Moral Corruption,” 156. The example of tempered liberalism seems to me to suggest that, *pace* McQueen, “epistemic humility and moral courage” can, in fact, go together—and even be mutually supporting.
62. Quoted in Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 23.
63. Evan Thomas, “The Gray Man.”
64. On support for ruthless regimes from apartheid South Africa to Pinochet’s Chile by earlier “neoliberals,” see Slobodian, *Globalists*, 149–79. For testimony (albeit slanted by the author’s quest for vindication) on ruthlessness in imposing “austerity,” see Yanis Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room*.
65. Berlin to Herbert Elliston, December 30, 1952, in Berlin, *Enlightening*, 349–51; Niebuhr, “Beria and McCarthy,” 4.
66. For empirical support for the view that eschewing ruthlessness may be politically effective, see Leanne ten Brinke et al., “Virtues, Vices, and Political Influence in the U.S. Senate.”
67. Bernard Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” 64–5; cf. Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands.”
68. C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left” (1960), in Mills, *The Politics of Truth*, 256–7.
69. See Benjamin Constant, “The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation” (1814) and “On the Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns” (1819), in Constant, *Political Writings*, 102–15, 308–28.
70. For incisive discussions of these phenomena in Donald Trump’s America, see Jamelle Bouie, “Kenosha Tells Us More About Where the Right Is Headed Than the R.N.C. Did”; Adam Serwer, “The Cruelty Is the Point.” As Serwer notes: “Once malice is embraced as a virtue, it is impossible to contain.”

71. Victor Orbán, quoted in *Reuters*, May 10, 2018, online at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-vision/hungary-pm-orban-sets-out-conservative-vision-at-start-of-new-four-year-term-idUSKBN1IB2o6>. For analyses of recent attacks on liberalism (in America) see Zack Beauchamp, “The Anti-liberal Moment”; for a more hopeful take, Matt Ford, “Liberalism Is at a Crossroads, Not a Dead End.” On Orbán’s intellectual following, see Damon Linker, “Victor Orbán’s American Apologists.” American right-wing intellectuals’ admiration for authoritarianism has antecedents in the period discussed here—for instance, the support for Francisco Franco’s rule in Spain, which was defended by (among others) William F. Buckley and James Burnham (see Jeet Heer, “National Review’s Bad Conscience”; Bécquer Seguin, “The Spanish-Speaking William F. Buckley”). Similar support for Franco among French Catholics provoked a rebuke from Camus, which articulated his liberal political ethos and ethics. See Camus, “Why Spain?” RRD 75–84.

72. Camus, *The Rebel*, 301.

73. On the futility and perversity of center-left parties’ attempts to follow the populist line on immigration, see Cas Mudde, “Why Copying the Populist Right Isn’t Going to Save the Left”; Werner Krause et al., “Does Accommodation Work?”

74. See, e.g., Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting*.

75. On the practice and value of exemplification—or “democratic enactment”—in the face of anti-liberalism, see Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 158–65.



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