

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY:
THE CONCORD OF CHRISTIAN REALISM AND THE ENGLISH SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

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RICHARD J. HOSKINS

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Chapter 1

Preface and Introduction

This dissertation grows from two sources: a lifetime of independent study of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, culminating in my formal graduate studies at the Divinity School with Prof. Franklin Gamwell, Prof. Jean Bethke Elshtain, and others; and more recently, my study of political theory and international relations theory in the Department of Political Science and the Committee on Social Thought, including with Prof. Sankar Muthu, Prof. Robert Pape, and Prof. Nathan Tarcov.

For a long time I have pursued an interest in what is sometimes called “political theology,” that is, ideas at the intersection of political theory and religious thought (especially Christian and Jewish theology). I have read theology all my adolescent and adult years, and I have nurtured a long interest in both political theory and international politics; but I did not appreciate that there were “theories” of international relations until I sat for Prof. Pape’s “Seminar on International Relations Theory.” Some things fell into place in that seminar: a number of previously-considered events and perspectives came into new relationship as I viewed them through the lens of the major IR theories.¹ This was deepened as I studied empires and the effect of imperial rule on political and religious thought, under the direction of Prof. Muthu. Naturally, I began to connect what I was learning in these studies with what I was studying in the Divinity School and in the works of Niebuhr. I went back to Niebuhr’s writings on international affairs and American foreign policy (a relatively small but important subset of his work) and soon grasped the kinship between the concerns and tenor of his thought, on the one hand, and, on the other,

¹ Throughout this paper, I follow the convention of using “IR” to denote the academic study of international relations, and the full term, “international relations,” when speaking of the actual relations among states.

that of the group of scholars known loosely as the “English School” of international relations theory. It was this relationship that I decided to make the topic of my dissertation.

The central thesis of this paper is that there is a distinct congruity, a discernable harmony, between Niebuhr’s international political thought and that of the English School. So far as I can determine, no one has suggested this connection before; nor has anyone sought to look at Niebuhr’s thought in the context of the major IR schools, to determine where there is agreement and compatibility.² Obviously, conducting this comparison and establishing my thesis requires a close reading of the writings of Niebuhr and a careful analysis of the ideas of the major English School thinkers. This is what I have sought to do in the chapters that follow. Here, I will provide a brief overview of the three parts of the dissertation in which the chapters are situated.

Part One: History and Providence (chaps. 2-4). When I originally planned this dissertation, history and providence were not part of the outline. Even less did I imagine that it should be considered at the threshold, before addressing the ethical and political branches of the study. Yet, the more I read Butterfield and reread Niebuhr, the more I came to see the wisdom of the insights of Whitehead and Morgenthau (which I relate at the beginning of chapter 2) concerning the close relationship between a thinker’s reading of history and her or his development of political ideas. Simultaneously, I was impressed by the observation of Langdon Gilkey that Niebuhr’s understanding of history is the key to all his theological thought. This was buttressed by the insight of Emil Brunner, so important to Niebuhr’s thought, that the Christian faith is, at bottom, “a peculiar understanding of history, the understanding of man as historical.” (Brunner, 435)

² Jean Bethke Elshtain, who chaired my Dissertation Committee before her death, warmly endorsed this project and topic, saying “I don’t know why it hasn’t been done before.” Her enthusiasm has provided enduring inspiration for me in this work.

Given the cogency and consistency of these observations, coupled with the fact that one of the two founders of the English School, Herbert Butterfield, was a distinguished historian, I determined that I must begin with a study of history and the closely related subject of providence in the thinking of Niebuhr and Butterfield. The more I researched and wrote chapters 2 and 3, the more I appreciated how appropriate this decision was. Although I should have known it from reading St. Augustine, I came to realize in ways that I had not before that the threshold of virtually all ethical and political reflection is an understanding of human history. Thus, the compatibility of Niebuhr's and Butterfield's apprehension of history, grounded in Christianity in both cases, became a solid building block of my argument.

Part Two: Ethics and International Relations Theory (chaps. 5-8). In Part Two I seek to do several things. Chapter 5 raises one of the basic questions of IR: does the study and understanding of international relations require (or permit) the inclusion of ethical questions? Put differently, do states, and the leaders who make decisions for them, have ethical responsibilities and constraints; and if so, how are these different (if they are) from those of an individual?

Chapter 6 surveys the major schools of IR theory and their relationship to ethics. Realism is emphasized (both classical realism and the neorealism that superseded it after Niebuhr's death), because of the role realism has played in the thought of both Niebuhr and the English School thinkers. Chapters 7 and 8 lay out and compare the thought of Niebuhr and Martin Wight with respect to the place of ethical evaluation in the study of international relations. Wight, the co-founder of the English School, was especially emphatic on the need to retain ethical judgment.

Wight's own moral judgments were formed by his Christian and Augustinian commitments, which make his thought particularly relevant to Niebuhr's.

Part Three: International Society (chaps. 9-11). To a large extent, the English School is a continuation of the classical realist tradition of Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau. It incorporates, however, much research from all the IR schools conducted since Niebuhr's death, and adds positive features that are distinct to it, most notably, the concept of the international society. To elaborate on the nature of the concept I rely chiefly on Hedley Bull, its most articulate spokesperson and the most important second-generation English School thinker (chap. 10), and on a leading third-generation (present-day) thinker, Robert Jackson (chap. 11). Before considering these scholars, however, I pull together Reinhold Niebuhr's thoughts on what he often called "world community," what it entailed and what is required to build it (chap. 9), in order to show how the concept for which Niebuhr was reaching was, as I argue, the international society notion of the English School.

In the concluding chapter (**chap. 12**), I recapitulate my main conclusions from earlier chapters and address two issues that have been implicit throughout but call for brief final comment: the concept of the "national interest," which is so central to IR analysis in all the schools; and the significance of Reinhold Niebuhr's theism in view of the fact that the English School, after the death of Butterfield and Wight, abandoned the theistic grounding of the founders.

**Part One:
History and Providence**

**Chapter 2
History and International Political Theory**

An understanding of history underlies all ideas, in the sense that history is the repository of human experience which is the raw material for all inferences from and interpretations of that experience. As A.N. Whitehead put it, “our history of ideas is derivative from our ideas of history.” (*Adventures of Ideas*, 7)

Hans Morgenthau wrote, “[I]nternational theory ... amounts to a kind of philosophy of history.” (Morgenthau 1970, 250) What he meant, I think, is that any theory of the interrelations of nation-states assumes an understanding and requires an interpretation of history, since theorizing involves drawing generalizations from historical facts. Political history is the soil in which any generalized ideas about how nations behave must be cultivated and tested.

What is history indeed, in the sense of historical writing or *historia*,¹ if not a selection and interpretation of the mass of historical data? Even if it were a non-selective, chronological account of past events (“one damned thing after another”²), it would still be necessarily interpretive because a choice must be made of what to include and what to leave out. Thus, all

¹ The term “history” has two meanings, as well-summarized by Gilkey: “It can refer to the objective course of events in which humans live and about which they can inquire: the history historians write *about*. Or it can refer to that inquiry itself and its results, the human knowledge and understanding of that course of events, the history historians *write*.” (*Reaping the Whirlwind*, 91) Niebuhr stated it even more concisely: “‘history’ ... as something that occurs and as something that is remembered and recorded.” (*ND-II*, 1-2) It is precisely the unique human capacity to transcend experience by reflecting on and evaluating it that makes possible *historia*. (*Id.*)

² This phrase has been attributed to various people, including Arnold Toynbee, Henry Ford, and numerous others. Perhaps they all said it.

history-writing is selective and interpretive. Some theory, some general set of ideas about what is “worth” reporting and evaluating, must shape any effort to understand and reconstruct past events and personalities.

The historian Daniel Little suggests that philosophers of history and others who think systematically about significance in history tend to ask four clusters of questions:

- (1) What does history consist of – individual actions, social structures, periods and regions, civilizations, large causal processes, divine intervention?
- (2) Does history as a whole have meaning, structure, or direction, beyond the individual events and actions that make it up?
- (3) What is involved in our knowing, representing, and explaining history?
- (4) To what extent is human history constitutive of the human present?³

Taking these questions as a framework, does historical interpretation amount to a philosophy of history? Langdon Gilkey has shown that interpretation, if done systematically, at least *assumes* a philosophy of history. Gilkey divides philosophies of history into two types: the speculative or constructive philosophy in which the thinker sees an underlying, unifying pattern, direction, or end of history; and the critical or hermeneutical approach which involves the more modest goal of achieving a critical understanding of what historical interpretation consists of and the relationship between the historian and the events being recounted and interpreted. (*Reaping the Whirlwind*, 91-92) These two approaches amount to a deductive, “top-down” interpretation of history, contrasted with an inductive, “bottom-up” approach. The second one may involve interpretive forays into historical events or periods, but less to demonstrate the overall meaning of history than to probe for the deeper pattern and significance of what otherwise appear to be purely contingent happenings. (*Id.*, 98)

³ Daniel Little, “Philosophy of History,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online), retrieved July 17, 2015.

A speculative or constructive philosophy of history seeks to perceive or construct a more-or-less comprehensive account of history's underlying movements and patterns, and perhaps its goal or end point. Examples are the theories of history of Hegel and Marx, as well as those of Spengler, Toynbee, and the early Christian historian Eusebius. The tendency of many Enlightenment thinkers to see unfolding "progress" in the march of history is another example. Montesquieu might also be included: he thought there were large causes to national events which could be discerned by human eyes:

It is not chance that rules the world. ... There are general causes, moral and physical, which act in every monarchy, elevating it, maintaining it, or hurling it to the ground. All accidents are controlled by these causes. And if the chance of one battle — that is, a particular cause — has brought a state to ruin, some general cause made it necessary for that state to perish from a single battle. In a word, the main trend draws with it all particular accidents. (*Consideration on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, Chap. XVIII)

Karl Löwith, on the opening page of his interpretive anthology, *Meaning in History*, defines philosophy of history in this strong sense as "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning." Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* calls it "historicism," links it with authoritarianism, and describes it as a theory that history develops inexorably according to patterns and laws which can be discerned by humans, who then may utilize it to subjugate or fashion society according to the precepts of its inevitable course.

The critical or interpretive approach, more in favor in recent times especially among English-speaking thinkers, is more modest. It does not purport to perceive any "key" to history, but merely to explore critically the human relationship to events and thereby to understand, for example, how and to what extent individual human will or pure contingency determine history, as opposed to stable human nature, fixed structural constraints, or divine plan. It seeks to bring a

critical eye to the process of interpretation itself, and is in that sense a critical hermeneutical enterprise. It contents itself with engaging in careful, critical reflection on the nature of historical knowledge as such, its scope and limitations, but may also offer an interpretation of patterns and lessons of discrete portions of history, involving a limited time and limited group of peoples. Even then, it remains self-critical of the process. It asks: what is the nature of historical knowledge? What is involved in learning, reconstructing, and interpreting history? How and when is it justified to draw more general conclusions from history? Understood in this critical mode, philosophy of history is to history what philosophy of science is to science (this is Gilkey's point): it does not describe the trajectory of history itself, but rather seeks to clarify our knowledge of history, how much we know of it, how we learn it, and how it can reliably be used. Based on this understanding, limited forays into historical interpretation are justified.

This distinction still leaves unclear what can be expected of each approach. It is reasonably clear what the "strong" philosophies of history offer: a master key or decoder to open up the overall pattern of past history and thus to predict, at least in general, its future course. Critical history does not aspire so grandly. Yet, as noted, the critical approach remains open to testing and interpreting history, or discrete portions of it, in accordance with certain hypotheses which can thereby be proven (or disproven) with at least minimal reliability. Hence, as discussed in a later chapter, Herbert Butterfield, despite not being a historicist or "strong" philosopher of history, nonetheless argued that the fall of Germany in World War II was the conclusion of a long arc of German rise and decline dating back to Frederick the Great. Butterfield offered this reflection, however, outside his role of professional historian. It was important to Butterfield to distinguish the writing of "pure" history from the interpretation of its significance: to differentiate the "what" from the "why." Thus, he drew his conclusion about the German rise

and decline not as a historian – he was not in any case a historian of Germany – but as a thoughtful observer interpreting this portion of European political history. Butterfield’s provocative book from 1953, *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War*, is replete with his observations about historical patterns, but he makes them strictly as a Christian lay observer, not as a professional historian.

This delimited approach to historical interpretation, while less than grand, is not without a defensible theory, as Gilkey explains:

Even if it refuses to explain through necessitating laws behind the events, nevertheless it does make events intelligible by moving through their apparent incoherence to a deeper level of understanding. Historical explanation consists in the creation of a vast and informed mental construct, an interpretation which – like the laws of science but in a different way – goes “beyond” the given data to set them in an intelligible pattern by creating the total world of the event: its conditions and their structural forms, its symbolic horizons, its motivating forces and intentions, its contingent interactions and its consequences. (*Id.*, 98)

Reinhold Niebuhr was not a historian, but nonetheless argued on the basis of historical evidence as well as his assessment of human nature that the divided powers of a liberal democracy provide the best guarantee against tyranny. As he famously noted, “[m]an’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” (*Children of Light*, xiii) He also quipped (but quite seriously) that original sin is the one empirically verifiable Christian doctrine. He meant that history provides the empirical proof.

A fundamental difference between the speculative philosophers of history and the critical ones has to do with tone and method. The former present a more-or-less comprehensive plan of historical development as an explanation of the past and, at least implicitly, predictive power for the future. The latter proffer fairly narrow political or social hypotheses (“intelligible patterns”) to be tested by reference to examples drawn from historical interpretation. The hypotheses are

acknowledged to be contestable, as are the historical interpretations that support them. Indeed, the critical thinkers invite debate over both the hypotheses and the supporting interpretation, hoping that critical dialogue will sharpen our ability to “learn lessons” from the past, however limited, for the benefit of the future. Notably, both the strong and the weak interpreters of history tend to assume that human nature (whatever assessment they make of it) remains basically constant across the ages and cultures, thus permitting generalizations from one era or nation to another.

All of this applies to international relations theory as it does to any political theory. Some understanding of history is implicit in any theory of how and why states, and the humans who influence and direct them, behave the way they do. If history is nothing more than a random set of acts whose causes cannot be understood or traced, or alternatively, if history is predetermined by forces over which humans have no control, there is nothing to theorize about. Most historians assume something between these extremes: that humans have and exercise free will upon external events, and also that there is a basic consistency in the ways that will is exercised in response to recurring forces and phenomena throughout time, thus leading to a degree of comprehensibility and predictability of human conduct.

For Christians, any philosophy or theology of history is inevitably bound up with providence, God’s continuing relationship with human beings. From the beginning, Christian theology (like Jewish theology) has assumed a historically-interested God whose providential role extends to political and social history, as well as to personal salvation. Yet the actual working out of this providence is often obscure – “God works in mysterious ways”⁴ – with the

⁴ This phrase, often thought to be Biblical, is actually from a hymn written by William Cowper (1731-1800), the English evangelical poet and hymnodist. It is from the first verse, "God moves in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm." The scripture often cited in support of Cowper’s point is Romans 11:33 (KJV): “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how

result that interpretation is often needed. In the thought of both Niebuhr and Butterfield their interpretation of providence played a central role in their understanding of political and social history.

In chapters 3 and 4 which follow in this Part I, I will examine the notions of history and providence as understood by Niebuhr and Butterfield with a chapter devoted to each, showing their fundamental similarities as well as some interesting differences, the differences owing mostly to the fact that one was a theologian and one a historian. If, as Morgenthau suggests, international theory necessarily rests on a philosophy of history, the fact that Niebuhr and Butterfield share a substantially similar view of history supports my later argument that there exists, between Niebuhr and the English School that Butterfield founded, a common commitment to ethics (Part II) and a strong compatibility respecting the idea of the international society (Part III).

unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out.” Cowper himself cited John 13:7 (KJV) next to the printed hymn, “Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.”

Chapter 3

History and Providence in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr

History and Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr was not a philosopher of history. Nonetheless, his work involves extensive commentary on political history and thus rests on an implicit understanding of history. Using Langdon Gilkey's categories from the last chapter, Niebuhr's understanding is something of a hybrid of the speculative and the critical-hermeneutical (with emphasis on the latter).¹ On the one hand, Niebuhr the Christian theologian believes that we can, by faith, discern the ultimate significance, purpose and direction of history, and can identify decisive events in which God acted in history, such as creation and the covenant with Israel, the Messiah's birth, death and resurrection.² These are what give history its significance: history unfolds within God's divine plan for the total relationship between God and humans (providence). To this extent Niebuhr's approach is "speculative" or "constructive." On the other hand, the freedom of women and men plays an often decisive role in human history, giving rise to contingent factors that make prediction impossible and interpretation difficult:

History is the fruit and the proof of man's freedom. Historical time is to be distinguished from natural time by the unique freedom which enables man to transcend the flux of time, holding past moments in present memory and envisaging future ends of action which are not directed by natural necessity. (*FH*, 55)

Hans Morgenthau once remarked:

[This is] an essentially insoluble problem to which Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed also time and again, that is, the conjunction of uniformities and contingencies. History is a mass of events which, in certain general principles, can be derived. But it is also a mass of contingencies, of unique events which happen in that way only once and never again.

¹ The same can be said for Herbert Butterfield, and for basically the same reasons as for Niebuhr, as the next chapter will show.

² I include for this purpose the creation and resurrection as historical events for Christians, while acknowledging that some theologians believe they are best understood as ahistorical events, independent of and outside of time.

The problem, which can only be adumbrated but cannot be solved once and for all, is how to assess the weight of the unique, the contingent, as over against the weight of the repetitive, the uniform.³

Niebuhr himself, in a review of Charles Norris Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, described history as "a curious compound of freedom and fate, which can be given meaning only in terms of some concept of providence which the classical mind cannot achieve."⁴

Interpretation plays a key role in Niebuhr's methodology – but not because anyone is authorized (or able) to "read" or "interpret" history in accordance with God's purposes. Indeed, the ways in which historical events fit into, or fail to fit into, the divine purpose are obscured from human vision, and that vision itself is constantly distorted by sin and self-interest. Nonetheless, some basic things are clear from the Biblical revelation. For one, time and history are meaningful because they are grounded in and transcended by timeless eternity. Thus, the "ultimate consummation" of history, the Kingdom of God on earth, is a "consummation beyond history," a part of eternity which both stands over time as its ultimate source and continues timelessly at history's end. (*ND-II*, 295, 299-300) Our work for the Kingdom on earth and the prophetic call for justice point in the direction of God's Kingdom, where justice and love will be combined. A commitment to justice now places the faithful Christian on the pathway to the fulfillment of God's purposes in history at the end, providing her or him with the proper response to the Great Commandment of love of God and love of neighbor.

Neither classical realism nor any IR school explicitly adopted Niebuhr's theological presuppositions, but both classical realists and English School thinkers respectfully agree with him that history with its patterns and lessons is a rich and indispensable source for understanding

³ Hans Morgenthau, "The Influence of Reinhold Niebuhr in American Life and Thought," in Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*, 101.

⁴ Quoted in Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 72; Niebuhr's review appeared in *University of Toronto Quarterly* vol. 10 (July 1941), 505-510.

human conduct; and that while human nature is skewed by self-interest and history infused with contingency, history can be profitably studied for pragmatic lessons in the service of long-term goals, including justice and peace among nations. Moreover, the founders of the English School, Butterfield and Wight, did share much of Niebuhr's theological grounding and therefore incorporated his worldview into their theoretical framework for international relations.

The first international realist is always said to be Thucydides, who used his history and interpretation of the Peloponnesian War as support for his theory that the chief causes of that and other wars are a combination of fear, self-interest, and honor (including the egoistic lust for power and glory). He argued that Athens was motivated by its hunger for expansion (interest) and its self-inflated lust for power (honor), while Sparta acted in fear. Centuries later, Niebuhr would draw similar lessons from various histories of war and conflict. Indeed, it seems that no one has improved significantly on Thucydides' triumvirate of bellicose causes.

Between Thucydides and Niebuhr was St. Augustine, a father of realism whose chief insights about politics are found and illustrated in *City of God*, a book devoted, at least in large part, to understanding the significance of the "fall" of Rome in 410 (*i.e.*, its sacking by the Goths) as well as the events that preceded it. Later, Machiavelli's observations about political power were distilled into his small political treatise, *The Prince* (although his own political views were more comprehensively presented in his *Discourses on Livy*). Thomas Hobbes is another progenitor of realism since, even those who do not agree with his solution of universal submission to the all-powerful Leviathan, acknowledge his insight that human nature requires and human history proves that security and safety are the bedrock of every social contract.

Hans Morgenthau, the "father" of twentieth-century IR realism (along with Niebuhr), was also committed to a deep understanding of history, going so far as to make international theory a

subset of philosophy of history: “What we call international theory, then, amounts to a kind of philosophy of history.” (Morgenthau 1970, 250) Morgenthau was contrasting the approach of English-School theorist Martin Wight with the neorealists who (as discussed later) have sought to transform IR into a history-free social science modeled on microeconomics – an effort which Morgenthau considered doomed from the start. Niebuhr would have agreed. Wight’s approach, like Morgenthau’s own, resists being abstractly theorized because it never loses sight of the specificity, the concreteness, and the contingencies of history as it unfolds, or of the practical wisdom required in present and future decision-making. Morgenthau explains that while he does not *equate* international theory with philosophy of history, because theory and history perform different functions, nonetheless, “both Wight’s and my orientation are historical.” (*Id.*, 251) In this, he was speaking for Niebuhr and all classical realists, as well as English School thinkers. There is no credible international theory without at least an implicit interpretation, and therefore a theory, of history.

Faith and History

In *Faith and History* (1949), especially chap. II, “The History of the Modern Conception of History,” Niebuhr reviewed various historical conceptions of history, dividing them into three epochs: (1) the ancient Greek view with its “cycle of endless recurrences,” a view which “equated history with the world of nature and sought emancipation of man’s changeless reason from this world of change”; (2) the Biblical-Christian approach “which found man’s historic existence both meaningful and mysterious” and which distinguished history from nature; and (3) the modern view, which, unlike the previous two perspectives, is essentially a philosophy of historical progress. (*FH*, 14-16)⁵

⁵ Books by Reinhold Niebuhr are generally cited by title only, sometimes with abbreviations explained in the Bibliography.

Christian thinkers saw the cosmos as a dynamic arena created by God and sustained by his love and will. Time and space are not, in this view, categories that have always existed; they were created by God specifically for his creation, Godself being unlimited by them. Christianity rejects the classical idea of endless cycles of time which are inescapable except into a mystical sphere which is timeless, spaceless, and without physical dimension. The God of Israel and of Christianity is not, like Greek and Roman deities, propitiated by sacrifices and otherwise unconcerned with the daily lives and conduct of men and women. Nor is he, as in certain Hindu and Buddhist interpretations, accessible only to the mystic. Judaism, the historical foundation of the Christian faith, is built on real historical figures such as Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, who acted in real time on earth in full consciousness, in ways that had religious significance. (*Id.*, 20-25)

Old Testament writers sometimes questioned whether history has a moral meaning or is merely a parade of the strong ruling over and oppressing the weak, and whether God's sovereignty over history is strong enough to overcome this rebellion against the moral order. Their messianic faith served in part to respond to these troubling questions. (*Id.*, 26) For Christians, the coming of Jesus as Christ provided a decisive answer to them:

The Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ represent an event in history, in and through which a disclosure of the whole meaning of history occurs, and all of those questions are answered. (*Id.*)

Christianity is based on a real historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, who is also believed to be Christ the anointed one. The universe was created by God, and humans within it. Time began God's creation and will continue until God ends history. But the divine presence is not limited to the beginning and the end. The Hebrew Bible is the testament to God's dealings over centuries with his people Israel, with their struggles, sinfulness, and sorrow. God's covenants first with

the Jews and later with the Christians in the New Testament, and the prophetic tradition first established by the Hebrew prophets, are two fundamental ways in which God maintains this ongoing providential relationship. Thus, it is intrinsic to Christianity that earthly history has spiritual and divine significance, that the faith of God's people includes their recognition that history is significant to God, and therefore to God's people, and finally that God is both beyond but also "in" history and the events that comprise human and social movement through time. (FH, 24-29)

As a result of the divine significance of history, Christianity, like Judaism, retains a robust interest in this-worldliness, seeing life here not as something to be escaped but as the venue for God's work.

In *Faith and History*, Niebuhr rejects both the classical view and the modern one. For Niebuhr, God's involvement in history – God's "plan" – is present but does not necessarily mean human progress; and it is mostly hidden from human view.⁶ It may be possible, after the fact, to see glimpses of God's historical movement at work, but one must be cautious even in this. While God's moving finger in history can sometimes be detected in retrospect, this is solely through faith and never with certainty.

The two guideposts (inevitably in tension with each other) are human freedom and human destiny. On the one hand, humans are free because of their God-given agency to fashion their own lives and make their own decisions, including in the social and political realms. Thus, history is subject to shaping by humans with free will. On the other hand, God is also a

⁶ St. Augustine put an end to the inevitably progressive and triumphalist view of history exemplified by Eusebius. As Allan Fitzgerald states it, "Augustine's eschatology translated into a theology of history. ... Throughout history there will be periods of progress and periods of decline. Eschatological hope does not include any *necessary* progress in human history." Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 317.

participant in history who shapes it in ways that are mostly obscure to humans but which assure that God's purposes are being realized and will ultimately prevail.

The "Biblical View"

Niebuhr's own view he usually calls the "Biblical view." He does in fact draw heavily on the Hebrew Bible, especially (but not only) the prophets, which he reads through the lens of the New Testament. Niebuhr took the words of the prophets very seriously. For example, he regarded their critique of greed and gross inequality to be both consonant with the teachings of Jesus and directly applicable to the present age. Unlike Augustine, Niebuhr did not take literally the Old Testament stories such as the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, or the seven days of creation. Rather, Niebuhr argues that these accounts, if taken "seriously but not literally," contain profound insights into human nature, good and evil, and the relationship between God and his creation. Indeed, taking them literally would present the danger of overlooking or avoiding their deeper significance.

Thus, in the Old Testament, God is present to the people of Israel, directing their history, punishing their wrongs, and inspiring the prophets' call for greater faithfulness. It is evident from the first chapter of Genesis onward that, while giving man the freedom to do good and evil, the Hebrew God is not remote or uncaring about the lives or choices of his creation. He takes an active interest in their affairs and leads them to his commandments, laying the foundation for an ethical life in accordance with God's wishes. From the beginning, the Israelites were given to understand that God had a purpose and destiny for them as a people, and that that purpose would be enacted in this world, in time.

Most significantly for Niebuhr, God made covenants with the Israelite nation – covenants that were forward-looking and which called for both God and the Israelites to act in history.

(*FH*, 24-27) God promised to make the nation of Abraham a great nation which would eventually have as its home the promised land of Canaan, presently occupied by other powers, the covenant to be sealed by the rite of circumcision by all of Abraham's male descendants. (Gen. 12:1-3, 17:2-14). Later, in giving the law to Moses, God gave the great but conditional covenant that he would make Israel his people, "my treasured possession," but only if "you obey my voice" and keep the commandments. (Ex. 19:5) As a result of these covenants, which involved Israel's obligations to keep God's law and as well as God's commitment to maintain his relationship with his people, all of history became imbued with divine significance. This significance was crowned in the New Testament where God's relationship was expanded to all of humanity, building on the covenants with the Israelites.

The Hebrew prophets continually called the Israelite people back to their commitments to God, as Paul called the early church in the New Testament. The prophets castigated the wicked and stressed the obligations of the rich to the poor and of the powerful to the oppressed, weaving these obligations over time into a foundation for social justice. Niebuhr connected this tradition with that of Jesus who, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5), stated the ultimate ethical standards for Christians when he blessed and commended the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the peacemakers, the meek and merciful, the pure in heart, the persecuted and those who are falsely reviled for Jesus' sake, "in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt. 5:11)

The greatest event of world-historic significance to the Israelite people was God's promise of a messiah, an anointed one to come in God's name. It was this messianic promise, culminating for Christians in Jesus as Christ, that constituted the new covenant (the "New

Testament”) between God and man. (*FH*, 26-27) Through the promised messianic figure God achieved an everlasting and human intimacy with all of his people.

All three of these elements – the covenants in both Testaments, the Hebrew prophetic tradition, and the messianic fulfillment in Christ – are central to Niebuhr’s understanding of the Biblical significance of history. In all these instances, God is acting in history, giving his laws, forgiving unfaithfulness through mercy, and guiding the overall course of his people and of history. Even so, humans retain their freedom to do good and evil and thus their responsibility before God. History is mostly the result of the actions and decisions of sinful men and women, exercising their free will in ways that often contravene God’s laws, even as God directs the broad trajectory toward his purposes. The “conception of a divine sovereignty over history” means that

[t]he freedom of God over and beyond the structures of life makes room for the freedom of man. All forms of naturalistic or spiritualistic determinism are broken. History is conceived meaningfully as a drama and not as a pattern of necessary relationships which could be charted scientifically. (*FH*, 27)

Because it is an active “drama,” the course of history frequently resists systematic analysis, much less predictability. The combination of – and tension between – God’s providential guidance of history and human freedom in making and influencing it makes of history a mystery ultimately impervious to categories of reason, yet one whose meaningfulness for Christians is vouchsafed “by faith, rather than by sight.” (*FH*, 112) As Ernest Lefever put it in his

Introduction to Niebuhr’s *The World Crisis and American Responsibility* (at p. 6):

Niebuhr can be called a true prophet because he speaks from a tradition that takes history (and therefore politics) seriously. He always sees the specific event, perhaps tragic in itself, as a part of a larger drama which is neither wholly tragic nor wholly heroic, but which stands under the mercy and judgment of Almighty God.

Niebuhr's Augustine

Next to scripture, the most important influence on Niebuhr was St. Augustine. Of course, Niebuhr was not alone; Augustine's influence extends to many of the most important thinkers of the last 1500 years. But it is impossible to understand Niebuhr without understanding Niebuhr's reading of Augustine.

Augustine reflected deeply on the nature of time. As Niebuhr noted with approval, he "rejected the cyclical theory of time and history" that was characteristic of ancient Greek thought (*FH*, 65), but also rejected the possibility of escaping history into a heightened, supernatural region of immediate communion with the divine. Rather, Augustine focused on God's initiation of time, on God's creation of the heavens and the earth at a specific point, on the goodness of all that God created, and on the succession of divine interactions with his human creation as disclosed in the Bible, culminating in the return of Christ and the end of time. Time was thus seen as linear (as we would put it) and teleological: it was created for a purpose, and all creation moves toward it.⁷ Jesus was born, died, and resurrected once for all time, which vouchsafes that history is not a series of repeating cycles, but in fact follows the pattern of Jesus's life.

Augustine's commitment to the "earth-centeredness" of much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, greatly influenced subsequent Christian ethical thought, including that of Niebuhr. But so did the theme of two cities, to which Niebuhr traced much of Augustine's excessive pessimism about social change. (*FH*, 127) Even more so in subsequent generations, the sharp distinction between the two cities threatened the unlinking of human history from God's history, assigning the former to the *civitas terrena* while the latter was confined to the *civitas dei*; although Niebuhr would have argued that this went beyond Augustine's actual

⁷ To say that history is "linear" for Augustine is not to say that it proceeds in a straight line, which would not be either his view or Niebuhr's. Niebuhr asserted that, despite the twists and turns of events, if history is looked at in faith and with a long view, *sub specie aeternitatis*, it displays an overall forward movement toward God's ends.

teaching. While this distinction was liberating for some historians, notably Herbert Butterfield who will be discussed below, it contained significant risks: risk of the liberation of earthly history from divine judgment or risk of escape of history into other-worldliness. Niebuhr's Augustine rejected both these outcomes and walked a fine line: on the one hand he taught and modeled a life in which participation in the "affairs of men" was important and invested with moral significance. On the other, these affairs lacked ultimate significance and would, in the end, go into the dustbin of salvation history.

Niebuhr, like Butterfield, made positive use of the separation of the two cities, particularly when it comes to man's responsibility for the city of man. Despite God's ultimate concern with human history and divine intervention at key points, human history, while ultimately serving God's history or salvation history, is fashioned by man's freedom and thus has a relative autonomy from God's history. While "for Niebuhr the center of Christian faith (as of each religion) lies in its disclosure of the structure and meaning of history and of individual life as lived in the wider context of history" (Gilkey 2001, 145), nonetheless, the actual making and living of social and political history is man's doing without direct involvement by the divine: "Human history is rooted in the natural process" and "compounded of natural necessity and human freedom." (*ND-II*, 1; see also *FH*, 35, 55) For Niebuhr as for Butterfield, man, not God, is responsible for the history we make.⁸

On the other hand, the autonomy of human history is not complete. God works *through* history. He does so less by intervention than in subtle ways suitable to his purposes though invisible to ours; but we know by faith that God directs the broad trajectory of history, and one

⁸ Butterfield was a "deep and sincere Augustinian" who appropriated the "Augustinian distinction between secular or profane history and sacred or Christian history," which became "central to Butterfield's way of conceiving the past." McIntyre, 5-6.

can sometimes discern by faith and after the fact God's arranging or bending of events or nations to his purposes.

Love and Justice in History

For Niebuhr, God's covenants with Israel and the "new covenant" represented by Christ's death for all humans (Luke 22:20; II Cor. 11:25), along with the teachings of the prophets and of Jesus, are the "school" from which we learn the basics of justice and faithfulness. Most fundamentally, we learn in the teachings of Jesus that love is the absolute norm for all human relationships, as it is the foundation for God's relationship to all humans. Yet, these teachings are not predictors of how humans will or even can actually behave in fashioning their own history, particularly the history of the collectivity. It is impossible, therefore, to judge whether "history" in the general sense encompassing all of humankind is getting consistently "better" or "worse" from a moral or any other point of view – much less whether it will get better in the future. Man retains his agency and, with it, both his transcendent capacity and the natural sinfulness in which his freedom was born. There are no cycles or set patterns. Moreover, God's providence, although very much a reality in history, does not act in ways that conform to man's expectations. God sometimes brings good out of man's evil and sometimes does not, leaving humans to the consequences of their own actions. God's action or inaction in history is inscrutable in its particulars, although God's love and ultimate concern for his creation are beyond question. Thus, the balance of goodness and wickedness in the world, of progress and decline, of moral growth and decay, of God's providence and man's sinful use of his freedom, will vary according to human choices primarily and God's providential involvement secondarily.

Niebuhr's theology of history draws much from Augustine as well as from the Bible, starting with the bedrock of God's ultimate sovereignty in history: "Whatever may happen in

subsequent ages, nothing can occur which will shake the faith of a true believer in God's sovereignty over all history." (*FH*, 141) It is thus God's sovereignty which establishes what Niebuhr calls "the general frame of meaning for life and history, according to Biblical faith." (*Id.*, 120)

Niebuhr also shares Augustine's recognition of the ambiguity of the actual operation of God's sovereignty in relation to humans (providence), leaving faith as the only sure basis for a theology of history. Part of that faith is the assurance that redemption will come and history's ultimate significance will be revealed at the end of history, the *eschaton*. Meanwhile, human history is one of conflict with God's commands and rebellion against the *agape* of Christ. To recognize this, and look for the redemption that can only come at the end of history by God's mercy, as represented in Christ's atoning death, is to begin to see the true meaning of history. History is a salvation story for Niebuhr, for societies and collectivities as well as for individual men and women; but the story can be known only as our alienation from God is recognized in the crucifixion of Christ, and only as we recognize the mercy and forgiveness which comes at the end of history, as it was disclosed in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection.

It was Augustine, Niebuhr said, who "first elaborated the sense of history, derived from Biblical thought, into the philosophical speculations of the West." (*FH*, 18) Niebuhr shares Augustine's unshakeable faith in God's providence, as well as his understanding that the works of providence are mysterious. They differ in degree, however, on the divine importance of human endeavors to affect history, such as efforts for social justice. To be sure, Augustine believed that Christian pilgrims must be attentive to and support the peace and justice of the *civitas terrena*; his vision was not wholly other-worldly, as is often unfairly charged. Still, there is an astringency in Augustine's warrant for such worldly efforts: his estimate of the prospects of

the earthly city are not high. By contrast, Niebuhr's passion was social justice, a passion he drew less from Augustine than from the great Hebrew prophets such as Amos and Isaiah. Though ever mindful of human limits, Niebuhr believed that justice, as the approximation of love in the social context, must be pursued with Christian dedication. He agreed with Augustine that the true justice of God's Kingdom is not attainable in history. Nonetheless, it serves as our essential goal and vision in response to the second part of Christ's great commandment – love of neighbor. (Matt. 22:36-40)

Finally, while Niebuhr valued the church as the place of renewal, prayer, and worship for Christian women and men, and even as a vessel of grace, he was critical of Augustine's "idolatry of the church," pointing out that Augustine's ecclesiology exempted the church from the willfulness of human sin:

The Augustinian interpretation of history, upon which the dogmatic theological structure of medieval Christianity rests, ... exempt[ed] the church from the ambiguities and contradictions of history more absolutely than the prophets of Israel exempted their own nation. Thereby new errors were introduced into the interpretation of history. (FH, 29)

As a result, the church was erroneously understood for centuries as being, too simply, the city of God on earth. This was not strictly Augustine's view, but Augustine's too uncritical exaltation of the church tended in later interpretation to elide the distinction between the church and the city of God. To the great credit of the Reformation, Niebuhr thought, this was corrected and Christians came to understand that all institutions, including their own, are afflicted by natural sin and stand under God's judgment. In this way, the Reformation restored the ancient prophetic insight.

Theology of History

Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of history is the key to all of his thought, according to Langdon Gilkey: It is "the center of Niebuhr's theology. The understanding of history is for him the most fundamental of theological issues, in fact of all the issues of human reflection." (Gilkey 2001, 169)⁹

In this, Niebuhr reflects the thought of Emil Brunner, whom he acknowledged as a theological mentor on this point. After being criticized by Brunner for failing to note the similarity of Niebuhr's anthropology with Brunner's in *Man in Revolt*, Niebuhr said, "Brunner's whole theological position is close to mine and ... it is one to which I am more indebted than any other."¹⁰ One of the issues Brunner addressed in *Man in Revolt* was history, upon which his ideas are indeed very similar to Niebuhr's:

There is no Christian philosophy of history, but there is a Christian understanding of history. Indeed, the special understanding of history is so interwoven with the nature of the Christian faith that we might well say: the Christian faith is a peculiar understanding of history, the understanding of man as historical. If we are to understand man from the Biblical point of view it is essential to understand him historically. The Bible does not regard man as an isolated individual or as a member of the species; it sees the individual human being as part of the history of mankind as a whole. (Brunner, 435)

⁹ Although I have not adopted Gilkey's anatomy of Niebuhr's theology of history (including his theme of the "vertical dialectic" between God and humans), I have learned a great deal from it and am grateful for the profound insights in *Reaping the Whirlwind* and *On Niebuhr*, as well as in his published articles on the subject. Gilkey establishes without a doubt the close relationships in Niebuhr's thought between history and human nature, to which I apply my own interpretation informed by Gilkey's work.

¹⁰ Brunner made the criticism in his essay, "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker" (Kegley, 82-87), in which he wrote:

In reading the first volume of his most significant work, the Gifford Lectures on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I was somewhat surprised to find no mention of the fact that in this work Reinhold Niebuhr had been strongly preoccupied with certain ideas which I had put forward in my book *Man in Revolt* in the year 1937. (Kegley, 86)

In his "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism" published in the same book (pp. 505-527), Niebuhr began by seeking to "make some amends for a grievous omission in my *The Nature and Destiny of Man*." He acknowledged that he had indeed read and "profited greatly" from *Man in Revolt*, that he had read it in the original German in 1937, and that he now apologized for not mentioning its influence in his published Gifford Lectures. He went on to say that Brunner's "whole theological position" is "close to mine" and the one to which "I am more indebted than any other." (Id., 507)

Niebuhr's ethics follows his understanding of history. His ethical thought emphasizes social structures, political power, and the possibilities for change throughout history. This emphasis, in turn, requires that he address human experience of social and political power in order to test and prove his ethical precepts. Early on, Niebuhr focused his ethics on society, politics, and history, thus inevitably engaging with history. In doing so, he encountered various secular thinkers, some of whose ideas he opposed and others he found compatible. Thus, much of his writing is apologetic in nature, explaining the insights of the Christian tradition (especially as to human selfishness and the role of power) to those outside it – but at the same time correcting and admonishing the understandings of many of those within it.

Although Niebuhr is sometimes cited for pessimism about history, for much of his life he combatted both excessive optimism and extreme pessimism, both of which he saw all around him in western history and contemporary American culture. Indeed, what came to be called Christian realism was his effort to avoid both hazards and to sail “the frail bark of social justice” between the extremes.¹¹ *Faith and History*, published in 1949, was his comprehensive treatment of history, even more important for his philosophy of history than *Nature and Destiny* a few years earlier. He wrote *Faith and History*, he said, in response to “the prevailing evolutionary optimism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” culminating a period that began with the Enlightenment. He noted that historical developments since 1914, however, led to a “process of decay” for optimism (*FH*, vii), which makes this an excellent time to examine the meaning of history:

...periods of historic decay may well be times of profoundest religious insights; for historic catastrophes break the power of the idolatrous worship of cultures and civilizations. They are, or may be appropriated by faith as, divine judgments upon the

¹¹ In borrowing Niebuhr's words from *ND-II*, 128, where he speaks of sailing the “frail bark of social justice” between the “Scylla and Charybdis” of tyranny and anarchy, I am suggesting that it also applies to his effort to steer Christian realism between over-optimism and excessive pessimism about human nature and history.

inclination of men and nations to regard a tenuous and tentative form of human order of justice as the final form” (*FH*, 111)

Moreover, the decay of optimism is far from complete in western culture. Excessive optimism revives from time to time and, especially in America, remains the dominant key in its relations with foreign nations. While the atrocities of the twentieth century weakened what was earlier a virtually unlimited faith in reason, this has been replaced in many quarters by an almost unlimited faith in history itself, the view that Niebuhr calls, “history [as] itself Christ,” which is to say that “historical development is redemptive.” (*Id.* viii)¹²

Having rejected Enlightenment and modern optimism on the one side, and on the other, twentieth-century pessimism, resignation and nihilism, Niebuhr offers his Biblically-based understanding of time and his Christian faith in “the divine power which is sovereign over history” – a power which contains “a resource of mercy and love which overcomes the rebellion of human sin, without negating the distinctions between good and evil, which are the moral content of history.” (*Id.*, 22)

This reference to God’s sovereignty is a reminder of Niebuhr’s anchor in understanding history (as with Augustine, noted earlier). It is not that the state of man is progressing or regressing, nor that we can “read” either God’s plan or the course of human history, or reliably detect the significance of either, much less predict future patterns. Rather, the key is that history – the history that we humans make in our freedom – has ultimate meaning (for good and evil) because it flows from our God-given agency and because God is judging and, in ultimate and inscrutable ways, guiding it. This is obviously an assertion of faith not of deductive proof

¹² Of course, Niebuhr too believed in a “redemptive process,” but it did not grow out of historical development. It results from the eschatological commitment that Christ will return at the end of history and redeem it. In this limited sense Niebuhr’s Biblical outlook can be deemed ultimately “optimistic,” but of course this is not the kind of optimism that develops from within history, and which he was attacking. As Niebuhr put it in *Nature and Destiny*, “[t]here is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God. History moves toward the realization of the Kingdom but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization.” (*ND-II*, 286)

because the precise nature of history's meaning and of God's involvement is occluded from human vision. History's meaning is an *ultimate* meaning, conferred from outside history; the immediate meaning of events within history is assigned by human agency. The former (ultimate) truth is confirmed by God's few but decisive interruptions from outside human history, including the creation itself and beginning of time and history, the fall of man, redemption through the Christ event, and the promised return of Christ at the end of history. It is also demonstrated through God's intentional acts within history, such as his teachings and guidance of the Israelite people, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the sustenance of the church by the Holy Spirit. The Biblical revelation vouchsafes the divine role in human history, which is not to override human freedom but to confer divine significance on its exercise.

Niebuhr thought it was necessary to understand history as God's work for several reasons. First, as a matter of faith, the idea of providence – God's continuing purposeful engagement with the life of humans which Gilkey calls, "the symbol of God's activity in nature and social history" (Gilkey 1976, 217) – follows directly from God's sovereignty over all creation, including all time and space. Indeed, the idea of providence itself is inseparable from history because sovereignty continues through history; it is not a one-time event. Second, the acknowledgment of God's involvement in history is important in order to avoid the tendency (illustrated for Niebuhr by ancient and Eastern religions) to escape from the vicissitudes and cross-currents of history into an ethereal mysticism detached from the world. The fundamental teachings of scripture – Jesus' law of love in the New Testament and the prophetic insistence on justice in the Old Testament – foreclose for Christians any such detachment and require taking history seriously by being at all times engaged in it.

Finally, as a political matter, flight from the uncertainties of history risks causing a radical reduction of historical understanding, which in turn can descend into a form of fanaticism which assigns ultimate significance to historically contingent goals (as twentieth-century fascism did), or to a deluded messianism which promises a heaven on earth within history (as twentieth-century communism did). To avoid this, Christians profess that ultimate meaning lies beyond history, but also commit to “the hazardous assertion of a meaningful history,” meaning the effort within limited human faculties “to discern meaning in all the confusions and cross-purposes of history.” (*ND-I*, “Preface to the 1964 Edition,” xxvi)

Given the need to take history seriously as God’s work, how can one explain the obscurity of God’s role in history? Niebuhr argues that this obscurity results not just from finite man’s inability to comprehend the infinite, nor even from the fact that man’s rebellion in the fall narrowed the human capacity to see God’s purposes – although both these things are true. (*FH*, 124-26) More importantly, the obscurity of God’s purposes is *intended* by God as a necessary corollary of the Second Commandment – the prohibition against idols. God’s incomprehensibility is a way that faithful humans can avoid the “idolatrous tendencies” in each of us to make God in man’s image, to worship ourselves, our culture and our nation through worshipping God, and to use our role as God’s agent to oppress and overpower others. If God’s purposes were too readily apparent to men, if God’s hand in history could be confidently read and discerned, men and women would inevitably manipulate those purposes to their own ends, even more than they already do. The obscure nature of the particulars of God’s providence thus makes it more difficult for the prideful to claim that providence for their own purposes. Niebuhr explains:

The idea of a source and end of life, too transcendent to the desires, capacities, and powers of human life to be either simply comprehended by the human mind or easily

manipulated for human ends, represents the radical break of Biblical faith with the idolatrous tendencies in all human culture. (*FH*, 103)

The ... contribution of the Biblical idea of divine transcendence to the concept of universal history is contained in the rigor with which the inclination of every human collective, whether tribe, nation, or empire, to make itself the center of universal history is overcome in principle. (*Id.*, 113)

Divine incomprehensibility obviously does not foreclose the sinful human tendency to idolize penultimate things, but it makes it more difficult.

Mystery ... prevents the realm of meaning from being reduced too simply to rational intelligibility and thereby being given a false center of meaning in a relative or contingent historical force or end. (*Id.*, 103)¹³

Thus, Niebuhr argues against the national or ethnic particularity of God's providence in history, in favor of the universality of providence under divine sovereignty. This is the meaning of the expansion of the Biblical scope from the particularity of God's chosen people the Israelites in the Old Testament, into the New Testament's universal gospel whose followers were commissioned to go into all the world and teach all nations. (Matt. 28:19) This concept – one history of all humankind under one God who is transcendent in time and space over all creation – is “basic to a Biblical interpretation of history.” (*Id.*, 104) It is a “unity of history” which can only be discerned “by faith, rather than by sight.” (*Id.*, 112) Its importance lies, at least in part, in the need to curb the tendency of every nation and culture to make its story the story of humankind, and thus a vehicle of spiritual pride and political oppression. God's concern for all of humankind, all nations and peoples, including even the enemies of one's own nation, is a necessary reminder of the essential equality of all men and women as children of the same God. Niebuhr was fond of recalling Amos as the first Biblical figure to make an “explicit exposition of universal history,” when he wrote: “Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children

¹³ Niebuhr's argument is a creative one, but I am not completely persuaded. Does not the obscurity of God's purposes make it easier, not harder, for humans to claim that certain acts are providential and thus to create “false centers of meaning” within contingent occurrences? So far as I can tell, Niebuhr does not address this objection.

of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?” (Amos 9:7; at *FH*, 107 n. 2)

History and Human Nature

In *Reaping the Whirlwind*, Gilkey observes:

Insofar as the historian uses general laws to reconstruct that explanatory story, the most important ‘laws’ or ‘principles’ are not those that the physical sciences, nor even the social sciences, formulate. Rather these ‘laws’ or truisms are his own most basic ontological or philosophical principles of interpreting human nature and its place in history.” (Gilkey 1976, 98)

The relationship between history and human nature – or, as Jean Bethke Elshtain prefers, between history and our “anthropological presuppositions”¹⁴ – is an old and rich topic. Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), reflecting much of Enlightenment thinking, set forth in *The New Science* (1725) an understanding that human nature is universal and that, therefore, history and its interpretation can be uniform across cultures and time periods. Hume’s *History of England* (published 1754-1761) makes the same assumption. At the other end of the spectrum, Montesquieu argued, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), that the particular climate, physical characteristics, and cultural variables of a society result in incommensurately divergent morals and manners. Herder (1744-1803) believed that different European countries or groups of countries (such as German-speaking Europeans) developed cultural characteristics that were distinctive, or even unique, to them.¹⁵

¹⁴ Elshtain preferred “anthropological presuppositions” over “human nature,” because it inoculates against the false view that persons who speak of human nature believe in a fixed, unchanging structure, unaffected by culture or society. See “The Dignity of the Human Person and *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries*,” *Journal of Law and Religion* vol. 14 (1999-2000), 53-65 (reviewing book by Michael Perry). Whatever it may be called, Elshtain agreed with Gilkey on its importance: “The ends toward which rights tend cannot be evaluated absent a recognition that one must begin with some understanding of the human person.” (*Id.*)

¹⁵ The relationship between human nature and human history is not simple. They are conceptually distinguishable, yet are linked in a kind of circle: human history is greatly, but not wholly, influenced by human nature, assuming there is a single human nature. Human nature, in turn, is formed by social activities and influences through time – *i.e.*, by history. Moreover, one’s understandings or assumptions about human nature become a key to interpreting history. Thus, many Enlightenment thinkers held that history can be interpreted across cultures and epochs because

No one has expressed a closer connection between history and human nature than Reinhold Niebuhr. He goes so far as to say that we can classify “various interpretations of the meaning of life by noting their attitude towards history.” (*ND-II*, 2)

Not only does he see history as largely a function and projection of human nature, he uses the facts of history to demonstrate the truths of human nature. More specifically, he uses political and economic power as exercised by those who possess it as a magnifying glass to enlarge and illuminate the internal characteristics of all humans. Much as Plato in *The Republic* explores the anatomy of the soul (*psyche*) by examining its enlarged form in the city, Niebuhr examines the wielding of power on the historical stage as a way of studying the contradictory forces that make up the self of every man and woman. The pride and lust for power within the individual, he writes, are present and observable in magnified form in international politics. (*CPP*, 13)¹⁶ Human nature is writ large in political affairs, and never more so than in the conduct of nation-states toward each other. Therefore, Niebuhr places particular emphasis on international relations as a sphere where human nature plays out in observable ways.

On the opening page of *Nature and Destiny*, vol. II, Niebuhr sets forth what is perhaps his single most important theme in comprehending human nature, and therefore human history:

there is a basic uniformity in human nature resulting in discernible patterns in human history. As noted in the text, Herder strongly disagreed, seeing human nature as a product of particular times, places, and cultures. (“Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind,” 1791, in J.D. Evrigenis, ed. and trans., *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publ. Co., 2004)) I do not think Niebuhr would say that either view is wholly wrong; the key is to determine the precise level at which humans depart from their fundamental human nature and become defined by their particular cultures and personalities. Part of the strength of the Augustinian-Niebuhrian view is that it posits human characteristics at such a fundamental level that their universality is very plausible, and to some degree even empirically demonstrable. There is still plenty of room for individual or cultural differences.

¹⁶ In the Preface to the 1964 edition of *Nature and Destiny* (p. xxv), Niebuhr said: “...human evil, primarily expressed in undue self-concern, is a corruption of [the self’s] essential freedom *and grows with its freedom.*” (emphasis added) Power, of course, typically augments one’s freedom, and thus magnifies the scope of potential human evil as well as good. The wielding of power thus provides a window on human nature, including its evil side. This is one of Niebuhr’s most profound insights, and another way in which, for him, human nature and history are inextricably bound together.

Man is, and yet is not, involved in the flux of nature and time. He is a creature, subject to nature's necessities and limitations; but he is also a free spirit who knows of the brevity of his years and by this knowledge transcends the temporal by some capacity within himself. ...

Man's ability to transcend the flux of nature gives him the capacity to make history. Human history is rooted in the natural process but it is something more than either the determined sequences of natural causation or the capricious variations and occurrences of the natural world. It is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom. Man's freedom to transcend the natural flux gives him the possibility of grasping a span of time in his consciousness and thereby of knowing history. It also enables him to change, reorder and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby to *make* history. (ND-II, 1)

In his "Preface to the 1964 Edition" of *Nature and Destiny*, Niebuhr said, "my thesis, which I still hold," is that "individual selfhood is expressed in the self's capacity for self-transcendence and not in its rational capacity for conceptual and analytic procedures." (ND-I, xxv) In a 1932 essay in *Christian Century*, Niebuhr described this same tension in human nature, as well as the need for self-transcendence itself to resolve it:

Man cannot live without a sense of the absolute, but neither can he achieve the absolute. He may resolve the tragic character of that fact by religious faith, by the experience of grace in which the unattainable is experienced in anticipatory terms, but he can never resolve in purely ethical terms the conflict between what is and what ought to be. (Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?," *Christian Century*, March 30, 1932, reprinted in Miller, 1992)

Repeatedly in *Nature and Destiny*, Niebuhr demonstrates the close intertwining of human nature and human destiny (with each being the prime focus of the two respective volumes). The fact that one is a human creature, has the ability to recognize and reflect on his creatureliness, but also has the capacity to transcend it and see himself as he is and beyond himself to what he might be – and the fact that humans have this same dual capacity in regard to history – these exemplify the paradoxical nature of human nature and give rise to the consciousness of history.

Another paradox, based on Biblical teaching and confirmed by our own experience, is that human nature is a mixture of good and evil; we display both virtuous and vicious traits and

inclinations from birth. Thus, Christianity “emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man’s spiritual stature in its doctrine of ‘image of God’” (*ND-I*, 150), for everything that God created is good. Yet, man is characterized not only by “weakness, dependence, and finiteness,” which are inherent, but also by wickedness and egotistical selfishness, which are expressed by choice. In Biblical terms a person is both sinful creature, part of the animal kingdom (but with free will unique to humans), prone to the serving of selfish needs and wants; and also made in the image of God and therefore capable of transcending, not only in vision but in action, one’s selfish creaturely origins. A human is comprised of both nature and spirit, existing “at the juncture” of these two. (*ND-I*, 181) All too often, the evil impulse has the upper hand, for “the Christian faith holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter.” (*Man’s Nature*, 39) But the upper hand is not the entire hand:

[T]he Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life. (*ND-I*, 150)

This dual aspect of human nature heightens the capacity for sin (as it does the capacity for good), but aside from this – and tragically – this very ability to see beyond one’s animal nature leads to a striving for heights that, while not reached, leads directly to the temptations of sinful pride and false superiority, and often, a fall. Niebuhr puts it this way:

[M]an’s knowledge is limited by time and place. Yet it is not as limited as animal knowledge. ... [M]an knows something of these limits, which means that in some sense he transcends them. ... The realization of the relativity of his knowledge subjects him to the peril of scepticism. The abyss of meaninglessness yawns on the brink of all his mighty spiritual endeavours. Therefore man is tempted to deny the limited character of his knowledge, and the finiteness of his perspectives. He pretends to have achieved a degree of knowledge which is beyond the limit of finite life. (*ND-I*, 182)

This pretense of knowledge masks one's anxiety and makes one vulnerable to the temptation to "deny the contingent character of his existence (in pride and self-love) and to escape from his freedom (in sensuality)." (*Id.*, 185)

History as Tragedy

Not surprisingly, the human predicament – the struggle between selfish animal desires and a transcendent vision – is reflected in human history and gives rise to the tragedy of history.

Greek drama well expresses the Christian sense of tragedy, though without the Christian faith to redeem it. (*ND-I*, 10) In both *Faith and History* and in *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr argues that contemporary culture's lack of a "vantage point of faith from which to understand the predicament of modern man" leaves it more in the situation of irony than of tragedy; but for those who do have a faithful vantage point, tragedy is the more appropriate understanding. (*FH*, 9)

Man is aware of his limitations, yet strives to overcome them, a struggle which is never completely successful but never completely abandoned. Within the struggle lie the seeds of the human response: either humility and submission to God, or hubris and the ego-driven pursuit of power over nature and other humans. Man is endowed

not only with a rational faculty which seeks to bring all things into orderly relation with each other but with an imagination which surveys the heavens, aspires to the stars and breaks all the little systems of prudence which the mind constructs. It is this imagination which is the root of all human creativity; but also the source of all human evil. (*Beyond Tragedy*, 161)

The tragedy of history is in one sense greater than that of individual existence because history involves collectivities, including society and political systems. Ever since the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932, Niebuhr stressed the greater complexity of ethical evaluation in public life, the unworkability of love as a simple norm of moral practice in society,

and the necessity of justice as the standard for all social and political relations. In the same year that *Moral Man* was published, Niebuhr wrote a piece for the *Christian Century* in which he called history “a perennial tragedy” precisely because “the highest ideals which the individual may project are ideals which he can never realize in social and collective terms.” For this reason, he said, “[s]ociety is and will always remain sub-human.” (“Must We Do Nothing?,” 1032, reprinted in Miller, 1992)

As noted earlier, one of the manifestations of the anxiety of the human predicament is the desire for power to satisfy pride. For Niebuhr (as for Augustine), pride is the most comprehensive and deep-seated sin to which humans are prone – the tendency to make ourselves or our possessions or causes into ultimate objects of devotion in place of God. Power feeds pride; pride swells in direct proportion to the degree of one’s power over others, which is why the way humans seek, maintain, and use power is a magnifying glass to enlarge and illuminate the essential characteristics of all humans. “Pride is the religious dimension of the sin which flows from absolute power; and injustice is its social dimension.” (*Discerning the Signs*, 64) Just as pride is by nature overweening, power strives always to overextend itself, which makes it, in international politics where it is wielded by leaders of state, “the nemesis of nations.” (*Id.*, 55)¹⁷ This can lead to its own form of tragedy in Greek as well as Biblical literature. Niebuhr points out that in the purest form of tragedy the suffering is self-inflicted. He uses the myth of Prometheus, which he regards as particularly instructive of the Christian conception of pride, to exemplify the inevitability of hubris “which attaches to the highest human enterprise.” The Promethean tragedy illustrates the “perennial self-destruction of man by his overreaching

¹⁷ “Nemesis” in the sermon “The Nemesis of Nations” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times* seems to have a double meaning. It refers to pride, the “pride that goeth before the fall” (Proverbs 16:18), in this case the fall of nations as Niebuhr explains in his exegesis of Ezekiel 31:1-14. (pp. 55-57) It also refers to the God who, in his role as Nemesis, “threatens all human pretensions,” especially those of the powerful. (p. 66)

himself.” (*Beyond Tragedy*, 160-61) This will always be true so long as humans look only within themselves for meaning.

“The problem of meaning,” Niebuhr said, is “the basic problem of religion.” It cannot be solved “without the introduction of a principle of meaning which transcends the world of meaning to be interpreted.” (*ND-I*, 164) While the classical worldview lacked the faith to comprehend the meaning and overcome the tragedy of human existence (and therefore of history), Christianity is not without that faith. Such a faith must necessarily transcend history and time, for neither history nor humans have the internal resources to bind up the lacerations of tragedy on their own. With that faith, the understanding of both history and the human become clarified:

The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.” (*ND-I*,14)

The tragedy of human history can only be redeemed from outside history; Christians believe that it will be so redeemed. This faith, combined with the recognition of the goodness of all of God’s creation and with every person’s “sense of obligation to the good as [the human mind] conceives it” (*MMIS*, 37), provides the necessary motivation for Christians to be deeply involved in the affairs of history despite the tragic dimension of the human predicament. Christians do so in complete awareness of the flawedness and limitations of human nature (including their own), of the pride which distorts the understanding of even their own transcendence, and of the intermingling of evil with good in every human heart. This awareness is what it means, in Niebuhr’s terms, to be a realist about human nature and its possibilities.

Niebuhr’s acute consciousness of the tragedy of individual existence and of human history underpins both his political realism and his critique of liberalism (political and theological). He

rejects not only the progressive view of history and perfectibility of man, but also liberalism's denial of sin and tragedy. He refuses to dilute the pain of realistic awareness by a sentimental account of God's personal presence. He acknowledges the remoteness and inscrutability of God and the consequent loneliness of the human journey, as exemplified in the life of Christ himself:

The meaning of life and history was revealed in a man who uttered a cry of despair before his ultimate triumph, giving an indication of how close meaninglessness and chaos are to the triumph of faith.¹⁸

Like Paul, Niebuhr placed the crucifixion and passion of Christ at the forefront of his theology, well ahead of the perfectionist teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

Providence

I have already discussed several key aspects of Niebuhr's understanding of providence in history, including the close connection between providence and God's sovereignty; the inclusiveness and universality of providence, reflecting the universality of God's sovereignty, with the result that providence is not exclusive to (and cannot be appropriated by) one nation or religion or ethnic group; and the theological significance (under the Second Commandment) of the fact that God's providence is humanly obscure, namely, the fact that the obscurity tends to impede the idolatrous tendencies of persons to manipulate God's purposes for selfish or parochial human interests. These are salient aspects, but others should be noted in order to round out Niebuhr's view of providence, which I want to do, in part, because of the enormous emphasis placed on providence by Herbert Butterfield.

¹⁸ I have not been able to confirm the source of this quote, though it has been attributed to Niebuhr more than once. I have seen it cited to June Bingham in *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, but I cannot find it there. It is attributed to Niebuhr (without further citation) at the Wesleyan decree online resource, 1961-current, November 02, 1981, found at <http://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/2015236592/1981-11-02/ed-1/seq-6/ocr/>, retrieved Sep. 14, 2015, in which it appears in the following form: "The affirmation upon which the Christian Church is founded ... asserts the absurdity of a 'suffering God' rather than a triumphant God, of a God revealed in a man who uttered a cry of despair before his ultimate triumph, and thus gave an indication of how close meaninglessness and chaos are to the triumph of faith." On the assumption that the quote is not apocryphal, I will continue to search for its precise location in Niebuhr's writings.

One reason that history is central to Niebuhr's thought and "the most fundamental of theological issues" for him (Gilkey 2001, 169), has to do with the relationship between time and providence. Niebuhr believed that the linear character of time as understood by the Hebrews and the Old Testament, in contrast to the endless cycles favored by classical thinkers, was one of the basic building blocks of modern consciousness. (*see, e.g., FH*, 16-22; *ND-II*, 154) Among other things, it gave rise to the possibility (though not the inevitability) of historical progress, and faith in progress maintains a strong hold on many moderns, despite a chain of adverse events since the seventeenth century. More importantly, providence is indispensable to the Biblical idea that God is at work in history – that God's providence is operative throughout all time. The idea that God has a "plan" or a "purpose" in history makes no sense if history is endlessly repetitive or if it has no meaning at all. Moreover, the attempted flight from the uncertainty or meaninglessness of history often becomes unbearable, leading, as noted earlier, to radical reductions of history to justify fanaticisms such as fascism or corrupted messianisms such as communism. (*ND-I*, "Preface to the 1964 Edition," p. xiv.)

The difference between faith in providence and faith in progress is obviously the object of faith. Providence assumes a divine presence beyond history, while intrinsic progress assumes, as Niebuhr puts it, "an immanent logos which is no longer believed to transcend history as an eternal form, but is thought of as operating in history, bringing its chaos gradually under the dominion of reason." (*ND-II*, 164) Few people in the twenty-first century would suggest that "reason" (whether as logos or otherwise) is bringing chaos gradually under its dominion. Indeed, the history of the past century as well as this one so far bears witness to more chaos than reason.

Is the situation any better with faith in providence? What hope is there for the faithful

observer of history to detect the benign providence of God? Can one take comfort in a providence that does not seem to reward good or punish evil?

In 1952, Reinhold Niebuhr preached a sermon at Union Theological Seminary called, “The Providence of God.”¹⁹ The Biblical text was Matt. 5:43-48 (“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”), and Niebuhr emphasized the usually-neglected next portion of the scripture which sets forth the impartiality of God’s favor: “for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” “God is like that,” Niebuhr says, “[t]he love of God is an impartial goodness beyond good and evil. The providence of God is an impartial concern for all men without any special privileges in it.” There is no such thing as “special providence” – at least not anything that can be counted on to achieve a simple correlation of good with benefit or evil with punishment. God’s providence, like his sovereignty, is ultimate, but is not confidently discernible in or traceable to particular acts of history; much less can it be summoned by humans seeking divine favor or holy wrath. It is fruitless and arrogant to think one can perceive the hand of God in the events or movements of history, or that these events and movements correlate with divine reward and punishment. On the other hand, God’s “goodness beyond good and evil” can be seen as transcendent mercy reflecting a divine love that is greater than our ordinary experience:

The Christian faith believes that within and beyond the tragedies and the contradictions of history we have laid hold upon a loving heart, the proof of whose love is first impartiality toward all of his children, and secondly a mercy which transcends good and evil. (*Id.*, 38)

Niebuhr considers the vagaries and vexations of life in three dimensions or realms. The realm of nature is basically autonomous from the divine will; we are subject to the prevailing and shifting forces based on natural causes without any expectation that God will “put up a special

¹⁹ Reprinted in Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, at 33-40.

umbrella for us against this or that possible disaster.” (*Id.*) The second realm is that of human history, the sphere of freedom and agency, and therefore of evil (as well as good) actions and effects. Because it would be “intolerable” if history “did not have any moral meaning at all” (*Id.*, 39), as well as inconsistent with our fundamental understanding of providence, we believe as a matter of faith that history has such meaning. However, there is no simple correlation between good and its reward or evil and its punishment. Indeed, Niebuhr seems to say, there may be no such *observable* correlation at all in history.

The third realm is that of grace, and so the realm of history is the middle ground between nature and grace. This last realm involves God’s freedom; if we embrace it in faith, we find that “all concern for immediate correlations and coherences and meanings falls away. The Christian faith stands in the sense of an ultimate meaning.” It is on this level of meaning, Niebuhr says, “that the Christian faith makes sense.” (*Id.*)

This sermon is a concise statement of three propositions that are fundamental to Niebuhr’s understanding of history: (1) that the freedom of humans to make history is complete, or nearly so, thus giving rise to the potential of great evil and great good unaffected by God’s intervention; (2) that, nonetheless, God remains available in history in the “realm of grace,” representing Christian hope as well as faith that ultimately God’s purposes will be accomplished; and (3) that faith alone is able to grasp the realm of grace, for reason and observation are not adequate to perceive God’s historical work.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, the great divide among religions is between those which “take history seriously,” *i.e.*, attribute ultimate significance to human history, and those which do not – the latter comprising both those who see God as wholly distant from history, leaving it to humans to find historical meaning only in human action without direct divine significance, and

those who seek to escape history into a mystical supra-historical realm where divinity is encountered but human action plays no active part. Neither of these latter is the Hebrew or Christian response as Niebuhr sees it. Judaism and Christianity are unequivocal that history is a subject of God's concern – that human activities have divine import and that God ultimately participates in human history. The degree of this participation has been understood differently over time. The Israelites talked to God with what strikes us as amazing frequency and directness, receiving verbal commands from him in response to which they rebelled against the king of Egypt, undertook a wandering 40-year journey, and attacked their enemies in the promised land. Viewed from our end of history, we see God's providence, if we see it at all, through a glass darkly: more in broad movements or trends which, after the fact, seem to conform to our best notions of divine justice, and therefore to be – perhaps – the result of providence. But whatever we see or fail to see, we rely on our faith in providence, not on our presumed knowledge of how or in what particulars it is working.

Faith, Hope, and Love

Niebuhr's understanding of history and providence has a number of aspects, as I have tried to show above. At least three conclusions for politics and social thought follow from this understanding:

First, God has left to man an enormous amount of freedom to make his own social world, with divine guidance being available (mostly in the Biblical teachings) but not imposed; second, human nature guarantees that, under these conditions, societies will experience both the best of goodness and the worst of evil; and third, through it all, God is present in mercy and has ordained the ultimate direction of human history, including the culmination at the end of history, though this is a matter of faith and not rationally provable.

Thus, in Niebuhr's theology of history, all three of the cardinal Christian virtues are deeply implicated. Faith is the undergirding necessity if history is to be seen as having any order at all, as it is also the means by which this order may be located and pursued within God's providence. Hope, the central virtue for the tasks of history, energizes the faithful to exercise their freedom to move toward the Kingdom of God on earth which is the culmination of history in eternity. This kind of hope gives rise to "a type of optimism, which places its ultimate confidence in the love of God ... in the ultimate and transcendent unity of reality and not in tentative and superficial harmonies of existence which human ingenuity may contrive." (*Christian Ethics*, 74)

Langdon Gilkey, a Niebuhrian in his understanding of hope, speaks of two kinds of hope: that for a "new world" in this life and in human history; and hope for life in God "beyond time and history." These two hopes cannot, for the Christian, be separated,

since the transcendent hope is the ground for the proximate historical hope. When our life and our expectations are grounded in the cross and the resurrection, the darkness of the future is dispelled and hope is possible; and if our lives are surrendered to what is beyond the promise of affluence and security, then new life and the prospect of a new society is possible. Hope for the future is a gift of grace, and the struggles for the new future a result of a faith that transcends all historical prospects.²⁰

The third cardinal virtue – *caritas* – is present as the "impossible possibility," the ultimate standard of all ethics. Because it is unrealizable as a simple possibility, it is transformed for now and here into justice and the passion for justice, which Niebuhr develops into the major theme of all his writings.

Niebuhr sums up much of his theology of history, including the tension between human freedom and God's necessity, in two short sentences near the end of *Nature and Destiny*:

²⁰ Gilkey, "The Theological Understanding of Humanity and Nature in a Technological Era," submitted as part of the Report of the Conference on "Science and Technology for Human Development: The Ambiguous Future and the Christian Hope" (Bucharest, 1974), sponsored by the Division of Church and Society of the World Council of Churches; reprinted as the Appendix to *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 319.

There is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God. History moves toward the realization of the Kingdom but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization. (*ND-II*, 286)

History is the long train of events in which human freedom, expressed in both transcendent ideals and self-centered sinfulness, interacts with God's sovereignty and providence to provide the basis for meaningful lives and meaningful history, invested with divine significance. One of the modern settings for those lives and that history is the nation-state, and everything that Niebuhr says about the relations among nation-states will be against the background of this understanding of history and providence.

Chapter 4
History and Providence in the Thought of Herbert Butterfield

Christian Philosophy of History

“For as the sun and moon exist in consequence of Providence,
so also do all things in heaven, even though we are unable
to trace out accurately the respective natures and powers of each”¹

C.T. McIntire, Professor of History and Religion at Toronto and Herbert Butterfield’s biographer, attributes the renewed interest in Christian philosophy of history following World War II to the publication of Reinhold Niebuhr’s two-volume *Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941 and 1943) and *Faith and History* (1949).² From these books were spawned, directly and indirectly, a number of Christian commentaries (and commentators) on the nature of human history and its relationship to social and political thought. (*Id.*) One such commentator was the English historian Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979), a founder (along with Martin Wight) of the English School of International Relations theory.

Butterfield thought deeply on the subject of human history and God’s providence, and grounded his international-political thought in a specifically Augustinian understanding of human nature and history. He believed in the intellectual autonomy of history and cautioned against drawing universal conclusions from it, but also believed that any kind of theorizing about political activity is impossible without resort to the patterns and lessons of history, however obscure and contestable these may be. As historian and IR theorist, he subscribed to his friend Hans Morgenthau’s statement that “international theory ... amounts to a kind of philosophy of history” (Morgenthau 1970, 250)

¹ Philo of Alexandria, *On Providence*, Fragment II (from Eusebius) (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen Publishers, 1993), 754.

² C.T. McIntire, “Introduction: The Renewal of Christian Views of History in an Age of Catastrophe,” in C.T. McIntire, ed., *History and Historians*, 3-4.

As will become apparent below, Butterfield the historian and Niebuhr the theological ethicist thought along more parallel lines than they knew (or than they acknowledged). Their fundamental agreement as to the centrality of history and the importance of providence contributed importantly to their compatibility in IR theory. But their differences were also illuminating. Providence was much more important to Butterfield than it was to Niebuhr. Butterfield was freer to see God's hand and to interpret history in terms of God's providential actions. Niebuhr was more restrained and did not feel comfortable identifying "special" or "specific" events of providence, reserving providence for the events of Biblical or salvation history (such as creation, atonement, and the eschatological return of Christ) and for God's ultimate purposefulness in human history. Butterfield was bolder in ascribing providential participation to large-scale historical events or sequences, at least after the fact.

History and Providence

Herbert Butterfield was as well known in England as Niebuhr was in the United States. He became a significant voice in the theorizing of history from a Christian standpoint. Butterfield was a distinguished historian with a particular interest in the history of science as well as political history and the history and philosophy of history itself. In the 1940s he became a recognized Christian commentator on history and public affairs, and later, an influential theorist in international relations when he convened the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics in 1959.

Butterfield was educated at Cambridge University, where he later taught, eventually becoming the Master of Peterhouse, Vice Chancellor of the University, and Regius Professor of Modern History. His best-known book is one of his earliest ones, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), which addresses the nature of history-writing itself. The book that made his

reputation as a historian of science was published in 1949, *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300-1800*.³

Butterfield was raised a Methodist, remained one all his life, and thought seriously of becoming a parson. For twenty years he was a lay preacher in and around Cambridge and a regular Sunday morning parishioner at Wesley Methodist Church on Christ's Pieces, Cambridge.

Despite this religious background, Butterfield was not a theologian or even a systematic thinker on religious matters. When he became a prominent historian he was open about his commitment to Christianity, however, and often referred to "providence" (sometimes capitalized; sometimes not) in his historical writing. He became something of an authoritative religious commentator in Great Britain, professedly against his wishes.

In 1948 Butterfield agreed to a request by the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge to give a series of lectures on history from a Christian perspective, which he did in the fall of that year. There were seven lectures, well attended by students and dons, six of which were broadcast on the BBC. They were wildly successful, which engendered in Butterfield mixed feelings of gratitude and sheepish perplexity. Nonetheless, he was persuaded to use the lectures as the basis for his most influential book in this area, *Christianity and History* (which I will cite as "*CH*"), published in the U.K. in 1949 and in the U.S. in 1950. His later, shorter writings on the same subject, which were numerous, were later collected, edited by C.T. McIntire, and published in 1979 as *Writings on Christianity and History* ("*WCH*").

At the beginning of an important essay, "God in History," written in 1952 and later published in *WCH*, Butterfield wrote: "Of all the factors which have operated to the ... undermining of the religious sense in recent centuries, the most damaging has been the notion of

³ The book is still in print, published in the U.S. by the Free Press, a division of Simon and Schuster, under copyright of 1957. Butterfield considered the two greatest accomplishments of western civilization to be the victory of Christianity over the pagan world and the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century.

the absentee God.” (WCH, 1) This was a negative way of stating what for him is not only an essential component of the religious sense, but also an essential premise for attributing any sort of meaning to history: the premise that God is “present” in history as providence.

For Butterfield, as for Niebuhr and St. Augustine, history is invested with divine significance. At the same time, Augustine’s dichotomy between the city of God and of man grants history, in Butterfield’s view, a certain autonomy (since it concerns the earthly city) and thus supports a point Butterfield never tired of making: that history-writing is properly descriptive (“technical”) not prescriptive, and (insofar as this is humanly possible) should not be written to serve any moral or political purpose beyond the accurate depiction of past events. This was the point of his critique in *The Whig Interpretation of History*, and was a theme in many things he wrote thereafter when speaking of “technical” or “scientific” or “pure” history-writing. This is to be distinguished, however, from the interpretation of history once it is “already-written.” It may then legitimately be interpreted to learn lessons from the past or to detect patterns of human conduct.

Providence was a central concept for Butterfield and often invoked by him. Butterfield was a historian, not a theologian, so he was less systematic in his philosophical or theological presuppositions than Niebuhr. On the other hand, Niebuhr was a theologian, not a historian, so the reflections of Butterfield on history (including providence in history) contain insights that are sometimes better articulated by Butterfield (even if the insights are not always consistently with each other). As the historian Malin Dahlstrom put it, Butterfield’s idea of providence “did not simply function as a kind of comfort blanket, but rather, posited the idea that history (as a discipline) ultimately had a moral base.”⁴ For Butterfield, history has a divinely-grounded moral

⁴ Malin Dahlstrom, Review of Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), published in *Reviews in History*, September 1, 2011 (Review no. 1133). It is not

base because it is ultimately overseen by God. Yet, the historian (as history-writer) is not reliably equipped to discern the finger of providence in history and therefore should not be influenced in his investigation, research, and writing. However, once past events have been accurately rendered, faith in providence may well affect how one then interprets the record of those events.

There are various statements in Butterfield's writings pointing to the nature of God's providence as being manifest in history. He is not always clear or consistent on this; his expressions, though felicitous, can be wooly in their logic and contradictory to other statements. Still, the basic things are clear. First and most fundamentally, history is meaningful because God has chosen to act in history, as the Biblical accounts attest, such as by raising up the Israelites as his chosen and covenanted people, and by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In light of such historical events, especially the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, history cannot, for a Christian believer, be simply a succession of meaningless events. There is an order and direction to it, rooted in its divine significance, however difficult it may be to trace that order or discern that direction or significance in particular events. Butterfield's view on this is fully congruent with Niebuhr's.

Butterfield built much of his understanding of both human nature and history on the theology of St. Augustine, as Niebuhr did, although Butterfield apparently arrived there independently of Niebuhr. Like Niebuhr, he acknowledged (though less eloquently) that man is bound by nature, yet has the capacity to transcend the natural flux, with the result that his life is

clear that Butterfield would have agreed with this formulation, given his commitment to "technical" history-writing being as value-neutral as possible. Perhaps Butterfield could let it pass because Dahlstrom says that history-writing "*ultimately*" has a moral base, which may mean that it has ultimate moral significance because what is being written about – the train of events constituting history itself – has moral significance. In other words, value-neutral history-writing provides the raw material from which philosophers, theologians, and other interpreters may reflect and thereby draw moral conclusions. This is indeed what Butterfield himself did when he was writing not as a historian but as an observer or interpreter.

caught in a kind of tragic limbo between the limits of his earthly grounding and the longings of his transcendent imagining. This same tension is reflected in collectivities such as states. Indeed, for Butterfield, “the tension between the transcendent and the secular was at the core of good historiography ... and of good political theory and practical ethics as well.” (Coll, 23)

Butterfield knew Niebuhr’s work but did not cite it specifically, so far as I can determine. He once said that when he wrote *Christianity and History* (published in England in 1949), he had not yet read either *Faith and History* published the same year or even *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, published in 1941 and 1943. That would change.

Butterfield and Niebuhr met at least twice. The first time was in 1956 when he gave a lecture at Columbia University attended by Niebuhr. Shortly thereafter, he agreed to become a contributing editor to *Christianity and Crisis*, in which capacity he published two articles, one in 1957 and one in 1958. (McIntyre, 304-305) The second meeting was also at Columbia, at a joint meeting of the American and British Committees on international political theory in the 1960s. Kenneth Thompson reports on that meeting, commenting that, to his surprise, the two men did not readily find common ground.⁵ On the other hand, Michael Bentley reporting on the Columbia meetings, concluded that Butterfield and Niebuhr (both of whom were trained in the humanities and opposed the social-scientific approach of Kenneth Waltz) “immediately sensed a conjoint space in their thinking.” (Bentley, 339)

Thus, by the late fifties Butterfield and Niebuhr were reading each other, had met each other, and recognized that they were in fundamental agreement on their theology of history,

⁵ Thompson suggests three reasons for this: (1) Niebuhr may have considered Butterfield unrealistic in urging the U.S. to “take a chance for peace” in arms negotiations with the Soviets; (2) Niebuhr “may ... have considered that Butterfield was reaching beyond his professional competence when he wrote on religious topics”; and (3) “Niebuhr, with all his respect for history, was a philosopher of history while Butterfield was a traditional historian.” (Kenneth W. Thompson, “Reinhold Niebuhr: A Personal Reflection and Political Evaluation,” in Clinton, 5) If Thompson is correct in attributing the last reason to Niebuhr, I would disagree. As noted elsewhere in this chapter, Butterfield was indeed a “technical historian” when writing as a historian, but in other books he readily engages in philosophy of history and religious interpretation of history once the history has been written.

despite differences of emphasis. For each of them the understanding of history, the effort to discern its course (even through a glass darkly), and faith in its ultimate purposes, were at the foundation of his commitment to history as meaningful and (in Butterfield's case) to history-writing as a significant domain of human endeavor.

For Butterfield, as for Augustine, God's providence, his involvement in the large forces, tragedies and triumphs of history for his own purposes, is a continuation of the work of the original creation – an ongoing work of creation, as it were. However, God gives humans an enormous range of free will, so our actions are not predetermined by God or fate, and the consequences are our responsibility. Yet God, though distant (to allow for human freedom) is not absent; but his presence in history is much harder to identify than in one's personal life, where we can have more confidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are instruments in carrying out God's purposes in history, whether we realize it or not – and whether we comprehend God's purposes or not (as most often we do not).

Butterfield acknowledges the tension between divine providence over history and human freedom in making history, but asserts the necessity of both as components of a genuine Christian faith. Indeed, he considered that it was part of God's providential oversight of his human creatures that they have free will. He accepts, as Niebuhr does, the tension between free will and God's providence, and never completely resolves the paradox.

Much like Niebuhr (and Augustine), Butterfield couples his assertion of the divine ground in history with his recognition of the opacity of history and of God's work in it. Therefore – most of the time – he avoids correlating specific events with his discernment of God's will, either before or after the fact. There are other times though when Butterfield claims to see God's hand when looking back at certain historical events or trends (as discussed below). Even then,

however, he does not claim this as the basis for his faith, but rather recognizes it as the (imperfect) result of it. In this, he is consonant with Niebuhr. Both take their cue from St. Augustine, who interpreted, for example, the sacking of Rome and its prior history in light of his Christian understanding, but not as a basis for it. In *Christianity and History* (p. 107), Butterfield says:

I do not think that any man can ever arrive at his interpretation of the human drama by merely casting his eye over the course of the centuries in the way that a student of history might do. I am unable to see how a man can find the hand of God in secular history, unless he has first found that he has an assurance of it in his personal experience.

The evidence of providence in history is invisible to reason. Faith in a certain kind of God (one who created time and invests history with a purpose) must precede any discernment of providential ordering in human affairs. Without such faith, God's hand cannot be seen; nor is there any basis for believing it is present. With such faith, God's role can be affirmed, though never with complete confidence as to particular events or outcomes. Butterfield combines a faith in the meaningfulness of history, an irrepressible curiosity to know the times and ways in which this has been (and may be) manifested, and a healthy skepticism that human knowledge can take us very far or with much certainty into correctly understanding these matters. Faith both precedes and follows discernment, and discernment is always done in humility and with conscious regard for the limits of human perception, even with the eyes of faith. The only providential truths we can know with certainty are those confirmed by Biblical revelation, such as that all creation was by the hand of God, that the Israelites experienced his guidance in a way that seems no longer available, that the ethical teachings of Jesus are true, and that salvation to all humanity is available through Christ.

The Augustinian distinction between human history and God's history, and Butterfield's notion of the "autonomy" of history-writing from moral judgment, are useful for understanding both Niebuhr and Butterfield. As noted earlier, Butterfield took from Augustine's dichotomy of the two cities his conviction that he was chronicling profane history, not sacred history (or what he would later call "providential" or "prophetic" history). Butterfield believed that "the logic of history precludes the intrusion of moral evaluations" into the writing of secular history. Following Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), Butterfield rejected the use of history as a moral tale, favoring what he called "technical" history (which he sometimes called "scientific" or "academic" history), by which he meant an account that seeks to reconstruct what occurred and why, being faithful to the people and events that occurred, within their context. To be sure, this involves (as he put it in *Whig History*, 91) "a creative act of the historical imagination" in which the historian puts himself and actually *feels* himself in the other person's place (*CDW*, 8-9) – but always with the sole objective of achieving as much accuracy as possible. The moral values of a particular time and place are indeed part of the critical context, but those are recounted and analyzed, not judged by later values. The historian's only duty (as historian) is to get the history right. History, Butterfield writes,

resurrects particular periods, reconstitutes particular episodes, follows the fortunes and discusses the decisions of individual people, and rejoices to recover the past in its concreteness and particularity. (*HHR*, 144)

Among professional historians, the lasting value of *The Whig Interpretation of History* was its robust defense of the autonomy of history-writing as a discipline insulated from pressures to serve as source of moral teaching, a prelude to the present, a repository of heroes or villains, or for any other purpose external to the enterprise of discovering and reconstructing the history itself. As the medieval legal historian Frederic William Maitland (1886-1906) put it: "if history

is to do its liberating work, it must be as true to fact as it can possibly make itself; and true to fact it will not be if it begins to think what lessons it can teach.”⁶ Butterfield said it even better: “The eliciting of general truths or of propositions claiming universal validity is the one kind of consummation which it is beyond the competence of history to achieve.” (Butterfield 1931, 65)

One must add, however, that for Butterfield the eliciting of these general truths may well be within the competence of the philosopher or interpreter of history -- just not of the historian *qua* historian. Moral judgments can and in some cases must be made on past decisions and events; otherwise we end up with history consisting of “unique individual[s]” and “unique episode[s],” with every political event being “a law unto itself,” without the ability to reflect on the past for the benefit of the future. (*Man on His Past*, 101-103) But such reflection must be done separately, by political or religious thinkers or even by historians, but not in the historical writing itself and not in the historian’s capacity as historian. Butterfield himself commented extensively on history. He did so, for example, throughout *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War*, a book of interpretation, not of history-writing, an example of what Butterfield called “providential” or “prophetic” history (“God’s history”⁷). This was always presented in books or articles separate from his “technical” or “scientific” historical work, and he never claimed superior intellectual or moral warrant for such judgments by virtue of being a historian.

While Butterfield has been criticized by historians who claim that his Christian commitment inevitably crept into his history-writing; Butterfield stoutly denied it and pointed to the care with

⁶ Quoted in P.B.M. Blaas, *Continuity and Anachronism: Parliamentary and Constitutional Development in Whig Historiography and in the Anti-Whig Reaction between 1890 and 1930* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 247.

⁷ In an interview by Ved Mehta, Butterfield said, “there are two kinds of history: God’s history and technical history. God’s history is evaluative; you distribute blame, you judge people, and so on. Technical history is what we all write; you look at the evidence, you draw conclusions.” Ved Mehta, *Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounters with British Intellectuals* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), 199.

which he kept the two compartments separate in his work and public life.⁸ Whether Butterfield's claim is credible can be debated. Niebuhr would have been skeptical because he thought that any written history is inescapably informed by the writer's overall conception of the matter, amounting to a "faith" of one kind or another.

Butterfield published *Christianity and History* in 1949 in England based on lectures in the fall of 1948 given to the Divinity Faculty of the University of Cambridge, as noted above. The book has become justly famous, in part as a personal and compelling statement of one man's vision of God's providence in history. It remains an account worthy of serious attention, particularly when read in conjunction with his later writings on the same subject and as background for his interpretation of history and of international relations.

Beyond the revelations of scripture, Butterfield believes that there are other providential elements in history, even providential guidance of events in some instances. Curiously, he calls them "elements of fixity." (*CH*, 95) These are markers of historical direction, though generally indistinct to human eyes. Viewing such markers, Butterfield sometimes ventures his own "providential reading" of large historical events. He asserts, for example that Germany's defeat at the end of World War II was a final humbling of a nation whose rise began with the reign of Frederick the Great of Prussia (r. 1740-86), gained speed after the unification of Germany in the late nineteenth century leading to the victorious Franco-German War of 1870-71, and culminated in the demonic rise and fall of Hitler and the Third Reich. (*Id.*, 48-50) The collapse of Nazi Germany. coming at the end of this 200-year trajectory, was for Butterfield God's "judgment ... passed on the militarism of Prussia." (*Id.*, 50)

⁸ Michael Oakeshott defends Butterfield in this regard. Referring to the line between technical history and historical commentary, Oakeshott said: Butterfield "never departed from the main line he laid out with so much subtlety and originality twenty years ago." Michael Oakeshott, "The Whig Interpretation of History," in Luke O'Sullivan, ed., *What Is History and Other Essays* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 222.

At other times, however, he pulls back, seemingly reluctant to put too much weight on any particular reading of providence, including his own. We should not attach ourselves too firmly to these readings of history, he says. History can be, at best, discerned obliquely, and it is a mistake to “turn into hard matters of principle those policies which ought to depend to some degree on time and circumstance.” (*International Conflict*, 13-14)

More broadly, there are “deeper tendencies of history,” “deeper processes of time,” which either are directed from the outside or have an internal direction of their own, with providence being the cause in both cases. In a slightly different context in *Christianity and History* (discussed more fully below), Butterfield suggests that even if a particular historical event cannot be attributed to providence, it may nonetheless be understood “*as if* its final shape were under the direction of a superintending intellect.” (CH, 99; emphasis added) This is quite similar to Niebuhr’s point that, while one cannot point to any historical event as the specific work of providence, some events “are, *or may be appropriated by faith as*, divine judgements” (FH, 111; emphasis added) Niebuhr was referring to Augustine’s judgments on the fall of Rome, but he was expressing a broader hermeneutical point: that although specific events cannot and should not be attributed to God with empirical certainty, nonetheless, when viewed through the eyes of faith after the fact and upon proper reflection, they may surely be utilized as exemplary of God’s wrath or God’s blessing. This seems to be Butterfield’s point as well, although Butterfield does not always follow this more modest interpretive approach in his other writings, as Niebuhr consistently does.

Progress and Human Nature

Progress was not one of Butterfield’s “deeper tendencies of history” or “deeper processes of time.” He particularly despised the “progress narrative” of post-Enlightenment history because it

distorts the work of historians and tempts them into being false prophets of a new dawn. With Niebuhr, Butterfield rejects the notion of inevitable progress: “one’s ultimate values – or the general meaning of life – can never be based on the idea of progress.” (CH, 96)

The reason there is no steady or assured progress in history is that history is made by humans and the fickleness of human nature does not change. “[T]he genesis of historical events lies in human beings,” Butterfield wrote. “The real birth of ideas takes place in human brains. The real reason why things happen is that human beings have vitality.” (HHR, 66) Because basic human nature stays the same there is no general historical “progress”: “every generation is equidistant from eternity” Butterfield affirmed, quoting Leopold von Ranke. (CH, 66) *The Whig Interpretation of History* was a diatribe against *post-hoc* hindsight-based biases in historical writing, often premised on the notion of inevitable progress to the present.

To be sure, as an accomplished historian of science Butterfield noted the development of human capacities through experiment, experience, and the accumulation of new knowledge. In the understanding of nature, great progress has been made. Humans progressively discover facts about the natural environment which have always been there but have been heretofore unknown. Natural science is not the only area where progress in knowledge occurs. Other examples are the development of larger and more efficient configurations of international trade, the evolution of more sophisticated commercial institutions and practices, and the aggregation of labor and talent to produce more complex machinery, devices, and systems to meet human needs.

This is distinct, of course, from progress in any moral or political sense. Every scientific gain has been used to enhance evil as well as good. As Butterfield notes, much of the rise of Germany from Frederick the Great through Hitler was attributable to its efficient production of war materials and, eventually, the deployment of industrial-scale death factories. That was

indeed progress in technology and complex organizational efficiency; but the opposite of progress in the moral realm.

Butterfield calls the advances of science and technology “non-normative” progress, as opposed to the normative nature of moral progress. Yet, he attributes all such progress to the processes of providence for he says that those who develop such efficiently organized mechanisms “are agents of deeper processes than those of which they are aware, instruments of a providence that combines their labours and works them into a larger pattern.” (*HC*, 97)

This statement may seem surprising at first since Butterfield, when making moral judgments, tends to measure by Christian standards. His point, though, is that providence supports all advances in human knowledge, despite the fact that such advances can be and regularly are abused. The abuses result from the sinful exercise of human freedom and the moral responsibility for the misuse lies with humankind. Time causes all systems to “turn sour,” he says, but the moral judgment of history is not so much on the systems as on human nature itself, “for in the course of time it is human nature which finds out the holes in the structure, and turns the good thing into an abuse.” (*CH*, 55) Nonetheless, the advances themselves remain no less the manifestations of providence.

In sum, Butterfield charts with pleasure the progress of science since the seventeenth century, but notes with realism the lack of progress in moral matters, past, present or future. Human knowledge of the laws of nature grows, but human nature is not so predictable and certainly not perfectible, so there will always be strict limits on improvements in the human situation.⁹ He does not explore in depth, as Niebuhr does, the scope that nonetheless remains for social justice and the dramatic difference that “a little more or a little less” justice makes in the

⁹ Butterfield has more to say about human nature in the context of his understanding of providence, which I will discuss below in the section entitled, “Lessons of Providence.”

lives of individuals. On the other hand, Butterfield, unlike Niebuhr, was not a student of domestic politics but confined his political theorizing mostly to international affairs, where the possibilities of justice are universally thought to be substantially less than within a society.¹⁰

Forms of Providence

Providence was a concept that Butterfield employed often, in a variety of contexts. Although he failed to define or delineate it in any precise way,¹¹ it was of central importance to him:

Nothing is more important for the cause of religion at the present day than that we should recover the sense and consciousness of the Providence of God. (*WCH*, 4)

Providence has an interactive nature for Butterfield. It does not consist of God's "deposits" or gifts of good things left here and there. Rather, God's providence is an interactive process that works with and through humans, to the extent God wills it and humans are available and willing. The result is to forge something new and good or, more often, to wrench some good out of bad events or situations. Or sometimes not, since the success of the process (defined in terms of making the world a more just or orderly or moral place) depends on human activity in response to the promptings or possibilities of providence.

Butterfield distinguishes between two kinds of providence. First, there is a kind of "natural" or "general" providence (my description) which underlies and works constantly through human curiosity and intelligence to create improvements or developments, or merely "moments of grace." These serve the providential order but do not involve God's direct, specific involvement. This is the "Providence that we must regard as lying in the very constitution of things" by virtue

¹⁰ Although Butterfield did not speak of justice in the international sphere, Niebuhr did, for example in *Nature and Destiny II*, 284-86, "Justice and World Community." This is a point which will be more fully developed in Part III of this dissertation.

¹¹ Malin Dahlstrom remarked of *Christianity and History* and its treatment of providence, "Like most of Butterfield's work, it is brilliant in places while holding many contradictions." *Reviews in History*, September 1, 2011 (Review no. 1133). I heartily agree.

of the mere fact that God created and sustains the very foundations of human life. (CH, 98) It is distinctly similar to the Calvinist idea of “common grace” developed in Reformation thinking.¹²

A second form of providence points to movements or activities in history that are specifically directed or influenced by the divine (a kind of “special providence,” though again this is my term).¹³ Thus, in his essay, “Providence and the Historical Process” in *Christianity and History*, he distinguishes between “the Providence which lies in the very constitution of things” and “another kind of Providence which it may be permissible to call human.” (*Id.*, 97-98) Although he confusingly calls it “human” (presumably because he wants to distinguish it from the “natural” form), Butterfield means God’s more-or-less direct intervention or direction of events by the use of human agents. This latter Providence “moves over history with the function of creating good out of evil” and therefore is a kind of partnership between good people and God: “if history is of the character that I have described, it might seem to require the

¹² Abraham Kuyper defines common grace as:

that act of God by which negatively He curbs the operations of Satan, death, and sin, and by which positively He creates an intermediate state for this cosmos, as well as for our human race, which is and continues to be deeply and radically sinful, but in which sin cannot work out its end. (Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 279)

See also, Charles Hodge who says of it:

the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good. . . . This is what in theology is called common grace. (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Hendrickson Publ., 1981 ed., 1999), volume II, 667)

As discussed further in a later chapter of this paper, Reinhold Niebuhr admired the Calvinist idea of “common grace” and embraced it in some of his writings. See, e.g., *Christianity and Power Politics*, in which he notes that common grace enables even fallen man to pursue “the task of seeking for justice by using the best methods of neutralizing self-interest in politics and of checking power with power.” (CPP, 59-60) See also, L. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 207: “These actions of God in history . . . designed to instigate and inspire inner renewal, are described by Niebuhr as ‘common grace.’” Manifestations of this grace are “essential structures of social existence that beguile or impel self-interest to enlarge itself into a wider interest inclusive of other persons or groups in the society.”

¹³ Unfortunately, Butterfield most often (but not consistently) capitalizes “Providence,” utilizing the lower-case when using “providential” as an adjective, as in “providential order.” This inconsistency may seem to undercut the distinction I believe he is making. Nonetheless, it is clear that he distinguishes “providence” into its divine and natural manifestations (although in both, God is the ultimate source). After I reached this conclusion based on my reading of Butterfield, I found that Alberto R. Coll reached the same conclusion in his book, *The Wisdom of Statecraft: Sir Herbert Butterfield and the Philosophy of International Politics*, 59-60.

operation of a Providence upon it – a Providence capable of bringing good out of evil.” (*Id.*)¹⁴ Clearly here, the providential reference is to God. The notion of God’s bringing good out of evil in history is shared by Niebuhr and derives ultimately from Augustine.¹⁵

In the following paragraphs of the essay, however, in giving examples of providential salvaging of good from evil, Butterfield retreats somewhat from the direct attribution to the divine. Thus, he cites three historical examples of good coming from evil (while not claiming the good *outweighs* the evil): the rebuilding of London “on a superior plan” after the horrors of the Great Fire of 1666, the legacy of tolerance that finally arose from the agonies and violence of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and the presentation of a “new idea of empire” following the loss of the American colonies by King George III in the eighteenth century. One is led to believe that these are examples of the operation of a direct providence operating through human agency, bringing good from evil.

Yet Butterfield shies away from this conclusion, saying instead that this course of history should be understood “*as if* its final shape were under the direction of a superintending intellect.” (*Id.*, 99; emphasis added) Why the withdrawal into ambiguity as to direct divine participation in these events? Perhaps because Butterfield feels uncomfortable with the concreteness of the examples to which he is attributing divine involvement, and feels the need to hedge his bets (or

¹⁴ On the partnership between God and man, Butterfield says, “we reach a stage higher in human consciousness and we improve our relations with the universe if we conceive ourselves not as sovereign makers of history but as born to co-operate with Providence.” (*Id.*, 99)

¹⁵ See, e.g., *Letters* 189, 122 in St. Augustine, *Political Writings*; also, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, chap. XXVII. Augustine thought that the imperfection of earthly justice is part of God’s plan, for God’s way is always to bring a measure of perfection out of imperfection, to bring good from evil. Thus, the possibility of evil (understood as a defect or deficit of the good) was part of God’s plan from the beginning for bringing good to pass: God “judged it better to bring good out of evil, than not to permit any evil to exist.” (*Enchiridion* XXVII) This is a startling and original assertion, signifying the power that Augustine assigns to God’s “method” of salvaging a measure of good out of the evil resulting from human choices, of distilling some degree of justice out of human injustice, of some peace out of war. “God turns evil choices to good use.” (*City of God*, XI.18)

to acknowledge his uncertainty).¹⁶ Whatever the difficulty of identifying specific instances, there is no doubt that Butterfield exalts the divine power to extract good from evil as a recurring pattern of providence. Lord Acton, the Cambridge historian whom Butterfield both admired and criticized, defined providence itself as God's "continual extraction of good from evil,"¹⁷ a statement with which Butterfield fully agreed. Neither Butterfield nor Augustine (nor Niebuhr nor Acton) claimed that the good extracted from evil and realized in history is necessarily greater than the evil left behind. Thus, providential extracting of good from evil, while mitigating evil, does not eliminate it, nor does it automatically provide more good than if the evil had not been present. The point seems to be that, even as a remnant, the good redeems the evil which it has transcended and left behind. It has "repaired," at least in part, the deficiency of good resulting from man's evil choices.

A recurring theme of Butterfield's writings is that we can recognize providence in history only by faith rather than by external proofs – another point on which he and Niebuhr are in agreement. In *Whig Interpretation*, Butterfield says:

We may believe in some providence that guides the destiny of men and we may if we like read this into our history; but what our history brings to us is not proof of providence but rather the realization of how mysterious are its ways, how strange its caprices – the knowledge that this providence uses any means to get to its end and works often at cross-purposes with itself and is curiously wayward. (Butterfield 1931, 23)

Faith rather than extrinsic proof is thus required to discern providential involvement in history. Speaking of 2,000 years of Christian history, Butterfield says, "I could not say that such a stretch of history would prove to an impartial person that Providence underlies the whole

¹⁶ I noted earlier the similarity between this and Niebuhr's teaching that historical events "may be appropriated by faith" as matters of providence or divine judgment. (*FH*, 111) So far as I can determine, each thinker arrived at the point independently of the other – expressed in Niebuhr's *Faith and History* and Butterfield's *Christianity and History*, both published in 1949.

¹⁷ Quoted by Stefan Collini, "The Life of Herbert Butterfield," in his review of Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), appearing in *Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 23, 2011.

human drama.” (*WCH*, 12) Only faith can lead to that conclusion. Personal faith must precede providential awareness. We must begin with an awareness of how faith works in our individual lives, then “expand this on to the scale of the nation [and] ... of mankind.” (*Id.*) This is the Biblical story of God’s self-disclosure in history and, in response, of Israel’s and the early church’s progressive and widening understanding of a God whose care and concern begin with the individual person then extend outward to the broadest reaches of humankind.

To the religious mind, providential order throughout all creation is divine, “the orderings of God Himself.” (*CH*, 111) In all the workings of history there is the movement of the living God, whether we are able to make it out or not, pointing to a consummation which does not lie in history itself. (*Id.*) Butterfield suggests that even the “lower,” natural forms of providence (including conscience, prudence and practical wisdom) are founded on Christian virtues, though their specifically Christian origin may be forgotten or overlooked. This is particularly true of what Butterfield called “providential order,” of which his favorite example was the art and science of European diplomacy in the eighteenth century, the apex in his view of diplomatic civility and usefulness:

... though the minds of the eighteenth century were losing the religious idea of Providence, they clung very tightly to that purely secular conception of a providential order which I have already mentioned. ... the eighteenth century kept that conception of a providential order which it was thought necessary in general to maintain – a conception which like a number of other things seemed to survive as a kind of shell after the religion, which had given it some reality, had evaporated out of it. (*CH* 101-02)

Butterfield worried that with increasing secularization, the “shell” that remains of religiously-sustained ideas may not be adequate to support the ideas themselves.

If human perception of God’s providential order is a matter of faith rather than of proof, where precisely does the faith come from? For Christians, it builds squarely on the Old

Testament experience of God by the Israelites, and it culminates in the New Testament's Christ-event, Jesus as Messiah. This is obvious in Butterfield's writings but not explicit. Reinhold Niebuhr is explicit about it, providing the theological grounding for Butterfield's view:

Christianity enters the world with the stupendous claim that ... in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the expected disclosure of God's sovereignty over history, and the expected establishment of that sovereignty had taken place. (*ND-II*, 35)

God's ultimate and continuing sovereignty, present in the creation but fully disclosed only in the Christ-event, is the foundation for any faith in providence. Butterfield links God's sovereignty to providence, but he does not establish, as Niebuhr does, that the moment in time when God's sovereignty and his providence combined in one ultimate expression or disclosure of power and love was in the coming of the Messiah. According to Niebuhr, Christ is necessary, is "expected," and is hoped for, wherever "history is thought of as a realm of fragmentary revelations of a purpose and power transcending history, pointing to a fuller disclosure of that purpose and power" – with a still fuller disclosure to come at the end of history. Thus, "[t]he significance of a Christ is that he is a disclosure of the divine purpose, governing history within history," (*ND-II*, 5) and thus the guarantor of providence. This is theological language that Butterfield would not write, but with which he would agree.

Lessons of Providence

Butterfield is most interesting, not when he looks back and suggests specific events that may be attributable to providential action, but when he lays out fundamental lessons which the long course of history seems to teach, and which in that sense might be considered "providential." Many of these lessons are directly relevant to international relations and come from his study of European statesmanship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One lesson is that of prudence: humans must recognize the limits of their own mastery lest they be brought low by hubris. Just as Niebuhr moves from sovereignty to providence, Butterfield moves from providence to practical wisdom (which, as noted, he considers a manifestation of providence), of which humility and self-restraint are significant components. Butterfield contrasts eighteenth century diplomatic history with the decline that, as he sees it, came thereafter. He considers that century and much of the next one the golden age of wise European diplomacy based on the shared commitment of leaders to preserve a “providential order” among nations:

From some date prior to the opening of the eighteenth century down to the time of Lord Acton [d. 1902] it is astonishing to see how much of the thought of politically-minded people was devoted to what one might call the science of the preservation of a civilized order. It was as though they knew – what the twentieth century so often forgot – that civilization is a precarious thing, a constructed thing, built on the side of a volcano, and requiring much thought even for its simple maintenance. (*CDW*, 82)

In this passage – a prime example of Butterfield doing “providential history” – one gets a sense not only of Butterfield’s respect for the craft of diplomacy, but also of the absolute necessity for him of a consciously cultivated, carefully preserved international order to which the great powers are committed – what he would later call an “international society” – the model of which was European balance-of-power diplomacy during this period. Diplomats saw the European international order as a “tremendous field of forces” which “could become very dangerous unless they were held in equilibrium.” (*Id.*, 89) These forces were not automatically harmonious or stable, and required constant diplomatic attention to keep them so. This was chiefly the responsibility of the great powers acting to preserve the balance of power among them. But it was not just a matter of preserving the power balance; the European nations shared a moral commitment to maintain what came to be called (after the Congress of Vienna in 1815) the “Concert of Europe.” For Butterfield, the convergence of moral values was at least as

important as the power balance. Hans Morgenthau shared this view, believing that “the success of the [European] balance of power ... was less a function of the distribution of capabilities than it was the underlying values and sense of community that bound together the actors in the system.” (Lebow 2003, 228) As Henry Kissinger wrote, the Concert of Europe, although “created more explicitly in the name of the balance of power than any other before or since, relied the least on power to maintain itself.” Rather, the “most important reason” the international order held for almost a hundred years “was that the Continental countries were knit together by a sense of shared values. There was not only a physical equilibrium, but a moral one.” (*Diplomacy*, 79) This was precisely Butterfield’s view. Now as then, a shared moral commitment is indispensable to a working international society.

To be sure, there were European conflicts and wars during this period, but these were limited in scope: there was restraint even in victory. Wars had finite objectives; victors did not utterly destroy their enemies, because all the states shared the value of preserving the international order itself, including the states within it. (*CDW*, 83) This was an implicit recognition that, “[s]omewhere or other there exists a point at which our ambitions, however well-meaning, do become a defiance of the providential order.” (*Id.*, 102-03) Butterfield believed that such defiance will be punished in the long term (although that may be long indeed). This was his point in arguing that the Nazi defeat and the utter devastation of Germany – which had been on the rise since Frederick the Great – was the providential penalty for the hubris of Hitler and the German nation.

Butterfield notes that the master statesman Prince Metternich (Chancellor of the Austrian Empire 1821-1848; d. 1859), foresaw the tragedies that would befall Europe when this consensual order broke down, as he feared it would, because he saw already “the human

presumption that had become so evident.” (*CH*, 102) What Butterfield means by “presumption” becomes clear when he states, as a providential principle, that “[t]he hardest strokes of heaven fall in history upon those who imagine that they can control things in a sovereign manner.” (*Id.*, 104) Hubris, the Christian sin of overweening pride and the refusal to accept limits, is a recurrent impediment to international order and the society of states. Elsewhere in *Christianity and History* Butterfield says, “Judgment in history falls heaviest on those who come to think themselves gods, who fly in the face of Providence and history, who put their trust in man-made systems and worship the work of their own hands, and who say that the strength of their own right arm gave them the victory. ... One who ‘ape[s] providence blasphemes God.’” (*CH*, 60)

In writing of hubris, Butterfield is arguing that, while virtue may not always be its own reward, vice frequently brings its own punishment, here on earth, before the eternal reckoning. The providence of a sovereign God will, at least some of the time, forcefully rebuke a person’s prideful overreaching on behalf of himself or his nation. In contrast, humility and self-restraint by those in power reflect a truer providential alignment and lead to wiser policy.

History contains repeated instances of nations and leaders defying the providential order. The fundamental reason is human nature, which, although not entirely vicious, is consistently self-interested, selfish, power-seeking, and domineering – characteristics which are magnified in direct proportion to one’s possession of power. Human sovereignty wants to replace God’s sovereignty. In *History and Human Relations* Butterfield observes that in analyzing social and political behavior, it is necessary “to submerge the question of what a man does in the profounder question of what a man is.” (*HHR*, 42) This is a master key to much of Butterfield’s political thought, showing faithfulness to his Augustinian roots. Butterfield ties together human nature and the fall of man with history and providence – with providence here being the

goodness of God which counters and is countered by man's sinfulness, yet remains available and acting:

Human history has always been under the terms and conditions of the Fall. ... history is always a story in which Providence is countered by human aberration. On the other hand, part of the horror which men feel when they look to the possible future is due to ... an unwillingness to imagine that life can still hold its essential values when our local historical order has been superseded. It is simply a distrust of the resources of Providence." (*HC* 106)

Thus, providence can be and regularly is thwarted by sinful human actions. God's sovereignty is not inexorable or inevitable, at least not in the short term or in particular cases. God's sovereign self-restraint ensures that human freedom has sway over history as a general rule. But the defeat of providence is never permanent because providence has boundless resources for the overcoming of sin, for the restoration of good, and for the (re)making of a more just historical order. God's sovereignty is not dominating, but co-exists with man's freedom, willing to work with human agents despite their fickleness.

Butterfield's understanding of and orientation on human nature is at one with Niebuhr's. Butterfield also echoes Niebuhr's teaching (discussed in the previous chapter) that the same God who has sovereign power over history is also an inexhaustible "resource of mercy and love, which overcomes the rebellion of human sin, without negating the distinctions between good and evil, which are the moral content of history." (*FH*, 22)

Another source of lessons from history drawn by Butterfield was the Whig tradition in British politics. Although he excoriated "Whig history" – history-writing with the benefit of hindsight – he was an admirer of the British Whig political tradition. He thought the history of his country vindicated the wisdom of the tradition's essential traits: commitment to ordered liberty, willingness to compromise, a moderate outlook that seeks the middle ground, a distrust

of extremes, a recognition of the strengths and virtues of one's political opponents, and an awareness of the limits of politics and of one's own wisdom. Thus, the English Whigs:

stood for a gradual, ordered progress, the kind that is conducted somewhat as opportunity allows or as necessity dictates. These men ... seemed to understand – by tradition and instinct – how to co-operate with history. ... The whig ... leans upon events somewhat, and seeks to ally himself with the underlying trend of things.” (Butterfield 1944, quoted in Coll, 67)

The book quoted from, *The Englishman and His History*, was based on a series of lectures Butterfield gave in Germany in 1938 which were published in 1944. It is both a recounting of the rise of the English Whig tradition from the seventeenth century onward, and an extended defense of its political traits. Butterfield particularly admired the self-restraint, humility, and acceptance of limits that he saw in the Whig tradition.¹⁸

Finally, and related to examples provided earlier, Butterfield concluded from history that humans, though blighted by original sin, are still capable with God's help of extracting good from evil and thus of being instruments of providence. While the final triumph of good over evil must await the end of history, God works with faithful women and men to bring redemption, or at least amelioration, out of damning events. This is not total victory for the good, but it is noble work, a work of providence, and for Christians a foretaste of the victory to come. Thus, what divine providence guarantees is “a mission in the world and the kind of triumph that may come out of apparent defeat – the kind of good that can be wrested out of evil.” (*CH*, 112)

¹⁸ By combining both history and political evaluation in one book – which was unusual for him – Butterfield risked mixing the “technical history” which was his task as professional historian with the philosophy or interpretation of history that he offered as an observer of that history. However, he was reasonably diligent in the book to make clear which “hat” he was wearing (or which “voice” he was using) when he spoke as a historian or as a Christian political philosopher.

Three Levels of Providence

The closest Herbert Butterfield comes to a definitive account of providence is in his 1952 essay, “God in History”¹⁹ In it he develops a tripartite methodology for looking at history, or as he puts it, “three different levels ... with three different kinds of analysis,” all of which can be simultaneously true. (*WCH*, 5) The idea seems to be that by utilizing all three of these distinct angles of vision, one has the best chance of understanding and interpreting history. C.T. McIntire calls Butterfield’s method the

integration of free acts by personalities in the context of conditions which may in retrospect be described according to laws. And if the whole picture, without ascribing anything to Providence, could be colored by the sensitivity which comes from knowing that all rests in the hands of God, then how much richer the history can become. (*WCH*, xlvii)

Butterfield is positing a kind of “deft touch of God’s hand in history” (my term). As McIntire suggests, Butterfield is less ready to ascribe particular things to God (although he sometimes does exactly that), than he is to read history suggestively for lesson-learning, with the faith that God’s hand is in it because God’s sovereign will is ultimately in control of it. The fact that we know the ethical principles taught in the Old and New Testaments and in Christian theology makes it possible to discern such lessons and to attribute them to providence.²⁰

At the first of the three levels of history, individual humans exercising their free will make decisions that comprise the stuff of history and of the study of history. This level is extremely important to Butterfield the historian: McIntire contends that, “[b]y far the single most important element in his thought is his idea of human personality in history,” meaning the freedom of men

¹⁹ “God in History” began as a lecture which Butterfield gave to a thousand high school teachers at a Church of England conference in 1952. It was first published in *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (1953), then in the collection edited by C.T. McIntire, *Writings on Christianity and History* (1979), pp. 3-16.

²⁰ Neither this nor any other of Butterfield’s formulations ever resolved the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, or explained when God’s ultimate sovereignty is influencing events as opposed to man’s unfettered freedom. Although Butterfield acknowledges this tension, he never resolves it – or seriously attempts to. I think he considered it unresolvable, a tension within which faithful humans must live.

and women in making choices. (“Introduction,” *WCH*, xl) At the second level, Butterfield takes account of the fact that the decisions of free individuals are not entirely free. They are constrained by larger forces and patterns, economic, social and political. Historians must factor in these forces and their effect on decision-making, including the repetitive patterns or “laws” created by certain of such forces. These first two levels are a restatement of what, in other essays, Butterfield calls the interplay of *freedom* and *necessity*, or of individual human will and the limitations imposed by external constraints.

The third level is providence – ultimately the providence of God – which mostly works through these other two levels, affecting (not controlling) both free choice and the historical forces that impinge on free choice, though in ways that cannot often be perceived. (*Id.*, 5-7, 10-11) This is what I spoke of earlier as “general” or “natural” providence, not involving miracles or God’s direct involvement in events, but providential partnership with humans. Yet, there are times when God may intervene in historical events to impose his will (“special” providence). In *Christianity and History* and elsewhere, Butterfield cautions that we cannot confidently identify when God has intervened (much less when he may do so in the future), or for that matter when his providential cooperation with women and men (including national decision-makers) has made a difference in history – but we can know that these things occur. As Christians, we know by faith that God’s hand is guiding history, but we also know that it is a light touch, leaving no clear fingerprints as it were, and we must be cautious in pointing to specific places and times where such contact may have occurred.

Nonetheless, as he was in his earlier book, Butterfield is irresistibly drawn to certain instances which seem to him providential, and so he suggests. He names the destruction of Nazi Germany, the setbacks of the British Empire, and the prosperity of the United States as

providential. He also concludes, "... looking at the war of 1914 – you must regard that war as itself a judgment of God on certain evils of our civilization which could not be rooted out in any other way." (Id., 8, 11)

Whether or not he has correctly identified God's providential actions – he acknowledges fallibility in any of his choices – it is more important to Butterfield (and impliedly to God) for humans to wonder and to contemplate what God may be up to, than to have ready answers. Thus, when bad things happen, we must ask, "what can it mean [that God willed or permitted this]? ... what sins did we commit as a nation to merit this response from God and from history?" (Id., 8) His argument is not that Christians are any better at providing answers than anyone else, but that they ought to be raising the questions, which is useful for everyone to contemplate. Christians should be raising the questions because they know by virtue of their faith (a) that God is in fact involved in history (he guides it, even if his touch is light); and (b) that history will eventually end up where God wants it (it has a *telos*). If they did not believe the first proposition, history would be meaningless; without the second proposition, it would be hopeless.

Actually, Butterfield goes farther than this. There are only two stark choices, he argues: "Either you trace everything back in the long run to sheer blind Chance, or you trace everything to God." (Id., 9) He is assuming, of course, the God of Abraham and of Christ who has eliminated chance by making history part of his divine plan. It is a forceful argument, though it is not clear that these are the only choices. Are atheists left only with the conclusion that everything is a function of blind chance? It seems not incoherent for them to believe that, even without God, humans are capable, at least in principle, of defining social goals (such as a good society or a peaceful and just international order), and progressing toward them in a purposeful

way. This is at least part of the argument from natural law as developed by Aquinas and later by Grotius – including the latter’s famous *etiamsi daremus* clause, that natural law would be operative and morally binding “even if we were to suppose (what we cannot suppose without the greatest wickedness) that there is no God, or that human affairs are of no concern to him.” (“Prolegomena to the First Edition” (1625), *The Rights of War and Peace*)

Butterfield would not, I believe, be moved by this objection. Yes, he would concede, “progress” of a certain sort may be possible; but without the transcendental foundation provided by God, there can be no ultimate meaning in history. Neither, Niebuhr would add, would there be a resilient source of hope to overcome resignation or cynicism in the face of continual disappointment in seeking to bring about such progress. Butterfield would agree. The debate about foundations is an old one (“old” at least since the Enlightenment): can there be genuine meaning in human life without an ultimate transcendent referent? Does meaning, to be meaningful, require an ultimate foundation? Does hope, to be enduring, require a transcendent source? Butterfield, like Niebuhr and Augustine, would say yes to the latter questions and no to the possibility of genuine meaning and hope without faith. Otherwise, providence would be empty.

Tragedy of History

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Reinhold Niebuhr developed the theme that history, like the individual human life, is touched by tragedy, characterized by the nation’s (like the individual’s) inescapable tendency to “overreach” its limits – and to do so precisely from an awareness of those very limits and a longing to supersede them.²¹ The myth of Prometheus, who

²¹ Niebuhr understood the slippery term “tragic” to apply when “the hero defies malignant power to assert the integrity of his soul. He suffers because he is strong and not because his is weak. He involves himself in guilt not by his vice but by his virtue.” (*Beyond Tragedy*, 156) Niebuhr was summarizing with approval the Greek

gave humankind the gift of fire and suffered for it, illustrates “the perennial self-destruction of man by his overreaching himself” (*Beyond Tragedy*, 160-61). It is at least as applicable to nations as to individuals, particularly states that possess great power. Niebuhr argued that power is always inclined to extend and ultimately to overextend itself. Butterfield agreed, citing Lord Acton’s observation of “the tendency of power as such to expand indefinitely, transcending all barriers at home and abroad, until it is met by a force superior to it.” (Butterfield 1953, 56-57) All three thinkers were aware of Hobbes’ teaching that power always “increases as it proceeds,” leading to what Hobbes called “a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death.” (*Leviathan*, chap. XI, p. 70)²²

In Butterfield’s view, this leads to a particular tragedy in the relations among great powers: the situation in which competing powers that genuinely want to avoid war with each other feel driven inexorably to measures which increase the very likelihood of the war they wish to avoid. As John Mearsheimer has written, “the situation ... is genuinely tragic” because “[g]reat powers that have no reason to fight each other – that are merely concerned with their own survival – nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system.”²³

This tragedy is triggered by a particular dilemma first identified by Butterfield in the early 1950s (and arguably earlier by Niebuhr). The root cause is the human tendency to believe in one’s own innocence while being ignorant of, and therefore doubting, that of the neighbor or potential adversary who might present a danger to oneself. Each nation is aware (or thinks it is)

conception for the individual person, but the same notion, extrapolated to the level of a nation-state, can be fairly read to cover tragedy in the sense that Butterfield intended.

²² Hobbes proceeds immediately to a succinct statement of what is now called “offensive realism”: “And the cause of this is ... because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.” (*Id.*)

²³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 3. Whether such powers truly “have little choice” is surely contestable; that they “feel” or “judge” that they have little choice is empirically demonstrable. Mearsheimer is a leading offensive realist.

of its own peaceful intentions, but cannot be sure of the intentions of others. The international arena is anarchic (like Hobbes's state of nature) with no higher authority guarding against conflict. It is thus a place of pure self-help: one's own safety can be secured only by the aggregation of enough power to discourage or overcome any potential adversary – an adversary whose intentions cannot be trusted to be as innocent as one's own. Because the stakes are so high – “survival,” defined as the preservation of the territorial integrity and political system of one's nation – no chance can be taken by placing faith in the non-aggressive intentions of a potential enemy. The worst must be assumed.

This gives rise to, among other things, the “security dilemma” or the “spiral model,” as it is called in the parlance of modern international relations theory.²⁴ Herbert Butterfield first identified and analyzed it in *History and Human Relations* in 1951.²⁵ He called it “the absolute predicament and the irreducible dilemma.” (*HHR*, 19) Referring to the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, Butterfield said, “The greatest war in history ... could be produced between two Powers both of which were desperately anxious to avoid a conflict of any sort.” (*Id.*, 19-20) Butterfield saw this as a tragic dilemma at the heart of all human strife involving power against power:

 this condition of absolute predicament or irreducible dilemma lies in the very geometry of human conflict. It is at the basis of the structure of any given episode in that conflict. It is at the basis of all the tensions of the present day, representing even now the residual problem that the world has not solved, the hard nut that we still have to crack. (*Id.*, 20)

²⁴ See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, chapter 3, “Deterrence, the Spiral Model, and Intentions of the Adversary,” pp. 58-113.

²⁵ John Herz also used the term in an article published in *World Politics* in 1950, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma.” This is the earliest use of the term I have found, although the concept is much older. The argument of Thucydides that the rise of Athens was the principal cause of the war with Sparta depends in part on the concept.

Robert Jervis, the most prominent modern theorist of the security dilemma, acknowledges the originality of Butterfield's insight, notes its similarity to the prisoner's dilemma, and states the roots of the dilemma this way:

The underlying problem lies ... in a correct appreciation of the consequences of living in a Hobbesian state of nature. In such a world without a sovereign, each state is protected only by its own strength. (Jervis, 62)

Thus, he concludes:

... the central theme of international relations is not evil but tragedy. States often share a common interest, but the structure of the situation [i.e., anarchy and lack of trustworthy information about the other's true intention] prevents them from bringing about the mutually desired situation. (Jervis, 66)

Butterfield's identification of this recurrent tragic dilemma was an important contribution to IR theory, as Jervis and others have recognized. Significantly, it grew from, and was indeed an application of, the recognition of tragedy in history as earlier explicated by Reinhold Niebuhr.

Part Two:
Ethics and International Relations Theory

Chapter 5
Ethics and International Politics

A major part of my argument that Christian realism is strikingly compatible with English School thought is the concern with the ethical dimension of international politics shared by Reinhold Niebuhr and all the major English School thinkers, and largely abandoned by the other schools. This ethical compatibility stems both from common roots in classical realism and from common Christian origins. The English School, alone among the major theories of IR study, maintains the importance (indeed the centrality) of ethical reasoning in its approach to the conduct of nations. The other schools have opted for the value-free social-science model and therefore eschew moral judgment.

To be clear, this is not to say that English School thinkers stand for an agreed catalog of specific norms by which nations are judged (although they do exhibit, in fact, a high degree of consensus on such norms). Rather, it is that they insist that judgments in IR include an explicit ethical component, *i.e.*, that the actions of nations and leaders be discussed and evaluated on moral grounds, among other grounds. This threshold insistence on an explicit ethical component, rather than the specific content of the norms, is what distinguishes the English School.

I will briefly set the stage here for the detailed work in the next three chapters addressing the ethical dimension of IR study.

The actions of states in their relations with each other are judged by a number of standards, including how well they serve their national interests, how well they determine or perceive what their national interests are, how adroitly they maneuver in the international space to accomplish those interests, and, perhaps most frequently, the effect of their decisions on the growth or maintenance of their own power in the world. In addition to these considerations of interest, are states and state actions also subject to judgments of right and wrong? Do states owe certain moral rights and obligations to each other, and are they subject to moral restraints in the pursuit of their national interests? What internationally-recognized rights and obligations, if any, do states have (a) to other states in the international order; (b) to their own citizens and residents; and/or (c) to persons outside their borders? What are the moral limits, if any, to state action? Is there a role for justice in international political thought?

Alternatively, are such ethical questions beside the point, given the anarchic arena in which states operate, the survival issues that are often at stake, and the responsibility of leaders for the protection and welfare of millions of people other than themselves?

These are the core questions of ethics and IR. The most important of them is the threshold question: should states be subject to ethical judgment at all? The answers have generally fallen along three lines:

(1) *Yes*, states are run by and for humans and are subject to basically the same type of ethical accountability as human persons are. While ethical situations differ in their circumstances, the underlying ethical inquiry is the same. This was a typical response in the middle ages and the early modern period when kings and princes (rather than “states” as corporate entities) were the subject of such inquiry. It is still the view of many in modern times.

(2) *No*, the responsibilities of leaders and the necessities of *realpolitik* being what they are, the application of ethical norms is inappropriate – at least the application of any norms other than those that arise from the national interest, including any that would require the sacrifice of the national interest, the preservation of which is itself the highest and only duty of state leaders. This is the view of Machiavelli in *The Prince*, for example, and the *de facto* view of many modern “realist” thinkers and actors including most “neorealists,” as will be discussed.

(3) *Yes but*: Ethical scrutiny does apply, but it must be fashioned specially, and perhaps uniquely, for application to states in the international political sphere. Politics, especially international politics, is a morally semi-autonomous space, distinct within but not exempt from ethical reasoning and judgment.

As will be discussed more fully in following chapters, this third position is the view of most twentieth-century classical realists, including Morgenthau and Niebuhr, as well as of most English School thinkers. The international actions of states are emphatically subject to ethical judgment, with the stipulation that there must be adjustments of method and principle because leaders are moral agents not for themselves but rather for others (citizens, the entire nation) for whom they bear a responsibility of trust and care and whose interests they cannot sacrifice.¹

To be sure, there came to be a marked distinction between the thought of Niebuhr, an avowed Christian thinker, and the later English School thinkers after Butterfield and Wight, such as Hedley Bull and Robert Jackson. It was the Biblical basis for Niebuhr’s realism that marked him as a “Christian realist” and his school as “Christian realism.” The founders of the English School shared Niebuhr’s theological presuppositions. Both Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight were Christian churchmen whose belief in universal ethical values were ultimately rooted

¹ I use “citizens” as a synonym for the permanent residents or inhabitants of a state, without regard to their precise legal status.

in Judeo-Christian teachings. Later English School writers abandoned this theological grounding but without abandoning the ethical precepts that derived from it. Hedley Bull, for example, while not a Christian thinker, retained the use of ethics as an indispensable tool for independent evaluation of nations' behavior. Thus, he argued that the existence and strengthening of the international society are moral goods serving moral ends, not merely matters of long-term political expedience for great powers. He judged national statespeople in part by their willingness to contribute to the upholding of international society, and thereby contribute to peace and order among nations and not merely within them. Similarly, Robert Jackson wrote of a "Global Covenant," which he meant as an explicitly moral understanding among states.

The fact that Niebuhr's Christian theological grounding was not shared by English School thinkers after Butterfield and Wight does not foreclose the conclusion argued for here, namely, that the School's "international society" approach fits most comfortably with the natural trajectory of Niebuhr's international thought. While Niebuhr rejected as unrealistic the revolutionary change in human nature that would be required to realize the idealist dreams for a non-tyrannical world government, he appreciated the need for, and saw the possibility of, the slow, deliberate development of a "world community" in which "the principle of order and justice will govern the international as well as the national community" and in which the present "anarchy" can be overcome. (*ND-II*, 285) This is an excellent conceptual summary of the international society which became the model of the English School.

Finally, a note about theology and the role of special revelation. Niebuhr's vision of justice was ultimately based on the "law of love" exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus, and thus can be discerned only by special revelation. Not all of his friends or admirers (including later English School thinkers) shared this ultimate foundation or accepted this special revelation.

Nonetheless, many of them shared his ethical principles and he worked with them to accomplish common social objectives. In his lifetime, Niebuhr and his non-believing friends found congenial company with each other as they worked for political and social change from a set of shared objectives deriving from different foundations. I am not sure that Niebuhr ever reconciled this difference, *viz.*, the fact that, on the one hand, his own ethical precepts were ultimately grounded in the law of love given by special revelation, and on the other, his confidence that those whose only basis was rationality could nonetheless affirm the principles of justice on which they and Niebuhr could agree. He seems not to have addressed it explicitly; yet he assumed at least this much: that a rational, non-theologically-based social ethic could get close enough to his own theologically-grounded principles of justice to permit meaningful cooperation in moving toward a more just order. This does not, of course, address the dangers of cynicism, pessimism, or moral entropy – lack of moral motivation in the face of stubborn and discouraging realities. For Niebuhr these dangers were averted by means of Christian hope.²

Today, more than forty years after Niebuhr's death, while English School thinkers have abandoned the ultimate theological foundations which Butterfield and Wight shared with Niebuhr, they have held onto the ethical commitments which were nurtured on those foundations. Thus, much as Niebuhr developed Christian realism as a distinct variant of classical realism, it would not be wrong to consider international thinkers in the Niebuhrian tradition – adherents of international Christian realism – as comprising a “Christian branch” of English School thought.

In the chapters that follow, I will first survey the major schools of international relations with particular reference to their stance on moral issues (Chap. 6). In Chapters 7 and 8, the heart

² For further discussion of this topic, see the section entitled, “Realism and Hope” in chapter 9 on Niebuhr, and “Theism and Hope” in chapter 12, the Conclusion.

of this Part II, I will treat the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Wight, respectively. With Niebuhr I will explore the ethics of his Christian realism as it relates to international politics. With Wight, I will discuss his work as the co-founder of the English School and as a thinker who, in the words of English School historian Timothy Dunne, “plac[ed] ethics at the centre” of his theoretical work. (Dunne, 9)

Chapter 6

Ethics and the Schools of International Relations

The Schools

Before addressing the history of ethics in IR, and as a foundation for the later idea (in Part III) of the “international society,” I propose to survey briefly the four major “schools” that comprise the modern study of the subject, especially since the schools are distinguished from each other in part by their relationship to ethical questions. These schools are usually labelled as (1) realism, (2) liberal internationalism (or liberal institutionalism or merely liberalism), (3) constructivism, and (4) the English School.¹ Before Martin Wight lectured and wrote *International Theory* (to be discussed later), IR thought was normally conceived as a binary choice between realism and idealism. Constructivism is a more sophisticated heir to idealism, while the other schools are variations of realism.

Preliminarily, it should be noted that the formal study of international relations is quite recent, beginning only after World War I with the writings of E.H. Carr and Reinhold Niebuhr, and with the overwhelming amount of literature being produced after World War II. Before the twentieth century, there was “diplomatic history” charting the relationships among mostly

¹ A number of histories of IR theory and its “schools” have been written, including the following which I have found particularly useful: Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*; Burchill, et al., *Theories of International Relations*; Bell, ed., *Political Thought and International Relations*; Brown, et al., *International Relations in Political Thought*; Jackson, *Classical and Modern Thought on International Relations*; Jackson and Sorenson, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*; Knorr and Rosenau, *Contending Approaches to International Politics*; Thompson, *Schools of Thought in International Relations*; Williams, *International Relations in Political Theory*. See also, Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*. In addition, there are histories of specific schools of IR.

European powers; and there were debates among statesmen about “idealism” and “realism,” but international relations was not a distinct object of formal study until the twentieth century.²

An Overview of Realism

Martin Wight once wrote, “Realism can be a very good thing; it all depends [on] whether it means the abandonment of high ideals or of foolish expectations.” (*Power Politics*, 294)

All theories of international relations begin with realism and none escape it entirely. It is the tradition with the oldest pedigree and all the other theories draw on the insights and assumptions of realism to a greater or lesser degree.³ Even constructivism must address the anatomy of power and its acquisition which is so basic to the conduct of the major nation-states.

The “standard history” of IR realism and its giants starts with Thucydides in the fifth century B.C., skips forward eight centuries to St. Augustine, then to Machiavelli and Hobbes in the early modern period, followed by the twentieth century with E.H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan. Niebuhr was familiar with this history, and his “Christian realism” drew especially on Augustine, while adding and contributing significantly to it. Although best known for his political realism in domestic political-ethical theory,⁴ Niebuhr’s thought includes an international dimension which he developed in written and face-to-face conversation with Morgenthau, a personal friend, making the two of them the most important IR realists of the twentieth century. Niebuhr called Morgenthau our “most brilliant and authoritative political realist.” (*Man’s Nature and His Communities*, 71) Morgenthau called

² Brian Schmidt has provided an excellent account of the “pre-history” of IR as an academic discipline, emphasizing its nineteenth century and pre-World War I roots, in his book, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations*.

³ There are many accounts of the history of realism. In addition to the books listed in the earlier footnote covering the history of IR schools, see, Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*; Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*; Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*; Waltz, *Man, the State and War and Theory of International Politics*.

⁴ For the best account of this, see Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (1995) and *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (2008).

Niebuhr, “the greatest living political philosopher of America.” (Landon, 109) After Niebuhr’s death, Morgenthau dedicated his next book, *Science: Servant or Master?*, to “the Memory of Reinhold Niebuhr.”

E.H. Carr, whose importance rivals that of Morgenthau and Niebuhr, wrote a major sustained attack on post-World War I idealism, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, published in 1939 (at precisely the right time for prophetic wisdom), which became, along with Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and Morgenthau’s *Politics Among Nations* (1948), one of the trinity of founding texts of twentieth-century realism in IR.

All these thinkers had ideas that were independent of Niebuhr’s (and none shared his theological foundation), but they all acknowledged learning from him. At one point George Kennan, referring to twentieth-century realists, called Niebuhr “the father of us all.”⁵ Morgenthau repeatedly acknowledged his debt to Niebuhr, and in particular, the latter’s contributions to the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of IR study.

Realism holds that nations consistently and predictably act in accordance with what they perceive to be their national interest, conceived chiefly in terms of power, for the purpose of preserving the survival of the nation-state and its political system as against foreign adversaries. They rarely sacrifice any part of this interest for another nation or people or for the “greater good” of the international community or of global institutions. Power is understood in terms of

⁵ This statement is repeatedly attributed to Kennan without citation as to source. I discovered the source in Kenneth Thompson’s recollection that “George F. Kennan ... used the words ‘Niebuhr is the father of all of us’ when he called to ask that I write the memorial tribute to Niebuhr for the annual volume of the American Academy for [sic] Arts and Sciences,” shortly after Niebuhr’s death in 1971. K. Thompson, “Reinhold Niebuhr: A Personal Reflection and Political Evaluation,” in David Clinton, ed., *The Realist Tradition and Contemporary International Relations*, 1. For a sample of the reports of Kennan’s reference to Niebuhr, see, William Pfaff, “Special Article: America’s Manifest Destiny,” *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 27, 2007; Eric Gregory, “Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 179-206, 180 (2007). Richard Fox in his biography of Niebuhr notes this “widely reported” remark of Kennan’s, but states that in 1980 Kennan did not recall making the remark. Fox, 238. Fox goes on to say that while Kennan found Niebuhr’s political judgments “unexceptional” (read, similar to Kennan’s own), it was Niebuhr’s “philosophical perspective that he found personally attractive.” (*Id.*)

“material power,” meaning military and economic power. The ultimate national interest being survival against conquest, these are seen as the bulwarks of national security, the essential assets for defending against aggression by others. “[T]he safety of the people is the supreme law,” said Hobbes in *Man and Citizen* (258), and this includes the preservation and protection of the geographic boundaries, political system, sovereignty and independence of the state. National security is the first responsibility of any government.

The combined attention to national interest, and its frequent reduction to national security, leads inexorably to the focus on “hard” power, *i.e.*, military power backed up by economic strength. Little attention is paid to the “soft power” of ideas, which are either ignored or treated as epiphenomenal.⁶ For realists, power thus understood is the coin of international politics and the measure of a nation’s standing. Moreover, *relative* power – power relative to other nations, rather than absolute power – is the key to understanding and predicting national behavior in a competitive international system. Therefore, the relative distribution of power among the states in the system is the most critical single factor in assessing the prospects for safety and order. This is because the international arena is an anarchy with no law enforcer, with states being left to their own devices – to “self-help” – in order to protect and look after themselves. Because survival is at stake and there is no external means of support, threats from others are quickly perceived as existential and the nation’s own power becomes its only security against elimination.

As the foregoing indicates, realism is “state-centric.” So too is the English School. Liberal internationalism and constructivism are slightly less so. While all IR theories retain states as main actors, liberal internationalism emphasizes transnational non-state actors almost as much as

⁶ Among IR scholars, the term “soft power” is most closely associated with Joseph Nye. *See, e.g.*, his *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

states. Constructivism stresses that in all such collectivities, ideas and self-conceptions are what matter most. Finally, although realist theory applies to any group of nations that pay attention to or compete with each other, and in that sense constitute a “system,” as a practical matter realism concentrates almost exclusively on the “major powers” or “great powers,” defined as those with the ability to preserve and defend themselves without assistance from others.⁷

Realists may be “offensive” or “defensive,” based on the aggressiveness with which nations are believed to aggregate power to preserve and protect themselves. The best-known offensive realist is John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago who argues that, as major powers view the world, offense is the only effective defense because the only sure way to preserve a nation’s place in the world is by expansionary policies looking to aggregate more power at every opportunity. As Mearsheimer puts it:

Apprehensive about the ultimate intentions of other states, and aware that they operate in a self-help system, states quickly understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system. The stronger a state is relative to its potential rivals, the less likely it is that any of those rivals will attack it and threaten its survival. (*Tragedy*, 33)

Ideally (according to offensive realism), a nation seeks hegemony in its region; more ambitiously, extra-regional hegemony may be the goal. Global hegemony is impossible.⁸

“Defensive realists,” represented by Kenneth Waltz of Berkeley and Stephen Walt of Harvard, believe that the basic security posture of major powers is defensive: they only seek as

⁷ “Realists focus mainly on great powers,” John Mearsheimer writes, “because these states dominate and shape international politics and they also cause the deadliest wars.” (*Tragedy*, 17) Niebuhr agrees: Only the “hegemony of the stronger powers” can ensure any kind of world order (*ND-II*, 285); “only the preponderant power of the great nations can be an adequate core of authority for a minimal world order.” (*Children*, 177)

⁸ Christopher Layne argues that the United States since World War II is the most prominent historical case of offensive realism – a major power that sought and attained extra-regional hegemony. *The Peace of Illusions*, 15-19. The U.S. has been the hegemon of its own region – the entire western hemisphere – since the Spanish were forced to relinquish their colonies in Central and South America in the first half of the nineteenth century (except for Cuba and Puerto Rico which were relinquished in the Spanish-American War at the end of the century). The Monroe Doctrine proclaimed U.S. hemispheric hegemony. Since World War II, the economic and military power of the U.S. coupled with its hemispheric hegemony has permitted it to project its power worldwide, not as a global hegemon but as a nation whose power and influence exist globally.

much power as will preserve, not expand, their geopolitical domain. This offensive-defensive distinction is slippery and in any event one of degree, so some thinkers ignore it or express skepticism that it is a meaningful distinction in the real world. Even Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, acknowledges that once a major power (such as the U.S.) achieves regional or broader hegemony, it then tends to shift to a defensive posture, becoming a status quo power – though without ever losing the desire for more power. (*Tragedy*, especially chap. 7)

After Niebuhr's death in 1971 and during the last years of Hans Morgenthau (d. 1980), American realism completed its transformation into what came to be called "neorealism" or "structural realism," of which all three thinkers just mentioned (Waltz, Walt, and Mearsheimer) are representative.⁹ Neorealism differs from the "classical" realism of Niebuhr and Morgenthau (and thus may be considered "post-classical") in two important ways: by setting aside the explanatory power of human nature (substituting structural "anarchy" as the operative paradigm); and by eschewing any explicitly normative dimension. (The English School has retained an explicit focus on ethics, and has not disavowed the importance of human nature, thus confirming its links with classical realism.) The traditional reliance on historical analysis and diplomatic practice was abandoned in favor of an empirically-based approach in which IR study aspires to be a value-free social science. Kenneth Waltz, the most influential theoretician of neorealism, leans heavily on microeconomics (analogizing power balancing to market equilibrium), game theory, and rational choice theory and eschews any discussion of moral

⁹ The term "neorealism" obviously signals a new stage beyond the original or "classical" realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and others; the "structure" in "structural realism" refers to neorealists' relentless emphasis on the structure of the international arena, i.e., the distribution of power among states in an anarchy. The turning point from classical to neorealism was the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, discussed below, although the transformation had been building since at least the mid-1950s. David Armitage calls the 1954 Rockefeller-funded Conference on International Politics in New York, in which Morgenthau and Niebuhr participated, the "high-water mark of an ethical approach to international affairs before the triumph of behaviouralist social science in the United States." This latter approach, he notes, "exclude[s] ideas and ethics from the realm of politics and International Relations, particularly in the United States." (Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, 25) The 1954 Conference is further discussed below in the chapter on Martin Wight.

purpose. Banishing human nature, with all its messy a-rationality, opened the door to the use of rational choice and game theory (developed in economics), thus facilitating modeling and theoretical constructs explaining and predicting human decisions. This is done by assuming consistently rational actors not affected by emotions or other a-rational or irrational influences on their choices. Of course, it also has the effect of excluding a great deal of actual, real-world human behavior and what motivates it.

The English School, without denying the usefulness of much empirical research, rejects the idea of stopping there. It objects to the incompleteness of the positivist, value-free, social-science aspects of neorealism, rejects its setting aside of normative judgment, and laments the consequent narrowing of much American political science. Reinhold Niebuhr could have been speaking for the English School when he warned of the modern liberal “illusion” that the empirical methods of science could be applied to collective man as simply another object of scientific investigation, or that scientific inquiry when applied to society is the instrument “by which mankind rises to higher and higher degrees of perfection.” (*On Politics*, 43)

The English School continues the tradition of classical realism in international politics, including the importance of human nature, of careful historical study, of the examination of practical wisdom in statecraft, and of the application of moral judgment to nations and political leaders. English School thinkers typically do not ponder the specific moral standards applicable to the conduct of nations or leaders, so much as they insist on an affirmative answer to the threshold question, should moral argument be part of IR study at all? To be sure, such thinkers do affirm certain moral standards, such as the moral worth of the international society as an instrument of attainable peace and justice, the importance of international law as repository of agreed normative judgments, and the validity of just-war doctrine. Nonetheless, the greater

energy is spent defending the principle that ethical judgments are appropriate and essential to IR theory.

English School thinkers incorporate a very elaborate understanding of the interaction of nation-states, whether as part of international “systems” or of the “international society.” Like neorealism, the English School examines the phenomenon of international anarchy, but unlike neorealism, does so as part of a deeper and more explicit understanding of human nature and of the limits of unselfishness and cooperation. It judges state behavior on normative grounds, and posits the international society as a moral good whose slow and careful deepening and expansion are morally worthy. Eschewing utopian hopes, the goal of thinkers in this tradition is a progressively more orderly and more just world community through the evolving international society – understanding that “progress” and “evolution” will be slow, uneven, and fitful and that success is not historically assured. The approach is gradualist but persistent, it encompasses moral goods and seeks to explore, through historical study and practical insight, means to move toward such goods.

The Other IR Schools

The two other major American schools (both of which are “post-classical” in the sense described above) begin from neorealism, but bring significant additions to it or variations of it.

Liberal internationalists (sometimes referred to as “liberal institutionalists,” “liberals” or “neoliberals”) have a more optimistic view than classical or neorealists do of the possibilities of cooperation in an anarchic system. They acknowledge the realists’ tenets that power is the coin and currency of national interest and that anarchy is the operative fact of international life. Like the neorealists, they reject the older humanistic methodology and conduct their investigations as empirically-oriented, value-free social scientists. But for these thinkers, anarchy is less

Hobbesian than Lockean: nations in the international state of nature “are neither enemies nor friends, but rivals. They all seek their own advantage, without particular animosity, or empathy, toward others,” but they quickly learn the value of cooperation. (Keohane, xiii)

Like neorealists, neoliberals lean heavily on economics and rational choice theory. They assert that nations engaged in competition for relative power are rationally motivated to build and support an international system of trade and economic cooperation which lessens the effects of anarchy and therefore tends to act as a stabilizer and a significant restraint on military conflict.

Currently, the single most prominent liberal theorist is Robert Keohane. In *After Hegemony*, he sets out what he calls a “functional theory of international regimes,” defining regimes as “clusters of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures,” often (though not necessarily) embodied in international organizations. (p. xi) He argues that such regimes, many of them based on free trade, “reduce transaction costs for states, alleviate problems of asymmetrical information, and limit the degree of uncertainty that members of the regime face in evaluating each others’ [sic] policies,” and thereby “promote mutually beneficial cooperation.” (*Id.*) Though much of the cooperation is economically motivated, it tends to buttress political cooperation as well. He has in mind such regimes and agencies as the World Trade Organization, regional trade pacts such as NAFTA, and also political organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations.¹⁰ He summarized his argument in a 2008 interview in which he discussed what led him to write *After Hegemony*:

... I started to think about the puzzle of institutionalized cooperation: if states are, as prevailing theory emphasized, so concerned to maintain their autonomy, why do they establish international regimes? The answer I eventually came to was to show how

¹⁰ This use of “regimes” to refer to international principles, norms, rules, and procedures, including those found in international law and embodied in international institutions, has given rise to “regime theory,” as both a subset of liberalism and an object of study by realists who do not identify as liberals. See, e.g., Stephen Krasner, “Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables,” *International Organization*, vol. 36 no. 2 (Spring 1982), 185-205.

even rational and egoistical states could find it in their interest to join multilateral institutions, insofar as those institutions reduced the costs of making and enforcing agreements and therefore facilitated cooperation that was beneficial to the society and to its political leadership.¹¹

All IR theorists (including realists) acknowledge that international regimes and the cooperation they engender make positive contributions to the maintenance of peace and stability, as well as to worldwide economic development. The question is one of degree: how much difference do they really make, particularly on the prevention of hostilities and other issues of national security? Realist critics point out that on the eve of World War I the Germans and the British were each other's largest and most significant trading partners; yet the War came. The usual criticism of liberalism is not that it is wrong – certainly trade contributes to stability – but that it is too optimistic about the difference economic ties can make.

Constructivism's most important exponent is Alexander Wendt who, in 1992, wrote an influential article entitled, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics."¹² The basic thesis is stated in the title: anarchy does not necessarily and for all time dictate the Hobbesian response that some realists posit. We humans have the freedom and the capability to fashion and modify our response to anarchy. Wendt followed this with his book, *Social Theory of International Politics*, in which he laid out a comprehensive case for constructivism.

Constructivism is the heir to the interwar idealist tradition which was fiercely criticized by IR realists, starting with E.H. Carr. But it digs deeper than simple idealism did. According to Wendt, it rests on two tenets:

¹¹ "Robert Keohane on Institutions and the Need for Innovation in the Field," *Theory Talk #9*, interview of May 29, 2008, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2008/05/theory-talk-9.html>.

¹² *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 2 (spring 1992), 391-425.

(1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature. (*Social Theory*, 1)

Constructivists acknowledge their roots in idealism, but stress the importance of “ideas” rather than “ideals.” Wendt casts the difference between constructivists and realists as basically a conflict between ideas and material interests, with the latter being understood as military power backed by economic strength, all in the service of a national interest which seeks to maximize power, wealth, and security. To put it differently, he sees the differences as occurring in response to two questions: (1) whether ideas are independent variables in international politics, as he believes, or merely dependent on and a reflection of material interests, which realists tend to assume; and (2) assuming ideas are independent variables, whether their role is major or minor compared to material factors. Wendt’s view is that complexes of ideas (such as national identity, social self-understanding, perception of others, ideology, discourse, and culture) have a significance that is independent of material factors, and that ideas have demonstrated their ability to be at least as important (for good or ill) as the material factors which realists stress. (*Id.*, 93)

Constructivists point to the unexpected end of the Cold War and of Russian communism as an example of how ideas can trump material factors. On the negative side, he might have mentioned the role of Nazism and communism as comprehensive ideologies providing a framework independent of (though interacting with) material factors in building the powerful states of Nazi Germany and the U.S.S.R.

Finally, returning to the earlier discussion, the **English School** is the fourth of the major IR schools and is correctly perceived as “standing aside” from these others. This is because, in continuity with classical realism, it is less interested in differentiating itself from them than in synthesizing certain of their insights with their own. As noted above, what distinguishes the

English School (aside from the importance it attributes to international society) is its methodology, specifically its insistence on retaining the ethical as an essential part of IR analysis, its rejection of the value-free, largely ahistorical positivism and empiricism of U.S. political science, and its recovery of historical and philosophical sources for understanding international behavior. As Hedley Bull put it, in defense of the “classical approach” at the root of the English School:

What I have in mind, however, is ... the approach to theorizing that derives from philosophy, history, and law, and that is characterized above all by explicit reliance upon the exercise of judgment and by the assumptions that if we confine ourselves to strict standards of verification and proof there is very little of significance that can be said about international relations, that general propositions about this subject must therefore derive from a scientifically imperfect process of perception or intuition, and that these general propositions cannot be accorded anything more than the tentative and inconclusive status appropriate to their doubtful origin. (“International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach,” *World Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Apr. 1966), 361-77, at 361)

Later, in his most important work *The Anarchical Society* (1977), Bull explores the essential place of ethical thought, including order and justice, in any complete theory of international relations.¹³ The contemporary Canadian-American thinker Robert Jackson does the same in his book, *The Global Covenant* (2000). (Both authors will be further discussed in Part III.)

A final word on all the schools. They are not sharply differentiated or mutually exclusive. The differences are ones of emphasis, of “weighting,” and of “angle of vision.” There are numerous commonalities among the schools, in large part because of their common roots in classical realism. All IR theorists acknowledge the importance of states, of power, of insecurity, and of self-help in an anarchic international arena. All recognize the validity of the perspectives of the other schools, even if they give them less weight. Thus, realists admit to the potentially moderating effects of international trade, and constructivists acknowledge the significance of

¹³ See especially chap. 4, “Order versus Justice in World Politics.”

material power. But realists believe that all the economic and ideational factors in the world will never overcome the distribution of material power as the chief predictor of how nations behave, and that to a large degree ideas are captive to material power. Liberal institutionalists think that trade and cooperative economic ties are not merely bonds of convenience for consenting states, but that they inculcate lasting habits of cooperation that can overcome at least some forces that would otherwise lead to conflict – that a nation’s perceived interests can be changed by the experience of cooperation. Constructivists acknowledge both the importance of power and the value of international trade and organizations, but emphasize that ideas underlie all of these. They believe that both realists and liberals are too prone to take established ideas as given, and not to realize that conventional wisdom can be successfully, if slowly, challenged and changed (which, they point out, has indeed occurred in history). Anarchy and the distribution of material power are important, but “what we make of them” is not fixed and immutable but a matter of human ideas.

Thus, these major approaches to the study of IR should be seen as different points on a methodological continuum. As R.B. Finnegan has put it, “[e]ach type of effort can inform and enrich the other and can as well act as a check on the excesses endemic in each approach.” (Finnegan, 64)

The English School is particularly adaptive, incorporating insights from all the other schools, while differing in method. This inclusiveness is not surprising since the English School remains closest to classical realism, the common ancestor of all the schools. It is distinguished by its attachment to “classical” modes of doing IR (including the study of history, the exercise of judgment, and the role of moral purpose), as well its rejection of the thorough-going positivism

of all the American neorealists, the excessive pessimism of the offensive realists, the inordinate optimism of liberal internationalists, and the undue idealism of constructivists.

Twentieth-Century Realism

The most important thing to be said about twentieth-century realism is that it is not idealism. In its years following World War I, realism defined itself against idealism. Yet, the excoriation of idealism did not mean the desertion of moral judgment. As noted earlier, morality remained central to classical realism. John Bew has demonstrated how realists and practitioners of *realpolitik* never lost sight of the fact that, along with the pursuit of power, modern states must to some degree adhere to the basic ethical insights shared by their populace. (Bew, “The Real Origins of *Realpolitik*”) This is certainly true of democracies, where the public instinctively thinks of politics in moral terms¹⁴; it is even true to some degree in totalitarian regimes such as the U.S.S.R.¹⁵ While realism abjures utopianism, it does not thereby reject the importance of ideals, including moral ones. Political ideals have their place in a realist’s view of the world, so long as they are realistically attainable and balanced with a sober understanding of human limits. Moreover, realists insist on a certain autonomy of political morality from personal morality; the simple transfer of individual moral norms to political judgment leads to “moralism” and all its deleterious consequences.¹⁶

In the twentieth century, IR realism came of age between the two world wars, reacting against Wilsonian optimism and the rise of the Nazi menace. E.H. Carr’s *Twenty Years’ Crisis*

¹⁴ “[T]he attempt to deny the relevance of ethical standards to international relations has been made almost exclusively by the philosopher, not by the statesman or the man in the street.” Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, 141.

¹⁵ In a 1994 lecture to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, George Kennan noted that Stalin was no more and no less amoral than Russian rulers in the czarist past. However, because Russian leaders’ amorality has long been “at odds with the strong moral sense of the Russian people,” Stalin, like his predecessors, exaggerated external dangers to Russia in order to justify his brutal measures. (Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, 250) Gaddis notes that Kennan often made a point of the basic moral sense of the Russian people, drawing on his years living in Russia and as a fluent Russian speaker and reader.

¹⁶ See the discussion below of Morgenthau’s critique of moralism. Kennan’s critique was equally strong; see, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1985/86 issue.

(1939) signaled the shift.¹⁷ Carr (1892-1982) was a British diplomat, historian, and professor of international politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. In his book, Carr castigated the myopic utopianism of those who had penned their hopes on the League of Nations and Wilsonian idealism. Such thinking had led, in Carr's view, to inflated and unjustified hopes whose fanciful unreality contributed to the Second War that was about to begin. Carr was a tough and unrelenting realist, but the necessity of moral judgment remained an integral part of his realism, thanks in large part to his admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr. Carr notes in the Preface to *Crisis* his indebtedness to *Moral Man and Immoral Society* which, he said, "seem[s] to me to have illuminated some of the fundamental problems of politics." (*Id.*, cvii) In the body of the book, Carr repeatedly cites to, and often quotes from, *Moral Man* in describing the inherent tensions between power and ethics, and the need to be attentive to both. Thus, for example:

"Politics," writes Dr. Niebuhr, "will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises." The compromises, like solutions of other human problems, will remain uneasy and tentative. But it is an essential part of any compromise that both factors shall be taken into account. (*Id.*, 95; quoting from *Moral Man* at 4)

In a later essay called "The Moral Foundations for World Order" (in a volume of the same name), Carr notes the usual three options on the relationship between individual and political morality, and chooses the third, *viz.*, that states do have moral obligations but they are different from those that bind individuals. He cites the widespread consensus among states themselves that they are morally obliged to keep their word as embodied in treaties to which they have committed themselves. Yet, "the analogy between the state and the individual ... can also be

¹⁷ Chapters 5-8 are particularly important in contrasting Carr's realism with earlier sentiments.

misleading.” (*Moral Foundations*, 57) He rests his remaining observations on the writings of Niebuhr in *Moral Man*:

Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr ... showed that whereas the behaviour of the individual member of society may reach a comparatively high standard of morality, the behaviour of societies and groups in general, and notably of nations, falls far below that standard. *Id.*, 58.

Indeed, to some degree the behavior of nations *must* fall below the standard of individual morality. Statesmen are charged with protecting the lives of others and the maintenance of the political order, which require the thoughtful exercise of power in the face of moral dilemmas different from those faced in ordinary life: “The problem of power presents the gravest stumbling block of all for those who seek to build a world order on moral foundations.” *Id.*, 62. There is a constant tension between power – the need for security and the desire for greater control – and morality, which requires potential sacrifice of power for the sake of others. The negotiation of these opposing forces is difficult but must not be abandoned by statesmen, in Carr’s view. The tension is intrinsic to realism.

The distinctiveness of Niebuhr’s Christian realism is that it is grounded in the insights of the Hebrew prophets and of Augustine theology. As noted, much of Christian realism for Niebuhr was defined by its not being “liberalism,” which he often equated with excessive idealism. His realism was thus inoculated against the view of human nature as basically good, infinitely perfectible, and leading to inevitable continued social progress consequent upon the expansion of human knowledge.

Niebuhr believed that one of the most fundamental difference between idealists and realists is their evaluation of human nature, and specifically, the human capacity for good as against evil. Since nations are led by individuals, these capacities define the limits within which international

conduct can be modified for the better. Thus, much of IR study (like political philosophy generally) starts from the tightly-woven connection between human nature and ethical capacity.

Classical realism generally, especially as articulated by Morgenthau influenced by Niebuhr, recognized the force of the doctrine of original sin. It viewed human nature as capable of good but conflicted in its desire to do good, and humans as ineluctably oriented toward self-aggrandizement and selfishness, especially where power is concerned. A particular contribution of Niebuhr's *Christian* realism, aside from its analysis of original sin, was its focus on power. Power is the tempter and corrupter of good will, a multiplier of tendencies toward selfishness and the penchant for pushing aside or oppressing the less powerful. Idealists (including Niebuhr's "liberals") have greater hopes for nations because they make a more generous assessment of the human capacity for present good and future perfectibility. Realists are skeptical that major changes in basic human inclinations are possible, but propose to work within those limits.

With the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, eight years after Niebuhr's death, IR realism took a decisive turn away from ethics, human nature, and the humanistic approach, and toward the "scientific-empirical" study of world affairs. It became known as "neorealism" or "structural realism." It rejected the prominent role of human nature in the realism of its predecessors; and it eschewed any role for ethics in the evaluation of international affairs seeking to remake IR studies into a value-free social science.¹⁸ In this it has largely succeeded, at least in the United States.¹⁹ In place of human nature, neorealism places

¹⁸ Many have written about the transformation of IR realism from a classical humanist study into an empiricist, value-free social science. See, e.g. Reus-Smit and Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, chaps. 7 and 8; Jackson, *Classical and Modern Thought on International Relations*, chaps. 1 and 2, and *The Global Covenant*, chap. 3. See generally Thompson, *Schools of Thought in International Relations and Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics*; Freyberg-Inan, et al., eds., *Rethinking Realism in International Relations*.

¹⁹ Neorealism has succeeded in replacing classical realism in the American political science community. Whether it has succeeded in eliminating ethics from IR is a different matter. Classical realists and English School thinkers argue that it is impossible to study international relations or politics without a moral point of view, acknowledged or unacknowledged. The result of the denial of ethics is not to eliminate the moral point of view but to conceal it from

the concept of international anarchy at its center and points to it as the chief driver of the conduct of great powers. As Keith Simko nicely puts it, “there is disagreement among neorealists about what exactly anarchy causes, but there is agreement that anarchy causes it.”²⁰

Anarchy in this context does not mean lawlessness or Hobbes’ war of all against all; merely the absence of international government and the necessity of self-help. Nonetheless, much as Descartes did with his *cogito ergo sum* or Hobbes with his single moral principle of self-preservation, structural realists deduce a mass of conclusions from the single fact of anarchy’s existence. Waltz’s work was the culmination of a trend in U.S. IR studies beginning in the late fifties. After Waltz, neorealism became the mainstream of realism which it remains today in the United States. The victory of neorealism never occurred in Great Britain, however, or in the English School, which has retained a healthy respect for the insights of classical realism and which continues IR study as a humanistic activity.

As an aside, it must be said that neorealism’s “discovery” of anarchy is not novel, and from a Niebuhrian perspective its purported abandonment of human nature for anarchy is largely illusory.²¹ Only a blind spot in modern IR theory would enable the belief that in adopting anarchy as the reigning paradigm, “human nature” has been set aside. Of course it has not. Neorealists posit that in reaction to anarchy, humans – both leaders and citizens – exhibit certain regular and predictable behaviors in response to threats or rivalries with other nations. They

examination. See, e.g., Jackson, *Classical and Modern Thought on International Relations*, chap. 2, “Conversing with Thrasymachus: Voices of Realism.”

²⁰ Keith Shimko, “Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism,” *Review of Politics* vol. 54, p. 299 (spring 1992); quoted in William R. Stevenson, Jr., “What’s ‘Realistic’?: A Framework for an Augustinian Analysis of Contemporary Approaches to International Relations,” in W. David Clinton, *The Realist Tradition in Contemporary International Relations*, 54. Stevenson (in footnote 15 of his essay) also claims that it was Martin Wight who first used the term “international anarchy,” citing *Power Politics* at p. 34. In fact, although Stevenson fails to note it, Wight devotes an entire chapter of *Power Politics* to “International Anarchy” (chap. 9, pp. 100-104) Wight also discusses it at pp. 105 and 293.

²¹ Brian Schmidt in *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* has shown that the role of anarchy has been central to the academic and theoretical study of politics since at least the mid-19th century, i.e., since the “pre-history” of modern IR studies, as he puts it.

believe these reactions can be tested and analyzed and will yield generalization about how nations behave. It is evident, however, that what is being posited and tested is not the abstract condition of anarchy *per se*, but rather, allegedly predictable, regular human responses to such anarchy –responses which inevitably reflect human nature. Indeed, if human responses to anarchy were not regular and predictable, *i.e.*, if they were not stable components of human nature, the empirical testing would yield no useful results. Thus, the belief that human nature has been eliminated as an independent variable of IR is an illusion. It has simply been masked (thus rendering it, like ethics, unavailable for critical scrutiny) by focusing on the more “objective” factor of the anarchy which triggers the human responses.²²

In truth, *both* anarchy and human nature play their parts, as Niebuhr argued. At least as early as *Moral Man*, he acknowledged the existence and importance of international anarchy²³; but he combined it with insights on the nature of the humans who respond to this condition. This seems a truer and more complete approach, and has been retained by English School thinkers.

While both neorealism and liberal internationalism seek to banish (or at least ignore) the role of human nature, constructivism acknowledges it, but only implicitly, by arguing that anarchy is what “we” make of it and that “we” can change how we view it or react to it. Alexander Wendt criticizes neorealism’s single-minded focus on anarchy, observing that many aspects of power politics and balancing are not really explained by “the structural fact of anarchy alone.” Rather,

²² Patrick James in a critique of Mearsheimer’s neorealism, has recognized that human nature remains an element of neorealist thought, though unacknowledged and unexamined, and suggests that a return to its explicit examination would be a useful path forward in neorealist thinking. James, “Elaborating on Offensive Realism,” in Freyberg-Inan, Harrison, James, eds., *Rethinking Realism in International Relations*, 51-53, 60. Similarly, Laurie M. Johnson Bagby has recognized it: “For structural realists, the structure *assumes* a certain human nature. The fact that this human nature is not clearly articulated does not mean the assumption is not present or important.” Bagby, “Thucydidean Realism: Between Athens and Melos,” in Frankel, ed., *Roots of Realism*, 172.

²³ “The will-to-power of competing national groups is the cause of the international anarchy which the moral sense of mankind has thus far vainly striven to overcome. Since some nations are more powerful than others, they will at times prevent anarchy by effective imperialism But the peace is gained by force and is always an uneasy and an unjust one.” (*Moral Man*, 18-19)

what is really doing the explanatory work here is the assumption that anarchy is a self-help system, which follows from states being egoists about their security and not from anarchy. Sometimes states are egoists and other times they are not, and this variation can change the “logic” of anarchy. (*Social Theory*, 18)

This amounts to a partial recognition – but very partial, since it is “states” who are “egotists” in Wendt’s account. He avoids attributing any such characteristic to the humans who actually make decisions for “states.”

In the early English School, Butterfield and Wight, influenced by Augustine and (at least in Wight’s case) Niebuhr, certainly recognized the role of human nature. Later English School thinkers emphasize it less but still acknowledge it, seeking to do what Niebuhr did, *viz.*, to understand anarchy *in light of* human nature, and human nature in light of anarchy.

Realism never takes its eye off the notion of national interest, which in many conceptions of realism is virtually equated with material power (chiefly military and economic), on the basis that no interest can be defended or advanced without power. Thus, every nation is (and must be) concerned with its national interest above all else, and power is central to that interest. Niebuhr often described every state, like every man, as possessing a “will to power,” and understood that neither power nor the will for it was going away; these are permanent factors in politics and in human relations. He castigated idealists for the “liberal view of power, according to which power was an archaism, the last remnant of the barbaric, preindustrial, feudal age.” (Thompson 1982, 24) In moderation, a will to power is an expected and manageable human characteristic, but moderation tends to vanish in proportion to the increase of power, every increment of which seems to whet the appetite for more. Excessive power, or power whose exercise is fueled by excessive ego, is capable of doing great destruction in the world, as Niebuhr often pointed out.

While the power of one nation over another has a number of components, realists tend to concentrate on “hard power” or the power to physically coerce; that is, military might backed by

a strong economy and a stable political system. As the realist sees it, the reason that power is the goal of nations is a perfectly natural one, deriving chiefly from the fact that survival is the ultimate national imperative, and so national defense, or security from outside attack or invasion, is the highest priority for any nation. National “survival” is usually understood to mean two things: (a) the preservation of the people and territory of the nation-state, and (b) the preservation of its political system.²⁴ Survival is seen not only as an objective and literal need, but also to have a moral value based on the nation-state as the political expression of its people, and therefore worthy of preserving, in the same sense in which Hobbes postulated that the individual person’s self-preservation is the ultimate principle of morality.²⁵ (On this principle, even neorealists sometimes find themselves talking in moral terms.)

Given the imperative for survival and self-preservation, power – ultimately military power – is indispensable. Because of this universally perceived need and desire, realists see conflict as an inescapable and inevitable feature of international life, justifying national security as the primary state responsibility. Belligerency of other nations and threats to one’s own security arise not only because of human nature (the classical emphasis), but also because (as neorealists stress) the international arena is anarchic, unpoliced, and sometimes hostile, leaving nations with only the self-help of their own resources (combined with whatever alliances they can muster). Moreover (and here both human nature and anarchy play a role), most leaders of great-power

²⁴ The principle of survival can admittedly be problematic in a dictatorship which, morally speaking, may not be worth preserving. But this judgment occurs only from the outside. Nations typically, and governing elites always, understand national survival to include at least a presumption that the political regime as well as the national territory will be preserved against invasion from the outside. See, John Stuart Mill, “A Few Words on Non-Intervention”; Michael Walzer, “The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1980).

²⁵ Michael J. Smith points out that “survival” is always defined in moral terms – but often very different ones. He contrasts the different choices made in the name of national survival by Czechoslovakia in 1938 and Poland in 1939, or the difference in the understanding of the survival of France in 1940 as between Marshall Petain and General deGaulle. Michael J. Smith, “Humanitarian Intervention: An Overview of the Ethical Issues,” in Joel Rosenthal and Christian Barry, eds., *Ethics & International Affairs: A Reader*, 74.

states, given the opportunity to grab more land or resources at the expense of another, will do so, seeing (or rationalizing) this as a means of enhancing security. The boldness with which such expansion is predicted to occur may be greater or lesser, depending on whether one is (in neorealist terms) an “offensive” or a “defensive” realist.

Realists believe that these are the independent variables: the enduring, “objective” factors at the heart of each state’s national interest which drive international conduct, no matter the personalities or preferences of national leaders or even the form of government of a given nation. Not that these other determinants make no difference in degree. But when faced with the pressures and threats of the international arena, security trumps all other purposes, and therefore power is indispensable. As political scientist Jack Donnelly sums it up:

Realists emphasize the constraints on politics imposed by human selfishness (“egoism”) and the absence of international government (“anarchy”), which require “the primacy in all political life of power and security.”²⁶

The single most influential spokesperson for realism in the twentieth century was Hans J. Morgenthau (1904-1980). A German immigrant steeped in European political thought and history, Morgenthau, more than any other academic figure, “invented” the field of international-relations study, separating it from what had been diplomatic history. He was a professor of political science and international relations at the University of Chicago from 1943 until 1973, and thereafter at the City University of New York.

Morgenthau’s work was significantly influenced by Niebuhr; as Niebuhr’s was by Morgenthau. While their views are not identical, they are close and mutually-supporting in virtually all fundamental respects, except, of course, that Niebuhr provided an explicit theological foundation and Morgenthau did not. Yet, in *The Purpose of American Politics*,

²⁶ Donnelly, “Realism,” in Burchill, et al., eds., *Theories of International Relations*, 31-32, quoting Robert Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism” in R. Keohane, ed., *Neo-Realism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 305.

Morgenthau wrote, “a great nation [must] pursue its interests for the sake of a transcendent purpose that gives meaning to the day-by-day operations of its foreign policy.” (p. 8) And at about the same time (a year earlier), in a tribute to Niebuhr, Morgenthau singled out precisely the theological basis of Niebuhr’s thought as essential:

Let me say in conclusion that I have always considered Reinhold Niebuhr the greatest living political philosopher of America, perhaps the only creative political philosopher since Calhoun. It is indicative of the very nature of American politics and of our thinking that it is not a statesman, not a practical politician, let alone a professor of political science or of philosophy, but a theologian who can claim this distinction of being the greatest living political philosopher of America. ... It needed a man who could look at American society, as it were, from the outside – *sub specie aeternitatis* – to develop such a political philosophy; and that man, I think, is Reinhold Niebuhr.²⁷

Morgenthau’s most important book, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, first appeared in 1948 and has been continuously in print ever since; the seventh edition, with co-authors Kenneth Thompson and David Clinton, appeared in 2005. In *Politics*, Morgenthau sets forth his “six principles of political realism.” (pp. 4-13)²⁸ The first three define the fundamental components of realism. I summarize them as follows:

1. Politics, including international politics, is governed by objective, consistent laws and patterns of human behavior which are grounded in human nature; and human nature has not changed since the early civilizations of China, India, and Greece. Thus, the entire range of political insights available from every period of history remains relevant to understanding the laws and patterns of international politics. Human nature being what it is, men possessed of power are (and historically have been) strongly disposed to keep and expand it, including at the expense of their neighbor.

As to human nature, Morgenthau observed in *The Decline of Democratic Politics*:

²⁷ Hans Morgenthau, “The Influence of Reinhold Niebuhr in American Life and Thought,” in Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time*, 109.

²⁸ My citations are to the Fourth Edition, published in 1967, the last edition published in Niebuhr’s lifetime.

[T]he element of universality, transcending any particular area and common to all, may be called human nature. However different in its specific manifestations at different times and places, it is the same everywhere and at all times. (p. 121)

2. The master key to international relations, both its practice and its study, is “the concept of [national] interest defined in terms of power.” (*Id.*, 5) This is a much better guide than the motives of political leaders (which are ultimately unknowable) or professed ideals or ideologies (which are often covers for power).

3. Interest defined as power is a flexible concept, with both “interest” and “power” shifting in different places and times. Interest in the context of international politics means the self-interest of the nation, or the national interest. Power has its ordinary meaning: anything that establishes and maintains the control or domination of one person (or entity or nation) over another.²⁹ Possessing national power in the international context does not necessarily mean that one nation’s power will be used to dominate or control another nation, although it may mean that. It does mean at a minimum that a nation’s power will be sufficient to keep another nation from dominating or controlling it.

The last three of Morgenthau’s principles of realism explicitly address ethical concerns and will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Ethics in Realism

I have noted several times that classical realism contained and always maintained an ethical strain within its analysis, which has had the effect of moderating and balancing its emphasis on will-to-power and the flaws of human nature. As Richard Betts has noted, realists disagree on various things, but they “agree among themselves about morality. Contrary to popular belief, they are not amoral.” (Betts, 48) I now want to make a more specific showing of that assertion.

²⁹ This is the classic use of the concept of “power” in political theory, as stated by Robert Dahl: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.” “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science*, vol. 2 no. 3, pp. 201-215 (July 1957), 202.

Plato and Aristotle regarded politics as conceptually subservient to ethics; politics is the expression of ethics in the life of the *polis*. St. Augustine held that it is impossible (even if it were desirable) to divorce politics from ethics, because political actions – involving as they do the coercive power of the state and the management of unequal power among collectivities – must be justified on moral grounds. This was emphatically the view of Niebuhr and of other Christian realists. As Jean Bethke Elshtain said, “politics and ethics are and always have been mutually constitutive activities.” (*New Wine*, 5) Hans Morgenthau, in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, rejected the view that human knowledge and understanding are complete without the moral dimension which informs the most important decisions of every human:

Not only does man try to know what the social world is about and to act according to his knowledge, he also reflects and renders judgments on its nature and value and on the nature and value of his social actions and of his existence in society. In brief, man is also a moral being. (*Scientific Man*, 168)

Kenneth Thompson, who studied under Morgenthau at Chicago, observed:

Man at root is not only ... a social and political animal. He is also a moral being. He cannot eschew moral judgments.” (Thompson, 1994, 1)

Although neorealists claim to be merely describing international politics without judging it, most classical realists join Aristotle and Augustine in suggesting this is delusional. As academic realist Jonathan Haslam puts it, “the claim that realist thought is not in itself normative – that is to say, it seeks to further no values but merely reflects reality – is surely untenable.” (Haslam,

11) Robert Jackson observes that although positivist IR thinkers want to have nothing to do with values, their theories

nevertheless contain underlying normative assumptions and concerns. In other words, even though positivist theorists of international relations usually do not expressly engage in normative inquiry as such, their arguments often carry important implications of a normative kind. There is a normative iceberg lurking just beneath the surface. (*Global Covenant*, 62-63)

Jackson goes on to argue for the classical approach as revived by the English School (which he calls the “International Society School”), as against the ethical denials of the positivist schools, because only the acknowledgment of embedded ethical values permits them to be uncovered, identified and debated openly. Even when IR theory is presented as a social scientific account of human conduct, “it cannot avoid employing what are inherently normative concepts and categories ... [and] making what are implicitly normative assumptions and indeed resting its entire case on normative foundations.” (*Id.*, 64) Indeed, the abandonment of the ethical dimension in favor of empirical measurement carries the risk of diminishing IR study into the compilation of little packets of discrete knowledge, a fear that Niebuhr voiced and Jackson shared:

[W]hen political science is severed from its ancient rootage in the humanities and “enriched” by the wisdom of sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists, the result is frequently a preoccupation with minutiae which obscures the grand and tragic outlines of contemporary history, and offers vapid solutions for profound problems. (Niebuhr, *Irony*, 60)

As noted earlier, the founding fathers of pre-twentieth-century realism, other than Augustine, are usually said to be Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. Despite their being mostly “secular” thinkers (although that is contestable in the case of Hobbes), there was, as classical realists have pointed out, a distinct ethical dimension in the thinking of each of them.

In the case of Thucydides, David Grene has shown that Thucydides judged the Peloponnesian War to be a “moral catastrophe,” not merely a catastrophic loss of Athenian power. (*Greek Political Theory*, 19) Although Thucydides rarely addresses ethics in a formal way, Grene shows that his moral disapproval is unmistakable when recounting the Athenian’s speech in the Melian dialogue that “right [justice], as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

(*Peloponnesian War*, Book V ¶89, p. 290) In this and other instances, the Athenians' war calculations, their raw display of power, and their disregard of moral limits when fighting their enemies is, for Thucydides, a lamentable departure from their ethical foundations. Jack Donnelly and Michael J. Smith, among other scholars, make the same point.³⁰

Paul Rahe goes even further, arguing that Thucydides' fundamental point in the *History* is that bare realism unlinked from moral limitations is inevitably disastrous, as it was for Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Without moral constraints to aggression there are no effective constraints at all, given human nature and the lure of immediate gain for the powerful over the less powerful. The result is unrestrained hubris. He sums up his view as follows:

It is evident from Thucydides' narrative that the passionate pursuit of unbounded, undefinable ends is incompatible with prudent, measured deliberation concerning advantage, for one cannot proportion means to ends when the ends are indeterminate. ... [I]n the absence of a sense of moral boundaries, human beings will pursue the unlimited. There would appear to be a connection linking the civilized capacity to respond to the claims of justice and human decency with the sense of measure, of limits, and restraint necessary for a sober consideration of self-interest. (Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik," *Roots of Realism*, ed. Benjamin Frankel, 128)

Is such hubris inevitable for strong states? Powerful states are typically ruled by powerful men, and human nature is not reassuring: "Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can." (Thucydides, *History*, Book V ¶105, p. 292) Thucydides treats this as a moral failing, but one that can, within limits, be curbed or mitigated – indeed, it must be if the nation's long-term interest is to be served.

In *The Prince*, his book of advice for princes (including the one he hoped would hire him), Machiavelli is famous for his frank emphasis on the maintenance of power at all costs, with ethical restraint being advised only when it does not interfere with reasons of state, *i.e.*, the

³⁰ See Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, chap. 6, "Morality and Foreign Policy," in which Donnelly points out that Thucydides (like Machiavelli) insists on a place for morality in relations among nations, however difficult it may be for moral limits to be respected, in view of human nature. *Accord*, Michael J. Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, 4-10.

maintenance of the prince's power. (However, in those situations, he counseled genuine restraint on ethical grounds, not only as a prop for popular consumption.) In the *Discourses on Livy*, writing in his own voice without a mercenary purpose, the tone is different. While maintaining his negative assessment of human nature, Machiavelli consistently praises the freedom of cities and states and the republican form of government, in part on explicitly moral grounds, namely, the common good. Thus, for example, he marvels at the greatness of Rome, and earlier of Athens, after they had been freed from their kings and each formed a republic in which its citizens lived "in freedom." The reason for this greatness is not hard to explain, he says:

for it is not the particular good but the common good that makes cities great. And without doubt this common good is not observed if not in republics, since all that is for that purpose is executed, and although it may turn out to harm this or that private individual, those for whom the aforesaid does good are so many that they can go ahead with it against the disposition of the few crushed by it. The contrary happens when there is a prince (*Discourses*, Bk. II, chap. 2, 129-130)³¹

Machiavelli's language is utilitarian and pragmatic, but it is also the language of morals. He notes the existence of both good and evil in matters of state, and that they are always mixed together in every difficult choice. He urges statesmen to follow the example of the Romans, who "always took the lesser evil to be the better alternative." (*Discourses*, Bk. III, chap. 37)

³¹ Isaiah Berlin once noted that Machiavelli's values may not be Christian but they are moral – reflecting, as Berlin thought, "the Periclean and Aristotelian values of the ancient *polis*." Robert D. Kaplan, "The Return of Ancient Times," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 2000, 16.

The Importance of Hobbes

Of the founding fathers of realism in IR study, Thomas Hobbes is the most frequently cited and quoted. It is telling that realists sometimes call themselves “Hobbesians” (or, less felicitously, “Hobbists”).

Hobbes’ views on human nature, which are more pessimistic than St. Augustine’s,³² have always been important to classical realists. Even neorealists cite such views as support for their emphasis on the primacy of power and security. Relatedly, Hobbes’s description of life in the state of nature is oft-cited support for the effects of anarchy, neorealism’s reigning paradigm. Hobbes prescribed an all-powerful ruler as the only way to ensure the requisite level of security and safety in a society, although he did not propose it as a solution for international anarchy.

Fittingly, Hobbes translated Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* into English. He had a lifelong personal horror of anarchy, the condition he attributed to the human state of nature where “the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (*Leviathan*, XIII.9) He placed the supreme value on personal survival and the avoidance of a violent death, and made this his baseline principle from which all else derived. This made him, in the realist account, our first and greatest philosopher of power, and the original observer of the universal “will to power.” He made power the wellspring of all human striving:

I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death. And the cause of this is . . . [that man] cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more. (*Leviathan*, XI.70)

³² A major difference between Augustine’s and Hobbes’s view of human nature is that the latter describes a purely self-centered, almost monomaniacal concern for one’s own interests to the exclusion of all else. This is bleaker than Augustine, who leaves room for a human capacity, despite the fall, to experience and respond to God’s grace by loving others. Additionally, Augustine perceives the distinct tendency of power to magnify the selfishness of those who possess it, thus corrupting even a well-intentioned person. In this he was more insightful than Hobbes, who never foresaw the corruption of the Leviathan that would follow inevitably from conferring all power upon him.

Leviathan is filled with prescriptions and prohibitions that are often couched in moral terms. He speaks of virtues, natural laws, natural right, worth, dignity, honor, liberty, and the obligation to “seek peace and follow it.” In chapters 14 and 15 in particular, he lays out specific natural laws, requiring the keeping of promises, the honoring of obligations, the importance of reciprocity in relationships, and the giving of gratitude in return for receiving a benefit from another. He states that punishment for evil should be limited to the purposes of correction and deterrence, not retribution for past wrongs. He enjoins equitable distributive justice among the members of a commonwealth; and, on the principle that all men are naturally equal, condemns the refusal to recognize such equality:

If Nature therefore have made men equall, that equalitie is to be acknowledged: or if Nature have made men unequall; yet because men that think themselves equall, will not enter into conditions of Peace, but upon Equall terms, such equalitie must be admitted. And therefore for the ninth law of Nature, I put this, *That every man acknowledge other for his Equall by Nature.* The breach of this Precept is *Pride.* (*Id.*, chap. 15, 107)

Yet, Hobbes also teaches that the single ultimate obligation in the state of nature is the natural desire to survive, that once a body politic is formed the Leviathan is the final arbiter of which laws are recognized and enforced, and that what men call “good” is merely “that which pleaseth, and is delightful to himself,” while “evil” is nothing more than “that which displeaseth him.” (*Elements of Law*, I.7.3) Is Hobbes really a moral thinker, or are his instructions about promise-keeping, virtue, natural law, natural right, etc., merely counsels of prudence for what an individual and a state would be well advised to practice and enforce for his and its self-preservation?

Scholarly opinion is divided. The long-held and perhaps still-majority view is that Hobbes recognized no ethical domain with “objective” moral principles which transcend an individual’s egoistic calculation of self-interest, but merely prudential ones aimed at maintaining a life and a

society relatively free of violence. Thus, Richard Tuck believes that for Hobbes moral approval or disapproval comes merely from “feelings engendered by the impact of something external on the system of passions and wants which make up the human emotive psychology,” and which either please or displease the person so impacted. Therefore, in the end, Hobbes was “left with nothing but the bare principle that we are morally entitled to preserve ourselves.” (Tuck, *Hobbes: A Very Short Introduction*, 63, 129) Thomas Nagel has argued that moral obligation “plays no part in *Leviathan* at all”; what Hobbes calls moral obligation “is based exclusively on considerations of rational self-interest.” (Nagel, 69)

Yet, there is a substantial body of thought disputing this reading, starting (at least in modern times) with an influential article by the British philosopher A.E. Taylor, “The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes,” published in the journal *Philosophy* in 1938. (Taylor, 406-424) Taylor argues that Hobbes’ principles were indeed moral precepts based on a coherent ethical theory. Later, Howard Warrender, also a British philosopher, published *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation*, agreeing with Taylor, disputing the common reading that Hobbes’ principles of obligation were derived from the state, and showing that they were based on Hobbes’ understanding of natural law divinely given.

One of the leading contemporary scholars of Hobbes, Sir Noel Malcolm of Oxford, similarly rebuffs “the claim that [Hobbes] regards morality as the mere creation of the state.” Malcolm points to the many pages in the *Leviathan* in which Hobbes refers to the laws of morality as “laws of nature” which are “immutable and eternal,” and “the science of them is the true and only moral philosophy.” (“What Hobbes Really Said,” *The National Interest*, 124) Malcolm goes further, arguing that Hobbes’ ascription of natural-law foundations to certain international

practices, such as the safe passage of diplomats and the desirability of peaceful trade among merchants from different states, leaves one with

no doubt that Hobbes envisages natural-law duties applying to international affairs. ... At one point Hobbes even summarizes his argument with the simple formulation “the Law of Nations, and the Law of Nature, is the same thing.”

The popular idea of Hobbes as a believer in the principle that “might is right” is [also] thoroughly mistaken. Hobbes insisted, emphatically, that might did not make right. (*Id.*)

Malcolm goes on to explain in what sense Hobbes’ morality was “objective” or “universal,” and how this can be squared with his paramount principle of self-preservation:

For Hobbes, natural law was objective, in the sense that universally true statements could be made about it. But at the same time, it was subjectively grounded, in the sense that it derived its force from the existential requirements of each individual. ... Self-preservation was thus a systematic requirement, and peace was the systematic condition in which self-preservation could best be secured. Hobbes’s natural laws were rules for the attainment of peace. (*Id.*, 125)

Malcolm is not alone. Other scholars argue that what Hobbes developed was a genuine, coherent ethical theory, and that his principles were moral and not merely prudential. *See, e.g.*, David Gauthier (University of Toronto), “Thomas Hobbes: Moral Theorist”; Dana Chabot (Indiana University), “Thomas Hobbes: Skeptical Moralism”; and Shirley Robin Letwin (London School of Economics and University of Cambridge), “Hobbes and Christianity.”³³

Finally, J.B. Schneewind views Hobbes’ relationship to ethics as ambivalent, even conflicted, noting the many contradictions and cross-currents in his works. Hobbes’ state of nature in Schneewind’s reading, even if understood as pre-moral, is the hard but necessary school that prepares humans for society and for ethical rules by showing them the abjectness of life in their absence. They come to see that the war of all against all leaves everyone much worse off than if they could develop mutual trust and moral standards of behavior. This, for

³³ Complete citations are in the Bibliography.

Hobbes, requires the forfeiture of each person's particular desires in favor of the uniform acceptance of those imposed by the sovereign; but the tradeoff is worth it, and once entered into, forms the groundwork for an authentic morality in which persons develop trust and a spirit of cooperation with each other. (Schneewind, 86-92) Thus, genuine morality evolves out of what was originally a prudential recognition of the wretched human condition in the state of nature.

The debate continues. Two things seem clear. First, far from ignoring ethics, Hobbes spoke in the language of natural law and of ethical value; whatever he actually intended to say; and he wrestled with moral principles in a way that seems inconsistent with a "value-free" approach to social contract or political life. Second, there is significant (though not unanimous) scholarly support for the proposition that Hobbes, like Machiavelli, came out on the moral side; that is, he infused his social thought with genuine moral principles – and further, as Noel Malcolm has shown, that these directly influenced his international political theory.

Much of what appeals to IR theorists about Hobbes is his depiction of the state of nature as an anarchy, and many do not bother to examine his thought further. Contrary to the usual assumption by realists, however, Hobbes did not see the anarchy of nations as being comparable to the anarchy of persons in the state of nature (the war of all against all). Therefore, even if we assume that Hobbes believed there could be no basis for morality in the state of nature, it would not follow that the international arena must be a value-free zone.

Noel Malcolm and David Armitage have shown in separate studies that the "standard" use in IR of Hobbesian thought which equates the two "states of nature," and therefore points to international anarchy to justify the unprincipled exertion of power to achieve security, is

misplaced.³⁴ Indeed, if Hobbes had thought the international state of nature was equivalent to the human one, he would presumably have advocated a global Leviathan, which he did not do. This is because he recognized that the life of nations is distinguishable from that of humans in the state of nature in several crucial respects. For one thing, it is less precarious: states (unlike persons) may exist perpetually; they have the ability to be vigilant at all times, having no need to sleep and thereby expose themselves to a violent death as humans do. Most importantly for Hobbes, states, being composed of many persons able to work cooperatively, engage in commerce and economic intercourse with other nations, which provide a context and ongoing incentives for orderly relations among them and which reduce the chances of conflict. There are opportunities and rewards for cooperation and conflict-avoidance. There is scope for a greater and richer ethical life, and not merely the imperative to survive. Thus, for Hobbes, the recognition of anarchy among nations does not preclude a commitment to ethical principle, even if one assumes he thought it did in the individual state of nature.³⁵

Hans Morgenthau

I have already summarized the work and importance of Hans Morgenthau generally as an IR realist. Here I want to show the degree to which he made ethics a significant part of his thinking. He was as concerned to retain an ethical component to his politics as he was to redeem international relations from moralism. In his first major work, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, Morgenthau sounded his twin themes of the primacy of power and the necessity of ethics. While subsequent accounts have tended to stress only the first theme, Morgenthau never abandoned the

³⁴ Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, chap. 13, “Hobbes’s Theory of International Relations”; David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, chap. 4, “Hobbes and the Foundations of Modern International Thought.”

³⁵ A number of scholars have pointed to Hobbes’ sharp distinction between the anarchy in the individual state of nature and the international anarchy, as I have summarized it. See, e.g., Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 228, 233; Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, 445; Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 35-50; Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 44-49.

second one. In a chapter highly critical of the modern apotheosis of science, entitled, “The Moral Blindness of Scientific Man,” he asserts:

Whatever some philosophers may have asserted about the amorality of political action, philosophic tradition, historical judgment, and public opinion alike refuse to withhold ethical valuation from the political sphere. (*Scientific Man*, 178)

This is because every person, by virtue of his human nature, not only seeks to know “what the social world is about and to act according to this knowledge”; such a person:

also reflects and renders judgments on its nature and value and on the nature and value of his social actions and of his existence in society. In brief, man is also a moral being. ... Man is a political animal by nature; he is a scientist by chance or choice; he is a moralist because he is a man. (*Id.*, 168)³⁶

Morgenthau’s insistence on the ethical dimension of international relationships is reflected in the last three of his “six principles of realism” in *Politics Among Nations*, referred to above (*Politics*, 8-14):

4. “Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action.” (*Id.*, 9) This “moral significance” is a function of the ethical understanding of the society which the statesperson serves. Morgenthau does not posit or seek to defend universal moral truths, but insists on the importance of moral truths as perceived by the society of the nation-state. On the other hand, political realism is “aware of the ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action.” (*Id.*) In Morgenthau’s account, morality, like balance of power, is important chiefly for the limits and restraints it imposes on permissible action. Realism recognizes the need to hold these in tension with the foreseeable short-term and probable long-term consequences in a concrete situation. There is no formula for doing this; it is a matter of experience, good faith and good judgment, and the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom: “Realism, then, considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative

³⁶ Morgenthau included this last sentence on the opening page of “The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil,” *Ethics*, vol. LVI, no. 1 (Oct. 1945), 1.

political actions – to be the supreme virtue.” (*Id.*, 10) For those in power, this is the essence of ethical “statecraft.”

In contrast, neorealists tend to dismiss judgment and prudence as variables in IR analysis, both because they cannot be tested or captured by positivist methods and because they are seen as captive to deeper forces such as power and self-interest. In this sense, neorealism is actually more “pessimistic” than realism.

Having established the place of morality in political decision-making, Morgenthau’s fifth and sixth principles address the importance of humility and the danger of “moralism”:

5. Political realism “refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.” (*Id.*, 10) This is an insight which echoes Niebuhr, who wrote eloquently against “national universalism” or “national self-righteousness” – what Kenneth Thompson called the “perennial tendency of states to see their national purposes as universal principles and ends.” (*Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics*, 150) An aspect of this is “American exceptionalism,” against which both Niebuhr and Morgenthau set themselves.³⁷

Morgenthau believed that the pursuit of one’s own moral objectives must be accompanied by a humble respect for the (different) moral perspectives of other nations. This requires a certain modesty in the making of moral judgments. “To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another.” (*Id.*, 10)

³⁷ The Puritans’ “city upon a hill” was not the only trope used to justify American exceptionalism. As Andrew Preston has shown, the Union victory in the Civil War was a spur to the notion that American values are universal and that it was the nation’s new “manifest destiny” to spread them throughout the world. “God had spared the United States for a reason: to save the world.” Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 170. Niebuhr consistently opposed this and similar notions. Andrew Bacevich in his Introduction to the 2008 reissue of *The Irony of American History*, notes that one of Niebuhr’s most important contributions was to call critical attention to “the persistent sin of American Exceptionalism.” (*Id.*, pp. x-xiii)

6. Finally, notwithstanding that politics among nations is not exempt from moral judgment, international politics is a distinct field of study and action, and has a certain autonomy and independence from other modes of thinking and doing, including law and ethics. “Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs.” (*Id.*, 11) This autonomy is not airtight any more than the study of law is absolutely independent of the study of politics, or the study of economics from the effects of the legal system. But it is conceptually autonomous, in Morgenthau’s view, in the sense that the study of international relations requires the fashioning of ethical principles appropriate to its distinct responsibilities, and these will be different from what is appropriate to individual life:

The individual may say for himself: “*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the world perish),” but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care. Both individual and state must judge political action by universal moral principles, such as that of liberty. Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival. (*Id.*, 10)

As the last sentence indicates, national survival is itself, for Morgenthau, a moral goal worthy to stand with others in the balancing of goods and evils. But he also recognizes how all-too-easy it is for politicians to overplay the survival card; he did not consider it a trump in any but the most extreme circumstances.

In *Dilemmas of Politics*, Morgenthau outlines three functions played by morality in international affairs, the first two of which are constructive and the third of which is harmful:

First, morality limits the interests that power seeks and the means that power employs to that end. Certain ends cannot be pursued, and certain means cannot be employed in a given society within a certain period of history by virtue of the moral opprobrium that attaches to them. Second, morality puts the stamp of its approval upon certain ends and means which thereby not only become politically feasible but also acquire a positive moral value. These moral values, then, become an intrinsic element of the very interests that power seeks. Third, morality serves interests and power as their ideological justification. (p. 51)

If morality can be both constructive and deceitful, if political action is subject to moral principles yet the national interest must be served, how are the tensions to be resolved? How are the ethical and the political to be balanced? Only, Morgenthau counsels, by the ancient and cardinal virtue of prudence, the exercise of careful pragmatic judgment by conscientious political actors who “weigh[] ... the consequences of alternative political actions,” including the ethical costs. (*Politics*, 10)

In insisting on weighing the ethical with the pragmatic, Morgenthau is again echoing Niebuhr, in the statement earlier quoted by Carr: “Politics will, to the end of history, be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises.” (*Moral Man*, 4) This clash and interpenetration of conscience and power, of the ethical and the coercive, point to a trope that was as important to Morgenthau as it was to Niebuhr: the tragedy of the human situation. Duncan Bell notes that Morgenthau was intimately familiar with the turn to tragedy by late eighteenth-century German intellectuals as a model for reconstituting ethics and philosophy. (Bell, 37) Morgenthau, with Niebuhr, made tragedy central to “the vision of the world that underlies” classical realism; he once wrote to Michael Oakeshott that he had come to understand tragedy as “a quality of existence, not a creation of art.” (*Id.*) His appreciation for the tragic made Morgenthau a persistent critic of “the misplaced faith in the powers of reason that have been encouraged by the Enlightenment”; but it also made him “equally wary of emotion freed from the restraints of reason and community.” (*Id.*, 38)

In both Morgenthau and Niebuhr, the recognition of the intrinsically tragic nature of the human situation leads not to the exclusion of ethics but to the necessity of moral responsibility. Thus, Morgenthau was as insistent as Niebuhr on the place of ethics in the study and conduct of

international relations. “Let me say,” he once wrote, “in criticism of those who deny that moral principles are applicable to international politics, that all human actions in some way are subject to moral judgment. We cannot act but morally because we are men.”³⁸

³⁸ Morgenthau, “Human Rights and Foreign Policy,” in Thompson, ed., *Moral Dimensions of American Foreign Policy* (Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 341.

Chapter 7 Reinhold Niebuhr: The Ethics of Christian Realism

Against Liberalism

In politics as well as theology, Reinhold Niebuhr was an early and consistent critic of liberalism and the idealism which it assumed. (At times he used the two terms interchangeably, though more in his earlier writings than in later ones.¹) His critique laid the foundations of his Christian realism, which he saw as a middle path between excessive pessimism and hopeless utopianism; but he was clear that the latter was the modern disease and the greater danger.² Liberalism's unrealistic optimism grew from the thought of the Enlightenment (which Niebuhr often referred to as the Renaissance), in ignorance of the teachings of St. Augustine. The difference between "realists" and "idealists," Niebuhr thought, is a matter of "dispositions" more than doctrines. Idealists display an admirable loyalty to norms and ideals, but often overlook the less appealing human characteristics that make their accomplishment impossible or difficult. Realism, on the other hand, "denotes the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power." (*CRPP*, 119-20)

¹ As a consistent critic of idealism, Niebuhr often used the terms "liberals/liberalism" almost interchangeably with "idealists/idealism" – implicitly accusing liberals of the excessive idealism that he excoriated. This conflation of the terms changed over the years, as Ronald Stone has traced in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (157-167) and *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr* (215-220). In the latter book, Stone summarizes the change: "Gradually, Niebuhr's polemics against liberalism became more discriminating and his harsh criticism was directed toward idealism and optimism. This shift reflected both his increased awareness of his own liberalism and an inclination to define liberalism differently." (217) Thus, Stone prefers the term "neoliberal" for Niebuhr's thought rather than "neoconservative," and applauds Gary Dorrien's similar conclusion in vol. 2 (1900-1950) of *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (see pp. 3-4 and all of chap. 7 thereof).

² Robin Lovin has argued that now, several decades after Niebuhr's death, excessive optimism is less a problem in the political realm than too much pessimism; therefore, Christian realism must be open to a different balancing, one that includes a willingness to take political risks aimed at accomplishing prudently-chosen idealistic goals, such as the alleviation of humanitarian crises. (Lovin 2008; see especially, 83, 152-155)

Niebuhr's Christian realism was not just an antidote to the excessive optimism of liberal thinkers; it also recognized man's freedom and capacity for doing good, which was limited but important. A consistent critic of Luther as too pessimistic, he was fond of Calvin's approach which recognized that the fall of man, while cataclysmic, did not wholly efface the divine image from the human heart.³

The times called for a vigorous attack on the prevailing optimism and unrealistic hopes following the Great War, and to some degree after the Second War, and Niebuhr provided it. He wrote a piece in the *Christian Century* in March 1931 reporting on the recent return from Europe of a highly-regarded American clergyman who reported that political and religious life on the continent was steadily moving toward conciliation in pursuit of the goal of "harmony and peace." In reality, Niebuhr argued, "the Europe about which this optimistic judgment was made is, in many respects, in a more perilous position than it was in 1914." He identified a particular danger in Germany, especially in "the Hitler movement." Liberals are blind to this building danger because "liberal religion has a dogma," which is that "the world is gradually growing better and that the inevitability of gradualness guarantees our salvation." (*The Christian Century*, March 25, 1931) Niebuhr thought that ideas like this threatened disaster for western civilization.

But pessimism was also no answer. Niebuhr extended his criticism of Luther to twentieth-century followers of Karl Barth. "For the Barthians," he said, "the world is too evil to be saved and all moral striving is, though necessary, futile." (*Id.*) The Barthians, he thought, have assessed the ills of our civilization more truly than liberal Christians have, but their pessimism drains

³ "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. ... God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty." *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.III.1. See also, Calvin's commentary on the Gospel of John 1:5, 9: "There are two principal parts of the light which still remain in corrupt nature: first, the seed of religion is planted in all men; next, the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences."

them of the energy to do anything about it. No one who looks unblinkingly at the facts of society or the international arena can be an optimist; but no one who seeks to address and ameliorate the enormous moral deficiencies in either venue can be a pessimist; least of all faithful Christians. “Man is neither totally depraved nor naturally virtuous.” (*Id.*) Original sin did not cause God to abandon humankind. Realism requires a rejection of the easy, romantic optimism of the liberal church, but just as much, a rejection of the hopeless, resigned perspective of the Barthians.

In his essay, “Augustine’s Political Realism” (in *CRPP*) Niebuhr elaborates on this point, contrasting Luther’s thought with that of Calvin and accusing Barthians of imbibing too much of Luther’s pessimism.⁴ The mistake that Luther and Barthians make, which is often made by realists generally, is to “assume[] that the universal characteristic in human behavior must also be regarded as normative. ... [T]he corruption of human freedom may make a behavior pattern universal without making it normative.” (*Id.*, 130) Despite the pervasive sinfulness of man, of which realists are so conscious, God has not deserted them; nor has the intrinsic human will to do good. Despite the restraints of their nature, men and women retain their God-given freedom and capability to act for the good, in accordance with love and just regard for others. These are things that hyper-realists like Luther and the Barthians tend to overlook or undervalue.

Nonetheless, Niebuhr thought, the Barthians were right about one thing: the crisis of this age has been brought about by excessive optimism and false utopianism based on a misguided view of sinful human nature. The roots of this error are in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and the chief twentieth-century manifestation is the liberal myopia during the interwar period following the Peace of Versailles, the victorious conclusion of the “war to end all wars,” the new idea of “collective security” replacing the old balance of power, and the double fantasy of

⁴ Indeed, Niebuhr notes, Augustine himself was sometimes guilty of an excessive pessimism, which led him into the error of being unable to distinguish between government and slavery, or between a commonwealth and a robber band. (*CRPP*, 127)

human perfectibility and durable peace on earth. Niebuhr saw these delusions lingering from the end of the First War and continuing after the Second War, so he set about his life's work of exposing the dangers of optimism and sketching the contours of realism.

Beyond Liberalism

Niebuhr's attack on liberalism never wholly ceased. Yet, he went beyond criticism to create a large body of work setting out, in a number of writings in a less than systematic fashion, a vision of politics for which ethics is central. He believed that international politics (like domestic politics) is subject to ethical evaluation; but also that the applicable ethical analysis is different from that for personal conduct, because, among other things, the politics involves the unique responsibility of national leaders for the lives of the inhabitants of the entire state.

Niebuhr was a realist – he believed that any ethical or political theorizing must begin with human nature as it really is, both fallen and self-transcendent. But his sources were distinctly Christian: the Hebrew prophets and St. Augustine. He had faith in God's providence and waited upon the redemption of humans through Christ and the culmination of history in the Kingdom of God, views not shared by conventional realists. Hence, he was a distinctly "Christian" realist.⁵

For Niebuhr, just as power is an uneliminable element of social morality, ethics is intrinsic to politics, including international politics. He argued in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* for the relevance of "an impossible ethical ideal" as playing, in effect, a regulative role – *i.e.*, the standard against which we measure our progress in terms of our proximity to it – so long as we also take into account the realities of human sin and the limits of fallen human nature. (*Christian Ethics*, 62-63) Commenting favorably on British foreign policy and the thought of Edmund

⁵ John C. Bennett, Niebuhr's colleague and fellow realist, defines Christian realism as the view that seeks to "avoid[] the illusions of both the optimists and the pessimists," by relying principally on two complementary affirmations: "First, that man is made in the image of God; and second, that man is a fallen creature." (Bennett, *Christian Realism*, x, 50) See generally, Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 1-32 ("An Introduction to Christian Realism").

Burke, Niebuhr summed up the general standard of Christian realism in assessing and influencing the conduct of nations: to “combin[e] moral purpose with political realism.” (*CPP*, 60)

Moral purpose is not only necessary for the political analyst; it is also indispensable for political actors and decision-makers, especially in these times in which public support is critical even for the actions of dictators. In all forms of government, moral purpose matters because citizens think instinctively in moral terms – they bring judgments of right and wrong, good and bad to their role as members of the body politic and to their critical judgment of political leaders. Niebuhr points out that a common failing of realists, with their relentless focus on power, is to overlook or undervalue the moral implications of the exercise of power itself:

They do not fully appreciate that a proper regard for moral aspirations is a source of political prestige; and that this prestige is itself an indispensable source of power. (“Plans for World Reorganization,” *Christianity and Crisis*, vol. 2, (Oct. 19, 1942), 3-4; *On Politics*, 244)

This awareness is even more crucial for religiously committed citizens. Ethical values infuse politics in much the same way that divine meaning infuses history – invisible but powerful in both cases. The God of the Old and New Testaments who created time and history and who provides a trajectory toward an *eschaton*, also provided guidance to humans living among each other in the in-between time between the resurrection and the second coming. God did this through the commandments, the teachings of the prophets and the other writings of both Testaments, and through the life and teachings of Jesus himself. By these we know – not always what we should do in what circumstances – but more fundamentally, that our conduct toward each other is a matter of ultimate significance to the divine, and thus a matter of moral striving for us.

Ethics involves the interaction of good and evil in human conduct, and the ever-expansive nature of *both* good and evil as humans extend their powers over each other and over nature. A founding insight of Niebuhr's realism, and one that he called "abhorrent to the modern mood" yet essential for Christian understanding, is that:

the possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good, and that human history is therefore not so much a chronicle of the progressive victory of the good over evil, of cosmos over chaos, as the story of an ever-increasing cosmos, creating ever-increasing possibilities of chaos. (*Christian Ethics*, 60)

Yet, there are counterbalancing forces to mitigate the chaos. Christian teaching culminates in the love of Christ and our love of neighbor through Christ, implying an overcoming of evil by the good. It is "not easy," Niebuhr concedes, to fashion an ethic in the midst of the "tension" between "Christian love perfectionism on the one hand, and this kind of realism on the other." (*Id.*) Yet, this is precisely what is required; and this became Niebuhr's lifelong intellectual mission: to create and sustain a realist social ethic grounded both in love of God and neighbor, and in a realistic apprehension of human nature and the expansionist tendencies of evil. This social ethic extends explicitly, for him, into the political and international realms.

Human Nature, Power, and Nationalism

Reinhold Niebuhr's career as a public intellectual was launched by the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932. Few books in the twentieth century have had a comparable impact on the development of political realism as a body of thought. In the study of international politics, it was the single most important work in the first half of the twentieth century, *i.e.*, prior to Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* in 1948.⁶ *Moral Man* had a "profound impact on

⁶ Its only rival would be E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939), but Carr repeatedly acknowledged his debt to Niebuhr and to *Moral Man*, as discussed earlier; and Carr's book did not have the long-lasting influence on so many thinkers that Niebuhr's did.

the emerging realist movement,” as political scientist Jack Donnelly put it in *Realism and International Relations* (27).

Although it reflected the Great Depression which surrounded its writing and therefore focused on large-scale economic issues, and even though it contained a much more favorable view of Marxist solutions than Niebuhr later believed in,⁷ *Moral Man* explicated a key insight for which Niebuhr would thereafter remain famous in American intellectual life: the notion that a collectivity such as the state is ethically different from persons acting as individuals, and that it is critical to ethical integrity in both realms to understand the difference between them. The opening sentence of the Introduction to *Moral Man* made the point concisely:

The thesis to be elaborated in these pages is that a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing.” (*Moral Man*, xi)

In other words, “society is and will always remain sub-human” as a moral matter because collectivities express themselves in lower ethical terms than humans. (“War in the Twentieth Century,” *Christian Century*, March 1932, 17). Later, Niebuhr put it this way: “collective self-regard of class, race, and nation is more stubborn and persistent than the egoism of individuals.” (*Man’s Nature*, 22)⁸

Niebuhr’s point, as William Schweiker has summarized it, is that “only persons have the degree of rational and volitional self-transcendence necessary to qualify as true moral agents. In so far as morality depends on the capacity to transcend brute self-interest, societies are by nature immoral.” (Schweiker, 182)

⁷ In *Man’s Nature and His Communities*, 21, Niebuhr criticized his “earlier error” in *Moral Man* and other works of the 1930s of being too uncritical of Marxism.

⁸ Later in the same paragraph, Niebuhr relates that a friend suggested that the title of the book should have been *The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities*.

Robert Jackson, a leading English School thinker about whom much more will be said in Part III, builds on Niebuhr's point to demonstrate why self-preservation as the chief national interest has a moral basis in international relations. When a person is acting alone as a single moral agent, making decisions purely on the basis of self-interest and disregarding that of others, it is usually considered selfish and morally blameworthy. "But when we – you and I together – are the self," as in the case of a leader representing all the citizens,

then a self-regarding relation is no longer purely and exclusively instrumental or expedient. Self-interest is not my interest or your interest exclusively, it is not even the mutual accommodation of our self-interests. Rather, it is our common interest. Self-interest at that point acquires a shared or joined aspect. It is a non-instrumental and specifically moral idea. (Jackson 2000, 115)⁹

There are at least two aspects of political life that make the simple application of individual morality problematic. First, political leaders are trustees for others: they bear the ethical responsibility to make decisions for the people of their nation, whom they are sworn to protect and defend, and upon whom it would be wrong to impose the self-sacrifice of the body politic as a whole:

An individual may sacrifice his own interests, either without hope of reward or in the hope of an ultimate compensation. But how is an individual, who is responsible for the interest of his group, to justify the sacrifice of interests other than his own? ... "No one has a right to be unselfish with other people's interests." (*Moral Man*, 267)¹⁰

There is a dark side to recognizing this difference between political leaders and citizens. While the former may be correct, in principle, that their responsibilities justify a modified ethic, political leaders inevitably abuse this distinction, and the abuse is to some extent excused or abated by the constituents themselves, sometimes out of cynicism, sometimes from fear.

⁹ Niebuhr understood this logic and would not disagree with it, as far as it goes. However, he also saw the dark side of this point when (as discussed below) he noted the tendency of patriotism ironically to "transmute[] individual unselfishness into national egoism" (*Moral Man*, 91). In other words, the same logic which gives national interest a moral basis can also provide a warrant for the exercise of egoistic power in the name of the national interest.

¹⁰ The last sentence quotes Hugh Cecil, *Conservatism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), 182.

National security is the highest responsibility of a president or prime minister, and it is all too easy for a political leader to (over)reach for the justification of national security.¹¹ Recall Morgenthau's citing politicians' use of morality as "ideological justification" to promote their political interests and power. (*Dilemmas of Politics*, 51) Niebuhr speaks of "the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives" and the "power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations." (*Moral Man*, xx) There is a characteristic absence of self-transcendence in groups which is fatal to their ability to act in a fully moral manner; a failure to rise above self-interest in a narrow sense, and thus an escape from moral scrutiny.

The second aspect of political life that affects ethical evaluation has to do with the effects of aggregate power. In the exercise of their duties, political and ethical leaders alike must recognize that because reason is most often the servant of interest, "social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone"; indeed, "it will never be possible to insure moral antidotes sufficiently potent to destroy the deleterious effects of the poison of power upon character." Thus, "[c]onflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power." (*Id.*, xiv-xv, 21) Thus, in the first pages of his first major work, Niebuhr sets forth the great moral problematic of power, and especially the distribution of power. Much of his political ethics will be built around the issue of power, its balances and imbalances; the implications of its centrality in all human collectives will be elaborated throughout his social and political thought.

The aggregation of power in the government of any state is inevitable. All now accept Weber's observation (in *Politics as a Vocation*, 1918), that the state is the entity that has a

¹¹ The recognition of this abuse and its danger has led to an entire IR subfield, called "securitization" studies, which examines the tendency of states and state leaders unjustifiably to invoke national security or fear of existential threats in order to justify extreme measures in response. See, Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publ., 1998); Michael C. Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies, Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 47 no. 4 (Dec. 2003), 511-531.

monopoly of legitimate use of physical coercion. Moreover, the state's first responsibility is to maintain domestic order and to deter or repel external attacks, both of which require superior power. But superior power, whether held by individuals or by states (*i.e.*, individuals acting in the name of states) inexorably breeds injustice. "Power is poison," Niebuhr quotes John Adams as saying, "which blinds the eyes of moral insight and lames the will of moral purpose." (*Id.*, 6)

Niebuhr was fond of Adams's statement to Thomas Jefferson in his letter of February 2, 1816:

Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws. Our passions, ambitions, avarice, love and resentment, etc., possess so much metaphysical subtlety and so much overpowering eloquence that they insinuate themselves in the understanding and the conscience and convert both to their party. (Quoted in *Irony* at 20)

Thus, inequality, the kernel at the core of injustice, consists of an immoral maldistribution of power. To the extent this maldistribution is of *economic* power, as it tends to be in advanced capitalist societies, it is less subject to governmental or legal remedy (however flawed these may be in practice). For while the government may be, and may morally *need* to be, the repository of all legitimate coercive power, in a capitalist society economic power and the distribution of such power is in the hands of the private sector at least as much as the government. Indeed, to the degree that *laissez-faire* economics is practiced, the government is relatively powerless to change the centralization of power in private hands. While some concentration of economic power is justified by the needs of a capitalist system, the inequality inexorably becomes wholly disproportionate: "it is impossible to justify the degree of inequality which complex societies inevitably create by the increased centralization of power which develops with more elaborate civilizations." (*Moral Man*, 8)

This is illustrative of the tragedy of history: steps necessary for peace, order, justice and the common good are often begun by persons of good will, but they are self-seeking as well as

idealistic; the efforts for good are shadowed by costs that are difficult to control and frequently overcome the intended benefit. Humans aspire to more than they can attain, and the split in their character means that the nobility of the aspiration is betrayed by the grasp for the power to attain it. This tragic pattern is not limited to the sphere of domestic political and social goods. The necessary aggregation of superior power within a society spills over into unnecessary conflict between societies: the “same factors which make for an uneasy peace within a social group ... aggravate inter-group conflict.” Niebuhr continues:

Power sacrifices justice to peace within the community and destroys peace between communities. ... [T]he whole history of mankind bears testimony to the fact that the power which prevents anarchy in intra-group relations encourages anarchy in intergroup relations. (*Id.*, 16)

This is enabled in large part by the ability of the modern nation-state to generate enormous emotional loyalty from large numbers of people. Patriotism is not intrinsically irrational for Niebuhr, but it thrives on what are often the irrational motives and delusions of its adherents – often stirred up and magnified by those in power for their selfish political purposes. Only the family breeds greater solidarity than the nation-state, but the family has far less power to inflict hardship or oppression on the lives of so many.

[T]he modern nation is the human group of strongest social cohesion, of most undisputed central authority and of most clearly defined membership. ... it remains, as it has been since the seventeenth century, the most absolute of all human associations. (*Id.*, 83)

Government is able to marshal this cohesion and loyalty because “the authority of government is the ultimate force of national cohesion” (*id.*), at least in states where the legitimacy of the political structure is acknowledged by the people. That recognition, plus the natural defensive fellow-feeling in times when the state is perceived as threatened by invasion, means that in most instances citizens will eagerly follow political leaders into war.

In his discussion of “The Morality of Nations” (chapter 4), Niebuhr explains that citizens contemplating foreign peoples lack the ordinary resources that create identification with others in individual relationships, such as intimate knowledge, a perception of shared values and history, and sympathetic understanding derived from proximity and empathy, with the result that the restraining power of ordinary morality is largely absent in popular reaction to the actions of strangers in foreign lands. Where foreign relations are concerned, and especially in times of perceived danger, homeland loyalty tends to be heightened and uncritical. What Niebuhr calls, “the frantic and morbid emphasis upon national and racial solidarities” (*Christian Ethics*, 93) are on uncritical display, exploitable by political elites to support armed conflict.

By a curious paradox, “patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism” (*Moral Man*, 91), which licenses the government to be self-assertive and egotistical because it is acting in the name of the people. Moreover, governments are aware that war has a unifying effect on the population, increasing the fervor of nationalism and providing broader scope for engaging in future foreign adventurism. “Nations do not really arrive at full self-consciousness until they stand in vivid, usually bellicose, juxtaposition to other nations,” leading to a “new vividness with which the reality and the unity of [the] nation’s discreet existence is comprehended.” (*Id.*, 96) This phenomenon – the formation and entrenchment of nationalism by excluding and demonizing foreigners – has been extensively studied and documented since Niebuhr’s death.¹²

Critical scrutiny of the government by the citizen – the careful examination and critique of the actions of one’s own nation-state – is a high moral responsibility for Niebuhr. The “narrower loyalties” of nation and race “must be constantly subjected to criticism” if justice is to have any hope of being done. (*Christian Ethics*, 93) Yet, critical opposition to one’s government is “not

¹² See e.g., Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism*, and works cited therein.

easily achieved,” and in fact is often seen as “a proof of a want of loyalty.” (*Id.*, 89) Reinforcing these tendencies for Christians is Paul’s admonition in Romans 13 that “every person [should] be subject to the governing authorities,”¹³ Niebuhr comments, “No passage of Scripture has had so fateful an influence upon Christian political thought.” (*Id.*, 94) This flawed theology – flawed if taken in isolation from the rest of the Bible – can lead to domestic oppression or war abroad: conflicts and disorder may justify repressive governmental power or aggression against another state. Paul’s teaching can be used to veil all governmental authority in an aura of sanctity. The result too often, Niebuhr warns, is an uncritical acceptance of almost anything done by the state, especially in foreign policy and particularly where rivalry or conflict with another nation is present or threatened.

Justice and Order

Justice is the animating concept in all of Niebuhr’s ethics. While he rarely applies it specifically to international politics, he often discusses it in relations to politics generally, and in terms that have applicability to his international thought.

An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935) is, among other things, a sustained meditation on the nature of social justice and its relation to Christian love. By the time of its publication, Niebuhr was already known (chiefly through *Moral Man*) for his attack on liberal Christian and secular thought and his insistence on a certain hard realism in assessing and responding to social wrongs, by coercion or even violence if necessary. Although *Interpretation* is more moderate in tone, it keeps up the attack. It also goes further by explaining in positive Christian terms what a

¹³ “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.” Romans 13:1-5 (RSV).

Biblical understanding of justice looks like. One of his objectives is to reconcile his heavy reliance on Old Testament prophetic thought with the perfectionist teachings of Jesus and the New Testament, such as in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the rough and tumble of politics where the realistic goal is “the ‘nicely calculated less and more’ of the relatively good and the relatively evil,” (*Christian Ethics*, 62) Niebuhr does not believe that turning the other cheek is always a wise strategy, especially for the less powerful. But it is equally false to consign Christian love, or *agape*, to the dustbin of unrealizable hopes. Perfectionists may seek to impose an impossible standard on everyday life, and secularists may dismiss love as a utopian dream bearing no relationship to mundane reality; but both are wrong. It is “the task of prophetic religion to insist on the organic relation between historic human existence and that which is both the ground and the fulfilment of this existence, the transcendent.” (*Id.*, 63) Prophetic Christian faith identifies the ultimate ground of meaning for all our decisions in a source beyond the human. This results in a morality that “points toward an ultimate perfection of unity and harmony, not realizable in any historic situation” (*id.*, 64), yet which retains regulative significance in our negotiation of historic experience, *i.e.*, as the standard by which we judge that experience. Love is the ultimate ethical principle of Christianity and justice is its social approximation in the fallen world. Because we live in that fallen world, justice itself will be imperfect. But it must be striven for with all our might, for the difference between “a little more and a little less justice in a social system” is often the difference between “misery and happiness” for those who long for “a little more.” (*ND-I*, 220) The realist knows that the parameters of the possible are restricted, but also knows that movement within those parameters is extremely important, especially for the less powerful, but

ultimately for all of humankind because we all live our lives within the limitations of the possible.

There are really “two natural laws,” an ultimate and a practical one, *i.e.*:

that which reason commands ultimately and the compromise which reason makes with the contingent and arbitrary forces of human existence. The ideal possibility is really an impossibility Yet this impossibility is not one which can be relegated simply to the world of transcendence. It offers immediate possibilities of a higher good in every given situation. We may never realize equality, but we cannot accept the inequalities of capitalism or any other unjust social system complacently. ... The principles of equal justice are thus approximations of the law of love in the kind of imperfect world which we know.... (*Christian Ethics*, 90; *see also, Love and Justice*, 25-29)

The development of “equal justice” as the political approximation of the law of love, of *agape* as sacrificial love, illustrates the central relevance of an impossible ethical ideal. Every human community, Niebuhr points out, develops minimal legal restrictions in order to make life possible – such as prohibitions on the voluntary taking of the life or property of another. But as society develops, the moral code exceeds the legal one as persons recognize that what is really at stake in these negative prohibitions is a notion of affirmative justice, in which all persons have the opportunity to achieve and maintain a life which is secure and provided with the necessities. Thus, various schemes of justice and equity are developed which imply an ideal of equality for all persons in the society. In this way, equality becomes “the regulative principle of justice,” and in this ideal of equality “there is an echo of the law of love, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’” (*Christian Ethics*, 65) For the Christian, love is the “motive of social action”; but “justice must be the instrument of love in a world in which self-interest is bound to defy the canons of love on every level.” (*Id.*, Preface to 1956 ed.; quoted in Charles C. Brown, 56)

If, then, justice is the practical approximation of love in our imperfect world, it follows that injustice is the collective outward manifestation of sin. As Niebuhr put it in *Human Nature*:

The Bible defines sin in both religious and moral terms. The religious dimension is man's rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God. The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice." (*ND-I*, 179)

Both justice and injustice are intimately concerned with power, that unavoidable factor in all human relationships. Niebuhr's approach to international as well as domestic political ethics evinces a deep appreciation of its decisive role. Affirmatively, empowerment is an essential component of the effort of any person or people to achieve justice and personal dignity. Negatively, the loss of power often portends the loss of one's happiness or even one's life. Unequal distribution of power often leads to injustice, and the abuse of power is perhaps the chief cause of conflict, cruelty, and every form of political injustice. Power will never be equal among persons or nations, but a rough balance of power is crucial to the effort to minimize injustice, for "there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation." (*CPP*, 104)

Niebuhr understands the necessity of the use of power, including physical coercion, because all forms of political justice require "coercing the anarchy of collective self-interest into some kind of decent order by the most attainable balance of power." (*Id.*) He agrees with Montesquieu that "[p]olitical liberty in a citizen is that tranquility of spirit which comes from the opinion each one has of his security, and in order for him to have the liberty, the government must be such that one citizen cannot fear another citizen." (*The Spirit of the Laws*, XI.6) But Niebuhr also recognizes the hubris and arrogant overconfidence which always accompany its use. Just as with patriotism, society "cumulates the egoism of individuals and transmutes their individual altruism into collective egoism." Therefore, "no group acts from purely unselfish or even mutual intent and politics is therefore bound to be a contest of power."¹⁴ In the words of a

¹⁴ "Human Nature and Social Change," *The Christian Century*, vol. L (1933), 363; quoted in Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, 107.

contemporary journalist, Niebuhr is “a thinker who simultaneously believes in using power and is keenly aware that its use is inevitably corrupting.”¹⁵ As Socrates observes in Plato’s *Gorgias*:

The fact is Callicles, that those persons who become extremely wicked do come from the ranks of the powerful For it’s a difficult thing, Callicles ... to live your whole life justly when you’ve found yourself having ample freedom to do what’s unjust.¹⁶

Socrates makes the same point as Augustine later: power magnifies the capacity for evil, and typically, its exercise as well.

Most of Niebuhr’s consideration of justice occurs in the domestic context. What is “justice” in the international context? Niebuhr did not provide a comprehensive answer specifically addressed to the international sphere, so we must infer an answer from his general political thought, and from the subset of his writings on international affairs – most of which focused on immediate concerns of American foreign policy and the crises or events of the day. He did observe that, most of the time, we can expect nations – whatever they say to justify their actions – will do justice only when it aligns with their national interest; but then he added a note of realistic hope:

Perhaps the best that can be expected of nations is that they should justify their hypocrisies by a slight measure of real international achievement, and learn how to do justice to wider interests than their own, while they pursue their own. (*Moral Man*, 108)

How might nations do this? Niebuhr suggests an answer by elucidating the relationship between justice and order: the indissoluble link between the two; the practical primacy of order, at least in the short run; and the necessity of justice to long-term order.

In the international arena even more than in domestic politics, justice is tightly bound together with order for Niebuhr. Where a tradeoff must be made, order inevitably trumps justice since justice is impossible without minimal order. At the same time, if the order is to be stable

¹⁵ David Brooks, “A Politics for Generation X,” *Atlantic* magazine, August 1999 (referring to Niebuhr).

¹⁶ *Gorgias* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publ. Co, 1987) 110-11.

and lasting, justice must be attended to. “The first task of government,” Niebuhr said, “is to create order The second task is to create justice.” (*Discerning the Signs*, 46). Niebuhr was speaking there of the situation within a society; but in *The Children of Light* in musing on “The World Community” (chap. 5), he applies the same principle to international politics:

The first task of a community is to subdue chaos and create order; but the second task is ... to prevent the power, by which initial unity is achieved, from becoming tyrannical. [Thus] [j]ustice is introduced into a field of order if the organizing power is placed under both moral and institutional checks. (*Children of Light*, 178)

[O]rder precedes justice in the strategy of government; but ... only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace. (*Id.*, 181)

The best hope of justice lies in the fact that a stable order is not possible without introducing instruments of justice into the agreements which are to provide for order. (*Id.*)

Thus, one must speak of order and justice together, since they are inseparable. Order comes first, since without it no justice is possible; but unless justice follows, order becomes tyranny which leads to instability and ultimately to an unsustainable order.¹⁷

The primacy of order has been maintained by virtually all IR thinkers, particularly realists, at least since Augustine – though they typically neglect the requirement of justice.¹⁸ Unlike the

¹⁷ Niebuhr was aware that holding the two in tension is not easy. He was also aware that others before him had recognized the difficulty. David Hume wrote:

All men are sensible of the necessity of justice to maintain peace and order; and all men are sensible of the necessity of peace and order for the maintenance of society. Yet, notwithstanding this strong and obvious necessity, such is the frailty or perverseness of our nature! it is impossible to keep men, faithfully and unerringly, in the paths of justice. (“Of the Origin of Government,” *Political Essays* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994, 2006), 38)

¹⁸ Constructivists and neoliberals do sometimes consider justice (without calling it “justice” or acknowledging the concept), but they tend to assume a stable international order of peaceful hegemony enforced by the United States and of indefinite duration, within which their projects can take place – thus bypassing the issues that worry realists most. (Recall that the leading neoliberal thinker Robert Keohane, titled his most important book *After Hegemony*. He meant American hegemony). The assumption is that under the umbrella of a stable, peaceful international order, important social works can be undertaken, such as seeking to reduce global poverty or to achieve greater equity in the use of natural resources. Keohane is one such thinker; another is Charles Beitz, whose major work is *Political Theory and International Relations*; see especially, “Part Three: International Distributive Justice,” in which he seeks to apply Rawlsian thought to the world. Realist critics have pointed out that international order cannot be merely assumed (nor can indefinite American “hegemony”), and therefore a rough balance between order and justice must always be attended to.

domestic sphere, stability can never be assumed in the anarchical relationships among nations, so the importance of order is even greater than within a society. Because of great disparities in the distribution of power as well as differences in the ideological, economic and other objectives of states, and in the absence of any superior governing authority to keep order, disorder is a constant threat, even in conditions of peace. Finally, order is primary because disorder between states can lead to devastating consequences, including war and the complete destruction of society.

As noted, much of Niebuhr's international thought occurred in the shadow of the Nazi threat in the 1930s and Second World War, and of the Soviet threat thereafter. While he theorized about order and justice, he said relatively little about the specific content of justice in the international context. Thus, the effort to tease a general set of principles from Niebuhr's writings, including a theory of international justice, can never be more than tentative.

Something more modest can be accomplished, however (which is the project of this paper), namely, to link Niebuhr's insightful but partial notions of world community and international relations to a larger school of thought – the English School – which shares Niebuhr's Christian roots, which incorporates or is convergent with essential elements of his political thinking, and which, I argue, represents the natural trajectory forward of his international thought, including the elements of both order and justice. This is the “concord” I seek to establish. The English School's conception of international society was developed to describe, sustain and enhance a system of international order, and through that order, a degree of justice among nation-states and their peoples. It is grounded in enduring moral principles deriving historically from ancient Biblical and Christian ethics, now forming the bedrock of international law (as Grotius noted). Butterfield and Wight shared fundamental Christian understandings with Niebuhr and, like him,

were political realists whose perspectives were heavily indebted to Augustine. They were also influenced by Christian hope and by faith in Providential concern for humans and for human history, co-existing with maximal human freedom to do good and evil. Their theoretical work in international relations, including the ethical component, reflects the same concerns that motivated Niebuhr's writings, with differences only in emphasis. Although later representatives of the School abandoned its explicit Christian origins, they did not abjure the principles derived from it, and contemporary English School writings remain fundamentally consistent with the approach of the founders and of Niebuhr.

As will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, both Martin Wight and Hedley Bull (the most important English School thinker of the second generation) believed that the fundamental precepts of international law are, first and foremost, *moral* principles binding upon all nations. The equality of states; state sovereignty and the mutual recognition of each other's borders and peoples; the principle of non-aggression; the obligation to keep promises and abide by treaty commitments; the immunity of diplomatic missions; the laws of war (particularly those deriving from just-war theory); safety within one's own territory; and the responsibility to protect one's citizens from external attack and from at least the worst forms of internal persecution – these are intrinsic *ethical* obligations of states and inherent principles of *justice*, whether or not they are embedded in treaties or enforced by international bodies. Only the English School understands, values, and treats these as full-fledged moral principles.

In the next chapter where the ethical thinking of Martin Wight is presented, and in chapters 10 and 11 where the thought of Hedley Bull and Robert Jackson is explored, it will be seen that the moral foundations that undergird Niebuhr's thinking on international politics are shared by these English School thinkers.

Natural Law

As will be shown in the next chapter, Martin Wight was an admirer of natural law and made it an important part of his political understanding. Niebuhr had an ambivalent and evolving relationship with it. On the one hand, Christian realism is built on a divine foundation: ethical judgments about politics are not the result merely of human agreements or insights into what seems right and good; they are based on the authority of the Hebrew prophets and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. This opens up the possibility of natural law based, as Paul said, on “the law ... written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness.” (Rom. 2:15, NRSV)¹⁹

On the other hand, the main tradition of Christian natural law is a Catholic one and Niebuhr was suspicious of it, rejecting it early in his career, frequently criticizing its inadequacies but slowly reconciling with it and even appreciating it (to a degree) as years went by. The more his assessment of natural law evolved from early hostility to later accommodation, the closer he came to Wight’s view. While there was not a convergence – Niebuhr’s thought never relied on natural law to the degree that Wight’s did – Niebuhr came to appreciate its significance in ways that were increasingly compatible with the way that Wight saw it.

In *Love and Justice* Niebuhr criticizes both Thomistic and Reformation theologies of natural law, and for the same reason: “the facts of human history are more complex than either the traditional Catholic or Protestant doctrines of natural order and natural law suggest.” (47) Thus, similar to his complaint against ontological systems generally (including Paul Tillich’s), he thought that the system of natural law was too pat; it fails to take sufficient account of God’s

¹⁹ “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. Romans 2:14-16 (NRSV).

freedom, of man's will (his "vitality"), and of the complexities that affect the exercise of human freedom. It skips over the contingencies of history which impinge on judgment, undervalues practical wisdom in making hard decisions (which often involves choosing between evils without clear guidance), and overlooks the inherent uncertainty that afflicts complex ethical discourse. Natural law and other comprehensive systems, while providing comfortable fixity, do not "do justice to the freedom either of the divine or of the human person, or to the unity of the person in his involvement in and transcendence over the temporal flux." (Kegley, 509) As a result, neither man's sinfulness nor God's merciful forgiveness is allowed to play the integral role each deserves in the economy of morals.

In *Nature and Destiny* Niebuhr describes with approval the Reformation's downgrading of the place of natural law, observing that Protestantism "has too strong a sense of the individual occasion, and the uniqueness of the individual who faces the occasion, to trust in general rules." (*ND-I*, 60) One of the accomplishments of the Reformation was the recognition of the individuality of the individual person and of his/her responsibility for a direct relationship with God. To be sure, with this freedom comes a certain insecurity; but the freedom (and thus the uncertainty) is essential to the nature of man as God created him. Just as God transcends the laws of nature in providing laws for humans, so does "man in his limited way transcend[] the 'laws of nature' and cannot be bound by them." (*Id.*, 141)

As Niebuhr saw it, the Catholic fervor for providing absolute norms and for limiting the freedom of individuals (whom the Church mistrusts in the weighing of ambiguous circumstances and making ethical judgments), causes it to incorporate in its divine system judgments that unmistakably reflect both its excessive institutional self-aggrandizement (its "high ecclesiology") and, with its Thomistic provenance, the cultural and economic values of a specific time and

place. Thus, the imposing moral edifice built by St. Thomas Aquinas is “no more than a religious sanctification of the relativities of the feudal social system as it flowered in the thirteenth century.” (*Id.*, 221)

Responding to Paul Ramsay’s critique of his position on natural law, Niebuhr summarized his objections to natural law as twofold:

The one point is that these concepts do not allow for the historical character of human existence. They are rooted in a classical rationalism which did not understand history. They therefore do not understand the uniqueness of historical occasion or the historical biases which creep into the definitions of natural law.

The other point of my criticism of natural law concepts is the tendency to make the law of love an addendum to the natural law, so that the one defines the determinate possibilities and the other the indeterminate possibilities of good. My point is that it is not possible to draw a neat line between determinate and indeterminate possibilities. Justice is an application of the law of love. The rules are not absolute but relative. They are applications of the law of love and do not have independence apart from it.

I make these criticisms of natural law concepts without challenging in any way the idea that there is an essential nature of man to which man must conform. But a part of that essential nature is his freedom, for which love is the only law.
 (“Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” Kegley, 511-12)

These observations were published in 1956 and are echoes of his thoughts in the Gifford Lectures (as published in *Nature and Destiny*), and in “Augustine’s Political Realism,” published in 1953 in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*. In the latter, he again stressed Catholic natural law’s rigidity, its failure to take adequate account of human nature, including in particular the “endlessly unique social configurations which human beings, in their freedom over natural necessity, construct.” (*Id.*, 132) Augustine is a necessary corrective to the later Aquinas. What makes Augustine “a more reliable guide than any known thinker,” particularly Aquinas and Luther, is that he recognizes man’s “radical freedom” and consequently his vitality which exceeds the forms of natural law. (*Id.*, 132-33, 146)

Niebuhr's fundamental critique of Catholic natural law's failure to take account of historical contingency and radical human vitality is of a piece with his larger critique of modern rationality and post-Enlightenment liberalism. Thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke exhibit a charming and naïve faith in the power of reason, which has had a decisive influence in modern liberal thought. But they overlook Augustine's insight that rationality is as flawed and subject to human manipulation as every other thing the hand of man is able to grasp. On the one hand, humans are excessively self-seeking and motivated by a will to power which is greater than what is reasonably necessary to ensure survival and happiness. Yet, humans are also capable of selfless acts of sacrifice for strangers (including the state), conduct which displays a love that defies rational understanding, which is grounded in the assumption of individual utility maximization. Thus, human nature spills over the bounds of "rationality" in both directions, and those who rely solely on human reason as the basis for understanding humans are using an inadequate model for reality.

Natural law, particularly Roman Catholic natural-law doctrine, suffers from this same inordinate faith in human reason. It thus feeds into and supports liberalism's "increasingly discarnate rationality" which purportedly "rise[s] above the welter of human conflict and decide[s] all contentious issues according to the 'plain merits and demerits' of the case." (*CPP*, 90) This is a false rationality, reflective of the inherent limitedness of all rationality. Reason is not a benign, autonomous force operating independently of the imperfect and self-interested persons who deploy it. Nor can it operate effectively if it is oblivious to its own limits, including the freedom and contingency that frequently defy reason itself.

Niebuhr observes, "[t]here is no such simple universal order or universal justice as modern rational culture assumed. All forms and orders of history are subject to the contingencies of

nature and time.” Thus, the “particularity of social life” in all its diversity is a constant of collective human existence. Contingency and radical diversity are not necessarily or inevitably sinful; however, being intrinsic to human experience, they complicate and distort the order of reason. (*CPP*, 62-64) Niebuhr’s recognition of the vitality and plurality of experience is echoed in the writings of English School thinkers such as Robert Jackson, who quotes Hannah Arendt:

Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live. (Jackson, *Global Covenant*, 407)²⁰

Despite his attacks on “discarnate rationality” and the shortcomings of natural law, Niebuhr was no antinomian. For one thing, although he refused to associate them with natural law, he acknowledged the existence of universally-shared shared human values, attributing these to “[t]he common sense of mankind, embodied in the judgments which men and nations make of each other.” (*FH*, 96) For another, he was clearly a “moral realist” who believed that, whatever the difficulties of discernment, moral principles exist objectively and apart from our human preferences or agreements.²¹ Specifically, he believed that such principles are rooted ultimately in God, the author of reality, who is revealed in the Bible. Niebuhr’s morality is chiefly social, and the north star of his moral compass is social justice. His Biblical approach yielded for him identifiable examples of social and political justice and injustice, leading to concrete insights and positions for the ethical judgment of public action.

Was he exaggerating the difference between the suppleness of his approach and the rigidity of Catholic natural law?²² Perhaps, as he would eventually conclude.

²⁰ He is quoting Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 2nd ed., 1998), at 8.

²¹ Niebuhr’s moral realism was a species of ethical naturalism, which holds that ethical notions such as “good” or “right” are derived in part from the natural properties of the things to which such terms are held to be applicable. (See Lovin 1995, 12-15)

²² Robin Lovin has pointed out that many of Niebuhr’s criticisms of natural law’s rigidity and insensitivity to context have been taken up in post-Vatican II Catholic ethics, perhaps responsive in part to Niebuhr’s critique. In

Niebuhr's critical evaluation of natural law was not altogether one-sided. He acknowledged that Protestant rejection of natural law and a too facile substitution of the law of love present the constant peril of a rudderless ethic and an unprincipled approach to human situations, resulting in the weakening of a consistent basis for social and political critique. He even suggests at one point that such rejection may have contributed to the ethical "anarchy of modern life." (ND-I, 60)

In the last chapter of volume I of *Nature and Destiny*, Niebuhr addresses "the limitations of Catholic natural-law theories ... when applied to the field of international relations," specifically regarding just-war theory. (ND-I, 283-84) Here the main flaw he sees is overconfidence in what natural reason can do in discerning and applying international norms to specific situations, such as whether the cause of a particular war is just or whether just methods are being employed in fighting it. Such analysis, even if it is sincere and not pretextual, typically overlooks the role of self-interest of those seeking to justify the action. Alberto Coll sees Niebuhr's skepticism as being based on his view that just-war standards are too malleable to impede engagement in any war that the rulers want to have, and that such standards have historically been employed as a useful cloak for the aggressive use of power.²³ Niebuhr saw the principles of *jus in bello* as particularly vulnerable to misuse because (a) in the midst of war, with passions raging and fear heightened, all restraints tend to be cast aside; and (b) in the age of nuclear war, it is not clear whether *in bello* restraints have any applicability because the damage is so widespread and discrimination is impossible. Therefore, principal reliance must be placed on raising the *ad bellum* bar, making it more rigorous so that war is harder to justify in the first place. But

any event, Christian moral realism and the natural-law tradition agree on the most fundamental ethical premise of all, namely that, despite the fall, "right action is action that conforms to human nature" rightly understood in light of God's decree that all he created is "very good." (Gen. 1:31) (Lovin 1995, 16)

²³ Coll, "The Relevance of Christian Realism to the Twenty-First Century," in Patterson, ed., *Christianity and Power Politics Today*, 28 ff.

Niebuhr was doubtful as to whether raising the *ad bellum* bar could realistically be done, thus reinforcing his skepticism about the applicability of the natural-law approach in the context of just and unjust wars. Consistent with Coll's analysis, Jean Bethke Elshtain finds Niebuhr ambivalent about just-war theory, neither disavowing nor embracing it, finding it alternately useful and diversionary. She describes Niebuhr as "cohabiting at times" with just-war views. (Elshtain, *Just War Theory*, 329)

Yet, despite its "capture" by Catholic rigidities and Thomistic limits of time and place, Niebuhr kept returning to natural law, attracted to its universality and its social focus. He was loath to deny Paul's insight about the conscience of the Gentiles and the "law written on their hearts." There is a danger, he realized, that if ethics could not be formulated in a way that transcends powerful cultural and national prejudices (particularly American ones), it risks becoming irrelevant to policy or reduced to relativism. Either way, political power is unchecked and an independent ground on which to judge the great issues of war and peace is lost.

In secular thought, the loss of natural law might abet an excessive empiricism and materialism, a charge often made against realists: they ignore or bypass ethics, or treat it merely as a component of public opinion, in order to concentrate on the heart of the matter, *viz.*, the aggregation of material power and the domination of others. In Christian thought, the absence of natural law may feed the perennial temptation of the faithful to wall themselves off from the contamination of worldly politics and focus on individual salvation. It might also strengthen the strand of "Lutheran orthodoxy [which] tends to regard reason as so completely involved in the corruption of sin that it has no confidence in any 'natural law' norms." (*Id.*, 284)

How to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of, on the one hand, rigid, time-bound natural-law norms that fail to allow for human freedom and flexibility, and on the other, a thorough distrust

of sinful reason leading to righteous resignation from the public square? Reason is worth saving, Niebuhr believes, including the natural-law norms that reason supports, but only by being subjected to a highly critical “dialectical analysis” of its place and function. He explains:

Reason is in fact in an equivocal position between the self-as-subject and the self-as-agent of action, between the self as transcending itself and the anxious self in action. It is the servant of both. Its universal judgments, its effort to relate all things to each other in a system of coherence, can be alternately the instrument by which the self-as-subject condemns the partial and prejudiced actions of the sinful self, and the vehicle of the sinful self by which it seeks to give the sanctity of a false universality to its particular needs and partial insights. (*Id.*, 284-85)

Reason as an effort “to relate all things ... in a system of coherence” is good and useful. The ever-present danger is succumbing to the use of reason as a vehicle for conferring “a false universality” upon the partial and prejudiced actions of the sinful self or the self-righteous nation. The only defenses are (a) constant awareness of the dangers, including the danger that the anxious, active self will seek to “take over” the judging self in order to produce comfortable justifications for sinful action; and (b) constant, disciplined engagement in a critical dialectical exchange between general ethical rules and concrete situations, without letting either dominate the other. Note that by approving a dialectic between “general rules” and specific situations, Niebuhr is implicitly recognizing the usefulness of natural law as a source of those general norms which the “judging self” must employ in this dialectic.²⁴ Moreover, Niebuhr’s dialectical methodology for incorporating ethical thought into larger political decisions is organically fitted to the interpretive approach of practical wisdom and pragmatic judgment which is characteristic of his entire body of thought, as well as that of the English School and classical realism.

In later writings, Niebuhr warmed to the Catholic natural law tradition and explicitly revised his assessment of it. In the Introduction (“Changing Perspectives”) to *Man’s Nature and His*

²⁴ Hedley Bull, without citing Niebuhr, proposes essentially the same solution in his article, “Natural Law and International Relations,” *British Journal of International Studies*, vol. 5 (1979), 171-181.

Communities (1965), Niebuhr acknowledges an “increasing sympathy” for the Catholic tradition, with a concomitantly more critical stance toward Protestantism, although the latter remains his foundational tradition. Niebuhr had long criticized the tendency toward excessive individualism in Protestantism, but the impressive social-justice commitments of various Catholic (as well as Jewish) thinkers and actors have awakened him over time to their ability, based on their tradition, to see and to value the social sources of human identity, and thus to locate the social roots of those evils which compromise or destroy human dignity. He finds Protestantism, with its Reformation heritage of individual salvation, relatively impoverished in this regard, whence comes the need to study and import insights from these other great religious traditions.

“Catholics, unlike many Protestants, never had any doubt about the social substance of human existence.” (*Id.*, 19) Therefore, although the natural law tradition arose from classical sources, Catholic appropriation of it lifted up its social dimensions, and therefore “naturally emphasized justice as the relevant norm.” (*Id.*) Natural law (Niebuhr now sees) is one of the chief instruments by which Catholic tradition has managed to be more consistently focused on social justice issues than have Protestant traditions, especially the Lutheran. This has given rise to modern Catholic social thought, which Niebuhr deeply admires:

I have a new appreciation of the fact that a great religious tradition, emancipated from the organic collectivism of the Middle Ages, has been able creatively to help modern technical cultures of the West to solve the moral problems of industrial collectivism. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church never lost the loyalty of its industrial workers. These workers in Protestant cultures often became infected with the virus of the Marxist rebellion. (*Id.*, 19-20)

This new-found appreciation was not uncritical. The Church’s prohibition on contraception (soon to become hardened dogma in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968) demonstrates that “natural-law theories drawn from a metaphysical base” remain “too inflexible.” (*Id.*, 19)

Nonetheless, he clearly expresses his own greater flexibility in being able to adapt and apply at least selected insights of natural-law theory.

Thomas Berg argues that, with the perspective of time, we can see that Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray were not so far apart as many had assumed, with respect to either Niebuhr's Christian realism or Murray's natural law theology.²⁵ In fact, in both areas, they agree more than they disagree. They share, for example, an ethical realism grounded ultimately in Biblical revelation but accessible, up to a point, through the careful application of reason alone. They agree (using different but equivalent language) that ethical principles must take into account the sinful limitations of human nature, but also recognize the human capacity for good and the intrinsic human need for flourishing. They agree on the fundamental ethical norms taught by the Old Testament and the Christian tradition, such as human equality before God, the preciousness of life, the prohibition on the taking of human life, and the need for justice. They both recognize (though with different emphases) that the stability and universality of fundamental ethical principles are balanced by a large degree of contingency and diversity in the application of such norms, made necessary by the protean nature of human life and the "vitality" (Niebuhr) of human freedom. Crucial to his argument, Berg contends that natural law as understood by Murray is more flexible than the version targeted by Niebuhr, including Murray's recognition of the limitations of human nature and sinfulness, and the large role of contingency in limiting the usefulness of exceptionless rules.

²⁵ Thomas C. Berg, "John Courtney Murray and Reinhold Niebuhr: Natural Law and Christian Realism," Social Science Research Network, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=847985, retrieved June 23, 2014. Berg acknowledges that Murray and Niebuhr during their lifetimes often emphasized disagreement more than common ground, citing for example Murray's attack in *We Hold These Truths* on the morally "ambiguist" approach of Niebuhr. (Berg, 5-6) Berg believes this is understandable in the public dialogue of two theologians seeking to illuminate their respective positions by contrasting them with those of the other. But with the perspective of time and distance we see the commonalities more clearly, and these outweigh the differences. Perhaps most importantly, Berg argues, a complementarity emerges between the two thinkers.

The understanding of natural law espoused by Murray and the Christian realism developed by Niebuhr are, Berg argues, complementary and mutually-reinforcing ways of understanding human capacities and needs in an ethical framework, and both are needed: “A combination of natural law and Christian realism suggests that a moral-political principle or institution is most solid when its justification rests on both the positive possibilities of human nature and on its negative tendencies.” Thus:

Each approach can take account of human nature both in its ideal and in its fallen aspects, as Christian political thought should; but natural law will contribute more to explicating the ideal ends of human beings, and Christian realism more to exploring their fallenness and its consequences. Each can affirm both universal moral-political principles and contingent, situation-specific ones; but natural law offers more resources for identifying the universals, while Christian realism reminds us of the importance of the contingent. Natural law offers assurance that ethical-political reasoning can rest in some solid foundations, while Christian realism offers the pointed reminder that Christian life in the world is characterized by tension and thus many political solutions must be provisional and subject to adjustment. As to sources of political arguments and decisions, natural law reflects more the contributions of general human rationality, Christian realism the role of distinctive Biblical concepts like sacrificial love and original sin. (Berg, 18)

Niebuhr’s later writings did not include an explicit reassessment of his earlier critique of just-war theory, which would not necessarily be affected by his warming to natural law theory.²⁶ However, the situation is somewhat different regarding universal human rights. Here, Niebuhr provided an early (though partial) acknowledgment of the value of natural-law thinking. In the third chapter of *Man’s Nature*, entitled, “Man’s Tribalism as One Source of His Inhumanity,” Niebuhr gives natural law – both Stoic and Catholic – much of the credit for the modern recognition of human rights. He notes that Stoic and Roman thinkers were the first to recognize and extol the common humanity of all persons. In particular, he quotes Cicero’s statement:

Out of all the material of the philosophers’ discussions, surely there comes nothing more valuable than the full realization that we are born to justice, and that right is based,

²⁶ In any event, just-war theory is no more important to English School thinkers than it was to Niebuhr.

not upon men's opinion, but upon nature. (*Man's Nature*, 91, quoting Cicero, *De Legibus*, I.x, 28-31)

This "universal humanism" along with the "implicit universalism" of the Hebrew prophets were twin streams flowing into early Christian theology which have remained forceful throughout its history. While social and political norms are strongest within limited communities and political entities, and rapidly grow weaker outside of them, such universalism survived as an aspect of Christian thought despite Augustine's too-sharp dichotomy between the two cities. In fact, Niebuhr allows, medieval Christianity maintained and deepened the idea of universality in morals and politics, including the thought of Aquinas and Dante (in *De Monarchia*) and the idea of *respublica christiana*. But the advent in early modern times of distinct kingdoms and states compromised and diminished this universalist tradition. The French Enlightenment, however, recovered it in a new key with its proclamation of the "rights of man," and subsequent chapters of secular history are still unfolding in the modern effort to maintain a "universal moral system of mutual obligation and ... recognition and respect for human beings as members of the same race, endowed with dignity and transcending brute creation." (*Man's Nature*, 98-99)

In this account of the development of human dignity and rights, Niebuhr acknowledges the significant historical contributions of medieval natural law theory, along with its Stoic precursor. He gives relatively little credit to modern natural law, implying that the French secular contribution may be greater. A little later in the discussion, however, he acknowledges that "the obligation of universal human rights" is "explicit" in all Christian creeds, and moreover that it is the Catholic Church, far more than Protestants, who have proclaimed those obligations. (*Id.*, 103) If this is not a ringing endorsement of the role of natural law in modern political-moral discourse, it is an implicit acknowledgment that it has played a not insignificant part, with perhaps the potential for a greater one. Martin Wight would assign it more weight, relying less

on its Stoic and Christian roots than on its adoption by Grotius as the fountainhead for the law of nations; a role which Niebuhr overlooks.

International Law and Institutions

As will be seen in the next chapter, much of Martin Wight's positive regard for natural law is owing to its foundational role in the thinking of Hugo Grotius and the development of international law and institutions. Wight regarded these as the most tangible expressions so far of universal morality in international life.²⁷ Perhaps because Niebuhr's focus was on Catholic natural law, he failed to see its place as the fountainhead of international law (first placed there by the Dutch Protestant Grotius). Nonetheless, Niebuhr valued international law and institutions, but emphasized the need to be attentive to the underlying "tissues" of common values and communities without which international law is a dead letter.

This is an area where Niebuhr's and Wight's insights are truly complementary. Wight is surely correct that international law, which is explicitly rooted in the soil of natural law, has yielded a number of significant moral and legal precepts of universal scope for the proper ordering of states and the recognition of the rights of nations and even of citizens. The Charter of the United Nations bears witness to this, as does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the entire modern idea that human rights are "intrinsic" to humans or "inherent" in humanness. Niebuhr did not emphasize these contributions of international law as vigorously as Wight did. He might have assessed it differently had he lived long enough to see the burgeoning

²⁷ International law plays almost no part in the thinking of neorealists or neoliberals, except, for realists, as phenomena to be manipulated by states, and for neoliberals, as positive support for economic institutions. As for constructivism, Wendt acknowledges international law in passing but mostly as a manifestation of the "Lockean culture" which enables states (like persons) to internalize certain norms expressed in international law. He does not see international law as an independent variable in constraining state conduct, although it does reflect and may influence constraining norms. (*Social Theory*, 288-91, 307-08) In these respects Wendt is closer to Niebuhr than to Wight.

support for human rights as it was energized and made more visible by the end of the Cold War.²⁸

On the other hand, Niebuhr pointed to a factor that Wight undervalued: the contemporary absence of, and need to work continually for, a deeper “organic” consensus on values and a stronger sense of world community if we are to go further – if these international precepts are to be treated truly as law with binding effect on all nations. If law is to bind, particularly in the absence of external enforcement mechanisms, a sense of shared community must undergird it. “Life is a better unifier than law,” Niebuhr said. “Law can only define and perfect what life has established.” (*Love and Justice*, 217)

In his essay, “The Illusion of World Government” (*CRPP*, chap. 2), Niebuhr defends the accomplishment of the United Nations as our chief international legal institution. The UN embodies “the necessarily minimal constitutional structure” that we have managed to build to this point, and it is good as far as it goes. (*Id.*, 16) But an international community of law cannot merely be legislated into existence. The authority of any government “is not primarily the authority of law nor the authority of force, but the authority of the community itself.” (*Id.*, 22) Our technological advances have created a global community of sorts, but it is “a community of mutual dependence,” which is not the same thing as “one of mutual trust and respect.” (*Id.*, 16) What is needed for such a community and the law to bind it together is the “social tissue” arising from a stronger and broader consensus on issues of order and justice. (*Id.*, 17, 28)

Can such connecting tissues be strengthened and such a world community be established over time? Niebuhr’s response is, yes, slowly and within certain limits. It can develop

²⁸ See e.g., Kathryn Sikkink, “The Power of Principled Ideas: Human Rights Policies in the United States and Western Europe,” in Goldstein and Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, 139-170.

incrementally, though it will never be strong enough to support a world government: human loyalties are too localized for that, and in any event the result of world government would likely be global tyranny from which no escape would be possible. Nonetheless, there are “forces which are operating to integrate the world community” (*Id.*, 29), and international law serves both as one such force and as a reflection of other such forces, slowly working over time. As noted earlier, Niebuhr believed in the possibility of the gradual, deliberate development of what he called a “world community” in which common principles of order and justice may eventually govern the international arena as well as the national polities. (*ND-II*, 285) This stronger, intentional world community is the indispensable basis for a more robust international law and community of states. English School thinkers make the same point, arguing that it is precisely the organic growth of our common commitment to these principles of order and justice that sustain and are sustained by the international society. To the degree this is accomplished, the anarchy which frustrates international peace and cooperation can be pushed back and made weaker.

For this strengthening and integration to occur, nations and citizens must continue the work of building the worldwide moral community to support the broadening and deepening of international law and cooperative institutions, and thus of international society. Such a community will be constructed, according to Niebuhr, not by pessimists, still less by cynics, but also not by the idealists. Rather:

The new international community ... must be built by resolute men who “when hope is dead will hope by faith”; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good. There is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God. History moves towards the realization of the Kingdom but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization. (*ND-II*, 285-86)

In other words, a true international community, if it is to be built at all, will be built slowly but determinedly by realists who have faith. The founders of the English School could not have said it better – and would not have said it differently.

Chapter 8

Martin Wight: International Theory as Normative Theory

Wight and Christian Hope

Martin Wight (1913-1972), the co-founder with Herbert Butterfield of what came to be called the English School of International Relations Theory, studied modern history at Oxford, graduating with a first-class degree and going on to graduate school. It was during these years that he met Herbert Butterfield of Cambridge, one of his examiners who recommended his “first.” Wight was thirteen years younger than Butterfield, though he died before him. In 1937 he became a staff member of Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs), where he worked with Arnold Toynbee. As a young man, Wight was a pacifist and conscientious objector, but he later changed his mind (perhaps under the influence of Niebuhr¹). He studied, cited and reviewed Niebuhr’s works throughout his career.²

In 1946 Wight published in pamphlet form what would later be expanded into the book that gave him his reputation as a realist, *Power Politics* (finally published in book form in 1978). From 1949 until 1960 Wight taught at the London School of Economics. It was during this period that he developed the lectures that became his most important book, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, published in 1991 after his death. In 1960, Wight left LSE for Sussex University to found the School of European Studies (now called the Sussex European Institute), where he was founding dean and professor of history.

¹ Eric Patterson suggests that it was probably “Niebuhr’s critique of pacifism” that ended Wight’s pacifist views, citing a dialogue he wrote, taking the part of just war in opposition to pacifism, and using Niebuhr’s arguments, including those marshalled in “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” published in 1940 in *Christianity and Power Politics*. (Eric Patterson, *The Christian Realists*, 111-12)

² Ian Hall provides numerous examples in his study, *The International Thought of Martin Wight*. See e.g, 8, 25, 28, 46, 61, 91, 99-100, 152, 158, 172, 177, 188.

As Butterfield was a serious Methodist layman, Wight was a devout Anglican all his life. Like Butterfield, he did not conceal his commitment to the Christian tradition or its influence on his work, including his admiration for the thought of St. Augustine. Wight was especially influenced by Augustine's view of human nature. In a lecture delivered in 1948 to the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, which became the basis for his essay, "The Church, Russia and the West," (the "Bossey Essay")³ he said:

We are not well-meaning people doing our best; we are miserable sinners, living under judgment, with a heritage of sin to expiate. (p. 36)

Wight was particularly impressed, as Hedley Bull put it, by

the efforts of Herbert Butterfield and Reinhold Niebuhr to recall Christianity "to the Old Testament or prophetic interpretation of history, with its belief in the sinfulness of human nature, in cataclysm and tragic conflict, in judgement and providence."⁴

In the Bossey lecture and essay, Wight lamented the "post-Christian" civilization that the west had become, including international politics' abandonment of Christian ethical restraints:

Russia and America are the last two Great Powers within the Westernised system of sovereign states. And the characteristic of that system, after centuries in which the Church has had no influence upon its development, is the emancipation of power from moral restraints. (p. 30)

Later in the same lecture and essay, Wight described the "meaninglessness of secular history" (p. 35) and renounced optimism in politics or history, placing hope in its place. But hope, he pointed out, "is a theological not a political virtue" (p. 33), deriving from the Christian view of Providence, *i.e.*, that history is ultimately in the hands of a loving, if mysterious, God. He did not counter the negative implication, namely, that without faith in a transcendent God hope is difficult to sustain and may devolve into pessimism or even cynicism. With transcendent

³ The lecture was delivered in June 1948 at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland. It was later published under the aforesaid title in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 1 no. 1, pp. 25-45 (Autumn 1948).

⁴ Hedley Bull, "Introduction: Martin Wight and the Study of International Relations," in Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 11. The internal quote is from Wight's article, "History and Judgment, Butterfield, Niebuhr and the Technical Historian," *Frontier*, vol. 1 no. 8 (August 1950), 303.

faith, man is enabled to view the tragic human situation realistically, but not without hope. Niebuhr makes the same point forcefully in *Christianity and Power Politics*.⁵

Wight rejected as strongly as Butterfield any idea that history might be “progressive.” While his Christian commitment made later scholars uncomfortable (as they were with Butterfield’s commitment, though less with Niebuhr’s⁶), Wight never wavered in its importance as an essential part of his fundamental political understanding, especially his “realistic” view of human nature and his rejection of a progressive view of history. Like Butterfield (and Niebuhr) he believed that God was the God of history, and that this alone gave meaning to history:

History is a process with an author, who lies outside it, that is to say outside time. It had a beginning and will have an end, both of them determined by its author; and it is only in relation to what lies outside itself that it has a meaning. (Bossey Lecture, 38-39)

In 1954, the Rockefeller Foundation convened what it called the Conference on International Politics.⁷ It brought together in New York foreign policy experts, commentators, and scholars to study and discuss the state of international relations. Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau were included. Later in the same decade, the Foundation funded a similar effort in the United Kingdom, known as the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics which, in retrospect, is considered the birth of the English School of International Relations Theory.⁸ It

⁵ “[R]ealism ... understands how tenuous and tentative every form of social peace and justice is. ... It is because modern man has no faith which would make it possible for him to escape despair if he looked at the sad and tragic realities of human existence and human nature that he holds on so desperately to the illusion of the goodness of man.” (CPP, 39) Too often, the result is “cynicism, prompted by a disappointed idealism.” (*Id.*, 82) For Niebuhr as for Wight, Christian hope enables courageous realism and the avoidance of debilitating pessimism.

⁶ Perhaps this was because Niebuhr, unlike Butterfield and Wight, was not an academic historian or political theorist, but rather an ethicist and theologian offering commentary on history and political thought.

⁷ This is the conference mentioned in chapter 6, *supra*, which David Armitage calls the “high-water mark of an ethical approach to international affairs before the triumph of behaviouralist social science in the United States.” (Armitage, 25)

⁸ The best short history of the British Committee is Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School*, chapters 5 and 6. In addition, Kenneth Thompson, whose Ph.D. from the University of Chicago was supervised by Hans Morgenthau, was instrumental in both the U.S. Rockefeller project (during which he became an avowed admirer of Niebuhr) and Rockefeller’s underwriting of the British Committee. Thompson writes about it in *Schools of Thought in International Relations*, addressing Butterfield, Wight, and the British Committee at pp. 107-110.

was chaired initially by Herbert Butterfield and met for the first time in January 1959 at Peterhouse, Cambridge, where Butterfield was Master. Butterfield asked Wight to be co-chairman. At its first meeting, Wight presented a seminal essay, “Why Is There No International Theory?”⁹ He quickly became, along with Butterfield, the most influential member of the group, assuring his place as co-founder of the English School.

From the beginning of the British Committee, the continuing role of ethics in IR analysis was a significant issue, in part because American political scientists were increasingly distancing themselves from the moral perspective, a trend that would only accelerate with time. But this was not true of all American thinkers. Niebuhr, rooted in Christian thought, was a forceful and persistent advocate for moral reasoning and ethical judgment in politics, including international relations. Morgenthau, partly influenced by Niebuhr and partly by his own European training, was similarly disposed. For them, the analysis of politics was impossible without ethical judgment. Wight and Butterfield were strengthened by these prominent American allies, especially Niebuhr, whom Wight called the “patriarch” of the “school of American realists in political theory.” (*Diplomatic Investigations*, 120-21)

⁹ The essay was later published as the first chapter in *Diplomatic Investigations* (1966), edited by Butterfield and Wight.

Power Politics

Wight rejected the tide in political science in the U.S. in the 1960s and afterward which abandoned the humanist, interpretive study of international politics including the moral dimension, and which refashioned the field as a value-free empirically-based social science. His rejection was based both on disagreement with the methodology and on its abandonment of normative inquiry.

Starting in *Power Politics* (1946), his most hard-nosed and pure-realist work, Wight acknowledges the indispensability of values in understanding and weighing the significance of the conduct of nations. In the last chapter, entitled, “Beyond Power Politics,” he stakes out what is, for him, the “central question” of international politics: “how far powers can be said to have interests in common,” as well as the kind of interests those are and the extent to which they can be harmonized for the sake of international relationships. (*Id.*, 288) Natural law, the historic foundation of international law, contains the aspiration that conflicting interests may be harmonized through a common moral order:

It taught that man is a rational and social animal, that there is a moral order in the universe to which his rational nature bids him always and everywhere to conform, that the true interest of human societies therefore do not conflict, and that they are bound together by obligations of law and morality. This tradition was the source of international law ... [and] used to appeal to “the common standard of right prevailing throughout the Christian world.” (*Id.*, 290)¹⁰

Wight revered the aspirations of natural law, finding it both descriptive and prescriptive for human conduct at its best. Natural law, though now diminished in common acceptance, is not only the ground of international law; it is also the kernel for Wight’s own “rationalist” tradition

¹⁰ Wight does not make clear why he put the last phrase in quotation marks – whether he meant to emphasize it as his own formulation, or whether he was quoting another work (which he did not identify).

of IR theory which he outlined in the lectures that became his most fully-developed work, *International Theory*.¹¹

That Wight has not given up on the tradition of natural law is apparent in the same last chapter of *Power Politics* where he links natural law to “the tradition of an international community with a common standard of obligation and justice” – a tradition which “has not altogether disappeared” and which “is the main influence that has modified, and can yet modify, the operations of power politics, and [which] still gleams faintly in the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations.” (291)¹² Indeed, as this passage hints, Wight’s idea of international society was closely connected with, and meant to support and strengthen, what remains of “a common standard of obligation and justice.” This was, for him, the moral basis of modern international relations. In an unpublished manuscript kept with Wight’s papers at the British Library of Political and Economic Studies, he wrote:

The least evil society would be that with the strongest sense of the existence of a moral order in the universe, which is discernible by human reason, and from which flow binding obligations of morality and justice, irrespective of religious sanctions. One of the most prominent political expressions of a respect for Natural Law would be a tradition of truthfulness and good faith, and the subordination of expediency to principle in public affairs. (Quoted at Hall, 85)

¹¹ As for “rationalism” in Niebuhr’s thought, while the relationship between it and his ethics is complex, it is clear that for him as for Wight, rationality plays an important role in the human endeavor to make and apply moral judgments. “Perhaps,” Robin Lovin writes, “a Christian version of ethical rationalism provides the key to the critical and responsible attitude that Reinhold Niebuhr sought.” Lovin 1995, 79; *see generally*, “Realism and Rationalism,” *id.*, 79-89.

¹² The Preamble to the UN Charter reads as follows:

WE THE PEOPLES of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom; and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims;

Accordingly, our respective Governments . . . have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

Wight added in pencil in the margin, “Esp. in international relations.” (*Id.*)

Wight’s attachment to natural law did not negate his Augustinian understanding of human nature; it complemented it. Like Butterfield (and Niebuhr), Wight was a realist about politics because he appreciated the selfish nature of all humans, the corrupting effects of power, and the ubiquity of the desire to put one’s own interests above that of all others. These are constant features of the human landscape, and any realistic theory of international politics must take account of them. But they are not the only features: human aspirations can transcend human limitations. Natural law points to the side of human character that strives to align with an innate, God-given desire to live harmoniously in society with others and to do good in the company of fellow-travelers, for their sake as well as one’s own. Reinhold Niebuhr’s friend and colleague John C. Bennett defined “realism” as that social and political understanding which “avoids the illusions of both the optimists and the pessimists.” (Bennett, *Christian Realism*, x) This was the location of Martin Wight’s thought, as to human nature and the other elements of his political theory. As we shall see, the concept of international society recognizes both the limits and the aspirations of individuals – both Augustine and Aquinas, one might say (or, as Thomas Berg would say, both Niebuhr and Murray). St. Augustine is a constant reminder of the ego of men and of the limits to idealistic progress; St. Thomas reminds of the human capacity for justice despite the selfishness of the ego. Wight admired both thinkers and sought to balance their insights in developing his political theory.

Wight believed that international morality requires a self-conscious *society* of persons, represented as states but exceeding national borders, giving rise eventually to “international society” among states. He was not the first to say so. E.H. Carr had laid this out in *The Twenty Years’ War* (1939), at 146-47. Carr’s basic argument was that any social morality (whether of a

single state or several states in the international system) requires a *society* or a *community* as a foundation. As he put it, “the morality of group persons can only be social morality” and “social morality implies duty to fellow members of a community,” which in turn assumes a self-conscious community. (*Id.*, 146) As discussed in the previous chapter, this is Niebuhr’s point about the importance of community as the foundation for any system of law. Hans Morgenthau made the same point:

There is a profound and neglected truth hidden in Hobbes’s extreme dictum that the state creates morality as well as law and that there is neither morality nor law outside the state. ... For above the national societies there exists no international society so integrated as to be able to define for them the concrete meaning of justice or equality, as national societies do for their individual members. (Morgenthau 1951, 34)

Carr quotes T.H. Green with approval: “No individual can make a conscience for himself, he always needs a society to make it for him.”¹³

A community or society, then, is logically prior to morality, at least as a matter of practical morality with enforceable law-like norms. Carr then asks, is there an “international society” that might serve as the necessary basis for international social morality? He concludes that there is, though it is embryonic and underdeveloped:

... there is in fact a widespread assumption of the existence of a worldwide community of which states are the units and ... the conception of the moral obligations of states is closely bound up with this assumption. There is a world community for the reason (and for no other) that people talk, and within certain limits behave, as if there were a world community. (*Id.*, 147)

Carr did not further develop this point, but English School thinkers did, starting with Martin Wight. Carr’s analysis is consistent with the views of Wight, both in respect of the necessity of

¹³ *Id.*, 146-47, quoting T.H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1884), 351.

“society” as prerequisite of social morality, and of the factual conclusion that there is already a fledgling international society giving rise to at least a limited set of moral obligations.¹⁴

In *Power Politics*, Wight makes an important point about morality and its relationship to the security of nations. As a realist, he believes that morality will be an empty letter in the absence of at least some minimal level of national security for the nations involved. Because security requires power, international politics will therefore always be “power politics.” Nonetheless, morality is possible within power politics – but only to the extent that nations have accomplished an adequate margin of security. He puts it this way:

[M]orality in international politics is not simply a matter of civilized tradition, but is equally the result of security. If British policy in the nineteenth century showed in general perhaps a greater degree of enlightened self-interest than that of any other great power in modern history, it was because Britain then enjoyed perfect security. “We could afford the luxury of gentleness,” as Harold Nicolson has said, “because we were completely unafraid.” (*Power Politics*, 292)

Morality typically ranks after security as a national priority. If a nation’s security is strained or threatened, self-imposed moral restraints will weaken dramatically. Therefore, a power that seeks to act morally “should strive for a margin of security big enough to make a certain bias in favour of an ideal policy possible.” (*Id.*)¹⁵ Those states with an adequate margin of security are ordinarily those from whom moral conduct is most expected, and so an international society worthy of the name should strive to increase the security of nations within the society. With collectivities as with individuals, we justifiably expect more from the wealthy and powerful (the

¹⁴ Carr went on to observe that it would be “a dangerous illusion” to suppose that any ethic of international society is comparable to the thicker social morality that is possible within a single society and state. The world community falls short in two main respects, he thought: it fails to provide or practice a principle of equality comparable to what can be accomplished in a single state, and it fails in the principle that “the good of the whole” takes precedence over the good of the part. Wight would not disagree, but would add that people in the world community can choose to move closer to these conditions over time.

¹⁵ Wight is quoting with approval a passage from F.A. Voigt, *Unto Caesar* (London: Constable Publ. Co., 1938), 272-73.

“secure”) than from the poor and powerless who are insecure. The powerful have a margin of security that makes it relatively easier for them to choose to act morally.

A difficulty, however, as Wight and other theorists have pointed out, is that just as rich people rarely feel they have enough wealth, states almost never believe they are sufficiently secure, so morality suffers from security-seeking more than is justified; the scope for moral action is lessened, at least in the minds of the actors. This tendency to underestimate security – exacerbated by the political advantages of emphasizing external dangers – and the resulting undervaluing of moral restraint, is itself a point needing greater moral awareness and political critique. If security assessment and the morality-security tradeoff are to be honestly done, states should be judged, and should judge themselves, in accordance with the margin of security they actually enjoy, not what they claim to need.

Finally, Wight concludes *Power Politics* by noting that modern states, no longer speaking of the “Law of Nature,” now talk of “the Law of Common Material Interest,” meaning rising incomes and improved material welfare, with little regard for common moral obligations grounded in a divine being, in our common humanity, or in any other source. Admittedly, a sense of common moral purpose across national borders may be harder to accomplish than the improvement of material conditions. Nonetheless, he argues, “in the long run the idea of a common moral obligation is probably a more fruitful social doctrine than the idea of a common material interest” – even when the moral ideal is breached more than it is observed:

[M]ankind has always betrayed its obligations, but so long as it continues to acknowledge and believe in them, the crack is kept open through which civilization can creep. Powers will continue to seek security without reference to justice, and to pursue their vital interests irrespective of common interests, but in the fraction that they may be deflected lies the difference between the jungle and the traditions of Europe. (*Id.*, 293)

This is a powerful encomium to the power of ethical ideas, notwithstanding the fallen nature of man (in which Wight believed as firmly as Butterfield did). It is also a counsel against despair in the face of merely modest or intermittent progress, a needed reminder of the importance of the incremental margin between good and evil (the “crack ... through which civilization can creep”).

It is an echo of Niebuhr’s words written more than a decade earlier:

The common currency of the moral life is constituted of the “nicely calculated less and more” of the relatively good and the relatively evil. Human happiness in ordinary intercourse is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and little less freedom, between varying degrees of imaginative insight with which the self enters the life and understands the interests of the neighbor. (*Christian Ethics*, 62)

Western Values in International Relations

Timothy Dunne, in his influential history of the English School, has remarked:

Martin Wight can justly be regarded as the father of the English School not only for pioneering an interpretive approach to the history of international relations, but also for placing ethics at the centre of theoretical enquiry. (Dunne, 9)

Scott Thomas concurs:

[A]t a time when “social scientific” and “positivistic” methods were increasingly fashionable, particularly in the United States, the main questions that concerned [Wight] most were ethical and theological, and he saw the study of history and of international relations as one of the most important ways these kinds of questions could be examined. (Thomas 2001, 908)¹⁶

Although Martin Wight’s concern with the ethical aspects of international politics is present throughout his work (starting with *Power Politics* as discussed above), his two most concentrated reflections on the subject are found in *Diplomatic Investigations* (especially his essay on “Western Values”) and in *International Theory*. In both these works, Niebuhr’s direct influence

¹⁶ Thomas demonstrates the significant influence on Wight’s thinking by Christian thinkers representing an “alternative intellectual and scholarly tradition” from the secular mainstream, including Christopher Dawson, C.H. Dodd, T.S. Eliot, Jacques Ellul, Jacques Maritain, and Arnold Toynbee, as well as Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield.

and Wight's own independent agreement with Niebuhr's thought are apparent (although it is mostly impossible to separate the one from the other).

The earliest book produced by the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics – effectively the charter document of the English School – was a volume of essays published in 1966, co-edited by Butterfield and Wight, called *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*. It contains chapters by the co-editors as well as by Hedley Bull, the leading English School theorist of the next generation, Donald Mackinnon of the University of Cambridge Faculty of Divinity, and others. Wight opened the volume with his famous essay, “Why Is There No International Theory?” in which he thereupon set about creating one.

Later in the same volume, Wight published an even more influential piece, “Western Values in International Relations.” In this essay he digs deeply into the intellectual sources and thinkers of western political theory, including Niebuhr.¹⁷ He divides his exploration into four parts: international society; the maintenance of order; intervention; and international morality.

Wight's focus in the discussion of the last topic is “the place of the individual conscience in international politics, and the notion of ethical limits to political action.” (*Id.*, 120) In mapping the place of political ethics in international relations, Wight dismisses both the unalloyed application of personal morality and the undiluted dogma of *raison d'etat*. Wight notes that while the latter option is less-openly voiced today than formerly, it remains very much alive in practice. The former option (personal morality) is often asserted with cynical purpose, especially by politicians who are not in power and wish to condemn leaders whom they seek to replace. Alas, the public in a democracy is often an accessory to this offense, insisting on the pure

¹⁷ Wight discusses Niebuhr's thought on the relationship between order and justice as expressed in *Moral Man, The Children of Light*, and *Discerning the Signs of the Times*. *Diplomatic Investigations*, 108.

standard of individual morality without considering mitigating factors of national interest.

Noting wryly that “[t]he public is still the greatest of all sophists,” Wight observes:

The history of democratic government has as much evidence of enlightened governments hampered by the folly and ignorance of the public and the selfishness of vested interests, as it has of the plain people judging right on broad considerations of humanity and justice against narrow-minded governments. (*Id.*, 123)

Whatever the difficulties, it is fallacious to suppose that international political action is immune from ethical critique. Such immunity is a particular temptation in international affairs, because of the ultimate issues at stake, the paramountcy of national interest, the weaker identification with foreign persons, and the tendency for decision-making to be more concentrated and secret. Nonetheless, Wight argues, ethical inquiry must have a seat at the table where decisions are made.

Wight then makes two points, one general and embracing, the other more specific and elaborate. His general point is that, more important than the rightness of any specific ethical outcome is the commitment to employ an ethical critique and make an ethical evaluation that is at least partly independent of the interests involved in the particular decision. This is the point at which, for Wight, natural law can play an indispensable part, precisely because of its independent and universal nature. The “vitality of the natural-law ethic,” he argues, is not so much that it provides specific answers (it does not), but rather that it gives “encouragement to ordinary men to criticize their rulers,” and to rulers for examining themselves, according to standards that are not limited to political necessity or partisan perspectives. (*Id.*) Another aspect is that those who seek to adhere to a natural-law ethic are thus inspired, or they should be, to feel and to practice a certain humility in the face of the difficulty of applying high ethical principles to concrete political factors, themselves involving a balancing of competing goals and dangers. The exercise of practical wisdom is, by its nature, a humbling practice whose outcome is not a

“right answer” or “right policy” so much as a result that is the best to be done under all the circumstances.

Wight cites several leaders who exemplify the “vitality of the natural law ethic” in making significant moral and political judgments: Abraham Lincoln in the Second Inaugural Address, and in England, Prime Ministers Gladstone, Salisbury, and Churchill at various times. He sums up his general point by stating, “It might be enough to say of the natural-law ethic that it survives in an awareness of the moral significance and the moral context of all political action.” In other words, the most important effect of the natural-law ethic is to facilitate a moral accounting of political actions based on standards coming from outside the narrowly political, even if reasonable persons disagree (as they will) on the precise standards to be applied or the specific outcome of such an accounting.

Wight’s second point begins with the ironic observation that Greeks and Romans were relatively unthinking about the theory of international politics: “It is striking that the civilization which invented political philosophy and political science gave so little attention to the relations between states.” (*Id.*, 126) There were major developments later, however, particularly in early modern Europe starting with Machiavelli and the development of *raison d’etat* or *Realpolitik*, the effort to exempt kings and states from moral rules. Meanwhile, a framework for understanding both personal and political morality was developed in the high Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas, building on foundations laid by Aristotle and Augustine.

It was also the medieval and early modern periods that saw the cultivation of a “middle ground” between the application of individual ethical standards to states and their exemption altogether by virtue of *raison d’etat*. Medieval thinkers (perhaps picking up fragments of Roman ideas) developed the idea of morality *between* kingdoms, *i.e.*, the notion that political

leaders as stewards of the prince (or the people of a republic) and trustees of his or its present and future interests, owed a duty not only to those they represented, but also to others, starting with the representatives of foreign governments. Wight believes that this development was not accidental: because natural law had been so highly developed in medieval Christian thought, it was able to yield late medieval and early modern insights that formed the basis for a fitting international morality, culminating in the thought of Grotius. It was seen that these international duties were not just utilitarian practices but were moral duties, and therefore inconsistent with strict *raison d'etat*. But it was also seen that they were different in kind from those of personal morality:

Political morality is different from personal morality, as the moral duties of a trustee are different from those of one who acts on his own behalf. ... But political morality is equally different from *raison d'etat*, since it upholds the validity of the ethical in the realm of politics. (*Id.*, 128)¹⁸

Wight acknowledges that this “middle ground,” being a departure from the better-developed domain of personal ethics, always carries the risk (often realized in history) of descending into casuistry or of serving merely as a rationalization for naked assertions of power. But at its best – and he shows from history that there were examples of its best,

the alternative policy is both a true alternative and a positive one, attaining justice or magnanimity or self-control ... [and being examples of] restraint in the exercise of power, of refusal to exploit an advantage, [and of] the attainment of better relations. (*Id.*, 129)¹⁹

Finally, buttressing his natural-law arguments, Wight makes a pragmatic case for this “middle-ground” international morality. The case rests on certain factual “assumptions” –

¹⁸ This notion – that a key difference from personal morality is that political morality involves persons who are “trustees” of the interests of others – is essentially Niebuhr’s argument for a distinct political morality in *Moral Man* (*e.g.*, at 267), of which Wight was aware.

¹⁹ He cites as examples Wellington’s magnanimity toward the French at the end of the Napoleonic wars, Gladstone’s ceding of independence to the Transvaal at the end of the First Boer War, and Atlee’s support of independence to India.

assumptions whose validity, he says, require something of a leap of faith, for they “lie within the province of philosophy of history, or belief in Providence, wither it is not the purpose of this paper to pursue them.” (*Id.*, 131) There are three such assumptions: that appropriate moral standards can be applied to politics without undue risk of the extinction of the state or body politic, as feared by advocates of *Realpolitik*; that the fabric of society can be preserved and maintained without authorizing government to engage in immoral conduct for society’s protection; and finally that “the upholding of moral standards will in itself tend to strengthen the fabric of political life.” (*Id.*, 130-31)

As the foregoing illustrates, it was not Wight’s way to prescribe a system of ethical rules with descending levels of specificity or permitted deviations depending on predetermined principles. Rather, his approach involves an interpretive apprehension of experience and concentrates on the intricacies of the diplomatic process, the ethical commitments of political leaders, and the need for a delicate balance between national interest and national values. It is interpretive and synthetic rather than systematic. It bears methodological resemblance to “virtue ethics” in that the emphasis is less on rules of conduct than on the development, by persons acting in good faith, of deepened ethical sensitivities and of habituated commitments to the perceived requirements of a moral life. It is also a species of the ethics of responsibility, relying on the integrity of leaders’ focus on the good of the whole society and the long-term welfare of its citizens.²⁰

²⁰ For virtue ethics, see, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stephen Darwall, ed., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); Daniel C. Russell, *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013). Regarding Niebuhr’s relationship to virtue ethics, see Lovin 1995, 89-92. For ethics of responsibility, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken, 2007). Regarding Niebuhr’s relationship to responsibility as an ethical principle, see Lovin 1995, 93-97.

Wight was not a systematic ethical thinker, so he did not embrace these approaches explicitly; he may not even have been aware of these categories. Nonetheless, his emphasis on virtue in diplomats and political leaders, and his extolling of responsible statecraft and practical wisdom, place him within these realms of ethical thought, which in turn illuminate the nature of his arguments.²¹

The Three Traditions of *International Theory*

Wight's mature thought is reflected in his most important book, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*. Although it was not published until 1991, almost 20 years after his death (having been compiled and edited by Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter), it is based on lectures he first delivered in 1957 as a visiting professor at the University of Chicago (at Hans Morgenthau's invitation), then developed over a number of years at the London School of Economics.

The framework of the lectures and of the book is Wight's division of IR theoretical traditions into three types, which he explores in their various interrelationships:

Realism (identified with Machiavelli and Hobbes), which emphasizes the fears and dangers of international anarchy, power politics among nations, concern for the supreme national interest in survival, and frequent conflict. Wight asserts that "everyone is a Realist nowadays" (15), meaning that realism is the starting point for every IR theory (from which there are additions, subtractions, and modifications); and everyone acknowledges that nations exist in a self-help system with no superior authority, with conflict being an ever-present danger. Realism is the baseline for the international system, both descriptively and normatively, and the other theories define themselves in relation to realism. However, Wight notes, unrelieved realism easily slides into amoral cynicism about international affairs, dismissing ethical concerns as marginal and

²¹ The same could be said of Butterfield. Wight's approach to Christian ethics and international statecraft was continuous with that of his mentor, as set forth by Coll in *The Wisdom of Statecraft*.

viewing international institutions as little more than tools for the great powers. The other traditions rightly criticize realism for its too-extreme conclusions. Thus, realists are too pessimistic, they exaggerate the necessary effects of anarchy, power politics, and conflict, and they fail to allow for the capacity to mitigate such extremes. Humans are demonstrably capable of better than a war of all against all – some degree of international harmony is not only desirable but possible. Realists, while not denying the desirability of harmony, tend to view its pursuit as largely fruitless, and so de-emphasize it. Peace, for them, is the interlude between the last war and the inevitable next one.

At the other extreme, **revolutionism (or idealism)** (which he identifies with both Kant and Marx, among others) emphasizes the commonality of all humanity and infers from this universality the need for and possibility of revolutionary change aimed at transforming the international community – understood as a cosmopolitan community of persons rather than of states. It is a broad tradition that, in Wight’s conception, seems defined more by action than by theory. Thus, what unites Kant and Marx with Calvin, Rousseau, Hitler and Stalin (all “revolutionists”) is obviously not a single vision of what humankind can become, but rather a strong vision that bypasses states and focuses on transformed individuals, coupled with a resolute determination to accomplish the vision and transform the individuals. For some (such as Marx, Hitler and Stalin), violent means may be necessary and justified to accomplish the sought-for state of society. For others, such as Kant, coercion is unacceptable, but the vision retains nonetheless the plausibility of its persuasiveness.

Rationalism (or Grotianism) (identified with Locke and Grotius). The median tradition between the other two, and the tradition with which Wight himself finally identifies (though he is

coy about saying so), he calls “rationalism” (and sometimes “Grotianism”).²² Because it closely approximates Wight’s outlook, I will explore it most fully. Before doing so, however, it is important to note that Wight did not completely reject any of the three traditions. He thought that no one of them has a monopoly on wisdom and that each represents a valuable way of viewing IR theory. He was insistent that the best approach to understanding and evaluating the complex issues of international relations consists of a dialogue among the three traditions in which each body of work serves (among other things) as a restraint or check on the others, lest any one of them purport to arrogate to itself the entire field of knowledge to the exclusion of the others. So far as I can tell, Wight is the most explicit among international theorists in making this key epistemological point; that is, in stressing the importance of a dialectical relationship among all the major theories, even if one believes that one particular approach is better than the others.

Wight’s three-part typology was a novel and influential contribution to IR theory.²³ As was touched upon in a previous chapter, political theorists before Wight had thought in binary terms

²² Wight uses “rationalism” in a sense that is distinct to his own theory, which must not be confused with various other uses of the term. Wight’s rationalism derives from an Enlightenment view of reason (exemplified by Grotius) as a valuable guide to all deliberative goal-setting and decision-making: more than merely instrumental reason, though not necessarily sufficient for ultimate values (Wight leaves this latter question open). The term is often used differently by other thinkers. Thus, for example, some American IR theorists use “rationalist” as a shorthand for proponents of rational choice theory, which is quite different from Wight’s usage. See, e.g., Wendt, 126. Reinhold Niebuhr, referring in the quote *infra* to those who are “rationalistic in method and idealistic in temper,” is using the term differently still. Niebuhr means that idealists are able to deduce idealism from rational premises only because they isolate their premises from real-world experience taught by history. Niebuhr, like Wight, values “the historical and realistic” approach to international politics. He would generally agree with the “rationalism” that Wight has in mind, though he would probably not call it “rationalism.” See also, discussion below of Wight’s “rationalism” as involving an ethical component, which sharply distinguishes it from the amoral realism that he calls simply “realism.”

²³ The existence of this tradition midway between the more extreme points eventually had an effect on realism, or at least on some realists, pulling them somewhat toward the center and away from more extreme statements, even as they remained distant from Wight’s term “rationalism” and his vision of “international society.” The pure realist view is that “international society” is nothing more than the system of international institutions and arrangements that happen to suit the interests of the great powers for now; when they no longer serve those interests, they will be changed or abandoned. In contrast, the institutions and arrangements of Wight’s international society have been incorporated into the perceived national-interest structure of the great powers, who consequently are willing to

of “realism” versus “idealism” or “utopianism.” Niebuhr also used this binary division from time to time:

[It] is possible to discern two general types of approach to the problems of international politics. One might be defined as the historical and realistic school of politics. The other is rationalistic in method and idealistic in temper. (“Plans for World Reorganization,” *Christianity and Crisis*, vol. 2, 3-4 (Oct. 19, 1942); *On Politics*, 244)²⁴

This same dual typology was used by the interwar realist E.H. Carr (see especially, chap. 2, “Utopia and Reality,” in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*). Carr identified the difference between the two political paradigms as akin to the antithesis of free will and determinism:

The utopian is necessarily voluntarist: he believes in the possibility of more or less radically rejecting reality, and substituting his utopia for it by an act of will. The realist analyses a predetermined course of development which he is powerless to change.

[Thus,] [t]he utopian makes political theory a norm to which political practice ought to conform. The realist regards political theory as a sort of codification of political practice. (*Crisis*, 12, 13)

For Carr and many others, the utopian proceeds from vision to reality in order to radically change the latter, believing it can be done; the realist, believing it cannot be done, proceeds from reality to theory in order to comprehend and analyze the former. Wight’s middle position is closer to the latter; but he rejects the fatalism of “hard” realists, believing that realists can also be visionaries, so long as their feet are on the ground and their sights are set no higher than what is prudently attainable within the foreseeable future. More than any other single thinker, Wight managed to undercut the simple binary division of “realist” and “idealist” and to propose the possibility of a realist with a sense of ideals, as it were. While Wight called this middle position

sacrifice at least some of their other interests in order to preserve and sustain international society. This will be further discussed in Part III.

²⁴ As noted earlier, Niebuhr often equated idealism or utopianism with “liberalism,” particularly when he was attacking it.

“rationalism,” Hedley Bull in the next generation tended to call it “Grotianism” and would take it further in his writings.

Another way to think of Wight’s position is as a kind of “bounded idealism” (my term). He regards political theory as derivative from political practice and the reading of history, but does not believe that politics as it is typically practiced is necessarily the limit of what can be accomplished. Progress is far from inevitable, but it is possible. His is a balanced view that lives in some tension with the other two traditions, and indeed within itself. Wight reserves a place for aspiration in international society, which keeps ethics central to his theory. And he believes that, within realistic limits, aspirations can be realized, which leads to his hopes for a progressively deepening and widening “international society.”

Wight never loses sight of the fact that humans are deeply-flawed moral creatures (“fallen,” as he is not embarrassed to say). He believes that power magnifies the tendency to selfishness and the capacity for wickedness, that there are limits to what can be done to alter power arrangements, and therefore that humility in the face of hard reality must be married to pragmatic, patient plans for incremental improvements in the international system with the aim of peace and a more just order. The approach is ameliorative except in those (rare) times and places when it is revolutionary. In all these respects, the location of Wight’s thought is remarkably compatible with Niebuhr’s.

In contrast to Thomas Hobbes’ ideas, Wight’s rationalism looks to John Locke’s definition of the state of nature: “Men living together according to reason without a common superior on earth.” (*Id.*, 13, quoting *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, chap. 2) In Locke’s view and Wight’s, human nature has the capability to discern by reason greater possibilities than mere physical survival, including a recognition of the basic equality of all humans, who are “all the

Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker” as Locke put it; and to perceive as well the need for and advantages of social cooperation for the preservation and betterment of all:

Every one as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his Station wilfully; so by the like reason when his own Preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of Mankind, and may not unless it be to do Justice on an Offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the Preservation of the Life, the Liberty, Health, Limb or Goods of another.²⁵

If this is true of humans in the state of nature, Wight suggests, it should be at least as true of nations in the international state of anarchy.

Wight elaborates his understanding of “rationalism” throughout the chapters of *International Theory*; but his starting point, which is announced early, is the classical notion of reason as a source of knowledge of ends, a source which is “superior to and independent of sense perceptions.” (*International Theory*, 13) He does not call it “the” source of knowledge, but rather “a” source.²⁶ He contrasts it to “sensationalism” or empiricism in the understanding of Locke and Hume; and also contrasts it to “what is now its popular sense, which is much closer to ... empiricism,” and which is “the sense illustrated by the Mills, father and son: belief in accordance with the evidence, and understanding of one’s real interest.”

Wight calls rationalism the “broad middle road of European thinking,” running between cynical realism and utopian idealism. (*Id.*, 14) Being broad like a highway, “its edges are difficult to discern” and sometimes it seems to narrow disconcertingly. Employing a wonderfully amusing image of a traveler proceeding down the road peering into the distance to locate rationalist thinkers, Wight concedes that, because of their inconsistent or ambiguous

²⁵ John Locke, *Second Treatise*; both quotes are from Peter Laslett, ed., *Locke: Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 271.

²⁶ This distinction is important in comparing Wight’s thought to that of Augustine and Niebuhr, both of whom consider reason a deeply-flawed tool – but not useless – for the acquisition of knowledge of ends; superior to sense perception but not the main source. Wight believes, as they do, in revealed truth as an independent source of knowledge of ends. However, to a greater degree than Augustine or Niebuhr would allow, Wight credits reason with the ability to grasp the genuine truths of natural law as reflective of human ends. See below for further discussion of this last point on natural law.

positions, such thinkers can be hard to pick out. “Hamilton, for instance, seems to be on the road, but look again and he is to be found well away from it, on the turf over towards the marshes.” Burke seems to be on the broad middle road most of the time, “but his movements are erratic.” Kant is mostly on it, “but he shows a disquieting tendency to dart away ... towards the crags and precipices.” Next on the road of political thought, “there looms up a pocket of fog called Hegel” whose position is almost impenetrable and whose writings often hopelessly obscure. Tocqueville and Lincoln are pretty clearly on the road, as are Gladstone and, probably, Wilson. The difficulty of making out exactly who is on and off this middle path demonstrates, he says, how the three traditions overlap, sometimes even in the mind of a single thinker, and thus cannot be treated as neat, mutually exclusive categories. (*Id.*, 15)

In subsequent chapters of *International Theory*, Wight describes the rationalist approach on a number of issues, including war, national power and interest, balance of power, diplomacy, and international society itself. He also devotes an important chapter to the ethical content of rationalism, to which I now turn.

Ethics in *International Theory*

Wight is an Augustinian realist, especially in his views of human nature, sin and selfishness, grace and hope. His student Hedley Bull reflected on this aspect of Wight’s worldview:

In the Christian attitude toward the march of history, he thought, two attitudes should go hand in hand: on the one hand, the rejection of secular optimism; on the other hand, the acceptance of theological hope. “Hope,” as he once put it, “is not a political virtue; it is a theological virtue.” In his 1948 article in the *Ecumenical Review* he attacks the Pelagian belief that “we are on the whole well-meaning people doing our best, who will somehow muddle through,” together with secular optimism, “the belief that because we are well-meaning and doing our best, things will therefore tend to come right; or (for optimism sidesteps subtly into fatalism) that what does happen will be for the best anyway.” Neither of these beliefs, he says is Christian. “We are not well-meaning people doing our best; we are miserable sinners, living under judgment, with a heritage of sin to expiate ... We will not somehow muddle through; if we ... cast ourselves upon God’s mercy we have the promise that we shall be saved – a totally different thing,

which carries no assurance of muddling through in this world. (Bull, "Introduction: Martin Wight and the Study of International Relations," in Wight, *Systems of States*, 11-12. The reference to Wight's *Ecumenical Review* essay is to "The Church, Russia and the West," *Ecumenical Review*, vol. 1 (Aut. 1948))

His realism also showed in his matter-of-fact recognition of the primacy of power, its acquisition and maintenance, as a central organizing phenomenon for the study of international politics. However, he sharply distinguishes himself and his rationalism from "pure" or "hard" realism in a number of respects, of which perhaps the most basic is the central role he assigns to ethics. He gives realists little credit for considering ethics. Depending on whom he had in mind as twentieth-century "realists," this would have been unfair to Morgenthau and Niebuhr, and even to Thucydides, Hobbes and Machiavelli (in the *Discourses*), all of whose political thought, as I have shown, included an explicitly ethical dimension. It appears that he was focusing on Machiavelli in *The Prince*, on Luther's "doctrine of justification by faith [which] maintains the separation of religion from ethics," and on Augustine's sharp "antinomy" between the two cities which became, Wight believes, a source for the fatal separation of ethics from politics. (*International Theory*, 245)²⁷ In any event, he is correct that realism can easily slide into moral-free *realpolitik*, as it has done in the minds and actions of many.

When Wight turns to the task of describing rationalism, his "broad middle road" of political thought (essentially, realism with an ethical component), he lays out two observations that could have been penned by Niebuhr. First, man is a complex creature who lives in tension between the two aspects of his makeup: the sinful, egotistical self, and the person who experiences his own self-transcendence and values social ties and the love of others. Human selfishness requires that

²⁷ As for Augustine's two cities, Wight acknowledges that the subsequent use of this trope to cause or deepen an antinomy between ethics and politics may have been a misreading of Augustine himself, for he notes that "Augustine reconciled the antinomy through the fundamental unity of Christian ethics: through the Church the virtues of the city of God flowed back into the organism of temporal society." (*Id.*) He blames Luther (among others) for this, as he also criticizes Luther for going beyond the pessimism of Machiavelli. Niebuhr, of course, was also critical of Luther on similar grounds.

law and politics establish boundaries and prohibitions for the protection of persons and societies; the human capacity for self-transcendence, on the other hand, motivates toward a vision of a good, or at least a better, society. Second, ethical evaluation requires a clear distinction between personal life which involves “the order of charity (love)” and politics which is in “the order of justice.” Justice (which, he notes, is different from love and does not involve self-sacrifice) is the ultimate ethical standard for political leaders, who are charged with acting for citizens and entrusted with their lives and interests, (*Id.*, 241-42) Although he does not cite Niebuhr, these are core themes and characteristic language from Niebuhr’s writings.

Wight echoes other Niebuhrian themes as well. First, what Niebuhr recognized as the importance of an “impossible” ethical ideal in a non-ideal world, Wight similarly holds up as a necessity:

Ideals are never realized, but should be striven for; the fundamentals wherein we believe will not be carried out, but it is necessary to affirm them: here is the moral tension within which Rationalist statecraft is conducted. (The mode of all statecraft and political action is compromise. Politics is the art of the possible) (*Id.*, 243)

Precisely because politics can accomplish only what is possible, Wight stresses that political choices are rarely between good and evil, and that characterizing issues in such a stark way is a dangerous distortion in both ethics and politics. Political choices are between more evil and less evil, and therein lies the range of ethical obligation. In support of the “doctrine of the lesser evil,” Wight cites Edmund Burke’s *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (“It is no inconsiderable part of wisdom, to know how much of an evil ought to be tolerated”), and the Roman Catholic papacy, which he calls, “the most consistent exponent of the doctrine of the lesser evil in international history.” (*Id.*, 243-44)²⁸

²⁸ In support of his assertion about the papacy, Wight cites Pope Pius XI’s Lateran treaty of 1929 with Mussolini signing away the temporal states of the church, Pius VII’s defense of his *concordat* of 1801 with Napoleon, and Pope Paul V’s justification of his policy of compromise with the Catholic power of Venice in 1605-07. (*Id.*, 244)

Relatedly, he makes a point emphasized in his “Western Values” essay, namely that political judgments are made amidst conflicting interests and principles, ethical as well as political. The principles of ethics are “disquietingly protean” making them extremely difficult to apply on a consistent and principled basis, much less to balance with political interests. Prudence is thus the cardinal virtue in international politics, although difficult to teach in advance or accurately measure except in hindsight. When done well, however, practical wisdom as “statecraft” incorporates within itself a strong element of “soulcraft,” which focuses on the greater good and the longer term. (*Id.*, 244)

Natural Law and International Law

It is apparent from what I have written above that Wight greatly valued natural law both as the foundation of international law and, if properly understood, for its ability to take into account the mixed nature of human character in formulating a framework for universal (or at least “Western”) moral-political discourse. The foundational idea that the law of nations is an expression of the law of nature and derives its initial authority from it is attributed first to Grotius (*The Rights of War and Peace*), then to Pufendorf (*Of the Law of Nature and Nations*) and Vattel (*The Law of Nations*). Grotius is, for Wight, the seminal thinker. It was Grotius who planted the seed for the international society as a system of states bound together practically by shared interests and morally by shared ethical principles regarded as law.

I have already discussed a number of ways in which Wight built his own “rationalist” international theory on natural law. It was partly because of his regard for natural law as an enduring guide to political-ethical judgment that he valued the application of practical wisdom in the arts of diplomacy and the evolution of statecraft. In contrast to Niebuhr, Wight found in natural law a flexible instrument for application to varying and novel situations in international

life, because its norms as embodied in the law of nations are of general application and offer a framework for approaching problems in a manner accessible to all reasoning humans.

As Wight argued in the “Western Values” essay, political ethics is its own gray area, distinct from individual morality yet not exempt from morality; subject to its own, particularized ethical considerations and constraints. Judgment is difficult in politics, and the uncertainty is compounded in international politics where national survival is often seen to be at issue. Still, he contends, judgments can and must be made, and they must be made in accordance with some moral standards and procedures. The best foundation for making them is natural law, which he calls “the soil out of which” universal moral ideas have grown. (*Diplomatic Investigations*, 123)

For Wight as for Niebuhr, morality has an objective basis apart from positive law or negotiated treaties; but for Wight more than Niebuhr natural law forms part of that objective basis. He makes it clear that natural law as he conceives it is a species of moral realism, and he sometimes equates the two concepts:

This view [the conviction of a higher law] . . . supposes moral realism, realism in the classical or philosophical, not the modern or political sense. That is, the doctrine that goodness, oughtness and value, the moral norms, are grounded in nature, independently of human interest and opinion, that they are existential categories corresponding with the data of moral experience. Moral realism in politics means the doctrine of natural law . . . (*Id.*, 100)²⁹

That Wight’s international rationalism is grounded in natural law he makes clear in his earliest discussion of it in *International Theory*:

To call this tradition Rationalist is to associate it with the element of reason contained in the conception of natural law. The belief in natural law is a belief in a cosmic, moral constitution appropriate to all created things including mankind; a system of eternal and immutable principles radiating from a source that transcends earthly power (either God or nature). But it is also a belief that man and woman has some inherent correspondence with this law, some inherent response to it, because of his or her possessing a rational faculty. Reason means the capacity to know this natural law and

²⁹ Wight goes on to say that the term “natural law” has become so “soiled by verbal battles” that it would probably be better to speak of “moral realism” instead. (*Id.*)

the obligations it imposes; this law (of justice) is “written in his heart.” [Romans 2:15] Men and women in essence are rational creatures, not merely sentient beings. Reason is the reflection of the divine light in us: “*Ratio est radius divini luminis.*” This is the justification for using the word Rationalist in this special sense in connection with international theory. (*Id.*, 14)

Wight points out that natural law is removed from the immediate political turmoil, which makes it uniquely useful in political analysis because it invokes a standard that is extrinsic to the political issue being argued and to the interests of the partisans. Because natural law is an independent source of judgment which, at its best, calls the participants back from the specific fray to a calmer place of reflection, it can be a resource for resisting the temptation to cover one’s purely self-interested stance with a moral gloss. Wight seems to have in mind something like Niebuhr’s dialectical use of reason discussed in the last chapter, in which (for Wight) natural law principles engage in a disciplined, critical dialogue with concrete political responsibilities, without either the moral principles or the political realities dominating the other.

The Importance of Grotius

In *International Theory*, Wight said, “The fundamental problem of politics is the justification of power,” an insight he attributes to Grotius, who observed in the *Prolegomena to Rights of War and Peace* (1625) that “power divorced from justice can no longer command assent.” (pp. 98-99) Niebuhr would have agreed (despite his neglect of Grotius) because for him as for Wight, only a moral justification can suffice as a justification for power. Ethics is thus inescapably central to politics, and justice is its ultimate standard. Because politics, by its very nature, involves the power of one person over another, it cannot be exercised without a moral justification grounded in justice.

Because Wight’s focus is on relations among nations, his starting point for the application of natural law is Grotius (1583-1645). Grotius is often called the father of international law, which

he certainly was; Wight at times also calls him the father of natural law, which he was not unless one ignores Aquinas and the Stoics. Grotius was, in any event, the father of moral realism and natural law *as indispensable foundation stones of international law and politics*, as he was the most influential proponent of the applicability of natural law to nations. Martin Wight revered Grotius because Wight considered international law to be a major pillar of international society, and natural law (as an expression of moral realism) to be its philosophical foundation. He cites *The Rights of War and Peace* frequently in his writings, especially the germinal ideas in the Prolegomena to the 1625 edition.

In the Prolegomena, having in earlier writings grounded natural law in God, Grotius now places it in nature itself (acknowledging God as author of nature). This law is a “dictate of right reason” (as Thomas Hobbes would later echo) which teaches right and wrong to all humans who choose to consult it, and teaches by principles accessible to reason and which are “clear and self-evident.” (*Id.*, §39) Humans, like other animals, care about their self-interest, but “in the case of men” alone there is also a concern for society, that is, “some internal principle, which is associated with qualities belonging not to all animals but to human nature alone.” This principle is a “care for society in accordance with the human intellect,” a “social instinct,” and it is “the source of *ius*, properly so called.” (*Id.*, §§ 8, 9)

Grotius declares that “human nature itself is the mother of natural law, as it drives us to seek a common society.” (*Id.*, §16) This was intended by nature’s God:

[T]he author of nature willed that as individuals we should be weak and in need of many things if we are to lead a good life, in order that we should be all the more impelled into living in society. (*Id.*)

Yet, even if there were no God, Grotius writes in one of the most famous sentences ever penned, our nature would still teach us all of this:

What I have just said would be relevant even if we were to suppose [*etiamsi daremus*] (what we cannot suppose without the greatest wickedness) that there is no God, or that human affairs are of no concern to him. (*Id.*)

Thus, natural law “necessarily derives from intrinsic principles of a human being,” although “it can also justly be attributed to God, since he willed that there should be such principles in us.” (*Id.*, §12)

Finally, and of particular importance to Wight, Grotius was the first to apply natural-law thinking to international relations. Quite apart from treaties or other “positive international law” (as we now call it), and similar to the situation within states, there “seem actually to be laws between states” which take account of the needful relations between them. “This is what is termed ‘the law of nature,’” and

just as on his own account a citizen is not irrational who obeys the civil law of his state, even though doing so may require the citizen to forego some personal benefit, so a nation is not irrational if it does not pursue its own interest at the expense of the common laws of nations. The reasoning is the same in each case: a citizen who breaks the civil law for the sake of some immediate interest will thereby undermine his own and his descendants’ permanent interests, and a nation which violates the laws of nature and nations will have renounced its right subsequently to live in peace. (*Id.*, §§ 17, 18)

It is clear from even this brief summary – touching on natural law as international law, on the innate sociality of humans, and on the “rationality” of observing natural laws as part of a nation’s “permanent interests” even when obedience cuts against less permanent interests – why Wight saw in the teachings of Grotius the seeds of his own “international society.”

I referred earlier to Wight’s laudatory appraisal of natural law in the last chapter of *Power Politics*. Long before the publication of *International Theory* he had placed the moral realism of natural law at the heart of IR study as he conceived it, even while regretting its declining importance in modern study. Natural law is, or could be, he thought, a major resource for “an

international community with a common standard of obligation and justice” (*Power Politics*, 291), a goal toward which his concept of international society was aimed.

To be sure, as Wight acknowledges, natural law carries one only so far: there is an inherent generality in its principles and consequent vagueness about their application in specific cases. If the strength of natural law is its universal accessibility and appeal, its weakness is its non-specificity and vulnerability to conflicting interpretations. This is part of what troubled Niebuhr, because he saw that this vagueness lent itself to manipulation. Wight saw this too but believed that it was outweighed by the ontological strength and universality of natural law:

The [criticism] can be answered by challenging the way the objections are formulated: too vague, too hard, for what? . . . [Natural law] does not claim utility. It is a basic ethical category, founded on ontological principles; it makes a statement about reality, about the moral cosmos. . . . If it seems vague, it is only because it offers general principles whose details must be filled in by the infinite variety of concrete political experience. (*International Theory*, 102)

He then quotes Leo Strauss, “There is a universally valid hierarchy of ends, but there are no universally valid rules of action.” (*Id.*)³⁰ Again, Wight insists, the verities of moral realism must be always in fruitful dialogue with the particularities of political realism.

In a display of his Grotian and Lockean orientation, Wight argues that natural law is the foundation not only of international law but also of international political theory. Thus, despite the sovereignty of competing states and the absence of an overarching worldwide order or enforcement authority, we do not have pure anarchy because “prior to all political organization there still exists law, based on reason and the nature of man as a social being,” evidenced chiefly by custom (including what international lawyers call “customary law”). (*Id.*, 234) As in Locke’s state of nature, there is not complete anarchy insofar as humans recognize the mutuality of their interests and commonality of their reason as expressed in natural law, which teaches the

³⁰ Quoting Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 162.

need for sociality and cooperation. The chief evidence of the existence and content of this law are the norms of customary international law and written treaties which instantiate settled understandings. Thus, despite the fact that “[n]atural law has been widely abandoned and discredited in its ancient form,” the structure of international jurisprudence continues to reflect its influence. (*Id.*) The authority of custom and the writings of jurists about custom, as well as the emphasis on “the usages of civilized nations,” testify to the faith of international actors in an underlying body of common principles which, upon reflection, can yield common principles acceptable to all, or which are at least contestable by means of shared values. (*Id.*) Wight states:

[T]his body of custom and existing practice, which is international law, does reflect and derive its authority from the recognition of ... a law behind the law. The element of *jus gentium* has come to predominate over that of *lex naturae*, but the recognition of a law behind the law remains: there are fundamental or natural norms, even though the way in which they are conceived, and the nature of the appeal to them, may change. (*Id.*)

This is the prodigious heritage of Grotius on which Wight constructs his role for international law rooted in natural law.

Wight and Niebuhr on Natural Law

It is apparent that Wight’s reverence for and reliance on natural law is much greater than Niebuhr’s, and his skepticism is less, so their overall evaluation of it differs. Yet, the disharmony is not so great as it may appear. The two thinkers were viewing natural law in very different historical contexts, drawing on different sources for its teaching, and putting it to different uses. When those differences are taken into account, the apparent disharmony greatly diminishes.

Niebuhr was a Protestant theologian who focused on Catholic natural law since Aquinas; he was suspicious of the uses and abuses to which it was subject, based on historical evidence. He was critical of its rigidity in the hands of the Church and of its reification of past values and

outworn political and economic structures. As noted earlier, he was disgusted by the natural-law reasoning that led to the ban on artificial birth control in *Humanae Vitae*. In the context of international politics, Niebuhr was ambivalent. He was dismissive of just-war theory, considering it too easily manipulable to provide reliable standards, either *ad bellum* or *in bello*; yet he defended the value of natural law against the Lutheran position that reason was so corrupt as to be incapable of yielding norms of natural law. While he would not have been comfortable with Wight's statement that "reason is the reflection of the divine light in us," he endorsed Calvin's teaching that the fall of man did not wholly efface the divine image from the human heart. Thus, traces of the divine image remain and these are capable of responding to the divinely-ordained nature of things.

Wight, on the other hand, had little interest in just-war doctrine or in theological issues separating the Catholic Church from the Reformers. He was not writing for religious readers but for IR thinkers and practitioners. He identified natural law not with the Church but with the modern international-law tradition initiated by Grotius (a liberal Dutch Protestant), from whom he believes it has developed into a flexible tool for reasoning on international custom and morality. Wight (like Niebuhr) did not believe in or hope for a world government, but he valued the progress made in establishing morally-authoritative international norms. He saw natural law as deserving significant credit for this progress, on which subsequent generations can continue to build.

For an avowedly Christian thinker like Wight who knew he was writing for a political audience that was less and less influenced by Christian thought, Grotian natural law may have represented a useful "bridge" between Christian and secular thought. Niebuhr did not need natural law as a bridge to the secular world. Writing for an American audience that was still

widely conversant with the Bible, Niebuhr called on the Hebrew prophets to form the backbone of his political ethics and theology. He was less impressed by and less focused on the accomplishments of international law and of the Grotian presentation of natural law. He concentrated on the responsibilities and dangers of the great powers, particularly his own country, and on the chief issues dividing western values from those of Hitler and later the U.S.S.R. Neither natural law nor international law figured so prominently for him as the prophetic wisdom of the Old Testament.

Thus, although Niebuhr was much less attentive to the role of natural law in international politics than Wight was, this does not preclude the uses made of it by Wight. I doubt that Niebuhr, looking at it from Wight's point of view, concentrating on the birth of the law of nations out of the laws of nature, would have been troubled by the valuation and uses of natural law made by Wight. And he would have been pleased, I think, to see the way in which Wight, as a Christian political thinker, marshalled the resources of natural law in service of strengthened shared norms supporting international society, which was Wight's purpose throughout his career.

**Part Three:
International Society**

**Chapter 9
Reinhold Niebuhr and World Community**

Justice and World Community

In a three-page section called, “Justice and World Community” at the end of chapter 9, volume II of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr concisely assesses the prospects of world community. (ND-II, 284-286) First, he reprises his core realist assumptions about how nations and national leaders work. The international sphere is one of chronic disorder, indeed anarchy, which must be tamed to whatever degree is possible if human life is to enjoy any measure of security and stability. World government being neither possible nor desirable, as he argued at length in a later book,¹ man’s only hope is in “enlarging the human community so that the principle of order and justice will govern the international as well as the national community.” (*Id.*, 285) This hope is realistic if humans are willing to shoulder the “new and compelling task” that it demands. It is important to realize that one’s sinful nature is offset by our God-given freedom to pursue and to accomplish “the indeterminate possibilities of good in history.” (*Id.*)

We must never overlook or underrate, however – especially as regards politics and government – the abiding power of power, its hold on the minds of leaders and peoples, and its status as the ultimate determinant of nations’ perceived security and therefore of their actions in relation to each other. The idealists, who imagine a new world order which can substantially

¹ *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, Chap. 2, “The Illusion of World Government.”

overcome the pull of power and the inherent shortcomings of human nature and provincial limitations of national loyalties, are wrong. In the real world, order requires the “hegemony of the stronger powers” (*id.*) who, for better and worse, have long determined the course of peace and war. Indeed, “only the preponderant power of the great nations can be an adequate core of authority for a minimal world order.” (*Children*, 177) This fact must be accepted as “inevitable,” as must the fact that it carries with it the constant danger of big-power imperialism, which is “the collective expression of the sinful will-to-power which characterizes all human existence.” (*CPP*, 25)²

The only way to overcome this danger of imperial hegemony by the stronger states is “by arming all nations great and small with constitutional power to resist the exactions of dominant power.” (*ND-II*, 285) This “constitutional power to resist” is more than international law or norms; it requires actual countervailing power, power balanced by power. Niebuhr agrees with Montesquieu, “So that one cannot abuse power, power must check power by the arrangement of things.” (*The Spirit of the Laws*, XI.4, 155) Effective resistance to power must include countervailing power, for this is “implied in the idea of constitutional justice,” and is a precondition for attaining any significant measure of international justice. (*ND-II*, 285)

The necessity of power checking power if hegemony or tyranny is to be restrained is a persistent theme of Niebuhr’s writing. It grew in part from his early experience as a pastor in Detroit observing and dealing with the fraught labor relations between workers and the auto companies. He later generalized power balancing into a principle for all the patterns of human community, referring to it repeatedly in *Nature and Destiny* and other works. In *Children of Light*, Niebuhr writes:

² Niebuhr’s focus of responsibility and hope on the “great powers” is consistent with the perennial view of realist thinkers, as discussed above in chapter 6 in the section entitled, “An Overview of Realism.”

For even the most perfectly organized society must seek for a decent equilibrium of the vitalities and forces under its organization. If this is not done, strong disproportions of power develop; and wherever power is inordinate, injustice results. (*Children*, 174)

In *Christianity and Power Politics*, Niebuhr reiterates that a balance of power is necessary not only for order, but for justice:

Justice is basically dependent on a balance of power. Whenever an individual or a group or a nation possesses undue power, and whenever this power is not checked by the possibility of criticizing and resisting it, it grows inordinate. The equilibrium of power upon which every structure of justice rests would degenerate into anarchy but for the organizing center which controls it. (*CPP*, 26)

Later in the same work, Niebuhr states categorically, “there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation.” (*Id.*, 104) In Niebuhr’s mind, a balance of power is prerequisite to justice in any conceivable system. This is because the core of justice, as Aristotle taught, is equality; and inequality – including undue or unjustified inequalities of power – is a driver of injustice, as Amos taught. Gross inequalities of power predictably lead to gross injustices. Earlier in chapter 9 of *Nature and Destiny II*, Niebuhr notes, “[a]ll communities ... are governed by power,” as manifest in two forms: the central coercive power of the state and the distribution and the equilibrium or balance of power among various elements within the state. (*ND-II*, 257) In the international arena, where there is no central power remotely resembling a unified state, the possibility of international justice depends almost entirely on the distribution and balance of power, particularly among the strongest of the states, those with the greatest capacity to do good or evil affecting all the others. (*Id.*, 285)

While maintaining a rough balance of power is a necessary condition for justice within any system, it is not sufficient: “an equilibrium of power is not brotherhood.” (*Id.*, 265) Nor is it love, although love is a necessary complement of justice.³ Nor is achieving such a tolerable

³ “A balance of power is something different from, and inferior to, the harmony of love. It is a basic condition of justice, given the sinfulness of man. Such a balance of power does not exclude love. In fact without love the

equilibrium the limit of human endeavor for justice in the international system. Much more can and needs to be done. In “Justice and World Community,” Niebuhr addresses the possibility of building an interdependent world community, growing stronger over time, despite the obstacles presented by selfish and suspicious states fearful of each other’s relative power. It can be done, he avers – but not by cynics who resign themselves to hegemonic imperial authority; nor by pessimists who believe humankind is locked into unalterable patterns based merely on the distribution of power; nor by the idealists who believe humans can be emancipated from the constraints of power politics. Both the realist tendency toward “the abyss of cynicism” and the idealistic leaning toward “the fog of sentimentality” must be avoided. (*Children*, 173)

If a world community is to be built, it must be built by men and women who are realists – but whose realism is fortified by hope nourished on faith. For Niebuhr, the Christian faith, with its assurance of God’s involvement in the ultimate course of history, with its acknowledgment of the evil inherent in human nature but also the transcendent longings and capacity of that same nature, provides the surest basis for harnessing fervent hope with honest realism:

The new world must be built by resolute men who “when hope is dead will hope by faith”; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good. There is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God. History moves towards the realization of the Kingdom but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization. (*ND-II*, 285-86)

Niebuhr’s movement from love to justice and his focus on the distribution and balance of countervailing power as preconditions to justice in the system of states, echo similar themes in his discussion of domestic politics and individual human nature. Each person maintains an internal balance, shifting and subject to change, between the power of selfishness and the power of love. That this is reflected in international politics is no surprise, for “nothing revealed in the

frictions and tensions of a balance of power would become intolerable. But without the balance of power even the most loving relations may degenerate into unjust relations, and love may become the screen which hides the injustice.” *CPP*, 26-27.

life of races and nations is unknown in individual life. The sins of pride and of lust for power and the consequent tyranny and injustice, while magnified in international politics, are all present in individual life.” (CPP, 13) Nothing is present in politics among nations that is not found in the human nature of the men and women who conduct it.

With humans as with nations a favorable balancing of forces is possible because man’s capacity for evil is not the whole story. Niebuhr criticized liberals and idealists for (among other things) their belief in the unalloyed goodness of the human spirit. But the image of God was not erased by the fall. Niebuhr criticized Luther (and later, Barth) on just those grounds, for leading Lutheranism into an excessive pessimism about human nature that results in either ethical paralysis or the unleashing of unrestrained evil, as in Nazism. (CPP, 50-51)⁴

The error that transforms realism into cynicism is the error of thinking that humans’ inherent evil is their only and inevitable moral trait:

A realism becomes morally cynical or nihilistic when it assumes that the universal characteristic in human behavior must also be regarded as normative. ... [T]he corruption of human freedom may make a behavior pattern universal without making it normative. (CRPP, 130)

The human creature, flawed and sinful, remains a child of God, created in God’s image and therefore good. Niebuhr favored Calvin’s thought over Luther’s on this point because of Calvin’s provision of “common grace,” the understanding that human reason has not been totally corrupted and that fallen man is still capable with God’s help of checking evil and of building a society which, though not the City of God, is capable of reflecting in some degree the *imago Dei* which remains in each of us, redeemed and unredeemed. (CPP, 59) Man is a hybrid of his striving to fulfill the good nature he was given by God, and of the selfishness and fear that

⁴ On the development of Nazism in the land of the Lutheran Reformation, Niebuhr said, “It is ... no accident of history that Nazi pessimism, with its glorification of force as the principle of order, its unqualified affirmation of the state, its disavowal of all concepts of justice[,] and its rejection of all universal standards of morality, should grow upon this soil.” (CPP, 51)

motivate the oppression and control of others. This balance of forces within human nature gets projected onto the social and political structures built by humans; structures which likewise have a capacity to uphold human dignity and protection, but also to become instruments of monstrous collective evil. Niebuhr argues that it is this more balanced Calvinist understanding which forms much of the foundation of modern democratic thought:

[T]he contributions of Calvinism to [democratic] political theory probably exceed those of either Thomism or sectarian Christianity. It is freer of perfectionist illusions than either and yet, in its later developments, it did not give up the task of seeking for justice by using the best methods of neutralizing self-interest in politics and of checking power with power. (*Id.*, 59-60)

Power-balancing is far from a perfect solution to international politics, and its shifting character requires constant tending by the major powers. To some degree, it will occur anyway, whether managed or not. To understand and utilize it as a kind of “managed anarchy” (*Children*, 174) is to make a virtue of necessity. To ignore it or to fail to understand it would be to default to the alternative, which is unmanaged and therefore unmitigated anarchy. As will be seen, Niebuhr’s nuanced and hopeful attitude toward international structures of interdependence as means of regulating the power balance coincides with the thought of Hedley Bull and Robert Jackson, and distinguishes the thought of all three from neorealism’s abandonment of justice, on the one hand, and from the unrealism of idealism, on the other.

Finally, international structures of interdependence can only be developed if and insofar as nation-states, led by the great powers, take a sufficiently broad view of their national interest that they choose to include ethical values, and eventually international justice itself, among those interests, along with the traditional factors of political, economic, and military strength. Niebuhr considered “the ultimate question in collective morality” to be this: “Are nations capable of being loyal to interests and values other than their own ‘national interest’?” (*Man’s Nature*, 71)

He recognized that the narrow understanding of national interest would trump in times of crisis or national threat. But he wanted to uphold the significance of the negative implication of that statement: that when nations are relatively secure – as the great powers usually are – there is or ought to be room in their foreign policies for the broadening of national interest to include the upholding of international law, peaceful compromise in order to avoid conflict, and even the exercise of some degree of justice as well as mercy toward other nations.

Martin Wight points out that great powers possess, more than any other nation-states, the capacity to act morally, precisely because they are great powers and therefore enjoy greater security. International morality, Wight argues, is “not simply a matter of civilized tradition, but is equally the result of security.” Thus, the comparatively enlightened foreign policy of Great Britain in the nineteenth century was made possible by the fact that it enjoyed “perfect security.” Wight quotes Harold Nicholson who said, “we could afford the luxury of gentleness, because we were completely unafraid.” (*Power Politics*, 292) Secure nations have both the ability and the obligation to look beyond their narrow self-interest, to augment international structures of peace and justice for the benefit of all nations and peoples, and to expand their concept of national interest to include the support of such institutions and ends.⁵

The concept of “national interest” is self-regarding but sufficiently elastic to enlarge its scope as the people supporting it appreciate the commonalities between themselves and other nations and peoples, and as they realize the necessity of tackling common problems together. Human nature is selfish but the perception of what constitutes the “self” and its welfare is not fixed and inelastic. Niebuhr observed a “residual creative factor in human rationality” whose

⁵ Interestingly, Niebuhr at one point defines “common grace” as “the ‘gift’ of security, without which the self is incapable of becoming free of preoccupation with its own security so that it might relate itself to others and achieve true fulfillment of the self.” (*Man’s Nature*, 108) He was speaking of individuals, but the applicability to states is evident.

moral significance should not be obscured. After criticizing Hans Morgenthau in *Man's Nature and His Communities* for overlooking this factor (p. 75), Niebuhr said:

[T]he strength of the modern nation's self-regard and power impulse has not eliminated the residual capacity of peoples and nations for loyalty to values, cultures, and civilizations of wider and higher scope than the interests of the nation. ... The importance of establishing this residual creative freedom in collective man lies not in the possibility of subordinating the lower to the higher or wider interest – but in the possibility that even a residual loyalty to values, transcending national existence, may change radically the nation's conception of the breadth and quality of its 'national interest.' (*Id.*, 76-77)⁶

Against Pacifism

Niebuhr's opposition to Christian pacifism (despite his own early attraction to it) tells us much about the Christian realism which became his signature approach to international politics. Pacifism, he believes, is a Christian heresy borne of unbiblical Renaissance optimism. He prefers the realism of St. Augustine, grounded in the Genesis narrative of the fall and Paul's theology of the crucifixion, which rejects pacifism in favor of the principle that war (and other forms of coercion) may be permissible but must be morally justified.⁷

For Niebuhr, pacifism ignores the Biblical disclosure of man's capacity for evil, mistakenly takes the law of love as the simple measure of human conduct in a fallen world, and willfully overlooks the fact that humans, unlike Christ, are beset by sin in all that we do, including the good that we do. (*CPP*, 2-3, 5-8) The ethic of Jesus is "finally and ultimately normative," but it is "not immediately applicable to the task of securing justice in a sinful world." (*Id.*, 9)

⁶ As noted in an earlier chapter, Martin Wight makes a similar point, attributing it to the French philosopher Julien Benda (1867-1956):

... mankind has always betrayed its obligations, but so long as it continues to acknowledge and believe in them, the crack is kept open through which civilization can creep. Powers will continue to seek security without reference to justice, and to pursue their vital interests irrespective of common interest, but in the fraction that they may be deflected lies the difference between the jungle and the traditions of Europe. (*Power Politics*, 293)

⁷ Paul Ramsey has helpfully pointed out that the just war tradition originated by Augustine (the *justum bellum*) should more accurately be translated as "justified" war rather than "just" war, since the notion is less that going to war is "just" as that it may under certain circumstances be morally "justified." Paul Ramsey, "The Just War According to St. Augustine," in Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed., *Just War Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 1992), 8.

The ultimate principles of the Kingdom of God are never irrelevant to any problem of justice ...; but that does not mean that they can be made into simple alternatives for the present schemes of relative justice. (*Id.*, 25)

The best that can be achieved by sinful man is to “achieve tentative harmonies of life with life which are less than the best.” (*Id.*) This applies directly to the relations among nations and the question of whether to fight or remain pacifist when vital interests or essential values are at stake. Just as coercion by a democratic government is a legitimate and unavoidable means for enforcing law and combatting injustice (such as racism) within the society,⁸ so is forceful resistance, including war if necessary, legitimate to prevent coercion or tyranny (such as Nazi or communist threats) presented by foreign powers.

A fascinating exchange on pacifism took place in the early 1930s between the brothers Niebuhr in the pages of *The Christian Century*. In the fall of 1931, Japan captured and took control of the entire region of Manchuria from a weakened Chinese government. It was a prelude to an even broader attack and conquest of China six years later. The Manchurian crisis inspired many in the United States to call for intervention against Japan to roll back the Manchurian invasion and aid the Chinese. In a piece entitled, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” in the *Christian Century* of March 23, 1932, H. Richard Niebuhr disagreed with intervention, arguing that forceful interference would be inconsistent with the only “radical Christian” response appropriate to the hour:

The way of doing nothing the old Christians called repentance. ... What is suggested is that the only effective approach to the problem of China and Japan lies in the sphere of an American self-analysis which is likely to result in some surprising discoveries as to

⁸ “All social co-operation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion. ... The limitations of the human mind and imagination, the inability of human beings to transcend their own interests sufficiently to envisage the interests of their fellowmen as clearly as they do their own makes force an inevitable part of the process of social cohesion.” (*MMIS*, 3, 6)

the amount of renunciation of self-interest necessary on the part of this country and of individual Christians before anything effective can be done in the east. (Miller, 11)⁹

A week later, in the issue of March 30, 1932, Reinhold Niebuhr replied in an essay called, “Must We Do Nothing?” He fully acknowledges the sinful role of the west, including the United States, in creating the conditions for the Japanese imperialism then ravaging the Chinese countryside and people. He agrees with his brother that the too-ready condemnation of Japan may encourage the hypocrisy which is the congenital sin of putative righteousness, especially among the powerful. He decries the refusal to recognize this hypocrisy in every effort to address the wrongs of another nation while concealing our own. Nonetheless, it is not adequate to forego all coercive action in all circumstances. If we apply literally Jesus’ invitation, “let him who is without sin cast the first stone,” we will never act, even in the face of the most obscene acts of violence against our neighbor. Such “[r]eligious perfectionism drives either to asceticism or apocalypticism,” both involving a smug withdrawal from the world. What this overlooks is precisely the tragic nature of human history, “for the highest ideals which the individual may project are ideals which he can never realize in social and collective terms.” (*Id.*, 17) Perfection is virtually impossible for sinful humans – but absolutely impossible for “subhuman” collectivities such as nations. The effort to achieve it can lead to the rejection of lesser, “lower” alternatives, and thus to the rejection of the world as we find it. In the fallen world in which we live, coercion is sometimes necessary to achieve a measure of the justice which is our best realistic alternative to perfect love among humans living together in society.

Christian perfectionism, and the pacifism which is one manifestation of it, reflect our longing for the absolute; but these fail to recognize that we live our lives in conditions that are far below those of the absolute for which we long. Niebuhr thus concludes his essay:

⁹ Both the H. Richard Niebuhr article and the reply by his brother Reinhold are set forth in Richard B. Miller, ed., *War in the Twentieth Century*, to which page-number references are made.

There can be nothing absolute in history, no matter how frequently God may intervene in it. Man cannot live without a sense of the absolute, but neither can he achieve the absolute. He may resolve the tragic character of that fact by religious faith, by the experience of grace in which the unattainable is experienced in anticipatory terms, but he can never resolve in purely ethical terms the conflict between what is and what ought to be. (*Id.*, 18)

Against Legalism-Moralism

Pacifism is not the only thing against which Niebuhr's realism defined itself. He also reacted against the strain of excessive moralism and legalism, particularly endemic to his homeland, which tends too quickly and simply to convert contextualized moral norms into universal, exceptionless legal commands, thus stripping them of moral context, nuance, and flexibility. Moralism is the husk that grows up around moral truths, encrusting them in absoluteness and hypocrisy which destroy their fruitfulness. Niebuhr's revulsion against moralism-legalism echoed the sentiments of his acquaintance and fellow-realist George F. Kennan.

Kennan was, with Niebuhr and Morgenthau, probably the most famous American realist of the twentieth century in foreign policy and international relations. The author of the doctrine of containment and much of the Marshall Plan, Kennan provided the framework for the U.S.-U.S.S.R. relationship, and therefore for most of American foreign policy, for the half century of the Cold War. John Lewis Gaddis, Kennan's preeminent biographer and the doyen of Cold War historians, calls these three men, along with Walter Lippmann, the "founding father[s] of post-World War II-realism." (Gaddis 2011, 696)

Niebuhr and Kennan have much in common besides their international realism. Both had strong Christian roots and both built their international philosophies around their shared understanding of human nature, especially its flaws and limitations as limned by St. Augustine. "I regard myself, if anyone wants to know, as a Christian," Kennan wrote near the end of his life

in *Around the Cragged Hill* (p. 40), a book in which he shared much of his understanding of human nature (*see, e.g.,* “Man, the Cracked Vessel,” chapter 1) and of his personal faith (chapter 2).¹⁰

Kennan shared Niebuhr’s view that international law and institutions were helpful to the cause of harmony only to the extent they represented and were supported by deeper emotional ties and ideational consensus on the need to be bound by such commitments, and this could only come about organically over time. In a 2000 interview with Nicholas Lemann, Kennan was asked about the cruelty and bestiality represented by the twentieth century’s two World Wars, the Holocaust, and other enormities of evil. He said:

Well, unfortunately, I think there are limits to what we can do about it. I think it’s dangerous to try to create great changes in human nature in any short space and time. If you’re going to change a civilization, it can be done only as the gardener does it, not as the engineer does it. That is, it’s got to be done in harmony with the rules of nature and can’t all be done overnight. (Nicholas Lemann, “The Provocateur,” *The New Yorker*, Nov. 13, 2000)

Kennan has become famous for castigating moralism and legalism in American foreign policy, but is less well-known for consistently reserving a place for moral judgment in international affairs. In the Walgreen Foundation Lectures at the University of Chicago in 1950, later published as *American Diplomacy 1900-1950*, he assailed “the legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems,” calling it “the most serious fault” of American foreign policy since it became a great power after the Spanish-American War. (*American Diplomacy*, 95) The fault is understandable, he said, in a nation proud of its political system and the rule of

¹⁰ In stating his “personal creed,” Kennan wrote that “my own religion feeling” is based not on rational calculation but on faith: “What [Christ] asked for was faith; and I am glad to give it: faith in the man himself, as Christ’s image has come down to us in the understanding, perhaps even in the creative intuition and imagination, of people of later ages – faith in the silent suffering Christ who, when Herod questioned him, ‘answered him nothing’; faith in the equally silent Christ who, in the imagination of Dostoyevski, responded by a kiss of forgiveness to the vainglorious and cynical visions of the Great Inquisitor; faith in the Christ whose own faith was so real and so human that he could find, in his agony, no other final words than a call for forgiveness for his executioners and torturers ... and, at last, the desperate and oh-so-human words ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” (*Id.*, 41)

law, and one whose diplomatic profession is modeled so closely on the legal profession. But it is badly misplaced in the international sphere where radically different ideologies and sharply conflicting national interests work against harmonious order. The legalistic fault is deepened by the close connection between law and morality, “the inevitable association of legalistic ideas with moralistic ones: the carrying-over into the affairs of states of the concepts of right and wrong,” and the refusal to face the incorrigible fact that political judgments, especially in foreign affairs, are almost always choices among evils and thus morally tainted. (*Id.*, 100) Moral judgment is not out of place in assessing political decisions, but the moralist inevitably reaches too quickly and confidently for the moral lever in order to impose ultimate moral judgments on situations of great complexity and ambiguity, thus ignoring “the deeper sources of international instability.” (*Id.*, 99) In effect, morality becomes a political weapon.

The attack on legalism-moralism in the Walgreen Lectures and in *American Diplomacy* led to much controversy, in part on whether Kennan was advocating an amoral foreign policy. He made it clear that he was not, in his essay, “Morality and Foreign Policy” in *Foreign Affairs*.¹¹ There, Kennan argued that governments, as agents of their land and people, must focus on the interests of that land and those people. As in the 1950 lectures, he wrote at length on the abuses of morality that are endemic when political leaders and partisan followers inject explicit right-wrong judgments into complex and politically-charged matters. He called this “the histrionics of moralism at the expense of [moral] substance,” that is, “the projection of attitudes, poses, and rhetoric that cause us to appear noble and altruistic in the mirror of our own vanity but lack substance when related to the realities of international life.” He believed that morally-infused political language can quickly become self-righteous justification, thus driving out all thoughtful

¹¹ *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 64 issue 2 (Winter 1985-86), 205-218; reprinted in *At A Century's Ending* at 269-282, to which I will be citing.

moral content, including the main office of morality in politics, which is to be a critique. Moralism is the enemy of morality because, clothed in moral language, it hijacks thoughtful debate on complex issues, turning it into a weapon for scoring political points. Kennan advocated an American foreign policy at whose “heart ... would lie the effort to distinguish at all times between the true substance and the mere appearance of moral behavior.” (*Id.*, 282)

There are a number of substantive ethical dimensions in a soundly-designed American foreign policy, Kennan thought. Most of them have to do with the self-restraining and humbling effects of proper moral thought. These include the need to “take ourselves under control and to establish a better relationship between our undertakings and our real capabilities” (*Id.*, 280); an understanding of our national interest as involving limitations as well as opportunities, especially when it comes to foreign intervention; a focus on getting our own domestic political and economic house in order in place of telling others how to arrange their systems; and avoiding clandestine intelligence and military activities in all but rare circumstances because these are inherently prone to overuse and abuse and are fundamentally contrary to our values. Understood in this way, it would be a foreign policy

that would seek the possibilities for service to morality primarily in our own behavior, not in our judgment of others. It would restrict our undertakings to the limits established by our own traditions and resources. It would see virtue in our minding our own business wherever there is not some overwhelming reasons for minding the business of others. (*Id.*, 282)

Louis Menand summarized it this way:

[B]uried within Kennan’s realism there is a moral view: that in relations of power, which is what he thought international relations ultimately are, people can’t be trusted to do the right thing. ... [This is] because it’s their nature. They can’t help it. This is an easy doctrine to apply to other nations, as it is to apply to other people, since we can always see how professions of benevolence might be masks for self-interest. It’s a harder doctrine to apply to ourselves. And that was, all his life, Kennan’s great overriding point. We need to be realists because we cannot trust ourselves to be

moralists. (Louis Menand, "Getting Real: George F. Kennan's Cold War," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 14, 2011, p. 83)

Menand's last sentence is interesting; to the extent it reflects Kennan's thought it means that moral concern without the tempering of realism, reminding us of our own faults and teaching us humility, leads to the prideful self-righteousness of moralism. Moral judgment is an indispensable part of Kennan's thought, but its first lesson is self-restraint and the avoidance of moralism.

Kennan's concern with international morality was long-standing. In a lecture to the National War College on December 21, 1949, summing up his years as Director of Policy Planning in the State Department, and with the prospect of nuclear war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. clearly on his mind, Kennan attributed the greatest crisis of the era not to the effects of the two World Wars or the vicissitudes of the Cold War, but rather to "the growing disparity between man's moral nature and the forces subject to [his] control." (Gaddis 2011, 373)

The foreign policy advocated by Kennan would be characterized by a morality of restraint and humility rather than by a mandate to remake the world in the image of the United States.¹² It would be based on a distinct national character which focused on spiritual values over material ones, because "the world ... despite all its material difficulties, is still more ready to recognize and respect spiritual distinction than material opulence." (*American Diplomacy*, 154) It would be characterized by patience, forbearance, resolve, and a long-term perspective as a brake on popular pressure for instant solutions and military crusading. Kennan's approach emphasizes precisely the "wisdom of statecraft," including its moral component, which was central to the

¹² "[W]e know in part and we prophecy in part" (I. Cor. 13:9, 12), was one of Kennan's favorite scriptures, for diplomacy is a matter of "seeing through a glass darkly." (Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, 369). Moralism is a constant temptation and knowledge is always limited; therefore power should be restrained. He never tired of quoting John Quincy Adams as Secretary of State: America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." (Adams speech of July 4, 1921; Gaddis 2011, 366)

international political thought of Herbert Butterfield and remains central to English School thinkers.¹³

Much of Kennan's political-philosophical thought is fully congruent with Niebuhr's. They shared a deep regard for the insights of St. Augustine, similar notions of human nature and the primacy of power in politics, and the conviction that the chief signs of genuine moral sensibility in international politics are the negative ones of self-restraint and humility. More than once, Kennan acknowledged a debt to Niebuhr, particularly in his late-life reflections in which he referred to Niebuhr's philosophical depth and "brilliant insights." (*See, e.g., Around the Cragged Hill*, 18, 82n, 183; and *At A Century's Ending*, 211, 212.) Whether or not Niebuhr was "the father of us all," as Kennan told Kenneth Thompson,¹⁴ he was the philosophical father of Kennan.

Niebuhr acknowledged the intellectual kinship between the two men. In June 1949, Niebuhr was invited to join a select group of distinguished advisors to Kennan's Policy Planning Staff in the State Department. Aside from their generally compatible approach to foreign policy, it was "Niebuhr's philosophical perspective" that Kennan found particularly appealing.¹⁵ Niebuhr recognized in Kennan the same fear of and repulsion at the "pretentious idealism" that is so often the default position of American foreign policy, and which leads to "a too simple 'legalistic-moralistic' approach ... informed by an uncritical reliance upon moral and constitutional schemes." (*Irony*, 147) Niebuhr had no more use for moralism than Kennan did.

¹³ See, Alberto Coll, *The Wisdom of Statecraft: Sir Herbert Butterfield and the Philosophy of International Politics*, arguing that "wisdom of statecraft" summarizes Butterfield's entire approach to international politics. The English School has continued to maintain, against the strict positivism of the other schools, that diplomacy and statecraft, and therefore the interpretation of history and prudent exercise of judgment, remain central to understanding international relations.

¹⁴ K. Thompson, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Personal Reflection and Political Evaluation," in David Clinton, ed., *The Realist Tradition and Contemporary International Relations*, 1.

¹⁵ Fox, 238. Kennan particularly appreciated the historical-philosophical perspective of *The Irony of American History*. The book was generally well received among historians, but Kennan's approval was especially enthusiastic. (*Id.*, 246)

On the other hand, Niebuhr cautioned, focusing on the national interest carries risks of its own, particularly the temptation to define “national interest” in narrowly material and military terms and thus to slide into moral cynicism. The national interest needs to be outward looking and to regard the needs and perspectives of other peoples:

The cure for a pretensions idealism ... is not egotism. It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind,” derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power. (*Id.*, 148)

This is an example – there are many others – of Niebuhr’s dialectical method of identifying two extreme options, each of which has some value but which, if followed slavishly or uncritically, will lead to disaster; then triangulating and exploring a delicate middle path which must be carefully navigated to avoid the dangers of both Scylla and Charybdis. In political matters, realism is Niebuhr’s middle path; but he is aware that the middle way tends to be the one least clearly marked and the one most fraught with the danger of straying off course into one danger or another. Keeping to the middle way is a constant and difficult balancing act which requires carefully checking and recalibrating one’s location and direction. (Recall from the preceding chapter Martin Wight’s similar description of rationalism in *International Theory*, 14-15, as the “broad middle road” of European political thought whose “edges are difficult to discern.”) But this is unavoidable, Niebuhr finds, if one is to locate the most fruitful and least problematic path through a thicket of complex moral-political considerations.

The Sinews of Community

As discussed earlier, Niebuhr insisted that the connective “social tissues” of community must be nourished and sufficiently strong before any sort of “legislation” of world community can be successful. I want to explore further his thought on this score, because his insistence on the necessity of patience and gradualism, fortified by hope, is another theme he shares with the

English School – and which he articulates better than even Butterfield and Wight with their explicitly Christian foundations.

The development of international community must be slow and accretive because constitutional structure can only stand on a foundation which is embedded in unconscious, organic groundwork. Niebuhr made this point in both *Love and Justice* (“Law can only define and perfect what life has established,” p. 217) and in “The Illusion of World Government” (*CRPP*, 17, 22), as noted earlier. He also addressed it in *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (1946), where he identifies Christian hope as the virtue that makes possible the slow but steady long-term commitment necessary for the growth of “social tissue” and the establishment of a more just world order. “[A]n ultimate hope,” he argues there, “frees us from a too great preoccupation with the prospects of immediate success or fears of imminent failure.” Hope enables patience and the avoidance of frustration and abandonment of the effort when faced with inevitable failures in the interim. While pure idealism offers no solution to the conflict among nations, and realism bereft of hope degenerates into cynicism and resignation, realism grounded in hope, especially an ultimate hope, provides the moral energy to persevere in the struggle:

We do not know how soon and to what degree mankind will succeed in establishing a tolerable world order. Very possibly we shall hover for some centuries between success and failure, in such a way that optimists and pessimists will be able to assess our achievements, or lack of them, with an equal degree of plausibility. In such a situation it is important to be more concerned with our duties than with the prospect of success in fulfilling them. ... The city of God is no enemy of the land of promise. The hope of it makes tolerable the inevitable disappointments in every land of promise. (*Discerning the Signs*, 84)

In *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959), Niebuhr distinguishes (as he has before) between the natural or “organic” basis of building a community – through ties of shared history, language, religion and values – and the legal-constitutional “artifacts” that, if they come later, can solidify and articulate the shared basis of such a community. This is crucial in the case of

world community where organic development is slower and thinner and where legal-constitutional writ is less effective. As a result, there is always the danger, Niebuhr notes, that the contrived artifacts of community (*e.g.*, international organizations underwritten by international law) may outrun their organic underpinnings, with the result that the formal structure totters or founders because it is heavier than its foundation. The idealistic pronouncements of charters and written statements are effective only to the extent they are reflective of an actual underlying community of mutual regard and respect among world community members. Thus, the slow work of building an organic international community – an ongoing task that will be continuous -- must go alongside the building of structure, and must precede each successive stage of the formal international order. This is because,

no amount of conscious contrivance can eliminate completely the organic element. ... Efforts to create world community through world government by constitutional enactment ... can only strengthen and slightly modify what more unconscious factors have created. (*Structure*, 262)

While international organizations and legal pronouncements can be useful as aspirational goals and exemplars, they cannot exceed too greatly the bounds of actual organic community-building, for “the edifice of government which we build will be sound and useful if its height is proportionate to the strength of the materials from which it is constructed.” (*CRPP*, 29)

Although the idea of building a world community through law alone is “illusory” (*id.*), the prospect of developing an international community for which law and organizations may be both cause and effect is not illusory. In doing so, hope is not the only thing that sustains us in maintaining such efforts. There is also a “lash of fear,” based on the realization that “our civilization is undone if we cannot overcome the anarchy in which the nations live.” (*ND-II*, 285) We need the spur of fear augmenting the pull of hope because, for international law and institutions to be effective, national sovereignty will have to be, to an increasing degree, abridged

or shared (*FH*, 11), and this is a deeply unsettling prospect for nation-states, especially the strong ones whose support for such institutions is indispensable. Still, at least for Jews and Christians, despite the fears and formidable barriers, the resources of hope are greater, for in “prophetic ethics” the unity of life transcends that of nations and states, and this “transcendent unity of life is an article of faith.” (*Christian Ethics*, 69)

Realism and Hope

For Niebuhr, the hope for the evolution of a world community is supported by Christian realism, not negated by it. Idealism, because of its false and optimistic assumptions about human nature, inevitably leads to disappointment and often to resigned withdrawal or angry scapegoating. (See, e.g., “Idealists as Cynics,” *CPP*, chap. 5) Ironically, it is idealism without faith that leads to the false dawns which repeatedly disappoint:

It is because modern man has no faith which would make it possible for him to escape despair if he looked at the sad and tragic realities of human existence and human nature that he holds on so desperately to the illusion of the goodness of man. (*CPP*, 39)

What is at stake is moral motivation. Niebuhr argues that realism, as against idealism, is not only truer to the facts of human nature but is also the better source of moral motivation, at least if it is based in Christian faith. Politics is often nasty and discouraging; cynicism is tempting. In the international arena, the narrow interests of nation-states typically reign supreme, sustained big-power cooperation seems rare, the constraints on progress are daunting, and advance is slow and uncertain. The “spiritual problem of modern man,” Niebuhr writes, is that he must “find a way of engaging in impossible tasks and not be discouraged when he fails to complete any of them.” (*On Politics*, 260) If we have well-grounded hope in the long-term outcome, even though we may never see it, we are less easily discouraged and more consistently moved to

action to overcome the obstacles. “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.” (*Irony*, 63)

We are also less prone to be stuck in verities which, though useful in their place, are not the last word. Take, for example, balance of power. Important as it is, it should not be mistaken for harmony, even partial or provisional harmony. The faith and hope of Christian realism inoculates against the tendency of “the realistic school of international thought” to believe that “world politics cannot rise higher than the balance-of-power principle.” (*Children*, 173)

With one eye fixed on the longer-term hope, realists who are also Christians may call upon a faith that is “not too relevant” to the immediate social and political concerns that fill the headlines. A certain detachment from the momentary crises of the world, borne of a faith that God is in ultimate charge of history, supplies a “sense of serenity” which is a deep “resource for doing what we ought to do,” even though we know not what the day or the hour will bring. (*Essays in Applied Christianity*, 101-02)¹⁶

It is significant that Herbert Butterfield makes the same observation in *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (1963). Because Christians “can hold fast to spiritual truths,” he wrote, they have the power to “be more flexible in respect of all subordinate matters, and to ally [themselves] with whatever may be the best for the world at a given moment.” (*Id.*, 3) This is because Christian hope endures beneath the shifting landscape of passing ideologies and temporary balances of power. The bedrock principles of faith can be applied anew to whatever novel circumstances might present themselves, even to the extent of “cut[ting] through the traditions of historical Christianity, so that all may be fluid and flexible save that ultimate Rock, which is Christ himself.” (*Id.*)

¹⁶ The original article, “Utilitarian Christianity and the World Crisis,” was published in *Christianity and Crisis*, October 27, 1952. Niebuhr goes on to quote St. Paul (Rom. 14:8) in support of his point: “Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.”

The “ultimate social problem of human history,” said Niebuhr, is “the creation of community in world dimensions.” (*Children*, 188) He closes *Children of Light* with the following meditation on the faithful hope which, at least for the Christian, undergirds that effort:

The world community, toward which all historical forces seem to be driving us, is mankind’s final possibility and impossibility. The task of achieving it must be interpreted from the standpoint of a faith which understands the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements and yet has confidence in their meaning because it knows their completion to be in the hands of a Divine Power whose resources are greater than those of men, and whose suffering love can overcome the corruptions of man’s achievements, without negating the significance of our striving. (pp. 190-91)

Although Niebuhr did not define in detail the “world” or “international” community that he considered the ultimate political goal of history, he repeatedly expressed a longing for the development of a conscious association of nations who share a sense of community among their states and peoples. At one point, he called it a “cooperative world community.”¹⁷ In effect, it is a society of states with a moral commitment to growing the “social tissue” essential for community, decreasing the chances of catastrophic war among states, and improving the lives of citizens within them, thus achieving greater degrees of justice. Despite the obstacles and the long and bumpy road to such a community, it is, he taught, a worthwhile journey – a realistic one – and one whose value increases in proportion to the progress that is made toward the goal.

An international community needs institutions if it is to last. In 1955, Niebuhr wrote a two-part essay presented to the Fifth National Conference of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, entitled, “Our Moral and Spiritual Resources of International Co-operation.” It was later published as chapters one and two of *The World Crisis and American Responsibility* (1958).¹⁸ In that paper and presentation, he laid out five great revolutions that distinguish our period of history, consisting of the extraordinary technical revolution, the changes wrought by

¹⁷ “The Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations,” Hazen Pamphlet no. 29, 1952, 13; *On Politics*, 320.

¹⁸ Excerpts also appear in *On Politics*. My citations are to the original book.

atomic power including nuclear weapons, the dynamic growth of international communism, the rise of America's own pre-eminence as a dominant world power, and the political and social ferment roiling the third world. All of these changes have brought the world closer together, for better and worse, and together they necessitate the development – not of a world government, which if it were possible at all would lead to global tyranny – but rather to a worldwide community in which nations and their peoples recognize the common dangers and challenges facing them. This is, Niebuhr said, “the moment in history in which a potential world community is forming but has not yet been actualized.” (*Id.*, 28) In order for progress to be made, the citizens of each nation (and especially of the great powers) “must have loyalties and responsibilities to a wider system of values than that of the national interest – to a civilization for instance, to a system of justice, and to a community of free nations.” (*Id.*, 43) This must be an international community in which the necessary connective sinews can be nurtured in their growth; and also in which shared ethical values are allowed to deepen and widen, and whose reciprocal acceptance among nations permeates the self-awareness of diverse peoples. Thus may the concept of “national interest” be nudged in the direction of a broader, more enlightened understanding of national interest.

This will take much time, of course; many nations are not “free nations,” and among those who are, national interests narrowly-understood will have to be enlarged to make room for the world community. But the United Nations represents a tangible and important start: an institution of international community, however imperfect. Our commitment to the UN stands “as a symbol of our loyalty to the principles of international cooperation and our responsibility to the international community.” (*On Politics*, 257; originally published in *Christianity and Society*, vol. 18 (Winter 1952-53))

The processes of the UN will not eliminate big-power rivalries nor bridge the gaps between power blocs or powerful nations. But it is a place for nations to meet, to locate as much common ground as can be found, to display their intentions and be held accountable by world opinion, and to dampen or slow what might otherwise be the emotional and other forces that so often have propelled powers toward conflict. George Kennan acknowledged the UN's role as a venue for moral accountability. In a 1946 lecture to the National War College, Kennan noted his initial skepticism about the organization, but found, according to John Gaddis, that the UN turned out to be "more helpful than he had expected, because it provided a way to connect power with morality." (Gaddis 2011, 240)

For the democracies, which by their nature share some degree of common values and mutual recognition, Niebuhr considered the UN "an organ for integrating" themselves into a nascent community of nations cooperating in social programs and seeking to align their welfare as well as their national-security interests. (*World Crisis*, 75) Indeed, "integration," as in the integration of free nations, is a frequent term of Niebuhr's for describing the slow, essential work of the UN and other international bodies.

What of the role of international law? Niebuhr considers it subordinate to the development of international institutions, which in turn is subordinate to the growth of the connective tissues which alone render institutions and law effective. Thus, he acknowledges that useful cooperative precedents and aspirational legal principles emanate from the UN and its agencies; he acknowledges the importance of "the constitutional instruments of world order," which will and ought to be perfected in time – but admonishes that these "more perfect instruments must grow out of the more perfect mutualities of daily living together." ("The United Nations and the Free

World,” in *World Crisis*, 84) Again, legal instruments are only as effective as the underlying social consensus that supports them.

In some ways, Niebuhr’s valuation of international law resembles his view of natural law: it is not trivial but it is often oversold as an instrument of political cohesion or world community, at least for now. In “The Illusion of World Government,” he concedes that natural law, being accessible to all humans through reason, is indeed among the thin tissues supporting world order; but adds that its specific application becomes quickly contestable and therefore its role as a source of human law is limited. (*CRPP*, 28) He would apply an equivalent judgment to international law: it constitutes connective sinews of cohesion which are not without value, but its deeper effectiveness awaits natural organic growth of the idea of international community with shared mutual responsibilities for the peace and welfare of persons beyond our national borders.

Niebuhr’s writings on the UN suggest that he sees institutions and organizations (themselves creations of international law) as stronger ligaments of cohesion than law alone, but they too can be only as strong as the underlying loyalties of the nations and peoples who subscribe to them. In all of these, Niebuhr recognizes the reciprocally-augmenting effects of, on the one hand, law, institutions, and organization, and on the other, the slowly-evolving sensibilities and habits of peoples and nations. The work is slow and uncertain but important, especially for people of faith, for it is sustained not by optimism but by hope.

Common Grace

Human nature, in Niebuhr’s view, is a mixture of lower and higher elements – we are grounded in our selfishness but we long for transcendence. Original sin and the fall are not the only lessons of scripture. Amos’ thundering calls for justice, David’s psalms of harmony, and

the ideals in the Sermon on the Mount reflect genuine and abiding human aspirations. They are important, not because they set out simple measures to be enacted in social life – none of them is appropriate for that – but because they represent ends toward which, in degrees, humans are capable and desirous of moving. In this regard, Calvin is more appealing to Niebuhr than Luther, as noted. Calvin’s thought avoids both perfectionist illusions and cynical resignation; and his notion of common grace both explains and motivates the journey of sinful humans who are “seeking for justice,” including social justice, by “neutralizing self-interest in politics and ... checking power with power.” (*CPP*, 60)

It is this common grace, fortified by Christian hope in the case of the faithful, which sustains the “residual creative factor in human rationality,” with its surprising ability to transcend human selfishness and self-interest. The absence of regard for this creative moral capacity in humans led Niebuhr to criticize the “excessive realism” of Morgenthau, and before him, of Luther and of Augustine.¹⁹ And this same morally creative capacity gives Niebuhr hope for a progressively greater degree of “justice and world community,” as he expressed it in *Nature and Destiny*.

I hope I have shown in Parts I and II the deep connections, intentional and unintentional, between Niebuhr’s thought and that of Butterfield and Wight. Having explored Niebuhr’s concept of “world community,” I seek to show in the remainder of this Part III that the English School’s notion of “international society,” particularly as developed by Hedley Bull and Robert Jackson after Niebuhr’s death, is remarkably congruent with Niebuhr’s thought, and is a conceptual advancement along the same road he traveled, toward greater degrees of justice and world community.

¹⁹ The critiques of Morgenthau and Augustine occur in *Man’s Nature and His Communities* at 75 and 97, and in the case of Morgenthau, is discussed briefly at the end of the first section of this chapter. Niebuhr’s critique of Luther is also discussed in the first section above, and appears in *Christianity and Power Politics*, 50-59.

Chapter 10 **Hedley Bull and International Society**

Order against Anarchy

Hedley Bull (1932-1985) was probably Martin Wight's most brilliant student. He certainly became his most influential one. Ultimately a professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and Oxford before his untimely death at 53, Bull had earlier worked as a junior member of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics co-chaired by Wight and Herbert Butterfield. He became the leading second-generation thinker in the English School tradition. His book *The Anarchical Society* (1977) remains the single most influential statement of the idea of international society.

Bull's thought (and that of the English School generally) is a study in political theory. It engages the works of the entire grand tradition of western political thought, starting with Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle and including Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Burke, Mill, and later thinkers. Yet, this grand tradition includes relatively little international political theory: it is focused almost exclusively on the domestic political society. As Bull observed, Thomas Hobbes "constitutes no exception to a general truth that may be stated about all the greatest political thinkers of the past: none of them ever devoted himself primarily to the study of this subject – a sobering reflection for professors of International Relations." ("Hobbes and the International Anarchy," 718) Nonetheless, in numerous writings, Bull displayed an abiding interest in the application of political theory to international relations. Perhaps this followed from his lifelong interest in order and justice among states.

The full title of his most important book is *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, and Bull built all of the various themes in the book around the central necessity

of order in an anarchic system. Because there is no central governing force in international politics, disorder is inherent in the relations of one state to another. If nations are to do much of anything other than war against each other, they must find mutually acceptable bases for ordering their relationships. Thus, order is the organizing principle and aspiration of international relations, even more basic than justice (in the sense that order can exist without justice, but justice cannot without order).

Bull defines the concept of “order” in three ways. First, “order” means the absence or displacement of “disorder,” since reducing or managing disorder is a precondition for any constructive human activity. More helpfully, he then defines order in accordance with St. Augustine: “a good disposition of discrepant parts, each in its fittest place.” (*City of God* 1950, XIX.13, 249) Thus, order is a matter of relative harmony or concord among components. (*Anarchical*, 3-4) This bears more than a passing resemblance to Plato’s understanding of justice in *The Republic*. As discussed further below, Bull combines this with Aristotle’s emphasis (in *The Nicomachean Ethics*) on justice as equality and giving each person his due.

Finally, building on Augustine’s “good disposition of discrepant parts,” Bull defines order in terms of a “pattern or regularity” among states which leads to and sustains “elementary or primary ends” sought by those states (*Id.*, 4, 6) – ends which are themselves predicates of order. He notes that in the internal lives of states, the three primary ends are personal security, the keeping of promises or commitments, and the preservation of property. The first goal is the negative or Hobbesian one – safety against violent death or bodily harm. His second and third goals are more positive and Lockean: to ensure that contracts and promises are kept so that forward-looking commitments can be relied upon and social cooperation facilitated; and to

protect possessions and property so that each individual has an expectation of preserving what he builds, earns, or secures.

In relations among states, the analogues to these three domestic goals, and therefore the fundamental predicates of international order, are security against attack, trust in treaties and promises, and respect for territorial sovereignty. For states as for individuals, order is the indispensable prerequisite for the attainment of these elementary goals as well as all higher ones, including justice and cooperative endeavors of any kind. To put it differently, providing or possessing the capacity for the attainment of these basic goals is much of what Bull means by “a good disposition of discrepant parts.”

Bull carefully distinguishes his general notion of international order – which exists insofar as nations cooperate to achieve a minimal level of peace and security in relation to each other – from any specific historical order, such as the Westphalian balance of power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century, or the one built by U.S. hegemony after World War II. All of these achieved a degree of order or stability “in the sense of a pattern that secures Western-preferred values” (*id.*, 84), but the concept of international order is broader than any one expression – and sometimes needs to be expanded or modified to avoid conflict with rising great powers originally excluded, such as Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and China in the present age.

International System and International Society

Bull makes a basic and oft-cited distinction between an international “system” and international “society,” based largely on the lesser or greater potential for order among states.¹

A “**system of states**” exists:

when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some manner – as parts of a whole. (*Id.*, 9)

In other words, wherever two or more states or independent political communities are in more than occasional contact with each other, they must, as a practical matter, take into account the actions of the other(s), including such actions or anticipated actions in response to one’s own actions. Historically, this has been closely tied to geography – the closer neighboring states are, the more one must take account of their actions, and vice versa. This is because one’s actions may cause an adverse reaction in another state, just as its moves may require a reaction in one’s own nation, ultimately raising the specter of direct conflict. He gives as examples of “systems” the contiguous territorial groups run by warlords during the Period of Warring States in China (c. 481-221 B.C.), the geographically adjacent Indian tribes in America before Columbus, and the European states in their relations with non-European nations not yet “admitted” to the European society but impinging on its political calculations.

In contrast, a “**society of states**” or “**international society**” exists when:

a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.

¹ By “states” Bull means not only nation-states but any “independent political community” (*see e.g., id.*, 8), in recognition of the fact that while states are currently the primary form of political organization, there are other independent communities that exercise state-like powers, such as the claim to internal sovereignty over its own territory and people and a claim to external recognition as a sovereign or quasi-sovereign entity. Examples he cites are American Indian tribes before the coming of the Europeans, or even now with their special status under U.S. law, and First Nations in Canada. He intends his concept of a “society of nations” to apply to such entities, *mutatis mutandis*.

Obviously, the key ingredients here are *shared interests and values* leading to a *national self-conception* that is committed to reciprocal *rules and institutions* in one's dealings with the other(s).

The development of even a system of states, much less an international society, assumes the end of isolation among states such that their contacts with each other are no longer occasional or insignificant. Alternatively, the development of a system or society involves the end of an empire (including the "soft empire" of medieval Christendom presided over by the Church and Pope), resulting in independent states which now must relate to each other as distinct kingdoms or nations without an overarching authority. In either alternative, a system arises naturally when geography throws the nations into such contact with each other that they must necessarily take account of their neighbor's actions and reactions. A society, on the other hand, must be willed: it requires deliberate intention by nations who choose to develop ways of relating to each other directly, out of which common institutions and norms arise, as well as a sense of being bound by those institutions and norms.

The process by which a system becomes a society is long and arduous, characterized by fits and starts, advances and retreats. "System" and "society" are end points on a continuum. One goal of international relations as Bull sees it is to move from system to society, from narrow national interest toward a broadened international interest, slowly widening and deepening the connections and bonds between states. He rejects the realist notion that it is impossible for nations to move beyond selfish national interest narrowly construed.

As a system evolves toward a society, certain practices and institutions are developed, the most elementary of which have to do with leaving each other alone, respecting each other's status and territory, in other words, regard for each other's independence and internal

sovereignty; a commitment to honor agreements made with another nation; and a tacit understanding that there should be certain restraints in exercising force against each other. From there, more specific rules and institutions may develop as greater mutual trust and a deepened commitment to the long-term preservation of the international society evolve, and as nations are able to see beyond short-term utility to a longer-term interest in preserving and deepening international norms. These advanced steps are often the result of economic activity, such as trade, and are characterized by a growing interdependence. As noted, the process is not linear and is marked by periodic setbacks and reversions to older anarchical forms and habits. This is inevitable given the central importance of power among states in an anarchical arrangement whose first concern is for their own security. Only in a longer arc can one see a movement toward the evolution of international patterns of greater cooperation, and even this may require looking separately at different international societies at different times.

A system can evolve into a society only if the cooperating states, perceiving the long-term utility of cooperation and mutual forbearance, affirmatively will it and seek to sustain it over time. Once formed, an international society may widen as well as deepen, expanding its reach by embracing nations which were formerly excluded. As Bull explains, the concept of international society originated in Europe with the end of Christendom and the birth of “new Europe” with the Westphalian treaties of 1648. (*Id.*, 17) Following a serious interruption by Napoleonic France 150 years later, it was restored in the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the resulting “Concert of Europe” which lasted at least to the Crimean War (1853-1856), and in an attenuated form until World War I. It began and was long confined to Christian Europe. However, diplomatic history since the beginning of the nineteenth century is a story of the slow expansion of that society beyond Europe, beginning with the recognition of Ottoman Turkey at

the end of the Crimean War (in the Treaty of Paris, 1856). Although the Ottoman Empire had long encompassed a large and (at times) powerful group of subject nations (and was thus part of the international system), it was not thought that the Muslim Turks sufficiently shared the moral values and commitments of Christian Europeans to be admitted to European society, with its expectation of reciprocal and reliable obligations. This changed because of Europe's long experience with the Empire, as well as its desire to control the fate of the many pieces of the Empire as it underwent its long decline. Later in the nineteenth century with the Meiji Restoration, Japan was recognized as part of the international society. Since then, and particularly following World War II under the auspices of American hegemony, the nascent international society has come to encompass, at least in an elementary fashion, most nations of the world, *i.e.*, those who have signed on to the Charter of the United Nations. (*Id.*, 31-36)

Bull recognizes that international society can involve both “thick” and “thin” relationships among its members, and the expansion to more nations has resulted in a “thinning” of the ties that bind many of them together (although “thicker” relationships subsist among subsets of nations who share common cultural or political traits). The U.N. Charter, though often honored in the breach more than in compliance, supplies fragile but significant connections among the nations. These co-exist with thicker bonds among the European states themselves (with the strongest bonds of all among European Union states) and between those states and their former colonies and present democratic allies, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as Japan, South Korea, and Israel. (*Id.*, 26-38.)

There is nothing inevitable about the continuation of the international society such as it is, much less its evolution in the direction of a thicker or deeper set of relationships. It is not “written into history.” In fact, Bull worries that there has been a shrinking of the “consensus

about common interests and values that provides the foundation” of the international society. (*Id.*, 303)² Like Martin Wight, he recognizes the argument that such a society is plausible only among European and North American nations and a few others with established democratic traditions and a long-standing commitment to the rule of law. But ultimately he rejects such limitations. In principle, there is no reason that all nations cannot commit to the support of common rules and institutions (what Robert Jackson would later call “procedural norms”), no matter what their internal governance. In practice, the process will undoubtedly be a long one.

In *The Anarchical Society*, Bull acknowledges the role of international organizations such as the United Nations. But “institutions” in his usage means more than organizations (although they are included). “Institutions” are patterns of intentional collective human conduct which express, enforce, and to some extent mold understandings of the relationships among those engaging in such conduct. He names five institutions of international politics: the balance of power, international law (including organizations created by treaty such as the UN), the practice of diplomacy, war, and the role of the great powers. (These are covered, respectively, in chapters 5 through 9.) I will discuss separately only international law and diplomacy (see “International Law and Moral Principles” below), while weaving in aspects of the other subjects as they arise in broader context. Moral considerations infuse virtually all of Bull’s perspectives. He deals with justice and with natural law, both in *Anarchical* and in his later writings, as I will discuss below. In all these areas, Bull’s approach carries forward core concerns of Reinhold Niebuhr, whether Bull was conscious of it or not.

Like Niebuhr, Bull never forgets the fundamental insights of realism, especially its appreciation for the abiding features of human nature and the preeminent role of power in

² As discussed below, this shrinkage is one reason Bull looks to natural law as a potential source for restoring the recognition of common values among states.

relations among collectivities. Yet, Bull differs from most realists in his analysis of Hobbes and Locke and the state of nature. For many realists, including neorealists because of their adoption of anarchy as the key paradigm for understanding state behavior, Hobbes is central because of his description of the anarchical state of nature as a war of all against all, with possible mitigation (including submission to the Leviathan) being based solely on calculations of individual self-interest. In a masterful deconstruction of the Hobbesian anarchical paradigm as it has been used by IR theorists, Bull shows how it has been consistently misapplied and demonstrates convincingly that the situation of nations in an anarchical system is incomparable to that of individuals in the state of nature. (*Anarchical*, 44-49)³ For one thing, contemporary and past history do not exhibit anything like a war of all against all, despite abundant wars and armed conflicts. Most states are at peace with most other states most of the time. For another, states do not have the same limited mortality as humans, nor do they sleep; therefore, their lives are not so unguarded nor their survival so insecure as that of the solitary individual in the state of nature. Nation-states provide for the common defense in a much more comprehensive way than any individual could possibly do – and they do so precisely through sustained cooperation. Even in the international sphere, nations cooperate with each other in alliances, trade agreements, mutual assistance pacts, and countless other ways that would be unrecognizable in Hobbes's state of nature. In fact, Bull argues, Locke's is the better analogy:

Locke's conception of the state of nature as a society without government does in fact provide us with a close analogy with the society of states. In modern international society, as in Locke's state of nature, there is no central authority able to interpret and enforce the law, and thus individual members of the society must themselves judge and

³ For a similarly masterful and more extended deconstruction of Hobbes's state of nature as an analogy to international relations, see Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 27-63. Beitz, like Bull, finds Locke's state of nature a more accurate paradigm for relations among states. Beitz also makes a compelling argument for an international morality that goes beyond principles derived from reciprocity or the enlightened or long-term interests of states. See footnote below regarding Beitz's advocacy of international distributive justice, which goes farther than anything suggested by Bull or Niebuhr (or John Rawls).

enforce it. [Thus,] ... justice in such a society is crude and uncertain. But there is nevertheless a great difference between such a rudimentary form of social life and none at all. (*Id.*, 46-47)

In the thought of Bull, as of Niebuhr, there is the promise, motivated in part by ethical concern (though not by theological promise as in Niebuhr's case), of building forms of international cooperation that are more than mere tools of great-power aggrandizement, and which are based on states' ability to see their own interest less narrowly but through a longer lens which incorporates the interests of other states within the nation's conception of its own interest. It is not (as in a constructivist or Kantian vision) that national interest will eventually be replaced by commitment to a cosmopolitan world order. It is rather that national interest, as in Locke's state of nature, is tutored over time by cumulative experience and moral learning, to transcend its narrow self and to move incrementally toward an enlightened national interest which includes and is shared by others in the world community, both for their mutual benefit and for the development of norms that underpin the community. Such a goal is certainly not assured or inevitable; but it is also not hopeless or myopic. In other words, it is realistic.

Order and Justice

I noted earlier that Bull's Augustinian understanding of order ("a good disposition of discrepant parts, each in its fittest place") bears some resemblance to the Platonic notion of justice. In other writings though, Bull invokes Aristotle's understanding of justice, with its emphasis on equality and just desserts:

As regards the meaning in general of the concept of justice I have nothing to add to the views of Aristotle, who said all that, for our present purposes, needs to be said on this subject, long ago. ... [W]hat we mean by it is a particular kind of right conduct, viz., conduct in which persons are treated fairly, or given their rights and benefits that are due to them. (Hagey Lectures, 208) (*accord, Anarchical*, 77)

Before his premature death made it impossible, Bull intended to write a companion book to *The Anarchical Society* which would focus on justice in the way that *Anarchical* focuses on order. Although this did not happen, *Anarchical* itself (along with the Hagey Lectures discussed below) gives a good indication of how Bull regarded justice, particularly in relation to order. In particular, three fundamental propositions stand out, all of which are parallel to Niebuhr's thought. First, order is foundational to justice:

[J]ustice, in any of its forms, is realisable only in a context of order; it is only if there is a pattern of social activity in which elementary or primary goals of social life are in some degree provided for, that advanced or secondary goals can be secured." (*Anarchical*, 83)

Second, the logical priority of order before justice does not mean that it is to be preferred over justice in every case (*Id.*, 93). Indeed, stability or long-term order requires sustained attentiveness to issues of justice:

Any regime that provides order in world politics will need to appease demands for just change, at least to some degree, if it is to endure; and thus an enlightened pursuit of the goal of order will take account also of the demand for justice. (*Id.*, 91)

Finally, giving priority to order assumes – and is justified only when – the political system itself (including the international system) meets at least elementary standards of justice. In other words, order is a legitimate priority only where the existing order is not an expression of systemic repression and injustice. (*Id.*) If a political order grows corrupt and unjust, the preference for and justifiability of order over disorder is progressively weakened until resistance is justified. Eventually, the point may be reached where a thoroughly unjust order is not worth preserving at all and the moral-political necessity of its elimination would justify the disorder required to destroy and replace it.

To summarize, order for Bull comes before justice in the sense that the latter cannot exist without the former; but order is not justified – and is not long sustainable – without justice, at

least some degree, in the absence of which order descends into repression and the state or system forfeits its legitimacy.

Bull appreciates the contribution of the natural law tradition to international moral development, and he also appreciates the tradition of the just war. In reviewing Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars*, Bull applauds Walzer's recognition of "the moral reality of war," that is, the acknowledgment that "war is as a matter of fact an inherently normative phenomenon; it is unimaginable apart from rules by which human beings recognize what behavior is appropriate to it and define their attitudes toward it." ("Recapturing the Just War for Political Theory," *World Politics* (July 1979), 595) Bull links the inescapably moral aspect of war to moral claims in politics more generally:

[B]ecause human beings do have moral feelings and make moral choices, they have these feelings and make these choices when they are at war; and we, who have moral feelings and are accustomed to making moral judgments, are as entitled to have these feelings and make these judgments about war as about anything else. (*Id.*, 596)

Bull then engages in a fruitful critique and defense of Walzer's premises, in an exercise which Niebuhr would have appreciated. Walzer can be faulted, Bull argues, for intentionally declining to elaborate and defend his fundamental ethical assumptions, which are contestable by those with a different philosophy. For example, Walzer assumes (1) that individual human rights and the protection of non-combatants are important enough to trump an effort for victory at any cost, even if it means jeopardizing ultimate victory in a justified war; (2) that some wars, despite the enormous costs, are worth fighting, and so pacifism is not a viable option; and (3) that "necessity" in a "supreme emergency" may justify otherwise immoral acts. As an example of the latter, he cites Britain's "terror bombing" of German cities in 1940-41 when Britain's survival was in danger – but *not* the later fire bombing (such as of Dresden) after the supreme danger had passed. Each of these propositions, and others which underlie Walzer's positions, are

contested by those who strike a different balance among the considerations that he admits to be in play. Yet, Bull notes, Walzer mostly assumes and does not defend the correctness of his underlying moral propositions

On the other hand, Walzer's decision is understandable on at least two grounds, Bull concedes. First, we are divided on ultimate ethical foundations these days. Therefore, as Walzer says, if he undertook the complex task of defending his ethical foundations, the book would probably never get beyond them – and it would be a very different book for a very different audience. Second, Walzer takes support for his approach from the fact that with respect to many political-moral issues of the day, including civil rights, nondiscrimination on grounds of race or gender, the need for some degree of economic equity, and most of the principles of the just war doctrine itself – there is a high degree of consensus in western society, even though people's foundations upon which such beliefs rest may differ. Walzer seeks to articulate a set of norms which, he believes, will reflect a substantial consensus, whether or not those who agree with them also agree on the moral grounds.

All in all, Bull engages with Walzer's book in a very Niebuhrian fashion, criticizing it on one level and defending it on another. This kind of dialectical, rigorous yet generous engagement with an important thinker is characteristic of Bull, whether he is addressing the work of Hobbes, Walzer, or others. His engagement with Augustine is more limited, but as noted above, it critically informs his understanding and definition of order, which is basic to his whole theory of international society. Moreover, he acknowledges and pays tribute to Augustine's role in the thinking of his mentors Butterfield and (especially) Wight, whose reliance on Augustine was much more extensive.

The Hagey Lectures

Bull delivered the Hagey Lectures at the University of Waterloo, Canada, in 1983. They were published in 1984, shortly before he died in May 1985. Entitled, “Justice in International Relations,” they are the best account we have of the thoughts he would have incorporated into his uncompleted book on justice, the planned sequel to *Anarchical Society* which would have rounded out the earlier book’s focus on order.

As noted, Bull began the lectures with an Aristotelian definition of justice, one which stresses “a particular kind of right conduct” in which “persons are treated fairly, or given their rights and benefits that are due to them.” (208⁴) The demand of many states today, especially third-world nations, is that nations be treated as international “persons,” such that principles of justice apply to nations as well as individuals, lest all international politics be the domain of the great powers for whom the many lesser powers are mere pawns. Bull does not disagree with this demand, and in fact considers inequality among nations – the relationship between smaller, developing countries and the great powers, economically developed and politically dominant – to be a central issue of international justice. It is this which provides the context for his consideration of justice in international politics.

After offering a review of third-world demands for justice, an account which is sympathetic in general but critical as to certain details, Bull turns to the question of what constitutes justice among nations; and the related question of what responsibilities the great powers and developed nations bear to promote justice among nations. In response, he develops a framework consisting of five “concepts about justice in international relations” which western nations ought, as a matter of shared international morality, to embrace. (*Id.*, 219)

⁴ All citations to the Hagey Lectures are to their published form in Alderson and Hurrell, eds., *Hedley Bull on International Society*, chap. VIII, “Justice in International Relations: The 1983 Hagey Lectures (1984), 206-245.

1. In the first of these concepts of justice, Bull takes aim at the idea of sovereignty. Dating at least from Hobbes and the Peace of Westphalia, reinforced by Grotius, Hegel and much of international law, the idea is that states are entitled to a strong (and perhaps absolute) presumption of sovereignty, both internal (where they exercise non-appealable authority over the people within a delimited territory) and external (where they are entitled to recognition, non-aggression, and non-interference). Ordinarily, a state is entitled to this status because it has occupied and ruled such land and people for a sustained period of time. Bull certainly recognizes sovereignty, but argues that it should not be seen as a monolithic concept, and moreover that the rise of non-state actors has weakened the uniformity of the concept of sovereignty. Therefore, its contours, shades, degrees, and limitations are those determined by the international community of nations:

First, whatever rights are due to states or national or other actors in international relations, they are subject to and limited by the rights of the international community. The rights of sovereign states, and of sovereign peoples or nations, derive from the rules of the international community or society and are limited by them. (*Id.*)

This is a radical idea: that the scope of state sovereignty is limited and defined by the international society, rather than the power of international society being limited and defined by sovereign states. The further implication is that sovereignty is a flexible concept whose dimensions may evolve over time as determined by the international society.

Bull notes that clashes over the scope of sovereignty often arise over natural resources, such as oil and valuable minerals, which are randomly distributed across the planet. He rejects both the absolute right over territorial natural resources sometimes asserted by third-world powers, as well as great-power assertion of absolute rights of access to essential resources. The degree of national sovereignty over natural resources must be negotiated by the world community: “the

idea of sovereign rights existing apart from the rules laid down by international society itself and enjoyed without qualification has to be rejected in principle.” (*Id.*, 220)

2. While the primary arena for the discussion of international justice remains that of nations, there is a growing recognition that justice is ultimately a matter of rights and benefits of “individual persons throughout the world as a whole.” (*Id.*, 220) To be sure, the world we live in is one of independent states and no world state is in prospect or even desirable. Nonetheless, “within this system, the idea of the rights and duties of the individual person has come to have a place, albeit an insecure one, and it is our responsibility to seek to extend it.” (*Id.*, 220)

A tangible expression of this recognition since World War II arose from the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes tribunals. Since the publication of *Anarchical* in 1977 (the same year as Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars*), and since Bull’s death in 1985, international support has grown for humanitarian intervention in certain cases of domestic genocide or other extreme crimes by a government against its people,⁵ as well as for the more general “responsibility to protect,” understood as a government’s moral obligations to its own people.⁶ These concepts derive from the evolving concern for people of the world, and not just nations. The speed of modern transportation and communication has contributed to this concern, making the world seem smaller and acquainting everyone with peoples and problems that, before, would have been too remote to matter, or would simply have been unknown.

3. The ultimate touchstone of international law and of international society is a moral one, namely, “our emerging sense of a world common good,” separate and apart from the good of any nation or group of nations. (*Id.*, 222) This sense is in its infancy; Bull’s acknowledgment that a

⁵ See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, “Humanitarian Intervention,” 101-108.

⁶ See International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa, Canada: International Development Research Center, 2001)

sense of world common good is barely “emerging” echoes Niebuhr’s observation of the thinness of popular support for world order (and, by implication, world justice). But a start has been made.

Just as this emerging sense of world common good ought to condition the limitations imposed on national sovereignty, it must also be the reference point of other common world problems, such as the stewardship and use of nuclear weapons, the global imbalance between resources and population, and the dangers of global ecological disaster. (*Id.*) We are all “world citizens” when it comes to dealing with problems of this magnitude; there is no practical moral alternative to the concept of a world common good.

Of course, “it is one thing to recognize the concept of a world common good, but another to devise the policies that might promote it.” (*Id.*) Nations are by nature jealous and selfish with a tendency to define self-interest in narrow terms; the international institutions for defining, much less enforcing, international norms based on common good are weak and diffuse – and themselves subject to great-power capture. Those who seek a common good will inevitably face discouragement if they expect progress that is easy or final. Nonetheless, we have no choice but to keep up the work of strengthening the building blocks we have in the hope that later generations will add to them and improve the possibilities of justice and the common good. This echoes Niebuhr’s statement that, “[n]othing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.” (*IAH*, 63) This hope, whether grounded in Niebuhr’s Christian faith or in a general faith in humanity, is an essential moral motivator for realists, who reject the idealist vision of a coming transformation that will be fully realized in history.⁷

⁷ As discussed earlier, Niebuhr would point out that it is precisely with respect to hope as a source of moral motivation that Christian realism has an advantage over Bull’s “naturalistic” or “humanistic” case for world common good. Bull abandoned the religious presuppositions of Butterfield and Wight and thereby forfeited their resources for hope in carrying on the difficult and discouraging work of building an international society and a sense

4. With the recognition of moral obligations to peoples and not just to nations has come an additional facet of international justice: the concern for the material and economic well-being of peoples, particularly in undeveloped or “third-world” countries, many of whom are former western colonies. There may even be a consensus among developed western countries that they have a moral responsibility to secure at least minimum standards of human welfare across the globe. To be sure, the actual steps taken to implement this responsibility have been appallingly modest, but “the mere existence of this moral concern with welfare on a world scale represents a major change in our sensibilities.” (*Id.*, 221)

Related to this welfare concern is an expansion of the concept of justice from the traditional occupation with reciprocal or commutative rights among nations to a newer dimension of distributive justice among nations and affecting peoples; in other words an expansion from procedural justice to more substantive concerns. Like the human-welfare dimension, the focus on distributive justice has been driven in large part by the economically less-developed nations, who point out the overwhelming proportion of wealth controlled by a few leading countries, in contrast to the poverty of the rest, including those countries that provide the raw resources that have fueled much of western wealth.

Bull acknowledges that the arguments for international distributive justice are compelling, although much work needs to be done to determine its scope and limits. He credits the United Nations as a fruitful coordinator of efforts aimed at distributive justice in areas such as the law of the seas and international waterways, environmental protection, and third-world aid and development. In the case of international trade he credits such organizations as GATT (the

of world common good. Bull’s hope must be located elsewhere, perhaps in a general faith in humankind or in an emerging moral consensus or in a “shared background of moral belief” (from his article, “Natural Law and International Relations,” p. 180, discussed below). Niebuhr, of course, never abandoned Christian hope or his conviction that without it moral motivation is weakened – although he did not argue that such hope is non-existent or impossible. See the section on “Hope and Realism” in the preceding chapter on Niebuhr.

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which was succeeded by the World Trade Organization in 1995).

Despite the force of the arguments for international distributive justice, Bull sees three major obstacles to its advance. The first one – the lack of adequate theoretical work on the nature of such justice – has been more fully addressed since his death, although without a scholarly consensus on the nature or implementation of such justice.⁸ The second problem is that, in the absence of world government, there is no “distributor” of distributive justice and no final authority to decide the extent to which resources should be transferred from wealthy nations to needy nations or peoples, or on what conditions, in order to meet a minimal standard of justice. “[I]n international society ... [t]he distribution of rights and benefits will be determined in the main by contending states and other actors, united if at all by only a very partial and tentative sense of community.” (*Id.*, 224) This is also a ground of Niebuhr’s skepticism about anything as ambitious as international distributive justice. As Bull puts it:

Finally, there is a “clash of competing principles” regarding the goals of such justice: Is a just distribution one among states or nations, or among individual persons? Does it consist in an “end-state,” a just result of a process of distribution, or is it to be thought of as a just process or transaction? If a just distribution is a particular “end-state,” is this to be thought of as an equal distribution, a distribution according to need, a distribution that can be justified by utility or by some conception of an original contract or in some other way? If, on the other hand, the justice of a distribution lies in the process by which it comes about, what processes are we to regard as just and what as unjust? Have the riches of the advanced market economy countries been justly acquired or have they not? (*Id.*, 225)

⁸ The case for international distributive justice to one degree or another has been made in a number of thoughtful monographs and articles since 1985. The thought of John Rawls has been a major catalyst. One of the most influential proponents of international distributive justice is Charles R. Beitz in *Political Theory and International Relations*. Beitz advocates applying Rawls’ difference principle to the problem of international inequality. Rawls subsequently considered and rejected Beitz’s approach in *The Law of Peoples* (115-119), confining the difference principle to domestic societies. Rawls went on to address international distributive justice in the context of a “duty of assistance” to burdened societies (*id.*, 105-120), a more modest approach than that advocated by Beitz. The debate is ongoing, but the theoretical aspects are no longer being neglected as Bull thought they were in his time.

Despite the lack of consensus on these and other questions, Bull argues that the significant thing for now is that we are having the discussion. It will be a very long road to achieving anything like a world-wide consensus, even among wealthy nations, on what distributive justice requires – even among those who recognize distributive justice as a principle. But “in a faltering way, the principle that distribution of wealth throughout human society as a whole should meet a basic need for welfare, has been generally recognized.” (*Id.*)

5. Finally, Bull insists, “justice in international relations, in any of the senses in which we have discussed the concept, has to be reconciled with order.” (*Id.*, 226) This raises the unavoidable tension between order and justice in relations among nations; and the further fact that, when these cannot be reconciled, hard choices must be made. The automatic tendency is to choose order because everyone agrees on the necessity of order (particularly political elites who hold power), while there is much less disagreement on the principles of international justice, particularly cosmopolitan justice, including distributive justice, which involves citizens *within* states rather than relations between them. Nonetheless, an exclusive focus on order which neglects justice will, in the long run, be self-defeating. That said, Bull concludes by noting that there will remain many situations where order will have to take precedence over justice, especially since “[s]ome of the conceptions of justice which we have examined can be pressed at this stage only at the price of placing peace and security in jeopardy.” (*Id.*, 227)

International Law and Moral Principles

Barry Buzan, a present-day English School thinker, points to the centrality of international law in Hedley Bull’s concept of international society: “[I]n its most basic and essential form, international society is a legal construction,” since concepts like sovereignty and the exclusive right to self-government are inherently legal concepts. (Buzan 1993, 346) Bull himself regarded

international law as deeply constitutive of international society, as opposed to an international *system* where law is almost entirely absent.

Yet, at least elementary forms of international society are possible without international law. Bull points out that neither the ancient Greek city-states nor the post-Alexandrian Hellenistic states nor the ancient Indian city-states embedded their relationships in anything resembling international law. After the advent of the Roman Empire and of ancient and medieval Christendom, however, the recognition of legal principles among nations became a permanent characteristic of western thought:

That modern international society includes international law as one of its institutions is a consequence of the historical accident that it evolved out of a previous unitary system, Western Christendom, and that in this system notions of law – embodied in Roman law, divine law, canon law, and natural law – were pre-eminent. (*Anarchical*, 137)

As Bull was well aware, there are four generally-recognized sources of international law, reflected in the founding Statute of the International Court of Justice (Art. 38) established under the UN Charter in 1945:

- [1] international conventions, whether general or particular, establishing rules expressly recognized by the contesting states;
- [2] international custom, as evidence of a general practice accepted as law;
- [3] the general principles of law recognized by civilized nations; and
- [4] subject to the provisions of Article 59, judicial decisions and the teachings of the most highly qualified publicists [scholars] of the various nations⁹

Only the first and, to some extent, the fourth of these sources consist of “positive” law such as treaties, other formal international agreements, or official decisions of the Court itself. The second and third principles – custom and “civilized” principles and practices (often discussed together as “custom”) – are the result of long consensus among European states. These, in turn,

⁹ Art. 59 provides that, “The decision of the Court has no binding force except between the parties and in respect of that particular case.” In other words, the ruling on the specific case binds only the parties. Nonetheless, the reasoning of the court, including the legal principles on which it relies, may be and are cited as precedent for what the law is.

as Bull notes, are largely based on natural law as developed by Aquinas and other Christian authorities, later “secularized” by Grotius. (*Id.*, 142) After Grotius, the “law of nations” rather than “natural law” was spoken of by international lawyers. While many of them were aware of international law’s foundation in natural law, references to the latter became fewer and fewer. Nonetheless, the idea that fundamental principles of international law are “natural” in the sense of universal and springing from the nature of humans and of society (if not from God), persists to this day.

The great contribution of Grotius and the international lawyers, as Bull sees it, was to clothe moral principles with the aura and authoritativeness of law, widely recognized as binding on “civilized” nations, despite the absence of enforcement mechanisms. Because most states, most peoples, most of the time, comprehend the need for order, resort to law as the mutually binding set of rules to mark and preserve that order is recognized by an increasing number of nations. Beginning with the European state system after Westphalia, this understanding (even in the absence of compliance with it) spread outward in the ensuing three-and-a-half centuries, eventually encompassing much of the entire world community. (Bull recounts this story at pp. 26-38 of *Anarchical Society*.)

Thus understood, international law serves at least three functions. First, it identifies the mutual recognition of national sovereignty as “the supreme normative principle of the political organisation of mankind,” the bedrock of “a society of sovereign states.” (*Id.*, 134) Since Westphalia, which itself followed the demise of medieval Christendom, national sovereignty and its corollary of nonintervention have been the bedrock principles of international order. To be sure, these have been repeatedly violated in practice, and need not be absolute in theory; but they have never been displaced as the agreed structure of international society.

In the second function identified by Bull, international law goes beyond sovereignty and nonintervention to build up “basic rules of coexistence among states” including in particular (a) rules regarding agreements between states and the keeping of those agreements – *pacta sunt servanda*, based in part on the Ninth Commandment against bearing false witness; and (b) rules restricting violence among states, particularly in warfare, based in part on Christian just-war notions of *jus in bello*. (*Id.*, 135)

Bull’s final function of international law takes into account the limited coercive means available for its enforcement, as well as the recognition that many nations will pursue at least their most important national interests in contravention of international law. But it also takes account of the wide-ranging consensus that all nations benefit from international law most of the time, and the near-universal desire to be seen to be supporting it. Thus, this third function is to provide the legal structure for creating affirmative incentives for nations to integrate compliance into its perceived national interest:

[I]t is not only through imposing restraints on international behaviour that international law helps to secure compliance with the basic rules of international society. The basic factors making for compliance with international law – acceptance by the parties of the ends or values underlying the agreement, coercion by a superior power, and reciprocal interest – exist independently of legal commitments, and without their operation legal commitments are ineffective. But the framework of international law serves to mobilise and channel these factors in the direction of compliance with agreements. In particular, international law provides a means by which states can advertise their intentions with regard to the matter in question; provide one another with reassurance about their future policies in relations to it; specify precisely what the nature of the agreement is, including its boundaries and limiting conditions; and solemnise the agreement in such a way as to create an expectation of permanence. (*Id.*, 136)¹⁰

¹⁰ This last sentence is a good summary of what, much expanded and elaborated, is the basis of the school known as liberal internationalism (discussed in an earlier chapter). See Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, arguing that nations have a myriad of reasons to support international institutions because of the benefits such institutions provide in facilitating and monitoring agreements, thus making compliance or non-compliance transparent; in reassuring trading partners of present intentions, thus cementing future relationships; and in creating various efficiencies for mutual profit and reciprocal political-economic support.

Relatedly, Bull argues that the oft-made critique of international law – that compliance occurs only as and when it is consistent with a nation’s self-interest – is a false criticism. It is true that states often do not comply when the rule of international law threatens what they perceive as an important national interest. Nonetheless, the proof of international law’s importance lies in “the fact that [states] so often judge it in their interest to conform to it,” even in derogation of their short-term interests. (*Id.*, 134) Thus, one of the central if unfinished tasks of international society is to reinforce and expand nations’ recognition that their own long-run self-interest is served by being citizens in good standing of the international society, in compliance with international law, even when it hurts. This is a long and hard task, including with respect to our own nation which in recent years has seemingly departed more than ever from international norms. Nonetheless, Bull is convinced, as Niebuhr was, that progress toward compliance with such norms (whether expressed as morals or as law) is possible and worth striving for.

By emphasizing the intimate connection between international society and law, Bull reminds us that, as the writ of international law is limited and its expansion slow, so is the progress of international society deliberate and incremental. This modest, realistic recognition of the limits of progress, coupled with insistence that progress can and must be made, echoes one of Niebuhr’s persistent themes throughout his writings.

Natural Law and Moral Judgment

If, as Hedley Bull believed, moral judgment is an inescapable component in understanding and evaluating the behavior of nation-states, natural law provides a valuable source of norms for making those judgments. Indeed, Bull says, “the natural-law tradition remains one of the richest sources of theoretical insight into the matters dealt with in the present study,” meaning order and justice. (*Anarchical*, 6) Part of what makes Bull, like Martin Wight, a self-professed “Grotian” is his commitment to the enduring wisdom of natural law, which Grotius made the foundation of international law. This recognition applies even for those like Bull (but unlike Wight) who deny or are agnostic as to its divine origin.

Bull believes that natural law, being a universal set of procedural and substantive norms accessible to rational discovery and argument, is even more important to international society now than it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when international society centered on the European powers. In those times, the basis of international law was more positivist than it is now; that is, the system operated on a body of experience and diplomatic practice which had evolved over time and whose authority arose from the consensus evidenced by the actual behavior and cooperation of European states in proximity to each other who shared a common cultural history. To be sure, this consensus was grounded in Christian principles (including natural law principles) which were the common heritage of Europe. But the Christian principles and foundation were givens; there was rarely a need to resort explicitly to “first principles” because a set of specific practices had grown up which earned a certain sanctity by their common observance through time. On the other hand, in the years since the First World War, as the international society has moved well beyond Europe to encompass almost all the nations on the planet, the specific practices of European states in the classical period, while still broadly

honored, have lost some of their “automatic” authority and their ability to spawn ever-expanded and more concrete principles. Therefore, Bull argues, a resort to universal natural-law moral principles is useful and necessary. To some extent this has already occurred, as evidenced by the provisions in the treaties of the League of Nations (the League Covenant) and the United Nations (the UN Charter). Bull concludes:

In [the twentieth] century ... the theory of international society has moved away from the emphasis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century legal and historical positivism on existing practice as the source of norms about international conduct, in favour of a return to natural law principles or to some contemporary equivalent of them (*Anarchical*, 37-38)

Two years after the publication of *The Anarchical Society*, Bull published an essay called, “Natural Law and International Relations,”¹¹ which he opened by saying, “There can be no enterprise more important to the student of International Relations than to understand the bearing on his subject of the tradition that asserts the existence of natural law.” (171) Here again, Bull emphasizes the enhanced importance of natural law in a world community that encompasses much more than Europe. Echoing Grotius, he argues that whether one attributes the basic precepts of natural law to divinity or to the distillation of shared human wisdom, they offer a universal starting point of contemporary relevance for defining the relationships among peoples and nations who otherwise lack “thick” commonality:

Natural law theories assert the existence of rules that are valid universally and are not confined to particular societies or cultures. Now that there exists a global international society that has clearly outgrown its originally European social or cultural base, and doubts may be entertained as to whether any genuinely universal society or culture has yet taken its place, a doctrine which proclaims that rules are valid among all mankind quite irrespective of the social and cultural facts of the time contains a strong appeal. (*Id.*)

¹¹*British Journal of International Studies*, vol. 5 no. 2 (Jul. 1979), 171-181; reprinted in Alderson and Hurrell, eds., *Hedley Bull on International Society*, 157-169. My citations are to the original article.

At another point, he attributes the “cardinal appeal of the natural law doctrine” to the fact that “it offers us a fixed point of reference” and thus a “corpus of moral truth that is beyond dispute.” (172)

Because the article is a review essay of a book by the Scottish political theorist E.B.F. Midgley defending natural law in IR analysis,¹² Bull is not required to commit himself on the truth (as opposed to the utility) of natural law. Toward the end of the essay, however, speaking in his own voice, Bull makes two points which underline his fealty to Grotius and to Grotius’s commitment to natural law. On the one hand, he acknowledges that natural law presupposes that moral questions can be decided and moral quandaries resolved, at least in principle, by the use of rational argument accessible to all humans. While that is a widely-shared view among many, including in the diplomatic community, it is not held by everyone or with respect to all moral questions; and to the extent it is not accepted, there is an obstacle to arriving at moral judgments on the basis of universal natural law.

On the other hand, he continues, because rational discourse is accepted by most participants in the international arena, it provides the closest thing we have to a universal basis for discussing and arriving at norms applicable to all nations – norms which are understood to have ethical (not merely utilitarian) force. Empirically, he notes, there is a striking similarity among fundamental ethical and political norms subscribed to by statespeople and international public figures. Almost every nation has signed on to the UN Charter and agreed thereby to its basic procedural norms and, publicly at least, expresses them as having moral force. The League of Nations was a political failure, but virtually no one argues that it was because the Covenant’s ethical precepts were wrong. The norms thus arrived at may or may not be “objectively” moral in a strict philosophical sense, much less grounded in an agreed understanding of a universal God.

¹² Midgley, *The Natural Law Tradition and the Theory of International Relations* (London: Paul Elek, 1975).

Nonetheless, “where there is a shared background of moral belief” – and Bull believes that there is such a sufficient shared background – “discussion can proceed for all practical purposes as if there were an ‘objective’ or ‘natural’ morality” founded on “certain moral premises that are shared universally, or nearly universally.” (180) And the universality of shared moral premises is crucial to the advancement of the international society:

To draw attention to the fact that these very widely shared rules seem to reflect not the conventions of particular times and places but the nature of human beings and the perennial situation in which they find themselves, has been one of the contributions of the natural law tradition.” (*Id.*)

In the same month as the essay occasioned by Midgley’s book (July 1979), Bull also published a review essay of Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars*. I discussed this essay earlier (“Recapturing the Just War for Political Theory,” *World Politics* (July 1979)) , including Bull’s criticism of Walzer for assuming rather than defending his basic philosophical norms. Bull goes beyond Walzer’s book, however, to lament the absence in just-war doctrine or in IR theory more generally of a stronger consensus on moral norms, such as exists “in relation to [domestic] issues of economic and social justice and equality,” where there has been “a remarkable and fruitful confluence of high ethical theory and practical concern.” (*Id.*, 599) He has in mind issues of racial justice and economic inequality, with respect to which “moral philosophy ... has broken out of its private world to illuminate once again great issues of public policy, and it has done so without lowering its standards of technical excellence.” (*Id.*)

Despite his disappointment at the lack of such confluence in IR studies, and despite the fact, as he notes, that value-free neorealism has caused an intentional divergence between ethical theory and practical concern, Bull argues nonetheless against abandoning the search for such confluence. First, in common with other English School thinkers, he asserts that any judgment of international politics is radically truncated if it does not include moral judgment as part of the

evaluation. Second, moral categories must be addressed if IR study is to avoid irrelevance: outside the academy, political decision-makers and ordinary citizens instinctively and emphatically apply moral categories when approving or disapproving the actions of nations, including their own. War is a supreme example: “war is as a matter of fact an inherently normative phenomenon” (595), and is so seen by citizens and political leaders alike. Only certain quarters of the academy purport to be ignorant of it. He continues:

because human beings do have moral feelings and make moral choices, they have these feelings and make these choices when they are at war; and we, who have moral feelings and are accustomed to making moral judgments, are as entitled to have these feelings and make these judgments about war as about anything else. (596)

The momentousness of the life-and-death issues dealt with in international politics, with the potential to enhance or jeopardize human welfare for millions of people, and even to annihilate human existence altogether, require that such issues be judged according to standards of right and wrong. They are too important to escape moral assessment. Especially in a democracy (although not only there), to exclude from the evaluation of governments any ethical reckoning is to forfeit the measure that is often the most important to those who participate in the democracy. In Bull’s view, as against that of the neorealists, just as IR study needs to preserve its pertinence by paying attention to the practical choices that diplomats and statespeople make, so must it pay regard to the moral element in the behavior of those same persons and the states for which they act. In paying such moral regard, one of the richest sources of norms for Bull is natural law.

It is evident that Bull, like Martin Wight, saw natural law differently than Reinhold Niebuhr did. Bull and Wight followed in the footsteps of Grotius who found in natural law a shared resource for international norms. At a time when international society was stretching itself far beyond Europe, Wight and Bull (and later, Robert Jackson), while acknowledging the European origins of natural law as well as the law of nations, also believed that it contains moral precepts

of universal applicability, that it has been so accepted by many nations outside Europe, and therefore that it could be a force for unity among disparate nations and peoples. So far as I can determine, Niebuhr never explicitly considered the role of natural law in international law or the formation of international political norms as such. Yet, his later-life warming to natural law suggests that he would have been open to appreciating Bull's qualified but powerful embrace of natural law as a rich source of international moral consensus and ethical dialogue.

Common Culture and Social Tissue

It is apparent from what has been written that Bull and Niebuhr, more than almost any other international thinkers of their time, wrestled with the problem of culture or the need for common culture as a necessary ground of international society. Niebuhr stated his concerns in terms of the "social tissue" required to support robust international norms. He noted the necessity of developing "more perfect mutualities of daily living together"¹³ before a sustainable sense of world community could evolve. Although Bull stresses a common culture among states (rather than peoples), he and Niebuhr agree that beneath the structure of international law, institutions, and norms there must be a substructure of common cultural values (Bull's term) growing out of organic social tissue (Niebuhr's).

Of the two thinkers, Bull's concerns are more systematically expressed. He puts it in the form of a question: To what extent are notions of international society – incubated in Europe at a time when states shared common cultural, religious, and philosophical roots – transportable to the highly diverse non-European states which make up the overwhelming majority of today's nations and populations? European nation-states in the three hundred years from 1648 to 1945, shared both a common intellectual culture, consisting of common language, common religious or

¹³ This was in his essay, "The United Nations and the Free World," published in his booklet, *The World Crisis and American Responsibility*, 84.

philosophical outlook, and common literary and artistic traditions; and shared ethical foundations based in the teachings of the ancient Greeks, of the Hebrew prophets, and of the New Testament writers. The diversity of the world community strains the effort to find or build sufficient cultural foundations for an international society. Yet, the progress of twentieth-century international law, treaties, and institutions in articulating a body of norms to which there is widespread assent bears witness to the fact that much of the European heritage has indeed been transported and adapted to the larger world. But this progress is relatively recent, dating mostly to the period after World War II. And in many areas of the world, the norms are given only lip service and the institutions ignored except when observance serves national interests. The common culture remains thin and the tissue relatively weak in many places.

Whether a supportive world culture can be thickened and strengthened, or will wither or be overborne by the individual self-interest of states, will be a continuing question. In the absence of a just world government – which Bull, with Niebuhr and Kant, consider an impossibility – an international society striving to grow deeper roots while co-existing with the great powers whose influence will continue to be dominant, is the best we can realistically attain. Niebuhr, whose faith engenders trust in the long-term course of history, counsels patience and hope. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” So long as this is understood in terms of hope and not a certainty, Niebuhr would agree. So would Bull, at least in principle. Bull’s writing evinces a sober optimism based on modern history, demonstrating that international society can be widened and strengthened as it becomes progressively integrated into the perceived self-interest of the same great powers who are also its impediments.

In the next chapter, I will discuss Robert Jackson, whose thought will elaborate and expand upon Bull's insights, and thus further illuminate some of the issues that troubled both Bull and Niebuhr.

Chapter 11

Robert Jackson and Global Covenant

Robert Jackson, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at Boston University, is a major English School thinker on this side of the Atlantic. He sees the English School as an ongoing conversation about international systems and the international society, involving

a variety of theoretical inquiries which conceive of international relations as a world not merely of power or prudence or wealth or capacity or domination but also one of recognition, association, membership, equality, equity, legitimate interests, rights, reciprocity, customs and conventions, agreements and disagreements, disputes, offenses, injuries, damages, reparations, and the rest: the normative vocabulary of human conduct. (“Pluralism in International Political Theory,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 18 no. 3 (July 1992), 271-281, 271)

The English School as elaborated by Jackson builds on classical realism and incorporates elements of liberal internationalism and constructivism, but parts company with neorealism and the other major schools in their exclusive concentration on impersonal forces and phenomena, their obsession with metrics, game theory, and rational choice, and their rejection of any normative role in IR analysis. Jackson insists on the humane, diplomatic, and ethical traditions of IR study which he believes to be more relevant now than ever.

The Legacy of Martin Wight

Jackson’s contributions to IR theory are built on the legacy of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull, whom he identifies as his two chief intellectual forbears. While he was influenced by both, it was Wight about whom he wrote more extensively, and in doing so Jackson reveals as much about his own thought as he does about Wight’s; so it is illuminating to explore the relationship between the two thinkers.

Wight (like all English School thinkers) rejected the “positivist” turn in international relations study exemplified by Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* (1979) and the

American school of neorealists following in its wake. To be sure, empirical research in IR is an extremely useful tool, but positivism foolishly forsakes the insights of classical political study, thereby abandoning its ethical dimension altogether.

Jackson describes Wight's thought as a "theology of diplomacy" firmly grounded in St. Augustine. (Jackson 2005, 51, 55) Its Augustinian foundation gives Wight's thought a certain immunity against the excessive political optimism borne of insufficient attention to human nature that is characteristic of much neorealist thought. To be clear, the pessimistic assessment of human nature is not the whole story; Wight, like Augustine, acknowledges that humans also have a transcendent desire for a better society and world, and a capacity to work toward it. They are torn between their "better angels" and their egoistic inclinations. As power increases, however, as it does for political leaders, the better angels struggle to play a decisive role against the ego.

Wight was a historian as well as a political theorist – indeed, Jackson thinks that no political thinker is so astute an historian as Wight. Therefore, Wight was acutely aware of the chronic defeat of international idealism by the subtle, often unacknowledged, and all-too-human characteristic of power-driven self-interest which limits (when it does not defeat) the loftiest hopes for social betterment. Positivism, by substituting perfectly rational actors in place of actual human nature and by setting aside an ethical component, leaves gaping holes in international thought, rendering it largely defenseless against both unrealistic optimism on the one side, and unrelieved cynicism on the other. Only the long western tradition which combines the affirming political ambitions represented by Aristotle with the restraining limitations taught by Augustine is capable of providing full and balanced guidance into the perennial problems of international politics.

Hedley Bull observed (and Jackson agrees) that Wight condemned the Enlightenment idea of inevitable progress as the modern equivalent of the Pelagian heresy. Bull, as noted earlier, quotes Wight as saying that hope is a “theological virtue,” not a political one. Wight believed that “two attitudes should go hand in hand” when the Christian looks at history: “the rejection of secular optimism ... [and] the acceptance of theological hope.”¹

In other words, hope based in God’s redemptive sovereignty over history – hope arising from faith – is appropriate, but the belief in self-redemption or redemption by human action is naïve, illusory and tragic. Human self-redemption not being possible in history, man’s duty is to deal with political and social realities as they are, building and augmenting the institutions that make life more tolerable and less savage, judging human conduct by the ultimate criteria of love and justice while expecting frequent failures, looking for moments and persons of grace when they appear, but avoiding the delusion that human progress is possible except in small increments within modest limits.

Jackson describes Wight’s revulsion at modern Pelagianism this way:

Martin Wight was a traditional Christian. A traditional Christian is someone who recognizes the permanent place of sin and grace in human affairs and does not subscribe to any doctrine of the progress and perfection of humankind. ... The heaviest sin is committed when people think they can create heaven on earth, which is the sin of pride in which they attempt to take the place of God. ... A traditional Christian is resigned to human imperfections and flaws and is profoundly skeptical about the possibilities of human perfectibility and the fulfillment of human destiny in the city of man. (Jackson 2005, 55, 57)

Jackson attributes Wight’s anti-Pelagian sensitivity to Niebuhr and Butterfield, and ultimately to Augustine. It was Niebuhr who identified for Wight the illusory nature of human perfectibility and the malleability of human nature, these being tainted ideological residues of the Enlightenment which have had devastating post-Enlightenment consequences. It was these,

¹ Hedley Bull, “Introduction: Martin Wight and the Study of International Relations,” in Martin Wight, *Systems of States*, 11.

Wight thought, that were the root causes of the unprecedented catastrophes of the twentieth century.

What did Wight consider a better approach – one that avoids the Pelagian heresy? Wight's answer in *International Theory* begins with the recognition that “politics is the art of the possible,” and nothing more – but nothing less either. This “possible” must involve not just political expediency but that which is *morally* possible. Describing the middle or rationalist position which he favors, Wight states:

Politics is the perpetual movement from one stage of the provisional to another. There are no complete solutions, only the constantly repeated approximations towards the embodiment of justice in concrete arrangements, which do as constantly dissolve with the passage of time. Thus, to be a Rationalist politician is to exist in a state of moral tension between the actual and the desirable. ... Ideals are never realized, but should be striven for; the fundamentals wherein we believe will not be carried out, but it is necessary to affirm them: here is the moral tension within which Rationalist statecraft is conducted. (*International Theory*, 243)

Except for his specialized usage of “Rationalist,” Wight's words could have been written by Reinhold Niebuhr, who was, in part, the inspiration for them, as Jackson acknowledges. (Jackson 2005, 72) Wight's conviction that this irresolvable moral tension is the permanent predicament of political society was derived from Niebuhr's teaching that international politics, indeed all politics, reflects the human predicament of being poised between human ideals to which we aspire and selfish needs to which we inevitably attend. Jackson notes that Wight's colleague Herbert Butterfield similarly saw this tragic predicament as “lodged in” the very nature of international relations, not surmountable by any ideology or political policy. (*Id.*) This is Jackson's view as well.

Thus, for both Wight and Jackson, Augustine and Niebuhr provide an ever-needed antidote to optimistic theories of the politically possible. They also represent the guardians of the view that to abandon ethics in the study of international relations is to risk losing the means to judge,

to limit, and to condemn the brutal aggrandizement of power – such as that represented by Nazism and Stalinism – as the only thing playing on the stage of world politics.

Normative Dialogue and Situational Ethics

Isaiah Berlin, with characteristic eloquence, stated the centrality of ethics in politics with the following words, quoted with approval by Jackson:

Ethical thought consists of the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring, and the systems of value on which such ends of life are based. These beliefs ... are objects of moral inquiry; and when applied to groups and nations, and, indeed, mankind as a whole, are called political philosophy, which is but ethics applied to society. (*The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 1-2; quoted at Jackson 2005, ix)

Jackson adds that the very language of international relations, used almost universally by citizens, diplomats, political figures, and even scholars, betrays the inescapably ethical underpinnings and aspirations of IR study. Such words and concepts as “rights,” “obligations,” “sovereignty,” “security,” “crimes against humanity,” “free trade,” “fair trade,” “nonintervention,” “humanitarian,” “aggression,” “appeasement,” “immunity,” “terrorism,” “development” – these and many others carry profound value judgments within them, and are widely understood and intended to do so. (*Id.*, 140-141) Even neorealists, who use these terms as the rest of us do, do not deny the morally-freighted nature of such concepts as these. They have made a methodological choice to exclude ethical elements from their “models,” both because ethical precepts complicate (and sometimes defeat) model-making and testing, and because neorealists wager that what they lose in completeness they more than gain in theoretical simplicity.

Classical realists, including English School thinkers, disagree, pointing out that while empirical testing can be extremely informative in its place, normative thinking is intrinsic to

political theorizing and political decision-making and thus should not be left unexamined; and insisting that a truly realistic theory of international behavior must address the role which normative values play in all political decisions, and must reserve the right to judge political leaders and nations against their own professed moral values. To be sure, this makes the theoretical picture messier and hypotheses harder to test, but it also brings the theory much closer to reality.

In general, these are the two roads in IR study: radically simplified models of reality leading to testable value-free hypotheses, leading in turn to falsifiable predictions, free of ethical complications; or, the analysis of politics in its full complexity, not excluding empirical studies but resisting reductionism and insisting on a humane, value-inclusive evaluation of what nations do and why. On a spectrum between these two ends, neorealism is at one end and the English School at the other. Liberal internationalism and constructivism are in between, acknowledging the ethical dimensions of international behavior but refusing to make it an explicit element of their analysis.

English School realists argue (as classical realists did) that moral standards for nation-states and leaders are different from those which are applicable to individuals. The difference is more methodological than substantive, owing to the different positions and responsibilities of the individuals involved. The chief difference is that leaders are not acting solely or even primarily for themselves. Their decisions affect large numbers, and the consequences of their actions are experienced widely and often for long periods. The population as a whole, or large segments of it, may suffer if the leadership is too self-sacrificing of the national interest or is otherwise too committed to what might be a suitable individual morality. Political leaders are trustees of the interests of the people they govern, and trustees must act solely in the interests of beneficiaries,

not of themselves – this is itself a moral principle. Thus, a proper conception of longer-term interest will make room for ethical concerns, but balance them, of necessity, with realistic assessments of material and military requirements, especially in a short-term emergency.

As it is in other ethical spheres, justice is the supreme ultimate norm in international politics. But it must be understood in the peculiar context and distinct dynamics of international policy-making. Thus, it is essential, Jackson thinks, to understand justice as a dialogical and interlocutory method of discourse, rather than a body of fixed principles:

It involves conversation, discussion, communication, intercourse, conferral, inquiry, parlay among parties with rival claims who seek an acceptable, at least tolerable, or passing accommodation between themselves. Justice is dynamic rather than static: it is a dialogue involving arguments for or against; it is giving a hearing to all legitimate parties involved. This dialogue can be conducted in many different places but the usual context is the state and the society of states. (*Id.*, 139)

Because there are fewer agreed norms among nations than within a domestic society, international dialogue about right and wrong will be more provisional and controversial than within a society, and the results will be a “rougher” justice. Nonetheless, the years since the Second World War have seen a broadening of shared international norms, both procedural and substantive, and this has made the dialogue richer and deeper.

Among the increasingly shared norms are those which have been inspired, at least in part, by John Rawls and his notion of “justice as fairness,” i.e., fair dealing in relationships among persons considered as equally deserving of respect and dignity, merely by virtue of being human persons. (*Id.*, 143-145) This idea, Jackson argues, has reinforced an understanding of nations as “ethical persons” (among their other aspects) in the global arena. This is a fitting elaboration of the Westphalian notion that, despite significant differences in power, all states have a right to equal recognition and minimal respect by virtue of their role as representatives of their people and (at least ideally) bearers of the character, aspirations, and symbolic unity of those people.

By the same token, states are also bearers of ethical obligations, internally with respect to their own people and externally in their relations with other sovereign states. While international institutions are merely in the infancy of testing the appropriateness of affecting a state's internal matters, international law and institutions are now moderately advanced in expressing widely-shared understandings and norms in the external arena. To be sure, there is no international police force or fully effective enforcement mechanism. Nonetheless, Jackson shows, these norms are far from irrelevant to the actual conduct of nations.

Jackson knows that his insistence on the ethical dimension in IR study is rejected in neorealism and the other major schools in the U.S. But he is also aware of a different danger in the "real" political world of democracies – one that is magnified if ethical thought is excluded from IR study. This is the danger of moralism.

"Moralism" comes in at least two forms. One is the insistence that the same morality that applies to individuals should apply, *tout court*, to nations. This can be a principled argument but one which, as I have shown above, is rejected alike by English School, classical and Christian realists, including Reinhold Niebuhr. For Niebuhr and other classical or Christian realists, a corollary of applying morality to nations is the recognition that moral principles must be adjusted for the peculiar circumstances of political leaders, especially in foreign relations. The other sense, related but more rhetorical than principled, is the facile use of morals to denounce, rather than fairly to judge, the conduct of political leaders. "Moralists" in this sense use moral judgment as a political weapon, and are often less than intellectually honest. It is this brand of "moralism" that is particularly decried by George Kennan. The two uses are related because it is much easier to denounce political action (or inaction) as immoral when the standards being applied are those appropriate for individuals regulating their own conduct rather than for leaders

responsible for the welfare of nation-states. The latter brand of moralism is best countered, not by ignoring moral questions, but by careful political thought that includes moral analysis but insists on doing it with transparent reasoning and without inflated rhetoric. It must also acknowledge and guard against the self-righteousness that so quickly and easily envelopes the moral critic who is himself or herself without the responsibility to make hard decisions.

Because Jackson thinks and writes within an intellectual tradition that includes moral judgment but excludes moralism, and because of his inclination toward the rich specifics of historical analysis rather than the sanitizing reductions of social science, it is unsurprising that he finds that “[t]he ethics of statecraft is a situational ethics” whose application requires thoughtful attentiveness to the role and context of the decision-maker. (Jackson 2000, 143) This echoes the emphasis of Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight on “judgment” – prudence or practical wisdom – as the cardinal moral-political virtue among political leaders and diplomats. It echoes Hedley Bull’s belief that “judgment” is the inescapable component in understanding and evaluating the moral behavior of nation-states. What Jackson is suggesting with the adjective “situational” is the enormous complexity of international political decisions, the host of ethical and material factors to be taken into account, the staggering difficulty of knowing all the consequences of today’s decisions, the typically contradictory principles that must be consulted and somehow harmonized, and the frequent impossibility of passing definitive moral judgment on the conduct of political leaders dealing with imponderable consequences. He describes situational ethics as “not the ethics of the ideal choice or the best choice or even the least costly choice”; but also “not moral relativism in which common standards of conduct are abandoned.” (*Id.*, 147) Rather,

it is the ethics of the best choice in the circumstances, or perhaps the least damaging choice if in the circumstances prevailing at the time all choices are deplorable and

destructive to some degree That is the decision that we feel bound to make, however reluctantly, after canvassing the options available, taking into account as best we can their foreseeable consequences, taking stock of our procedural and prudential responsibilities as we understand them, and being honest with ourselves and forthright with others. (*Id.*, 147-148)

As this passage suggests, Jackson's situational ethics self-consciously invokes the tradition of Weber's ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), involving the careful weighing of consequences to the extent they can be ascertained. (*Id.*, 137, 143) But there is more. To avoid a solely consequentialist ethics or mere instrumental reasoning, Jackson requires that, quite apart from weighing consequences of alternatives, the decision-maker must also (1) adhere to the fundamental moral norms of the society on whose behalf she or he acts, and (2) commit oneself to the kind of "virtue ethics" based on Aristotle (also favored by Hedley Bull) which emphasizes the care, discipline, practical wisdom, and good faith of the decision-maker. This emphasis on the commitment of the decision-maker to a disciplined process in decision-making is appropriate for Jackson because (as he often stresses) outcomes are so difficult to judge until many years later, if then.

Jackson takes up the decision of President Truman to drop two atomic bombs on Japan as the way to end World War II with that nation. (*Id.*, 146-47) The decision deliberately targeted civilians, at least 130,000 of whom died from the blasts, which thus could be called the largest single act of terrorism in history.² Yet, given the alternative Truman likely faced for bringing the war to an end – pouring hundreds of thousands of American troops into an all-out invasion of the

² I call it the largest "single" act because, although there were two bombs on two cities three days apart, they are normally considered a single moral event in pursuit of a single strategy to end the war with Japan. The intensive "fire bombing" of German cities late in World War II – also arguably acts of terrorism – caused many more civilian casualties than at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but were consummated over several months in several German cities. *See generally*, Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 255-268.

heavily-fortified Japanese homeland with casualties in the millions on both sides³ – it is unwarranted to condemn the atomic decision without careful scrutiny of the deplorable attributes of both options as they appeared at the time based on information then available. What we can do with greater confidence – and this is morally more productive – is analyze the process by which the decision was arrived at, the care that was taken to explore alternatives, the weight given to civilian casualties in both scenarios, and the intelligent good faith of all those contributing to the American decision.⁴

Later, in his discussion of “Political Virtue in International Relations” (*Id.*, 149), Jackson makes explicit his commitment to virtue ethics and the analysis of the decision-making process, observing that before any ethical judgments can be made about international decisions, we must ask the logically prior question, “what can we reasonably expect from the women and men who make decisions for nation-states in the international arena, both in this particular case and more generally?” The best framework for answering that question remains, he thinks, the classical idea of political virtue, with its focus on the integrity of the decision-maker and the political virtues of such a person. By “political virtues” Jackson means,

the dispositions and disciplines, intellectual and moral, that are required to make the best choice the circumstances permit, or the least worse choice if all choices are deplorable to some degree, which is not uncommon in international politics. ... [These include] the ability to steady down, to ignore the surrounding clamour, to forbear from acting according to impulse or temptation or passion or dogma, and to carefully determine the most responsible course of action in the circumstances. (*Id.*)

Jackson supplements this description by drawing a sharp distinction between personality and character – treating the latter as a moral rather than a psychological category: the ability to

³ A study prepared for President Truman’s Secretary of War estimated up to four million American casualties, including a half-million or more deaths, with an additional five to ten million Japanese casualties. *See generally*, Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999).

⁴ In his classic treatment of *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer (at pp. 263-268) concedes that the bombing of the two Japanese cities was likely justifiable on a consequentialist basis given U.S. war aims, but questions whether “absolute surrender” was necessary for the Japanese as it had been for Germany. He also analyzes the fire bombing of German cities at pp. 255-263.

harness the personality and guide the mind in accordance with a commitment to acting rightly, insofar as “right” can be discerned by careful thought and consideration.

Jackson explains that this “virtue approach” is superior for several reasons. First, as noted earlier, the plethora of relevant factors and the limited available knowledge of consequences makes it extremely difficult to conduct a fair evaluation of an international decision after the fact, hindsight having a strong tendency to overwhelm moral judgment. In contrast, it is achievable (though still difficult) to assess the *process* by which a decision was reached (including the consideration of *foreseeable* consequences), including the intellectual and moral integrity of the decision-makers in working through that process. Second, international political decisions inevitably involve large factors of discretion and judgment, with consequent likelihood of errors, miscalculations, and mistaken impressions, such that a moral evaluation of processes is likely to yield better insights than would a retrospective effort to judge the merits of a decision in isolation from how it was arrived at. In other words, in international politics moral scrutiny should be focused on the “why” and the “how” of the making of particular decisions, more than on the “what” of the decisions themselves, including even their consequences.

There is another reason why Jackson considers this the most fruitful avenue, and his discussion of it resonates particularly with Niebuhr’s thought. Niebuhr acknowledged repeatedly that the difficulty of applying moral principles to political life is not the shortage of principles but their surplus – coupled with a shortage of means to adjudicate among them. Thus, he was fond of quoting Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: “People are always extolling the man of principles; but I think the superior man is the one who knows that he must find his way in the maze of principles.” (*see, e.g., On Politics*, 323) For Jackson, the only way to evaluate one who works through the maze of principles to make a decision is by judging her or his care and

conscientiousness in exercising “discretion” and “judgment” in that process – which is why prudence is the main measure and the chief virtue in ethics and politics; a point in which Jackson is seconding both Niebuhr and Morgenthau.⁵

Moral Norms and Political Decisions

In making the point that political leaders necessarily possess great discretion in the courses they choose to take or reject on behalf of the nation, Jackson invokes Ronald Dworkin’s definition of “discretion” in *The Philosophy of Law*. We say that someone exercises discretion, according to Dworkin, when she or he is charged with making decisions within a context of standards set by a higher (often legal) authority, such as a constitution, a statute, or a superior officer of government. “Discretion, like the hole in a doughnut, does not exist except as an area left open by a surrounding belt of restriction.” (Dworkin, ed., *The Philosophy of Law*, 52) There are certainly constraints on the political leader, both legal and moral; but there remains broad space “within the doughnut hole” for decisions to be taken at the judgment of the official. Thus, the political leader applies her or his judgment within the area permitted for the exercise of discretion. (Jackson 2000, 150)

This being so, Jackson sees “the political virtues as the norms that fill in the area of discretion in political activity.” (*Id.*, 151) In other words, the political virtues are the ethical measures which guide the official in exercising judgment within the confines of allowed discretion. Our moral evaluation of leaders and of their exercise of moral judgment should thus follow two steps, (1) to ensure that their decision-making has occurred within the constitutional and legal limits that define their discretion; and if so, (2) to inquire how conscientiously, how

⁵ “Realism,” according to Morgenthau, “considers prudence ... to be the supreme virtue.” (*Politics Among Nations*, 10) Niebuhr agreed, acknowledging that “prudence as well as justice must be a norm of statesmanship.” (Kegley, 512) Recall that one of Niebuhr’s objections to natural law as he understood it was its reductionist tendency with respect to the contingencies of history and thus its undervaluing of the factors of situational judgment and practical wisdom in making hard decisions.

faithfully, and with what degree of discipline and care they applied the relevant norms to the complex situations they were required to judge and decide. In the frequent case where conflicting substantive norms are at play and perfect harmonization is impossible, the leader should be judged chiefly by the degree of partial harmonization achieved and by how sensitively she or he assessed the multiple factors to arrive at a final decision. If those criteria are met – if these virtues are sufficiently demonstrated – then the *moral* standard would ordinarily have been met. The critical observer may disagree with the final decision as a matter of *political* merit or judgment. Indeed, such disagreement (including with the benefit of hindsight) is fair and important for political critique, for historical evaluation, and for future planning – but not for negative *moral* judgment.

Take, for example (as Jackson does), the fundamental moral-political norm of nonintervention into the territory of another sovereign – a basic premise of international society since Westphalia in 1648. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, an important counter-norm – usually called “humanitarian intervention” – has been developed in cases where “the dominant forces within a state are engaged in massive violations of human rights,” or where “the bare survival or the minimal liberty of (some substantial number of) its members” is at stake. (Walzer 1977, 101) According to an influential international commission, such a situation is said to give rise not only to a right but to a “*responsibility* to protect” those who are endangered, even if that means armed intervention across international borders.⁶

Obviously, the question of when to engage in armed intervention for the purported protection of the citizens of another sovereign state, or when to abstain from doing so, is fraught with difficult moral as well as political implications. It is virtually impossible to say in advance,

⁶ *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa, Canada: International Development Research Center, 2001). On humanitarian intervention, see Walzer 1977, 101-108.

as a moral matter, when the norm of nonintervention should be trumped by the norm of humanitarian intervention. Even in a concrete situation, providing a moral judgment of either intervention or abstinence will be extraordinarily difficult. In such cases – and there are many in international political life, as Jackson reminds us – moral evaluation must ordinarily be content to assess critically the processes of the decision-making and integrity of the decision-makers. This accords with what we have the human capacity to do, and also with what is likely to provide the best guidance for future decisions.

Finally, Jackson explains, political judgment in the sense he means it – the exercise of discretion by political leaders in difficult matters in accordance with virtue – underlines the place of prudence as the cardinal moral virtue of all political decision-making. Prudence is “a special kind of acquired discipline and a particularly important political virtue which derives, in significant measure, from practice, from experience.” (Jackson 2000, 152) It sums up all the political virtues, even as it acts as the primary means for their proper application and measure in each particular case.

In sum, if we are to have a proper understanding of the role of ethical assessment in international political life, the problem is not so much the discovery of the correct basic moral and legal norms to be applied. These are well-enough known and agreed-upon, not only within a given society but also, and increasingly, internationally (although future agreement as to more specific norms would be helpful). The problem is to determine which ones to apply in what measure in different situations; how to balance conflicting norms, harmonize them, or perhaps choose between them in particular circumstances. Therefore, we must conceive of international ethics as situational, highly contextual, and concerned with ethical responsibility. But most of all, we must judge it by the political virtue of the women and men who make the decisions, by

the prudence and ethical sensitivity they bring to bear, and by the discipline and processes they employ in arriving at difficult judgments with far-reaching ethical implications. If these tests are met in a particular case, we have done what we can do ethically.⁷

The Global Covenant

In his most important book, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*, published in 2000, Robert Jackson articulates a set of norms which are now subscribed to, at least in principle, by the great majority of countries in the world. These nation-states make up the international society in its current stage of evolution, and they are loosely held together by a set of mutual obligations and rights that Jackson calls “the global covenant.” This is particularly true in democracies, and even elsewhere to the extent that a free press or internet is available to hold leaders accountable to their professed moral commitments. To a greater or lesser degree, these norms have been accepted as part of and incorporated into the national interest of most nation-states.

The international society represented by the global covenant is a significant advance beyond the harsh, hyperrealist world of ethics-free power politics among sovereigns portrayed in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, although far short of Kant’s cosmopolitan community of mankind as individuals.

It is an intermediate world ... a world of dialogue between separate but recognized political others. The global covenant constitutes the only standards of political conduct which apply around the world and are acknowledged as such. It connects human beings everywhere through their membership in a sovereign state and regardless of ... their domestic way of life. (Jackson 2000, 16)

⁷ Arnold Wolfers makes a similar point in his oft-cited essay, “Statesmanship and Moral Choice,” in which he places realists such as Reinhold Niebuhr among the “nonperfectionists” of political ethics:

However much nonperfectionists may disagree on ethical standards and thus on the nature and hierarchy of values, they hold in common the process by which they reach their moral judgments. This appears in *Discord and Collaboration*, 51, for which Niebuhr wrote a laudatory Foreword.

This implicit or tacit “covenant” among nations represents “the underlying moral and legal standards by reference to which relations between independent states can be conducted and judged.” (*Id.*, 19)

Jackson divides these standards into two categories: procedural norms and prudential ones, although, for reasons discussed below, a better description might have been, respectively, “procedural and substantive norms” and a “prudential methodology.”⁸

For a summary of the **procedural norms** Jackson points to the ten Helsinki principles developed by the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) based on the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Although they came to be called the “Helsinki Decalogue,” they have been recognized far beyond Europe. Indeed, they are based in large part on the United Nations Charter which is itself a treaty obligation of all signatories.⁹ These are the procedural norms:

- (1) sovereign equality among states and mutual recognition of their rights vis-à-vis each other;
 - (2) refraining from force or the threat of force in relations between states;
 - (3) inviolability of current borders;
 - (4) recognition of the territorial integrity of states;
 - (5) the peaceful settlement of disputes;
 - (6) non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states;
 - (7) respect for fundamental human rights, including of one’s own citizens;
 - (8) the self-determination of peoples;
 - (9) cooperation among states; and
 - (10) good-faith fulfillment of treaty and other obligations under international law.
- (*Id.*, 16-17)

The cornerstones of these procedural norms are mutual recognition of state sovereignty and non-intervention in the affairs of other states, core principles of the Westphalian system for 350

⁸ Jackson does not define the difference precisely, but refers to them as “two different vocabularies”: the “vocabulary of international procedure which is part of a larger ethics of principle, and the vocabulary of international prudence with is part of a larger ethics of virtue.” (*Id.*, 16) As will be seen below, he places fairly specific norms in the former category and a methodology of prudence for the latter.

⁹ Of the 196 states in the world, 193 have signed the treaty and are members of the UN General Assembly. The three non-members are Kosovo and Taiwan, which are recognized only by some nations as independent states, and Vatican City.

years. (See, e.g., Kissinger, *World Order*, 2-10, 23-41) As expressed in the UN Charter (Art. II), “All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” While this is an old norm, its universality is fairly recent. Nonetheless, it has been challenged in modern times both by invasions of less powerful nations by more powerful ones (for various reasons), such as the two invasions of Iraq by the United States in 1991 and 2003; and by such notions as the “responsibility to protect” and arguments in favor of humanitarian intervention, mentioned earlier. Still, it remains a lynchpin of international peace and stability – if not an absolute norm, one with strong presumptive validity.

Obviously, the progress toward international society since 1945 builds on and modifies earlier norms in the western tradition. Jackson points to three now-abandoned norms that were common to European nations in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, but which are now unacceptable: the right to make offensive war, the right of conquest including the right to enslave conquered peoples, and the right of colonization. (Jackson 2000, 19) These have all been negated and superseded by the principles of mutual respect for state sovereignty and of non-intervention in the affairs of other states, principles which leave no room for conquest or colonization of another nation, much less enslavement of captured peoples.

Turning from procedural to substantive norms, Jackson invokes ethics in a more explicit way. Following in the tradition of Butterfield and Wight’s understanding of statecraft as a type of virtue, Jackson argues that the central virtue of effective diplomacy is prudence, understood in both its political and ethical implications, and encompassing such things as “foresight, judgement, circumspection, [and] sense of responsibility.” Understood this way, prudence is a “normative concept [because] it concerns others besides ourselves: it is a political virtue to take

care not to harm others. In politics, international politics especially, prudence arguably is the cardinal virtue because power is so great.” (*Id.*, 20)

Thus, he calls his non-procedural norms “prudential” ones. They are prudential not only because they involve the application of thoughtful discretion and good judgment, but also because they require weighing conflicting goods and choosing between contradictory norms, and therefore require the exercise of Aristotle’s virtue of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Statecraft assesses likely outcomes as well as intrinsic goals and normative limits on means. It requires sifting through unsatisfactory options, weighing these against irreconcilable objectives, and coming up with a course of action that is ethically and practically most efficacious, least costly, and least morally offensive. Thus, the “ethics of statecraft is, above all else, a situational ethics the core of which is the norm of prudence.” (*Id.*, 21)

Even the concept of a state’s “national interest” – the central notion of realism and a key concept for any understanding of international politics – is a moral one, based on the conviction that statespeople must serve the interests of those they represent (however their “representation” was attained), and that the preservation of the nation-state, absent a better alternative, is an intrinsic moral-political good. In other words, states are – at least presumptively – deserving of respect on moral grounds because they are in principle (if not always in practice) the expression of their culture and people. Ultimately, this serves the interests of the individual, both because statelessness is one of the most vulnerable conditions an individual can experience, and because it is only within the context of a secure state that persons may have at least the possibility of pursuing a good life. Michael Walzer makes the same point in his extended essay, “The Moral Standing of States” in 1980. John Stuart Mill made it even earlier in his essay, “A few words on non-intervention.”

For Jackson, respect for states in an international society is the only consistent way to respect the interests of individuals within those states:

The international society school views the society of states, and its connected law of nations, as the only practical institution through which the values and interests of humankind can be defended and advanced. (Jackson 2005, 124)

It is noteworthy that Jackson emphasizes the singularity of the international society of “states” as the only “practical” institution for defending and advancing ethical values and interests. Non-state actors are important, increasingly so in the twenty-first century, but Jackson and all realists maintain that the state is still the central actor in world politics for better and worse, and will remain so for the foreseeable future.¹⁰ The reference to the state’s being the only “practical” institution for advancing the values of mankind is an acknowledgment that, except in the rare case where states are willing to engage in humanitarian intervention, the best that can be done for citizens of other states is through programs, aid, pressure or persuasion aimed at the states who govern those citizens.

Having described the normative nature of prudential decision-making, Jackson delineates only a limited number of specific “norms” or rules of prudence (*see* the section below on *societas* and *universitas*). His more basic point is that all substantive decision-making in international politics is infused with ethical implications and requires the exercise of the moral virtue of prudence. The exercise of political power by leaders on behalf of citizens affects not only the lives of those citizens but also the lives of people beyond the borders, and is thus an inherently ethical activity. These decisions must be justified morally, among other ways, although with due recognition for the fact that they often require the weighing and sifting of

¹⁰ Indeed, the fact that even prominent terrorist groups such as the so-called Islamic State aspire to be recognized as states (even as they seek to make their “state” coterminous with their “caliphate”) testifies to the enduring importance of the state as goal and ambition.

incommensurable factors and inconsistent norms, and therefore that what is being evaluated is leaders' and nations' judgment and processes rather than their conformity to specific norms.

In his later book, *Classical and Modern Thought on International Relations* (2005), Jackson borrows from the work of Martin Wight certain moral norms for diplomatic practice based on the prudential nature of international relationships. Jackson summarizes these in four categories: (1) the foundational importance of honesty, truthfulness, and a professional trustworthiness in the relations among diplomats and other agents of the state; (2) the exercise of moderation and restraint, keeping a sense of proportion, particularly in critique of another nation's policies or practices; (3) authentic courtesy based on mutual respect, including the avoidance of arrogance or airs of presumed superiority; and (4) respect for the position, thinking, and pressures faced by one's diplomatic and national opponents. (Jackson 2005, 59)

International Societas

Jackson adopts Bull's distinction between a "system" of states – a configuration of two or more states with sufficient contact to require them to take each other's actions and reactions into account – and a "society" of states. A society assumes a higher degree of contact and interdependence, and exists among states who are conscious of certain common interests and values, who conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules, and who thus share in the working of common institutions. In other words, these nations have incorporated certain common interests, values, and rules into their conception of long-term national interest, and thus observe and uphold them to more than a trivial degree – and do so even at the cost of sacrificing other interests.

Neorealists reject the concept of a "society" of nations, in part because they consider all international institutions to be merely the tools of the great powers, and in part because such a

“society” is too complex to be effectively modeled and tested (from which they conclude that no falsifiable or other useful observations can be made). Because they see themselves as social scientists standing outside and observing the international scene, they gather data, match the data with various alternative empirical assumptions, and construct decision-making models which they hope and believe will have predictive power as to what nations might do in the future. Such an approach requires a strict economy of variables and, as they concede, is not well suited to the analysis of multivariate concepts, much less ones involving normative considerations.

Jackson’s method, by contrast, is the classical humanist one most ably defended by Bull: to look deeply into the history and craft of international choices, searching for patterns but also engaging in fine-grained analysis of particular cases, building a richer understanding of the factors and processes that cause national leaders and groups to do or refrain from doing things which, in turn, lead to international conflict or cooperation.¹¹

Both methods concentrate on the “great powers,” the handful of major players who dominate the global scene and set the terms for others’ (more limited) involvement. From there, however, they diverge. The positivist is skeptical that other nations matter at all because they lack the necessary power to affect the global balance; and besides, the positivist wants to reduce complex realities to a relatively small number of objective, empirically testable variables. Humanists point out that, by being so exclusively concerned with empirical inputs, the positivists are guilty of reductionism and lose too much complex, nuanced reality. Humanists’ preference for the richness of historical reality results in their retaining an interest in the relations between the great powers and the less powerful nations. They also believe that these relations implicate moral issues which must be part of the political evaluation of great-power conduct.

¹¹ As noted in the chapter on Bull, he advocated this approach in several places, but see in particular, “International Theory: the Case for a Classical Approach,” *World Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Apr. 1966), 361-377; reprinted in Knorr and Rosenau, eds, *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 20-38.

Jackson's approach is, by his own account, aligned with Max Weber's interpretive sociology, or *Verstehen*, in which the observer seeks to understand and interpret the world "from the inside," the way the observed persons see it. (Jackson 2000, 97-99) Thus, the observed persons are intended to be *subjects* rather than objects of study. Weber's *Verstehen* or participative/interpretative understanding contrasts with *das Erklären*, the detached explanation of objects in nature, which is the aim of the natural sciences and of IR conceived as a social science. Jackson thinks the latter is deeply flawed for IR. Because he sees IR as studying human interactions primarily, and only secondarily the interactions of impersonal forces (such as material factors impinging on the decision-making of those humans), he rejects the positivist neorealist approach with its excessive focus on objective external forces, such as anarchy:

[I]nternational relations are not a dependent variable of some external non-human reality which shapes those relations and holds the key to our knowledge of them. There are no background "social forces" or "social structures" unconnected with human agency which somehow mysteriously drive or constrain international relations and seem to operate as the secular version of providence in world affairs. The international society approach rejects that positivist social science conception. But it does not doubt that there are of course plenty of human and physical *circumstances* which limit the choices and actions available in international politics. (*Id.*, 99)

Like Butterfield, Wight, and Bull before him, Jackson finds most fruitful and "realistic" the careful study of the complex humans who make and influence political decisions, and of all the circumstances that impinge upon their decisions. The objective circumstances are important, but only as they affect actual decision-makers and decision-making, not as abstract variables whose force or direction can be mapped in advance.

What then makes an "international society" of nation-states? Primarily, Jackson says, there is a well-understood social framework of mutual expectations and required conduct. At the foundation, states are expected to acknowledge and respect each other's sovereignty. While power relationships vary enormously, sovereignty confers an equal dignity on all states, however

small or uninfluential. States are the rights-bearing and obligation-bearing units of international society, the building blocks of international relations as things currently stand. They achieve the status of statehood not by self-declaration but only by being so recognized by other states. This international recognition is generally accorded only if and when the other states determine that the subject state controls and “represents” in some sense the people within their geographic borders, and that the subject state will respect the sovereign boundaries of other states. In other words, statehood is achieved by means of recognition by fellow states based on facts on the ground in the subject state, as perceived by other states; not any longer “from above,” as would be the case if there were a world state, or as it was with the medieval *republica Christiana*.

As this process of state recognition illustrates, international society is a social construct depending on normative ties as well as interest to hold it together, with the normative ties being seen as components of a broader or enlightened self-interest. The strength of the normative ties depends in part on the fact that they are voluntarily imposed by the member states on themselves and on others, and so the members possess limited but non-trivial means to hold each other accountable to standards subscribed to by everyone. Thus, Jackson finds,

international society is basically a normative framework with regard to which the foreign policies and other international actions of states can be evaluated without imposing an external standard they do not commit to. Its norms provide an *internal* basis of evaluation: pertinent cues and expectations which statespeople have regarding acceptable or at least tolerable international conduct. The significance of international society resides in their general willingness to operate by reference to its norms. (*Id.*, 104)

Jackson is echoing the words of both Butterfield and Wight, who wrote that “the principles of prudence and moral obligation ... have held together the international society of states throughout its history, and still hold it together.” (*Diplomatic Investigations*, 13)

International society is a society of states, but not itself a state. In international law, the definition of a state conventionally involves five elements, with the last being recognition by fellow states of the existence of the first four, namely: (1) a defined territory; (2) a permanent population; (3) an effective government; and (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other states. (Murphy, 32, citing the Montevideo Convention of 1933, 49 Stat. 3097, 165 L.N.T.S. 19)

International society has no defined territory or permanent population; it is not a world government and does not enter into relations with sovereign states as another sovereign state would do. Although it is manifest in a number of international laws, rules, practices, and institutions, international society is not a state actor; rather, it is the framework within which states act:

International society is, by and large, a *societas* rather than a *universitas*: it is an association of independent and legally equal member states of varying substance, rather than a substantive and purposive enterprise in its own right; it basically consists of standards of conduct which statespeople are expected to observe in their foreign relations. (Jackson 2000, 105)

In contrasting *societas* with *universitas* Jackson is borrowing the distinction of Michael Oakeshott in his essay, "On the Character of a Modern European State" (Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Pt. III, 201-204). Oakeshott distinguishes between a state conceived along liberal lines as a civil association in which individuals are enabled to pursue their individual ends within the limits of law (a *societas*), as against the state as a collective enterprise pursuing shared goals and common purposes (a *universitas*). Terry Nardin makes a similar distinction, calling them, respectively, a "practical association" and a "purposive" one. (Nardin, chap. 1) In his use of *societas* and *universitatas* Jackson is analogizing from the state to the international society, in which the international order is a *societas* held together by a loose association of procedural and prudential norms. States, each of which thinks of itself as a *universitas* unto itself, retain their

individual sovereignty, but most states most of the time exercise it within limits imposed by reciprocally-adopted legal and customary norms of international law and practice. To be sure, there are modern examples of the international, multi-state *universitas* (or “purposive associations”), but they are regional in geographic scope. The most prominent one is the European Union in which more than a trivial degree of state sovereignty has been relinquished in favor of common economic and political goals.¹²

Latin Christendom before Westphalia is the paradigm of international *universitas*. It succeeded the Roman Empire (itself a *universitas*) with a structure of kingdoms built around the unifying authority of the Pope. Sovereignty was not a developed concept and, at critical points, gave way to the authority of Rome or warfare among the kingdoms. The *universitas* was far from perfect, but it reached its apex in the high middle ages with the rise of the strong papacy (c. 1050-1300). It was less than an empire but more than a society of independent kingdoms, although the relations of kingdoms to each other were left ambiguous, legally and morally. In Jackson’s reading, the dawn of international *societas* came with the decline and eventual collapse of the medieval *universitas* after the Reformation. Specifically, there were three developments that laid the foundations. (*Id.*, 166-167) The first, deriving directly from the Peace of Westphalia, was the prudential norm, *rex est imperator in regno suo* (“the king is emperor in his own realm”). Every king is sovereign in his own land, meaning that he is not subject to any higher political authority. The state is a *universitas* within its own borders. And, of course, this was true of other kings as well in their lands.

The second norm dates back a century earlier to the Peace of Augsburg of 1555: *cujus regio ejus religio* (“whose realm, his religion”). While addressed to religion, it had broader

¹² Cf., Barry Buzan’s treatment of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* as contrasting approaches to how international society comes into being, in “From International System to International Society,” *International Organization*, vol. 47 no. 3 (summer 1993), 330-352.

implications. Under this norm, not only was religion removed as a basis to invade another's realm, but (as it evolved over time) so were ideological differences or differences in belief systems of any kind. Peaceful coexistence depended on mutual recognition of the king's norms as the people's norms within the territorial confines of the kingdom.

Finally, in what Jackson calls a prudential rather than a procedural norm, states recognized and began to practice the balance of power, which is to say, a frank recognition that an excess of power in one state is a threat to all others and that the avoidance of hegemony by any state is essential to the sovereignty of other states. A corollary is that nations should do what is necessary, alone or in alliance with others, to balance against those kingdoms or states that appear to have hegemonic ambitions or whose power threatens to grow out of proportion to the power of the others.

Thus, the beginnings of the international order as *societas* – a society of independent and legally equal states – coincided with the emergent understanding of the state as a sovereign political entity, a *universitas* unto itself, capable of, and also needful of, cooperative and mutually beneficial relations with other states.

Beyond Power Alone

In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (p. 173), Reinhold Niebuhr criticized “the realistic school of international thought” because it believes that “world politics cannot rise higher than the balance-of-power principle.” Since Niebuhr wrote those words, neorealism, the primary successor to “the realistic school of international thought,” has proven even less capable than classical realism of rising above the analysis of power in order to glimpse the hopes or aspirations or values of those who lead and are affected by international politics.

As Robert Jackson's thought illustrates, the English School is different. Without sacrificing the basic insights of realism, including its core concepts of human nature and national power as shaped and articulated by Niebuhr among others, Jackson shows that there is the potential and the actuality of more than power at work; that there has been progress in the ability of the world community to agree upon and enunciate universal procedural norms of behavior and even, to some degree, international substantive norms. Jackson's "global covenant," as he calls the current international *societas*, acknowledges power politics as inescapable, but also sees the capacity to transcend it, to envision and to implement projects for the global good. Despite all the setbacks and weaknesses, there have been tangible advances in the influence of international law and institutions, in the importing of humanitarian thought into international dialogue, and even in the (limited) ability of states working together to punish outlaw states which flagrantly violate international standards.

In a postscript at the end of *Classical and Modern Thought in International Relations* (p. 179), Jackson describes himself and those of his school as those "who incline to skepticism, to acceptance of human imperfection, to discerning and respecting the limits of human reason and the power of human will in the activity of politics"; and yet who are challenged to "think harder, indeed much harder, to articulate and hopefully vindicate our empirical conception of world affairs," a conception at whose heart lies the international society of nations who cooperate as well as compete, who coordinate aid for the poorer and weaker states as well as work to ameliorate conflicts among the powerful ones. Reinhold Niebuhr did not comment specifically on the concept of the international society or the English School; it is unclear whether he was aware of them. But this conception, lofty but limited, aspirational without abandoning its

realism, is more consistent with the letter and spirit of Niebuhr's thought than any other theory of international politics, and thus is a worthy successor to his work.

Chapter 12

Conclusion

It may be apparent by now that my concern to articulate the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr in the contemporary English School results, at least in part, from my own judgment that Niebuhr's account of Christian realism is most appropriate to Christian political and ethical thought, and that the general approach to international politics that both he and the English School represent is, for me, most convincing. Defending these judgments is not the purpose of this work, which has argued rather for the distinct congruity between Niebuhr's thought and the English School. Nonetheless, I acknowledge my convictions here because I want to take the liberty, in parts of these concluding comments, to include my constructive beliefs.

Niebuhr and the Schools

In this final chapter, I will recapitulate and elaborate somewhat on my conclusions in the three parts of the paper, and also reflect on two issues implied but not explicitly addressed in earlier chapters: the concept of "national interest," and the significance of Reinhold Niebuhr's theism for understanding his relationship to English School thought.

Throughout the paper I have sought to demonstrate what I see as a remarkable and reasonably comprehensive congruity between the thought of Niebuhr's Christian realism as it pertains to international politics and the English School of international relations theory. The urge to find new affinities for Niebuhr's international thought arises because, shortly after his death in 1971, the classical realism that he, Hans Morgenthau, and others had established as the leading school for the academic study of IR, and with which Christian realism was closely allied, was succeeded in the U.S. academy by neorealism, which has since dominated the American

field. Neorealism abandoned the humanistic, holistic and historically-based study of the behavior of nations and statesleaders, and excluded ethical evaluation as an element of such study, transforming itself into a value-free social science on the model of microeconomics. While there remain prominent classical realists among American commentators and public intellectuals (such as Henry Kissinger and Fareed Zakaria), they are almost entirely absent from the American academy.¹

The other two major American schools, liberalism and constructivism, while drawing somewhat different inferences from the anarchy which orients all post-classical thought, agree with neorealism's pursuit of value-free social science as the correct model for academic IR research.

The English School is, as a practical matter, the home of continuing classical realism. While appreciating the value of anarchy as an important element in understanding international behavior, and utilizing empirical studies conducted by post-classical researchers, English School scholars also give weight to the persistent features of human nature which, if unchecked or uncountered, crave power. More importantly, they resolutely assert that political analysis is, at least in part, inescapably moral evaluation and that the two are inseparable. In these ways, the English School continues to be fundamentally compatible with the classical realism of Morgenthau and, especially, of Niebuhr.

As for Niebuhr's distinctly Christian form of realism, it is significant that the English School began as an approach built on explicitly Christian groundwork, that its founders were avowedly

¹ This is not to overlook such scholars as Terry Nardin, Kenneth Thompson, and Richard Ned Lebow who continue to mine classical thinkers for insights into politics, and who emphatically include ethics within their purview. See Nardin, *Law, Morality, and the Relations of States*; Nardin and Mapel, *Traditions of International Ethics*; Thompson, *Moral Dimensions of American Foreign Policy*; Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics*. While Nardin is often considered part of the English School (see e.g., Albert, et al., 95-96), Thompson and Lebow are viewed as classical realists; but neither they nor others of like mind have succeeded in reconstituting a classical realist "school" among political scientists -- though they (along with English School thinkers) have contributed to keeping alive the ideas of classical realism.

Christian thinkers, and that even second- and third-generation thinking continues to show the marks of the school's Christian roots. Thus, for example, Augustine is still acknowledged as a major thinker in the realist tradition whose insights are often cited by English School thinkers; and natural law continues to play a prominent role as a source of universal norms and international law.

The English School is more than classical realism updated to take account of the results of structuralist and constructivist empirical research – although it is that. It adds a concept and a vision distinctive to itself: the idea of the international society, with the implicit judgment that the path to increasing justice and improving the fate of humans around the globe requires the enhancement of cooperative relationships among the peoples and governments of nation-states. English School thinkers, like Niebuhr, believe that nation-states remain the most important institutions in international life and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future, that world government is unachievable and undesirable, and that the most realistic course is to build and sustain the procedural norms and prudential agreements that grow tissues of cohesion among the peoples of the world, strengthen international law, and thus improve the enabling conditions for global peace, security, and justice.

(Part One) History and Providence

It is evident, I think, from all that was said in Part I that the writings of Niebuhr and of Butterfield on the nature of history and the assurance of providence are notably congruent, and in some ways even indistinguishable. That they saw history the same way is not surprising since they were drawing from a common theistic heritage: Hebrew prophets, New Testament scripture, and the writings of St. Augustine.

For both Niebuhr and Butterfield, history is part of God's domain. It follows that what women and men do in history matters to God and to God's plan in history, which in turn imbues the work of women and men with divine significance and transcendent hope. Human history is the arena for the working out of God's will and also for the exercise of human free will, the latter for both good and evil purposes. This tension between human freedom and God's "necessity" was never completely resolved by either thinker, although the tension was reduced in the mind of each by the view that God gives man great freedom over human decisions and concomitant responsibility for consequences, while assuring the accomplishment of God's own purposes. God sometimes steps in to mitigate the consequences of human decisions by salvaging good from evil. When and how God chooses to do this is not transparent to human perception.

Although history has divine significance from beginning to end, the place of particular events is obscure. Both thinkers agreed that God's ways, though grasped through faith, are too opaque to be tied to specific events or trends, much less to predict the future course of history. Niebuhr suggested that if it were otherwise, if man could point confidently to God's finger in history, the result would be a new form of human self-idolatry. In any event, with faith and the proper humility, historical interpretation is possible, including the effort to interpret God's role in human history. Both Niebuhr and Butterfield engaged cautiously in such interpretation, being careful not to claim any special authority or warrant for it from either special revelation or the writing or study of history itself.

Both thinkers invoked the concept of providence in their understanding and interpretation of history. In general, the term was a stand-in for the more general concept of God's participation in history, including, for example, those times when God salvages good out of otherwise evil conduct, and God's concern with evil and human suffering. Providence was a much more

pivotal concept for Butterfield; but despite his frequent use of the term he did not sufficiently clarify what he meant by it, even as it became apparent to the reader that he was using it differently in different writings (or even within the same book or article).

For many who have philosophized about or interpreted the sweep of history, human nature plays an essential role. Indeed, it would seem impossible to generalize about historical events or movements without assuming the basic constancy of human nature. Niebuhr and Butterfield were certainly attentive to human nature, both as to its central importance and for the significance of the story of the fall of humankind. They took both understandings from St. Augustine. Humans are grounded in nature but also transcendent in vision, endowed by God with both limitations and longing. This view of human nature deeply informed their interpretation of history.

Finally, for both thinkers, international politics is a particularly significant arena for the playing out of history, because great power magnifies the human capacity for good and, too often, for evil – particularly when it is said to be exercised for the benefit of millions of persons in the name of national security or for protection against foreign enemies. The issues of war and peace with which political leaders deal are real enough; but so is the temptation to use these as pretexts for the exercise of unchecked power or for personal or political self-aggrandizement.

Butterfield and Niebuhr's sophisticated analysis of power is part of the foundation for both thinkers' concern with ethical norms as a means of judging leaders and of devising practical restraints to avoid abuses of power, as well as the need for an international society which would itself act as a check on the worst impulses of national leaders.

(Part Two) Ethics and International Relations Theory

The publication in 1932 of Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was a confirmation by an influential Christian ethicist that, while politics is a human activity subject to moral restraints and obligations, it should be judged on its own terms by an ethical methodology which is distinct from individual morality. Niebuhr showed that this was for ethical reasons, as well as for practical or prudential ones. Ever since Machiavelli, realism had been associated with amorality, if not immorality (based on *The Prince*, not *The Discourses*). Niebuhr, as a Christian theologian in a nation still attentive to the teachings of Christian theologians, provided a moral basis for realism. He insisted that politics must be evaluated ethically, but differently from the way we measure personal or individual morality. This clarification provided an important impetus for restoring politics to its ancient place as a subset of ethics, with the understanding that it is not subject to individual ethics *simpliciter*. It also enhanced the public and academic respectability of realism by bringing it within the orbit of moral reasoning.

The other most significant result of *Moral Man* was its influential critique of liberalism and idealism – with which Christianity had been strongly associated since the nineteenth century. Long before Morgenthau appeared on the American scene (*Scientific Man* was published in 1946 and *Politics Among Nations* in 1948), Niebuhr had laid the foundations for a “new” American alternative to liberalism and idealism, as acknowledged by both E.H. Carr and Morgenthau himself.

One of the persons influenced by Niebuhr was Martin Wight in England. The publication of his first major work, *Power Politics* in pamphlet form in 1946, shows the stamp of Niebuhr's influence throughout, not least in its insistence on the “moral order in the universe” to which nations and statespeople are subject. This order is expressed, in Wight's view, in both natural

law and in its offspring, international law. Like Niebuhr, Wight was not devoted to specific moral pronouncements so much as he was to the insistence that IR study include a commitment to moral evaluation and a consistent methodology for making judgments. For Wight, more than Niebuhr, natural law provides the framework for such judgments, and international law supplies the touchstones of modern principles for the argument and working out of such issues.

As I noted in the discussion of chapters 7 and 8, the chief distinction between Niebuhr and Wight was the much greater use made by Wight of natural law and international law. In the end, however, this distinction makes little difference. Niebuhr, who studied and valued international law much less than Wight, acknowledged it as tangible evidence of the “tissues” needed to hold peoples and nations in peaceful cooperation. I doubt that he would be uncomfortable with Wight’s greater reliance on it. After all, that the law of nations is historically based on natural law has been universally acknowledged since Grotius, and is not something Niebuhr would have questioned. In the latter years of Niebuhr’s life as he was warming to natural law, even in its Roman Catholic form, it is unfortunate that he did not have occasion to consider it more carefully as the foundation of international law. Martin Wight would have been a good tutor in this respect, and there is nothing in Niebuhr’s writings to suggest that his response would have been other than positive.

This is an example (I sought to show others in Part Two) of how Niebuhr’s and Wight’s writings, essentially consistent with each other but bearing different emphases and exploring things from slightly different angles, are complementary, particularly in regard to the role of ethics in international relations.

(Part Three) International Society

There are two problematic aspects of realism for which the English School and the idea of international society provide a useful corrective.

First, as Jack Donnelly points out in *Realism and International Relations* (at 193-94), realism (including neorealism as well as classic or Christian realism), is essentially a “negative, cautionary” philosophy. It does not present a positive design or vision. Like Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, its main effect is to counsel restraint, to encourage a disciplined modesty in pursuing human aspirations, and to remind us of the limits and perverse harms of human ambition, even of the most well-intentioned.² This is a considerable virtue in a world of limitless hubris and inflated political egotism. Still, it is not a strong affirmative vision of what might be accomplished.

Second, as Niebuhr frequently reminded us, pure realism is always in danger of sliding into cynicism and resignation. It needs to be coupled, therefore, with a hope or perception of future (earthly) goals that are worthy and attainable.

Both these shortcomings are accentuated, but also modified, by the era in which we live. In the last 70 years, thanks to the violence and tensions of the Second World War and the Cold War, the cautionary lessons of realism have been reasonably well learned. Excessive idealistic hopes are no longer the legacy of the twentieth century; nor do they seem sustainable in the twenty-first. This is one of the “new realities” in Robin Lovin’s *Christian Realism and the New Realities*. George Schwarzenberger, in his preface to the second edition of Wight’s *Power*

² Robin Lovin has summed up Christian realism as “a reminder of our limits.” It teaches us that, our knowledge is imperfect, our plans are incomplete, and our expectations are inevitably distorted by self-interest. We are always trying to overcome these limitations, and we are often partly successful; but our partial successes make it all the more important to remember that the limits remain, mocking our confidence with ironic reversals and threatening our pride with forces beyond our control. Final answers and permanent solutions elude us. (Lovin 2008, 1)

Politics (1951), made a similar point when he observed (referring to 1941, ten years prior), “it was necessary to be on guard against naïve day-dreaming on international politics. Now it is imperative to be so against the other pernicious extreme: unrestrained cynicism.” (Preface to *Power Politics*, xv; quoted at Donnelly, 193) George Kennan, in his 1985 Foreword to *American Diplomacy*, noted:

The problems of excessive legalism and moralism, as treated in the original lectures [1950; published in 1951], are today, in large part, historical ones. To be sure we still have a tendency to fall back on both of these extremes when it suits our purpose to do so. But the bewilderments of the Cold War have produced strange consequences, and there are times in these recent years when I have found myself wishing that there were a bit more of morality in our concepts of what is legal, and more attention to legality in our concepts of what is moral (*American Diplomacy*, vii)

The English School responds to both these shortcomings, but without abandoning the cautionary character of negative restraint which continues to be realism’s most essential contribution to international politics. The English School pairs this restraining virtue with the positive conception of the international society as a realistic framework for continuing efforts at global cooperation and understanding, reduction of the worst excesses of war, and even the promise of improved human welfare. It rejects cynicism in favor of pursuing a political goal that is bounded but dynamic and attainable, and upon which progress can be built in the future.

This is squarely within the tradition of Niebuhr’s Christian realism, and consistent with Niebuhr’s writings about politics and hope. The international society concept acknowledges that power remains paramount in the international order; nor does it blinker the egotism and narrow self-interest of nations and leaders. At the same time, it believes that the sinews that bind nations’ interests to each other and into the international fabric can be strengthened by means of the international society, and that over time the number of such connective tissue can be increased and made to grow.

The English School, like all the IR schools, focuses on states and state actors. Notwithstanding the rise and power of multinational corporations, transnational terror groups, supranational religious loyalties, global NGOs, and world-spanning financial markets and environmental issues, the state remains the most important actor in international life. The “world community” which Niebuhr envisioned was a community of states, not of persons, although the ultimate goal is to improve the welfare of persons by working through and with nation-states. For now and the foreseeable future, global problems and opportunities will be addressed within the broad structure of the Westphalian order of nation-states developed over the last 350 years. These have been strengthened (in principle if not consistently in practice) in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly with respect to such issues as mutual respect for national sovereignty, non-aggression between states, and adherence to treaty and other obligations of international law. But more can be expected and hoped for than the continuation of the present state of affairs. Robert Jackson has done the most extensive work in outlining the progress that has been made, both procedurally and substantively, and the ways in which the “global covenant,” broadened and deepened, can support a stronger international society.

The English School was grounded in Augustinian political theology and continues to speak the language of Niebuhr. As Niebuhr taught, both positive Christian hope and the negative “lash of fear” if we fail to mitigate the consequences of anarchy, should inspire Christians to work with all persons of good will to strengthen the international order, widen the perspective of the rich nations, broaden the concept of national interest, and insist on justice as an ultimate goal. In the systematic study of international relations today, the English School offers the most promising approach to these ends, the one most compatible with Niebuhr’s teaching, and the one

within which Christian realists can retain their distinctively Christian view of the conduct of nations and persons.

The Concept of National Interest

As the preceding pages make clear, “national interest” is a central concept in all realist thinking – indeed in all theorizing about IR in any of the schools. But its precise meaning and scope are seldom delineated.³

In the first place, it is always assumed, though not stated, that national interest means national “self-interest.” For most thinkers (though not all), as for most politicians, a nation’s concern for people outside its borders must be justified by the self-interest of those within the nation. First comes a nation’s concern for itself.

What then is the primary national interest? According to Hans Morgenthau, for realists it is “interest defined in terms of power.” As an empirical matter, nations are preoccupied with the attainment and preservation of power above all else. “International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power,” and power means influence and ultimately control over the minds and actions of others, including other nations. (*Politics Among Nations*, 5, 25-26) Subsequent thinkers, whether realists or non-realists, have largely accepted Morgenthau’s premise and proceeded to explore the different kinds of power sought by nation-states. As a result, the

³ The failure to define precisely the idea of national interest has led to much conceptual fuzziness in IR study. Raymond Aron has described the confusion in these words:

... whatever the diplomacy of a state may be, nothing prevents one saying after the fact that it was dictated by considerations of “national interest,” as long as “national interest” has not been strictly defined. Indeed, the so-called theory of “national interest” either suggests something as undeniable as it is vague – that each actor thinks first of itself – or else tries to oppose itself to other pseudo-theories, for example that the foreign policy of states is dictated by political ideology or moral principles. ... To say that the Soviet Union conducts its foreign affairs on the basis of its “national interest” means that it is not guided exclusively by its ambition to spread Communism. Such a proposition is undeniable, but to conclude from it that the rulers of a non-Communist Russia would have had the same diplomatic policy ... is simply absurd. The purpose of the empirical study of international relations consists precisely in determining the historical perceptions that control the behavior of collective actors and the decisions of the rulers of those actors.

Aron, “What is a Theory of International Relations?,” 192.

working assumption among IR theorists is that national (self-) interest is paramount, and this interest is most directly served by the attainment and preservation of power.

In partial mitigation, Morgenthau notes that power is not usually sought for its own sake, but rather as a means to an end. Mostly, that end is survival and therefore security against foreign invasion or aggression. While this is surely a worthy end, what often occurs is the false “securitization” of issues, *i.e.*, the use of fear to enlarge and elevate lesser issues into ones of national security, for political or military purposes.

Despite its centrality, security is not the only national objective. Sometimes, Morgenthau observes, power is used for the accomplishment of genuine religious, philosophical, ethical, or social objectives not related to the preservation or attainment of power as such. (*Id.*, 25) This is his implicit acknowledgment that long-term or broader-scope national interest may include different ends than short-term interest, particularly in the case of a nation that enjoys a comfortable margin of geopolitical security such as the United States.⁴

Although the main salutary effect of ethics in international relations is to operate as a restraint on the exercise of power (as in just-war theory, for example), this last point about long-term or wider-term interest opens up the possibility of a more positive ethical purpose – and thus space for international society as a national priority. Can perceived ethical obligations cause a nation to act affirmatively in ways it would not if it were concerned solely with its self-interest narrowly defined (*i.e.*, interest as power)? As Morgenthau and Niebuhr recognized, seconded by Jackson, there is contemporary evidence that it can. The UN itself imposes obligations on states that require them in certain instances to sacrifice their short-term self-interest for the benefit of the international community, and they sometimes do so. Moreover, while much of the foreign

⁴ Recall Harold Nicholson’s observation of nineteenth-century Britain: “we could afford the luxury of gentleness, because we were completely unafraid.” (Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, 292)

aid distributed by the U.S. since the end of the Second War has served the country's self-interest, much of it has not, at least in any direct way, and was motivated in part by a genuine desire to raise the living standards of poorer countries. Niebuhr made this point explicitly as regards the Marshall Plan.⁵ In recent times, the international movement supporting a "duty to protect" persons in murderous regimes, and actual examples of armed humanitarian intervention in the last few decades, including Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999, demonstrate that powerful nations sometimes put their resources and their own citizens' lives at risk for the protection of endangered or oppressed peoples.

Does the national interest have intrinsic moral value, particularly in a democracy where elected leaders hold the safety and welfare of their citizens in trust and are obligated not to squander those interests for the sake of peoples beyond the borders? It is a highly-charged question on which reasonable – and moral – people disagree. Morgenthau definitely felt that to be the case, given "the moral principle of national survival" (*Politics Among Nations*, 10), though as noted above, where survival or national security is not at stake, he allowed that nations did and should pursue broader ends.

Niebuhr was not so sure that national interest should be granted the dignity of independent moral standing. He was aware that idolatry of state symbols and power is always a danger. He was also convinced that the law of love is the ultimate moral standard, that social justice is its practical expression in a broken world, and that some degree of self-sacrifice may be required. He found no direct connection between the national interest and any of these moral landmarks.

⁵ This occurred in a discussion in 1967 between Niebuhr and Morgenthau recorded in the short-lived journal *War/Peace Report*, as recounted by Daniel Rice in "Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau: A Friendship with Contrasting Shades of Realism," *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 42 no. 2 (Aug. 2008), 255-291. Although my conclusions are somewhat different from Rice's, I profited from his analysis of the contrast between Niebuhr's and Morgenthau's views on the moral content of the national interest.

It was largely in dialogue with the work of Morgenthau that Niebuhr worked out where he stood. “There are modern realists,” he said in his essay on Augustine’s political realism, who “in their reaction to abstract and vague forms of international idealism, counsel the nation to consult only its own interests.” He continued:

In a sense collective self-interest is so consistent that it is superfluous to advise it. But a consistent self-interest on the part of a nation will work against its interests because it will fail to do justice to the broader and longer interests, which are involved with the interests of other nations. A narrow national loyalty on our part, for instance, will obscure our long range interests where they are involved with those of a whole alliance of free nations. Thus the loyalty of a leavening portion of a nation’s citizens to a value transcending national interest will save a “realistic” nation from defining its interests in such narrow and short range terms as to defeat the real interests of the nation. (*CRPP*, 136-37)

Niebuhr is arguing that “enlightened” or long-term self-interest requires attentiveness to the interests of other nations. Is this merely a pragmatic argument that enlightened self-interest best serves the selfish interests of the nation in the long run? Or is Niebuhr using such language to win over political realists, while harboring the deeper idealistic conviction that we should give weight to the needs of nations and peoples other than our own because justice requires it? The answer is not entirely clear, but there can be little doubt that Niebuhr did not want to lose the independent role of justice in limiting or shaping our conception of national interest. On the one hand, he understood that the most practical way to serve justice is to identify those instances when there can be just action which also serves the national interest narrowly defined. On the other, he was anxious to avoid having justice swallowed up in the national interest, or having it be an objective only when it coincided with narrow national interest. Thus, commenting on George Kennan’s prescription for avoiding international moralism by concentrating on national interest (in *American Diplomacy 1900-1950*), Niebuhr said:

Since the lives and interests of other men and communities always impinge upon our own, a preoccupation with our own interests must lead to an illegitimate indifference

toward the interests of others The cure for a pretentious idealism, which claims to know more about the future and about other men than is given mortal man to know, is not egotism. It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind,” derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power. (*Irony*, 148)

Finally, recall Niebuhr’s emphasis on the difference between “a little more and a little less justice” (*ND-I*, 220), and his statement quoted earlier in chapter 9:

[T]he strength of the modern nation’s self-regard and power impulse has not eliminated the residual capacity of peoples and nations for loyalty to values, cultures, and civilizations of wider and higher scope than the interests of the nation. ... The importance of establishing this residual creative freedom in collective man lies not in the possibility of subordinating the lower to the higher or wider interest – but in the possibility that even a residual loyalty to values, transcending national existence, may change radically the nation’s conception of the breadth and quality of its ‘national interest.’ (*Man’s Nature and His Communities*, 76-77)

Thus, Niebuhr’s view is that while prudent commitments to those outside our borders may serve our long-term national interest, such other-regard is independently required by the demands of justice as understood in the Judeo-Christian tradition. I referred in chapter 3 to Niebuhr’s fondness for Amos’ insistence that Israel was not the only concern of the God of justice, but that the “children of the Ethiopians, ... the Philistines of Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir” were also within the purview of God’s love. (*FH*, 107 n. 2, quoting Amos 9:7)

Theism and Hope

I indicated earlier that the English School is the one school of IR study in which Christian realists may remain both Christians and realists, sharing in the realism and vision of the School yet retaining their distinct Christian identity. The “Christian” component of the term derives, of course, from the theistic commitment which was foundational for Niebuhr, a commitment no longer shared by leading English School thinkers.

In all of his alliances with various “atheists for Niebuhr,” Niebuhr himself never forgot or concealed the Christian theism that formed the foundation of his own thought. Indeed, he drew on it repeatedly and explicitly, as in his well-known writings on Augustine as the most reliable guide, on Hebrew and Christian insights into the flawedness of human nature and the limits of human reason, and on Christian hope. On the last topic, I discussed in chapter 9 (in the section, “Realism and Hope”) Niebuhr’s view that idealism without hope risks degenerating into cynicism, and that Biblical faith is, for Niebuhr, the indispensable source of hope. Because nothing worth doing can be accomplished in our lifetime, “we must be saved by hope.” (*Irony*, 63) It is that hope which gives us the “sense of serenity” which is a vital “resource” for doing what we seek to do in the face of frequent discouragement. (*Essays in Applied Christianity*, 101-02) Herbert Butterfield echoed the same point in *Christianity, Diplomacy and War* (p. 3).

Most English School thinkers after Butterfield and Wight abandoned Christian hope and sought their moral motivation in other ways. This does not necessarily undermine the strength of their substantive ideas or the connection of those ideas to the political-ethical teachings of Butterfield, Wight and Niebuhr. It does amount to a kind of “realist’s idealism” without theism. It is not a warrant for Christian thinkers to follow suit and abandon their theistic grounds.

The upshot is that Christian realism may, as I have argued, act in concord with the English School, sharing its historical and ethical values, its classical realist outlook, and its vision of international society. But Christian realists will also remain distinct, faithful to their Niebuhrian heritage, their theistic roots, and the Christian hope that is nourished from those roots.

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- I. Works by Reinhold Niebuhr.
- II. Works by Major English School Thinkers.
- III. Pre-Twentieth Century Texts (Ancient Greeks through Max Weber, d. 1920).
- IV. Modern Sources (since Max Weber, d. 1920).

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