

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND AN ETHIC OF
POLITICAL HUMILITY IN DELIBERATIVE
POLITICS

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The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the degree to which the political psychology of Reinhold Niebuhr contributes to a more capacious theory of deliberative politics and to what degree such a theory may permit individuals to express themselves with more workable forms of democratic practice. Considerations of Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of impermanence, anxiety, self-reflection, and empathy borne of humility guide the framework of the argument in that they inform and augment individual political preferences. The author uses these ideas to develop a theory of deliberative politics built upon the empathetic tendencies found in the self-scrutinizing humility of Reinhold Niebuhr's politics. The author considers this theory in contradistinction to ascendant strains in political theory and theologies of public life, which at times may disavowal Niebuhr's understanding of natural theology, his correspondent political realism, or otherwise miscategorize Niebuhr's political claims. The degree to which Niebuhr's ethical framework can or should be separated from Christian considerations of ethics more broadly, especially from Christian eschatology, is a major topic of discussion. Contrasting Niebuhr with other Christian ethicists permits us to see in what manner Niebuhr's political psychology might retain political value beyond a particular religious

community. This work also considers limits of Niebuhr's understanding of liberal politics, and whether an ethic of humility can be overly disempowering at times. Tension between individual and aggregate political perspectives frames that discussion.

**REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND AN ETHIC OF HUMILITY IN DELIBERATIVE
POLITICS**

By

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**Dedicated to my loving parents who made real the possibility of
undergraduate and graduate studies for myself and for my sister.**

Thank you.

Reinhold Niebuhr and An Ethic of Humility in Deliberative Politics

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Chapter 1: A Niebuhrian Ethic of Humility in Public Discourse

When we consider Reinhold Niebuhr as a writer who focuses on indeterminate history and psycho-social limitations in relational expressions of personal experience, we may instead have a cursory tendency to see him as a realist, an ironist, and a geostrategist who shaped just war theory, particularly with regard to the Cold War. Beyond this skewed perspective, Niebuhr wrote extensively about the relation of history to political order, the power of human creativity to reflect on personal motivations. In doing so, we can thereby relate our motivations to those of others within political communities, and quell the political problems that arise from the anxieties of human frailty. Niebuhr concerns himself with the limitations of social communication, but moreover with regard to human capacities for self-deception and self-aggrandizement as things that distort self and social perceptions. We often consider political failures in terms of epistemological errors rather than the human capacity for deceit as an ontological constraint, which limits our view of ourselves and of others. Self-deception and even willful malice toward others are therefore crucial things we must consider and seek to diminish when we want to talk about deliberative politics in a way that wants people to present arguments with lucidity and honesty. Reinhold Niebuhr's social ethics provide an important tool set toward that end.

Much attention has been given to Reinhold Niebuhr on matters of foreign policy and strategic thought. His particular understanding of Christian realism has spurred much discussion and has influenced American politicians of contentious ideological backgrounds. Neoconservative viewpoints borrow Niebuhr's reluctant acceptance of

interventionism and utilize it as a categorical endorsement of warfare. Liberal readings of Niebuhr alternatively may discount his realism to make him more of political idealist. These attributes are usually argued with regard to foreign policy rather than with regard to how Niebuhr's understanding of human capabilities and shortcomings can contribute to our understanding of a healthy polity. Niebuhr's political psychology provides to us tools with which people can reflect consciously on the veracity of their individual preferences for public goods, sincerely express their viewpoints, and properly receive such viewpoints from other people. These capabilities are the essence of a robust deliberative democracy, and a Niebuhrian view of politics provides to us a unique and useful roadmap for discerning how we can improve our democratic, relational experiences. I shall argue that even beyond deliberative democracy, Niebuhr provides us with a useful toolset for understanding forms of political dissent outside of a democratic framework. Toward that end, the chief examples I have in mind for my Niebuhrian ethic of political humility are Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Adam Michnik, who factor significantly into my conclusion.

More broadly then, beyond concerns of foreign policy, I believe Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of social psychology is important, unique, and deserves consideration for its merits. Chief among these merits is the usefulness of self-reflection for a more self-conscious comprehension of individual participation in deliberative democratic discourse. Toward that end, this work considers and articulates a Niebuhrian ethic of humility that we can extrapolate from his social psychology toward the end of constructing a Niebuhrian expression of humility in deliberative democratic theory.

Understanding Niebuhr's political psychology also gives us insight as to why he has fallen out of favor in American seminaries that have adopted approaches to theology that put witness and community above certain kinds of personal reflection that Niebuhr would prefer. Much of my understanding of Niebuhr's social psychology cautions against that shift.

The utility of Niebuhr's social psychology cannot be overstated for contemporary political debates. Whether discussing the political calculus of justifying particular acts of warfare since 2001, drone assassinations, NSA metadata programs, or any number of contemporary political problems, we face a question of balance. Each of these issues raises the cost of doing business in politics. We consider not which policies we prefer because we find them to be better ideals or more practically useful, but also because we can overzealously dole out or too cautiously withhold our level of trust toward other persons and institutions. Such feelings arise from a buoyant, hopeful idealism or inevitable, cautious disdain for specific political actors and practices, or more problematically, as an attitude toward social life more generally.

Balancing preferences and attitudes in questions of political power, official corruption, and institutional trust therefore is not merely a matter of managing what federalism means for America, what it means to be conservative or progressive at any given point in time, but instead how we manage our attitudes toward idealism and realism. For a Niebuhrian ethic of politics, the former tends toward naivete as the latter tends toward cynicism. What Reinhold Niebuhr's social psychology provides to us is a method of considering political questions that seeks to qualify and understand how to

best contextualize the naivete of ideals and the cynicism of realism in situations where they may be unwarranted or reflect personal prejudices. Specifically, Niebuhr enables us to continuously scrutinize bounded, limited selves and the transience of our social ontology. In other words, Niebuhr's psychology permits us to intensely examine anticipated consequences of political thoughts and actions and utilize that reflection to augment or diminish our ethical intentions to make them ostensibly less imperfect and to increase our awareness of the imperfections of our creeds and ideologies. A Niebuhrian case is one that argues for the increase of relative justice, rather than in categorical absolutes. Toward that end, a major effort of this work is to provide us a means of considering political questions in this manner.

We should care about this important contribution because heretofore few authors have considered the complexity of Reinhold Niebuhr's complex individual psychology of situating one's self in political life. We can in turn use the positional self-reflection that Niebuhr endorses as a means of more sincerely and articulately relating political claims to other people. Certainly, if we think of rifts across religious and ideological divides within political debate in the United States and elsewhere, a tool-set of Niebuhr's social psychology is therefore worthy of our consideration toward the end of expanding a theory of deliberative politics and practices of deliberative democratic politics that better reflects what goals people actually believe and prefer. Such a theory can produce more widely-intelligible claims and therefore better outcomes when people are better able to check their own interests, present those interests charitably to others, and receive claims of others in like manner. Toward the end of articulating such a theory, I shall now provide a

conceptual road-map of my understanding of Niebuhrian thought in deliberative political theory, then contextualize Niebuhr against those critical of his understanding of politics, and defend him from such detraction.

To state the positive case for Niebuhr as a proponent of a particularly useful kind of deliberative politics, I shall very briefly outline the steps of how I understand Niebuhr's reflective politics to work. Later I will explain those processes more deeply in the main body of my argument. Specifically, there are five aspects of my argument that we must consider if we are to view deliberative politics with a Niebuhrian lens. These include the contingent ontology of persons as political actors, the anxiety of selfishness that arises from the uncertainty of our contingent lives, a pragmatic ethic of humility to analyze and mitigate that political anxiety, the capacity to analyze and recalibrate the ongoing appropriateness of that self-criticism relative to the claims of other people and relative to idealistic or cynical misconceptions of reality, and then the praxis of that method of criticism as a sincere kind of deliberative practice that takes seriously differences between individuals and groups that hold either precise or inchoate rival political claims.

This chapter will highlight the literature and arguments in which my understanding of Niebuhr's social psychology of deliberative politics is best situated. This chapter therefore emphasizes a brief overview of the general argument, situates Niebuhr in relation to other categorizations of him in Augustinian thought, and discusses in summary the questions and concerns that subsequent supporting chapters will raise with regard to liberalism, communities, religious ethics, the scope and limits of humility

as a virtue, and the other-worldliness of Christian eschatology as criticisms that may apply to my Niebuhrian ethic of political humility.

First and foremost for Niebuhr is the important acknowledgment of the bounded, finite nature of individual lives, political claims, and political institutions. Niebuhr largely saw this as a theological constraint on our epistemology, but my Niebuhrian argument opens the door to other views of political ontology that may differ in their understanding. That is, the brevity of life and the narrow perspectives of our experiences fundamentally limit our understanding of ourselves and our view of political goods. Acknowledgment of cognitive biases toward particular beliefs is as useful for understanding politics in this way as is Niebuhr's own Christian understanding of the view of human beings as individuals limited in their capacity for perfectible justice, selflessness, and cooperation.

If we are to develop a more workable and inclusive understanding of deliberative politics, we must consider Niebuhr's strain of positional, relational politics in relation with major ideas in the development of deliberative tradition of political thought. Jürgen Habermas has recently argued that religious and secular claims made against one another should give each other greater respect in public spaces, as I shall discuss later. For this reason, Niebuhr's appeal to both religious and secular readers makes him a useful thinker to consider on the topic of deliberative discourse beyond his important social psychology. Specifically, both secular and religious thinkers from such varied traditions as political pragmatism and Augustinian ethics of citizenship draw upon Niebuhr as a common source for inspiration and for theoretical underpinnings of specific political claims.

Niebuhr's wide-reaching legacy provides that people who inhabit vastly different political doctrines can utilize the capacity to communicate honestly without bracketing their personal beliefs, or subsuming such beliefs into a particular ideal formulation of a community or a republic. It is my task to construct a unique theory of deliberative participation on the basis of Reinhold Niebuhr's writings, and to explain how this theory informs and augments important changes expressed in recent years in the self-critical qualifications of contemporary deliberative democratic theory. Toward that goal, Niebuhr's emphasis on a particular expression of political humility as a foundation of deliberative discourse provides an important ontological framework. Specifically the five aspects I outlined earlier apply here: ontological contingency, political anxiety, a pragmatic ethic of humility to analyze and mitigate political anxiety, the capacity to analyze and adjust the ongoing appropriateness of that self-criticism relative to new information, and then the implementation of that method of critical awareness.

This framework distinguishes Niebuhr from other strains of Augustinian thought, from Christian thought more broadly, and from the pragmatic and realist traditions that he also inhabits in his political theory. To contrast Niebuhr's theory with those of others, some major thinkers I shall consider extensively in relation to Niebuhr include John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, John Milbank, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, Jeffrey Stout, and others in related traditions of political and religious ethics. I shall address these authors in detailed discussions of how Niebuhr intersects with their various political perspectives. I shall also discuss in detail those authors for whom Niebuhr is a primary concern, including Langdon Gilkey, Robin Lovin, Eric Gregory, Charles Mathewes, and

Ilsup Ahn among others. Each expert offers critical insight for Niebuhr if we are to understand how his reflective understanding of anxiety in politics can help us to develop a more capacious and mutually intelligible political order. This chapter serves as an introductory framework for my argument and locates it within various traditions of relevant discussions concerning Niebuhr's political thought. Chapter two outlines a Niebuhrian view of deliberative politics in detail and provides its intellectual context. Subsequent chapters rely specifically on the citation of other close readings in Niebuhr and in relation to potential critics toward the end of a cogent, complete argument that takes seriously anticipated objections. To understand why a historical contextualization of human life is important to a Niebuhrian ethic of political participation, we must first contextualize the locus Niebuhr's political theory.

To understand Niebuhr's ethic of humility, we must first discern him in contradistinction from other proponents of Augustinian thought. Niebuhr denies much of a historical account of his own religion, yet insists that it still holds symbolic truth for a political understanding of relational identities. Furthermore, that symbolic historical context is generally imperative for understanding and affirming his political claims. Critically, this distinction which emphasizes symbolic religion makes Niebuhr's claims about human behavior intelligible to those who do not share his own theology. His theology is fundamentally a political and social one, rather than a strictly doctrinal one. He holds this view in part because his understanding of his own religion describes an ultimately ineffable experience. This claim is not to discount his personal faith or religious experiences, but to stress the importance of his social psychology to those who

may not share those beliefs.

While I do not share Niebuhr's theology, I nevertheless find his insights regarding political life to be important in shaping and broadening the role of individual position and perspective in deliberative democracy. In this work I hope to show that Niebuhr's sense of irony predates many pragmatic understandings of communicative rationality, including contemporary arguments for pragmatism that utilize the same terminology of Niebuhr, with regard to such concepts as humility, anxiety, selfishness, and historical contingency. Furthermore, the Niebuhrian ethic of personal reflection in the face of contingent anxiety brings a useful tool to better utilizing deliberative practices in the face limitations that develop from encountering differences in the face of human selfishness. I will argue that Niebuhr's understanding of Christian eschatology does not diminish his ironic understanding of creative politics enmeshed in individual positions and historical circumstances, but rather it provides context for acting with creative thought toward political ends. Niebuhr's eschatology is not an escapist dream, but rather the crucible of situated imagination and possibility. His eschatology reaches beyond personal preferences and social circumstances in a way that ancient virtues and modern perfectible social comprehensions of politics cannot fully achieve. Given Niebuhr's agnosticism about the precision of his eschatology, I will argue that this eschatology is useful as a heuristic for understanding social relationships even to those of us who do not share his theology. We can respect Niebuhr's understanding of Christian eschatology without either necessarily either sharing it or discounting it.

In addition to temporal concerns of Niebuhr's theory, one may consider whether a

Niebuhr's ethic of humility disempowers alienated and marginalized persons if it merely encourages them to accept their unfair or diminished lots in life. I will argue that Niebuhr's understanding of human behavior, which emphasizes humility, nevertheless does not depress or further alienate marginal social groups. I shall argue this on grounds that a Niebuhrian ethic of self-reflection establishes significant historical progress as a realistic and in some cases ostensible possibility and on grounds that reflecting upon one's life with humility but also with pragmatism in relation to others does not necessitate a radical shift toward self-affliction. Toward that end, I shall argue that decisive political actors like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Adam Michnik understand a Niebuhrian ethic of humility without adopting some absurd self-abnegation. With his acute self-reflection and contextualization of political claims, Niebuhr takes that possibility more seriously than many other traditions within the fields of political theory or Augustinian theology, which may at times stray into utopian or perfectionist understandings of the deliberative capacity for justice, and alternatively or even simultaneously take an altogether cynical view of political life, as per Augustine's famous dictum regarding the difference between pirates and emperors only in the scale of their respective thefts.

With this framework and these topics in mind, we can consider what value Niebuhr's critiques of traditional democratic and liberal theories maintain in contemporary social inquiry. Niebuhr is not just a realistic geostrategist or Christian filter for Nietzsche's will-to-power, inasmuch as he promotes a particular theory of self-criticism in political life that is uniquely his own. Niebuhr refashions older ideas of Augustinian ontology, whose psychology remains politically relevant and socially

intelligible to people who need not share that particular belief system or even Christianity more broadly.

Traditionally, prior to Niebuhr, as per Augustine's *City of God*, chapter XIV, a more literal interpretation of a sinful fall of Adam and Eve asserted that generational, transferable sinfulness had been the justification for Augustinian understandings of political participation. Such ideals emphasize a dichotomy of divine and earthly love, the duality of charity and cupidity, and the heavenly and earthly cities that reflect those divergences. For Augustine, love of God and heaven were perfect but indefinite and somewhat ineffable goods. Instances of love of persons and of civic life were inferior goods, but nevertheless of significant, albeit imperfect, value. Augustine's material world is erratic and full of dependent contingencies in political relationships. For Augustine's understanding, this ontology required a strong belief in the literal narrative of redemptive Christianity. This belief provided a hopeful teleology on which an individual could infuse analogous, distinct meaning in daily life. Augustinian sin was original in the sense that it was seen as a historical fact, not a psychological manifestation of common biases and social failures.

Alternatively, Niebuhr's symbolic approach to biblical narrative, particularly the garden of Eden, relegates sinfulness to a political phenomenon of our anxiousness in our identities and in the limitations of our relational experiences. Niebuhr sees the Fall of Man story not so much in the radical redemptive language of a *felix culpa*, a historic boon that permits the fulfillment of Christian redemption, but as a descriptive psychology of human relationships. For Niebuhr, the Fall is the story of our political anxieties made

manifest in the face of uncertainty. On the matter of the Fall of Man being symbolic, Niebuhr is closer to the Pelagian heretics that Augustine condemned, but not as an exemplar of human freedom, but rather that “renders us unable to choose the good we would choose.”¹ Differently though, Niebuhr does not affirm the symbolic story of a positive freedom of humanity, but rather of the imperfections of human trust, our tendency toward venerating insecure foundations as having stability, and our general comfort with delusions and cognitive biases that serve selfish interests. This shift in turn makes Niebuhr a fascinating study for cases in which religious speech makes itself intelligible to a secular audience on grounds that a given interlocutor might find Niebuhr's symbolic claim more reasonable than an unqualified religious claim of biblical history or divine command. What is remarkable for Niebuhr is that he does not feel that he has abandoned his religious framework in the process, but rather fulfilled it in claiming a humble, skeptical attitude that still affords a belief in a radical form of love as a creative political ethos. Returning to Augustine's *City of God*, we see one source of Niebuhr's inspiration for his political theory. Drawing from Augustine's discussion of the narrative of the Fall of Man, “There is, therefore, something in humility which, strangely enough, exalts the heart, and something in pride which debases it. This seems, indeed, to be contradictory, that loftiness should debase and lowliness exalt.”² While Augustine and Niebuhr as an inheritor of Augustine's thought concern themselves with a formulation of Christian theology surrounding this claim, I believe that Niebuhr also uses this perspective on human psychology as a robust basis for pragmatic and relational claims in

1 Gilkey, Langdon. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2001). 136

2 Augustine of Hippo. *The Confessions. The City of God. On Christian Doctrine*. J.F. Shaw, trans. William Benton. Chicago, London, Toronto. (1952). 388

deliberative discourse that has a further appeal beyond its respective theological understanding. For my purposes then, this process of contingent self-affirmation that Niebuhr espouses is distinguishable from Nietzschean or transcendental ideals in that Niebuhr affirms a more guarded acknowledgment of the limitations to his own thought processes and intellectual perceptions, affording more respect to the travails and perceptions of other people who likewise inhabit experiences of uncertainty, vulnerability, and contingency.

Here it may be useful to explain why I should emphasize humility, whereas some Augustinian ethics of citizenship and their utility for deliberative politics generally fall into categories of hope, love, or justice. It would be naïve to argue that humility is some supererogatory virtue, but for my Niebuhrian ethic it helps to consider one's own emphasis against approximations of various other virtues, Christian or otherwise. Niebuhr maintains love as a basis for political relationships, but Niebuhr's consideration of love is not strictly Augustine's love. Niebuhr's understanding of the law of love in politics as an ascendant norm is an ambivalent one. Daniel Rice argues concerning Niebuhr and the law of love, "...the paradoxical nature of the relationship between love and law has been misunderstood precisely because the concept of sin has not been taken seriously in so-called rational moral treatises."³ In other words, in much discussion of a good political order love becomes an unqualified ideal that does not properly reflect human frailties. If we think of love in the contingent and anxious political reality that Niebuhr describes, our love may become desperate in its insecurity or mechanical in its

³ Rice, Daniel F. "The Spirit of the Law in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr" *Journal of Law and Religion*. Vol. 4. No. 2. (1986). 253-291

practice. For Niebuhr, to claim an authoritative religious doctrine of command in loving would be the height of arrogance, the furthest thing from his understanding of Christian humility and charity. Love, like other virtues for Niebuhr, is often a mixed motive steeped in the symbol of sin. Its proponents may utilize it in instrumental and inauthentic ways that may not be readily apparent. Niebuhr's political order is then more self-aware and self-correcting than the Augustinian tradition from which he originated.

Augustinian citizenship offers a significant tradition that seeks to salvage political life from radical expressions of selfishness presumed to be endemic and pernicious to various social theories, particularly to liberal theories which generally extol the individual as the primary locus of all things political. While Niebuhr respects and espouses the importance of individuals as unique persons of value who in turn inhabit and experience unique positions, he nevertheless maintains reservations regarding particular strains of liberal creeds. For Niebuhr, some forms that selfishness takes might affirm perfectible or naïve discourse that results from unqualified faith in rationality, unmitigated hope in progressive history, or radical expressions of doctrinal fanaticism. In Niebuhr's understanding, these ideals are always inchoate and commingle with such emotions as ambition, lust, and pride. Indeed, these experiences may strike us in ways we cannot always anticipate, recognize, or explain. In the best cases, political claims come with simple mixed motives because our desires are tied to a particular time and place as much as they are to any ideological framework of reference. We may wish to espouse such a framework as a relatively just and reasonable set of ideals, but selfish rationalizations intervene and warp our ideals to our whims. In the worst cases, someone may crassly use

an ethical claim to uphold a self-interest that harms another person or class of people in a direct, violent manner. There are better and worse ways of acknowledging such limitations in political liberalism. Niebuhr provides us with useful tools for making such distinctions, which I have applied to my Niebuhrian ethic of political life.

Reinhold Niebuhr can offer a compelling and unique analysis of what Augustinian citizenship embodies relative to other theories within the Christian tradition, as well as relative to contemporary liberal and democratic discourse. Arguments for Augustinian citizenship, according to one proponent, Eric Gregory, fall into categories that prioritize hope, justice, or love, with various emphases. Citing Herbert Deane, Gregory explains how an Augustinian ethic of hope, which he ascribes explicitly to Niebuhr, is a “realm in which fallible, sinful men work out imperfect, precarious solutions to recurring difficulties and tensions.”⁴ At first glance, this taxonomy seems to fit Reinhold Niebuhr's ironic understanding of political life, but I shall argue that Niebuhr's understanding of humility and our possible constructive responses to it push his political claims into categories of pragmatism and communicative discourse, which are dependent upon humility more than love. Niebuhr's ethic exceeds this narrower framework of an ascendant ideal of hoping against the likelihood of hope in politics. Political relationships with possibilities for growth and magnanimity can exist for Niebuhr in discreet and tenable experiences. The symbolic sin that curtails political life for Niebuhr may be inevitable in contentious politics, but it is not a fixed necessity of political discourse. Each political encounter provides a unique experience in which people share

⁴ Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2008).

opportunities to act in a unselfish manner. Furthermore there is another problem with Gregory's claim. Charles Mathewes, another major Augustinian theologian of public life, does not acknowledge or affirm this understanding of Niebuhr as a categorical thinker who prioritizes political hope as his ascendant political virtue. Highly critical of Niebuhr, Mathewes claims that he, “treated hope almost as an anesthetic, like a scotch at the end of a hard day of work.”⁵ This dismissive attitude likely originates in a complaint that Niebuhr's eschatology is inchoate, thereby mitigating the importance of hope in the sense it has within a finite religious narrative of redemptive history. Such a criticism makes sense to Mathewes because his project is to affirm a particular theological perspective and evaluate that perspective in relation to a liberal framework of justice. Niebuhr is too much of a political realist, in Mathewes's view, to consider him as a proper Augustinian theorist who can affirm hope as a specific virtue beyond its role as an “anesthetic,” a hope cloaked in extreme pessimism. Equally, Niebuhr's interests in neither justice nor love, other virtues Gregory cited above, do not concretely inform his political theory as its fundamental bases. If I had to pick one of Gregory's categories for Niebuhr, an ethic of love is perhaps most appropriate relative to the other two options, but it comes with the strong caveat that love is only available after significant self-reflection in the face of an uncertain world and the anxieties that ontology imposes on human beings. If Niebuhr does not fit concretely into such a category of liberal Augustinian hope, or justice, or love, I argue it is because he has not been properly considered as a thinker who inspires important claims in traditions of deliberative democracy, Augustinian politics, and pragmatic political thought because his chief virtue is humility and humility is a tricky

⁵ Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 239

thing to the extent that one should not oversell it to people who are suffering. When we pay sufficient attention to a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in politics, we can see how it makes possible a more self-aware understanding of love and reciprocal respect in politics toward the end of better deliberative practices.

With regard to his theology, Niebuhr gives in his writings a relatively brief consideration of the specific doctrinal content of his Christian eschatology. Constrained persons situated in particular positions in contingent time and space necessarily have difficulty maintaining such radical hope. Mathewes's criticism of anesthetic hope is ostensibly an important one. Problematically as well for Niebuhr's theological critics, the lack of emphasis on eschatology as a definite point in time indicates that Niebuhr is much more concerned with the problems of everyday life in human communities than he is with any yearning for a perfectionist understanding of love found in Augustine's heavenly city. In other words, Augustine's divine charity is so far off for Niebuhr that material cupidity, Augustine's inferior good of love, diminishes higher, charitable love's practical relevance to everyday social life. Nevertheless, I believe that Niebuhr's conceptual eschatology is important for personal and social orientation for producing creative, communicative political claims, as I shall argue in later chapters. Its relevance here is only in consideration of Niebuhr as an Augustinian thinker.

Niebuhr emphasizes historical progress and political institutions as objects contingent upon the whims and self-aggrandizement of politicians. In like manner, commutative or procedural justice also does not appear to be Niebuhr's normative focus for living a full life as a citizen. The notion that distributive justice can ever be

adjudicated fairly is also a point that he considers with much skepticism. While Niebuhr values increasing relative justice in a given society, justice as an ideal is certainly not Niebuhr's ascendant virtue in Gregory's taxonomy. In its perfectionist tendencies, it suits Niebuhr worse than either hope or love. This divergent understanding of Niebuhr and Augustinian virtues leads me to believe that Niebuhr does not belong decisively in any of Gregory's aforementioned categories, but is in important ways still very much a different kind of Augustinian ethicist, albeit one with caveats that govern his sensibilities and conditions for the attainment of a robust civic order. Chiefly for this reason of Niebuhr's miscategorization, I believe my understanding of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in politics to be an important and useful one.

Alternatively, I contend that Niebuhr is a theorist who builds his Augustinianism primarily upon existential anxiety, and the human capacity to act creatively and boldly in the face of humble self-doubt. Niebuhr sees this action as a means of making human freedom more realistically, reasonably self-directed within the confines of positional, psychological, and biological constraints. This priority I hold in contradistinction to other theories that would consider humility as an ancillary concern relative to the proper ordering of political loves, as a footnote to procedural justice, or as an ephemeral appendage of a hope-driven eschatology. I argue Niebuhr stands against those who would treat humility as a mere conditional attitude rather than a political ethic in its own right, one which can add much depth and scope to deliberative discourse theory to the extent that it permits those persons to experience and define themselves authentically relative to other individuals and a larger polity.

Importantly, this capacity exhibits a relational aspect, as human anxieties about mortality and subsequent reactionary capacities for self-importance tend to diminish authentic, reciprocal communication, especially in public discourse. That is not to say that Niebuhr does not sincerely value human capabilities or personal creativity, both of which he finds to be of critical importance, but merely that we should each keep a proportional understanding of our own achievements and shortcomings in relation to our knowledge of the experiences of others who by definition inhabit different lives. With regard to the context of this work, the notion of creaturely creativity from Langdon Gilkey signifies an affirmative social expression in the face of various constraints. Such constraints include historical contingency, the finitude of the self, and more generally the limited freedom that comes with constrained life experiences and choices. I shall argue that Gilkey's understanding of Niebuhr's creaturely creativity as he terms it is a category of political action that follows from a proper understanding of my Niebuhrian ethic of humble self-reflection toward the end of a more capacious theory of deliberative politics.

Beyond this understanding from Gilkey, Niebuhr scholar Robin Lovin also provides some insight into Niebuhr's politics of Christian realism that I shall consider. In particular, he expands Christian realism in Niebuhr with discussions of political realism and moral (individual) realism that are useful for understanding Niebuhr more generally. Another Niebuhrian scholar Ilsup Ahn refers to the situated identity as the positional self, which is worthy of evaluation and expansion. In short, Ahn focuses on a co-reconstruction of Niebuhr and Habermas for the purposes of reflecting upon the actions of those in positions of power. I want to expand this notion of the usefulness of the idea

of the positional self in light of Gilkey's idea of creaturely creativity, which provides for political expression regardless of one's social standing. Each of us inhabits a particular position and experiences anxiety as a result of the constraints that respective position poses for each of our lives. How does Niebuhr's understanding of that fact inform his contribution to questions of political deliberation and participation? That is, a broader and more capacious formulation of the positional self may make possible a more perfect (but not perfectible) conception of relative social justice through a loving reciprocity that follows from redefining one's personal situation through realistic but humble self-awareness.

Such an understanding of justice is built upon more authentic political discourse that takes seriously Niebuhr's concerns of anxious pride and his correspondent response to that norm. Putting the anxious, suspicious self into an authentic creative relationship with others can turn radial possibilities into actualities for Niebuhr in questions of public discourse. For example, the transformational role of the civil rights movement in American history seems to contradict a theory of pessimistic, entrenched political realism. Nevertheless, Niebuhr's creative understanding of politics helps us to comprehend the possibility of such a transformation. Hope is not *entirely* an anesthetic, but it does directly rely upon positional reflection and relational expression of that reflection to discover fruition in major political endeavors. To achieve positive and inclusive goals of social transformation, we therefore require a positional understanding of communicative action that extends beyond advice to those in privileged positions of power. Realism is not only for entrenched, powerful decisions, but for matters of

transformational social hope, under the right set of preconditions. When we consider the tactics many participants in the civil rights movement employed, we see readily that humility, realism, and political victory are not incompatible things. On the more individuated scale, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Adam Michnik are the examples that I shall consider in my conclusion. These movements and individuals of course do not rely wholly or in each case upon religious conceptions of political goods.

We must consider Niebuhr not only in relation to relevant religious conceptions and expressions of political ethics, but secular ones as well. In advancing a Niebuhrian ethic of democratic discourse, I will be mindful of other traditions of political theory more broadly that Niebuhr criticizes and rejects. Particularly, the indictment of the social contract tradition found in *Man's Nature an His Communities* will provide an important focus as an indicator for his general skepticism of Enlightenment thought and for the contractarian conception of liberalism that it manifests. I will therefore draw parallels between Niebuhr's understanding of imperfect Augustinian self-love and limitations of contractarian political theory. I will explain how the thought experiments often found in contractarian theory sublimate wishes of political order in ways that become problematic and even dangerous for taking the claims of other citizens seriously.

Though Niebuhr espouses a love for human creativity as a benchmark for social flourishing, he distinguishes creativity from imagination. The former is more directly active in the world and relates to other people, the latter may provide internal dialogues and rationalizations that are less beneficial in social relationships. I will consider correspondent thought experiments that parallel Niebuhr's own perspective on liberal

politics and evaluate their comparative conclusions and affirmation relative to Niebuhr's own. Towards this end, the most useful comparisons are probably Thomas Hobbes in the early modern contractarian tradition, and John Rawls as a more contemporary voice. The rationale for the priority of the views of Hobbes and Rawls relative to other contractarians is that their views of human capabilities and pessimism concerning the ubiquity of human selfishness is close to Niebuhr's own understanding on that important point, even if Niebuhr would likely consider both of them to be guilty of other grave errors in judgment. Each contractarian I shall draw upon helps distinguish Niebuhr's own political psychology from alternative thought experiments, both those that preceded and follow his own work. In drawing such distinctions from contractarian works, we can see how Niebuhr values the positive outlook of the Enlightenment in terms of promoting individual rights and liberties, but finds it to be intellectually naïve and politically disorderly in its self-manifestation of the 20th century American democracy that Niebuhr experienced. For Niebuhr then, the Enlightenment emphasizes disruptive social life rather than creative social life, as he terms it in *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Regarding other contracts and dialectical notions of history more broadly, race relations and labor relations certainly fomented strong, critical sentiments within Niebuhr's writings against the ascendant Lockean liberalism of 20th century America. Niebuhr extends this critique to Marxist political ideologies on grounds that they are both fundamentally materialistic conceptions that misrepresent the relationship between toil and value. They are for Niebuhr not fundamentally flawed simply because they are materialistic, but rather because each utilizes its understanding of labor as a value in-and-

of-itself to affirm politically salient, oppressive goals. In this affirmation, political elites manipulate and overwhelm individual experiences, whether in the avatar of Henry Ford or of the vanguard party. In consideration of political elites though, the focus shifts from a contractarian one to one of elite-driven community, which is for Niebuhr always negative regardless of its ideological pretenses.

In like manner, I will also consider another major strain of political thought that Niebuhr scrutinizes. Although Niebuhr is initially critical in earlier works of laissez-faire capitalism, as well as Marxism as parallel and arrogant conceits of an overly progressive understanding of history, there are more general communitarian concerns that apply to political communities beyond that derided capitalist or Marxist ideal. These communitarian critiques apply to macrocosmic social tribes generally, parochial and religious ones, as well as to nation-states that must contend with the pull of nationalism. Furthermore, this critique applies to communitarian understandings of political life explicitly articulated as such. Notably, some of these concerns differ from those expressed in regard to contractarian theories. If Niebuhr understands personal selfishness as a likely attitude, he understands group selfishness is a given phenomenon, whether we are discussing communitarian or republican conceptions of community. Nevertheless, Niebuhr does not always differ from communitarian claims about politics, and those instances where he does not helps inform his treatment of individuals as situated persons with discreet, unique claims.

Problematically for Niebuhr, while a virtuous regard for other people is rare enough in individuals, it is even more rare to find a sincere and authentic regard for the

welfare of other groups within a singular group. Paradoxically, although we are radically dependent upon our communities to check our own selfishness, the self-affirming delusions of groups are dangerous for Niebuhr because they mutually reinforce shared individual conceits. Ethics of shame and duty to community turn personal conscience into a crass social utility. Given that constraint, how can one arrive at a relatively just society? Can we inhabit, at best, only tentative and fragile communities? Niebuhr's answers to these questions are nuanced, but he basically affirms the individual as the primary locus of political life, though in unconventional ways. Niebuhr's emphasis on contextual history of individual life necessitates this understanding of Niebuhr as essentially liberal, though not contractarian and with many caveats with which communitarians may sometimes agree. In drawing distinction with these other traditions, we can see how Niebuhr's political theory may be instead categorized as contributing to pragmatic and deliberative political traditions in a significant manner.

If Enlightenment liberalism and its heirs present us with naïve and inchoate political claims, ignorant of the will-to-power and of personal pride, then a conservative, traditional community is even more emphatically no solution for Niebuhr. A traditional community for Niebuhr is a bastion of historical prejudice, which is often unjust, unjustifiable, and predatory. If the rationality of the Enlightenment is usually a “disruptive” force, then the irrationality of conservatism as prejudice is naked advantage and expressive will-to-power that favors institutional elites and dynastic power. If Niebuhr's anxieties about political idealists are explicit in his critique of liberalism, then his contempt of community prejudice is even more clear and more indignant. Though

Niebuhr emphasizes personally inhabited social lives as important narrative contexts for political action, he would likely also be uncomfortable with Michael Sandel's critique of "unencumbered selves" in liberal theories because communities as defined within a historical circumscription can be given to such problems as prejudice, self-righteousness, or nationalism. I shall discuss Niebuhr's ambivalence toward communities and develop Niebuhr's Augustinian ethic of civic life based on imperfect relationships of limited, mutual reciprocity. In that argument, Niebuhr's discussion of prophets as political outsiders is particularly important and useful for considering particular expressions of an ethic of humility from positional reflection. Any ethic that prioritizes and venerates the view of outsiders thereby abandons an attitude of conservatism.

I will therefore argue what it means to stand within a community vs. to stand at odds with it. I will argue that Niebuhr sees dissent as being a healthy means through which a member of a particular community can nevertheless stand sufficiently apart from it for its overall health to sustain it. Through the trials of unpleasant jeremiads, the ironies and errors that individual critics lay bare, a polity can self-regulate itself more than it otherwise could with an agonistic liberalism or a participatory community as its primary conceptions of justice. This understanding of creative possibilities within communities differs significantly from a cohesive ethic of a community. In short, I shall argue that Niebuhr's emphasis on humility does not preclude particular instances of radical expressions of political dissent.

In like manner, the classically virtuous understanding of community that Alasdair MacIntyre espouses is problematic as well for Niebuhr. Virtue ethics without regard to

individual life differences between people, even those cultivated within the context of a community, may become inchoate in the minds of their participants. In selfishness, individual may reshape and redefine a particular ethic to suit their desires. The internal dialogue of someone who cultivates a particular virtue within a community is not to be discounted. Language is insidious when it subverts internal narratives. Such selfishness cedes justification to self-rationalization that may be radically at odds with the community. For this reason, Niebuhr largely though not exclusively considers the ethics of communities to be reflections of their respective power brokers, as I shall explain in discussions of Niebuhr's understanding of political prophecy. Stanley Hauerwas's communitarian criticism of Niebuhr is problematic for similar reasons. I shall also argue that Niebuhr considers communitarian and civic republican arguments to be cut from the same intellectual cloth. They are therefore related problematic frameworks because of that connection.

I will also give further consideration to Niebuhr's Christian realism as a foundational community and consider the degree to which it can accept plural outsiders or remain intelligible to them. Does Niebuhr's political realism have any meaning for non-Christians? For Niebuhr, to what degree are a religious community and political community mutually exclusive? The degree to which Niebuhr's political arguments can be expressed in secular, universal ways and stand independently from his political theology shall be a lynchpin of this discussion. Niebuhr himself published both religious and secular works, moving fluidly between audiences. Religious thinkers often deride him as too thoroughly secular, while secular thinkers may dismiss him for this theological

beliefs. This context will further frame my discussion of scope and audience in political communities. I will give further consideration to the degree that Niebuhr's own theology might make his own arguments implausible.

Another consideration is the distribution of what Niebuhr terms sinfulness and how its universal distribution can exist without an equally distributed burden of guilt and blame. Certainly for Niebuhr, given his emphasis on realism, judgments regarding guilt and blame for social problems are concentrated in particularly powerful individuals and particularly egregious communities. To what degree is Niebuhr an egalitarian theorist, given this juxtaposed paradox? How do we rescue civic responsibility from total depravity? Beyond grim pessimism about human capabilities, what values can a Niebuhrian citizen espouse irrespective of religious persuasion or social position? The degree to which Niebuhr overburdens disempowered people to check their own political resentments I shall consider, as well as whether his stricture might be too draconian to serve any use in such cases. Does Niebuhr fail his own test of political selfishness here, or merely explain the universality of his anxious will-to-power in a non-paternalistic way? These questions of criticism I will consider in depth following the expository argument and contradistinctions from other traditions. Toward understanding this frustration, questions of Niebuhr's understanding of race and gender in light of Niebuhr's ethic of humility provide important insight on this matter.

Toward that end, Niebuhr's understanding of political dissent and marginalization will be of critical importance. In short, for Niebuhr, dispossessed people are no less selfish for being dispossessed, but their capacity of their selfishness to harm others is

diminished to varying degrees. For Niebuhr, social hardship teaches a more capacious understanding of justice in most instances, but in particularly willful persons it might also inspire an overreaching resentment. This concern explains Niebuhr's shift away from the early Social Gospel movement as much as any personal theological shift. Niebuhr would argue an accountable political order must acknowledge that limitation as a universal human sentiment, rather than exploit it toward resignation or vengeance. Only then would Niebuhr see a fair and honest account of the most vulnerable members of a society. Instead, far too often, Niebuhr would argue either dispossessed causes become rallying cries for self-righteousness and impetuous revolution, or scapegoats for perpetual discrimination and continual marginalization. Neither of these extreme views properly respects plural perspectives with regard to Niebuhr's understanding of conceptual sin, anxious pride, and a will-to-power. A consideration of how relative outsiders or dispossessed members of a community can utilize a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in self-affirming ways shall shape my argument on this matter.

In consideration of other theories of Augustinian citizenship, I expect to draw distinctive and novel conclusions that prioritize specific emphases on humility as a bulwark against pride in Niebuhr's political thought. Beyond that, I expect that some of the insight I glean on the finitude of individual political perspectives will help bolster the ontological ground for such cases of mutual intelligibility found in the deliberative discourse between religious and secular voices, as between Habermas and his Jesuit interlocutors in *An Awareness of What is Missing*. Toward this end, Niebuhr offers valuable insight into defining and situating religious discourse in a post-secular, post-

metaphysical framework of communicative action, rational or otherwise. The purpose of this conclusion is to justify the practical usefulness of Niebuhr as a political theorist, apart from ideas of Christian realism in international politics, toward the end of achieving a more mutually intelligible formulation of deliberative discourse politics. To emphasize this understanding, Ilsup Ahn and Langdon Gilkey present the primary arguments I wish to build upon, but Jürgen Habermas and Jeffrey Stout represent the larger deliberative and pragmatic political landscapes with which I wish to engage my argument, beyond the narrower scope of theoretical accounts of Niebuhr's own politics.

Put another way, the purpose of this work is to advance a relevant understanding of Reinhold Niebuhr's political theory, to express and elaborate his impact on contemporary discourse of communicative action, as well as on discursive participation that follows from different life experiences. His ethic of humility provides important ties between the deliberative democracy of Jürgen Habermas and the democratic pragmatism of Jeffrey Stout and provides a common language of politics to both of them. The importance of Niebuhr is not simply that he can bridge gaps in communication between a particular religious tradition and those who may reject any such traditions in public discourse. Instead, I will argue that Niebuhr's presentation of political humility and political anxiety in the face of human frailties make his political psychology an important and often overlooked conduit for explaining and developing reciprocal political relationships. To affirm this claim, I will contrast Niebuhr with other theorists who offer diverse ideals of what Augustinian citizenship entails. As stated, I will also contrast him with various liberal, communitarian, and republican writers within secular traditions and

consider rebuttals to the priority of the political utility of interpersonal humility. These contradistinctions will provide the proper context for understanding the Augustinian ethic of humility as distinct to Reinhold Niebuhr. Through contrast with these various traditions, the usefulness of Niebuhr's views of contingency in political ontology, anxious reactions to such uncertainty, positional self-reflection, and socialization of that self-reflection we may express a Niebuhrian, robust understanding of how to better enact and inform deliberative political practices.

I will argue that one need not adopt Niebuhr's ontological or theological viewpoints to ascertain the merits of his ideas as a critique of contemporary political theories of relational identities. His affective and interactive political psychology will take precedent in my work above his theology, but the latter will necessarily inform and shape the former to some degree. Regardless, one can differ on such matters with Niebuhr and still value his contribution to political theory beyond the historical importance of Christian realism in international relations. His political realism is also of merit on its own terms. Niebuhr's social psychology is important to develop a deeper conception of deliberative discourse because it makes an inter-narrative pragmatism like that of Jeffrey Stout more accessible and plausible, as I shall argue when I cite Stout. In his multifarious language, Niebuhr's ontological uncertainty in human finitude provides common experience to people from divergent narratives, which may emphasize either a particular religious tradition or a philosophical naturalism, in cases where these views might otherwise stand in stark conflict against one another.

Chapter 2: Limited Creatures: Political Contingency, Anxiety, and Self-Delusion

The purpose of this chapter is to give a basic background of Niebuhr's understanding of political ontology, to explain his particular emphases on such themes as historic contingency, existential anxiety, and reflective humility. The ways in which Niebuhr's understanding of sin informs his view of contingency and the kind of political relationship we are to develop from an ethic of humility each serve respectively as precursor and conclusion from these aspects of Niebuhr's social psychology.

An ineligious account of Reinhold Niebuhr's political theory demands a synthetic understanding of his major works of social discourse. Toward achieving that goal, *Beyond Tragedy*, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, *Man's Nature and His Communities*, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, *The Irony of American History*, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, and both volumes of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* will constitute the core of Niebuhr's texts for building and explaining my argument that follows. The complete oeuvre of Niebuhr is useful for understanding particular claims about contractarian thought, communitarian discourse, Augustinian perspectives on politics, but the aforementioned works shall be given priority in dialogue with those other traditions as they espouse widely political claims, rather than more narrowly doctrinal or homiletic ones that make up the bulk of some of Niebuhr's essays and other books. Those aforementioned works make clear the contingency of personal security, existential anxiety, and reflective political humility that I emphasize in Niebuhr's writings as important for a Niebuhrian political ethic of humility.

Here we should understand political contingency to refer to human mortality, the

impermanence of political institutions, and the imperfections of communication in our experiences. Our responses to that hardship in Niebuhr's view often lacks realistic, critical self-evaluation. Too often we either become too idealistic or desperate when we observe our own transience and that of our conceived public goods. Existential anxieties and personal conceit therefore permeate Niebuhr's reservations concerning love and reciprocity in political life. His political realism therefore exhibits a skeptical reluctance toward dogmatic ideologies.

Subsequently, the best way to express critical self-evaluations borne of an ethic of humility in my Niebuhrian view is a practice of deliberative discourse that such diverse groups as realists, pragmatists, and Christians can each affirm as salient to their own intellectual endeavors and epistemological foundations. The specific value of analyzing Reinhold Niebuhr as opposed to someone else who has a similar intellectual inheritance from Nietzsche or Augustine is the bounded contextualization of Niebuhr as someone whose thoughts flourish between disparate worldviews. Niebuhr's situated understanding of the self permits discussion that is equally meaningful to many strains of religious thought, Christian and otherwise, as well as to proponents of a secular naturalism in public discourse, often with a pragmatic ethical ontology. His provides an emotive approach to philosophy that nevertheless does not completely discard teleological concerns. Understanding Niebuhr's social psychology of sin and love helps us to understand his view of circumstantial contingency and prideful anxiety that precede the capacity for a Niebuhrian ethic of humility.

As I have discussed, Niebuhr denies a literal heredity nature of Augustinian

original sin. Correspondingly, he is skeptical of any claims of a lucid, complete understanding of Augustinian charity in a comprehensive sense. As Niebuhrian sin is not capricious but instead a ubiquitous defect of human psychology, such a knowledge of charity would be impossible for a human being to understand completely. Talking about political life in terms of radical Augustinian charity is a kind of category error. Augustinian charity is inapplicable to human relationships for Niebuhr, except in a hazy approximation. The closest we can come to such an ideal is a conception of love commingled with and tempered by a will-to-power and individualistic, anxious pride. Niebuhr explains his understanding of sinfulness as follows in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, “Genuine forgiveness of the enemy requires a contrite recognition of the sinfulness of the self and of the mutual responsibility for the sin of the accused. Such spiritual penetration is beyond the capacities of collective man.”⁶ It is for this reason, Niebuhr argues, humility provides the appropriate tool for meeting others of goodwill in cases of conflicting interest. Augustinian love for Niebuhr at best is a kind of working knowledge of experience that acknowledges its own blind spots as best as possible, primarily in personal relationships and political bargaining. Augustine's cupidity is much more intelligible than his charity, but imperfect affective loves may still be insincere or self-serving. At its worst, political love becomes a talking point of people who wish to be seen in as positive a viewpoint as possible, for utterly selfish reasons. Human goods for Niebuhr are therefore imperfect goods worthy of pursuit, but the highest order of goods is elusive and inchoate. Given this framework of constraints, what behavior can we expect from political actors? What normative checks provide the best incentive for an individual

⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. (Harper & Brothers. New York and London. 1935). 111

ethic of humility and the best possible society? For a Niebuhrian ethic of deliberative politics, it appears then that individual participation and personal relationships are of paramount importance. We must consider that view of love as a limited virtue in our understanding of Niebuhr's self-reflection going forward in the argument.

Having rearticulated Niebuhr's account of symbolic sin and interpersonal love in politics, a comprehension of Niebuhrian political thought requires a more thorough understanding of several particular matters. Chiefly these are Niebuhr's view of historical circumstances as an ironic but limited vantage for each person, his perspective of situational ironies of anxious experience that follow from such insecurity, and the ethic he espouses to mitigate these contingencies that stifle constructive social interactions beyond narrowly personal relationships. Niebuhr's theory of history is perhaps best delineated in his early work *Beyond Tragedy*. Within this volume, Niebuhr defines his understanding of sin as a frailty of human psychology, rather than as a inheritance of supernatural blemish. This formulation provides accessibility of his claims to a larger, secular audience. For now his explanation of sin emphasized original sin, but decades later Niebuhr would regret this categorization, as it made his moral ontology less intelligible to people inhabiting other traditions, and because it was only of symbolic importance to his own argument. Still for Niebuhr, it is a definition that is more psychological than theological in its categorization for social practices and behavioral norms. This attitude also distinguishes Niebuhr's social ontology from that of traditional Augustinian beliefs, wherein sin is a substantive transmission of birthright in a literal history of biblical narrative. This distinction from the more literal, traditional understanding of Augustinian

original sin in turn informs Niebuhr's unique political narrative. Niebuhr therefore uses the category of original sin in *Beyond Tragedy*. He shifts in later works to talk of sin in general because the originality aspect of the Fall in Genesis and its supposed transmission is less important for Niebuhr's purposes than the psychological state that the symbolic story describes as a commonality for most human experiences. To highlight this shift, "I disavowed Augustine's horrendous conception that sin was transmitted from generation to generation through lust in the act of procreation."⁷ Nevertheless, the account within *Beyond Tragedy* is still probably the most detailed for understanding Niebuhr's conception of situational contingency in a common historical narrative, applicable to both Christians and non-Christians alike as an expression of anxious pride in the transience of life.

How then does our personal contingency inform our positional anxieties? To distinguish Niebuhrian politics from other forms of Augustinian ethics of citizenship more broadly, we must consider Niebuhr on matters of the frail contingency of human life. On this matter Augustine offers both an insightful point of contradistinction and a useful example. For Niebuhr, the critical flaw in Augustine's theology was an identification of perfectible human love with an earthly and fallible political institution, "the heresy of identifying the church with the Kingdom of God and of making unqualified claims of divinity for this human, historical, and relative institution."⁸ In Niebuhr's consideration, though Augustine offers important realistic insights into politics, he does not reckon sufficient acknowledgment of secular power because he wishes the

⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 24

⁸ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937).

church to prosper and supersede in that role. Augustine's identification of the church with divine power is borne from his own anxious politics. While Augustine certainly wanted to affirm the political authority of his church, he existed within the context of his own history and personal experiences. In early life, Augustine's confidence in his own virtues was uncertain and anxious. Later in his life, those same descriptors applied to the church following the sacking of Rome. The affirmative and aspirational role of the church for Augustine is therefore understandable given Augustine's circumstances, but for Niebuhr, it is nevertheless incorrect to the degree that identifies limited institutions with a conceptual perfection. This confluence of limitation and perfection is something Augustine generally sought to avoid elsewhere in his thought, as in his distinction between earthly and divine cities, and in his semiotic theory that divided signs and signifiers between objects of use and objects of enjoyment.

Niebuhr's distinction and difference from Augustine on this matter of the church's role in politics is critical because it makes, for Niebuhr, human attempts at experiencing some perfectible relationship with another person or a larger community an effectively impossible task. For Niebuhr, we can strive for better institutions, but must not seek perfect ideals in political institutions. For like reason, undertaking a perfectible, spiritual experience becomes problematic in the political theology of Niebuhr. Hence history informs all personal experiences, and the contingencies that history imposes on individuals as anxious and transient inhabitants of lives in turn draws individuals toward perfectionist ideologies. It should be noted that such concerns regarding history are not merely progressive. Geoffrey Rees observes, "...anxiety arises in the individual precisely

because the individual not only is enmeshed in temporal processes, but is *constituted* by them...The temptation to sin is as much backward-looking as it is forward-looking, because the self cannot account to itself the origin of its own freedom.”⁹ Positional anxiety thus tempts individuals to make extreme and unreasonable claims against each other in public discourse for the sake of mitigating tenuous feelings of insecurity regarding both personal origins and individual aspirations.

Niebuhr thereby understands traditional categorizations of Augustinian political loves as being possible manifestations of a historically progressive dialectical process; nevertheless, they remain ontologically problematic and perpetually fragile. The need for mutual acknowledgment of forgiveness for the sake of love in such an ethical framework, for Niebuhr, sometimes comes to replace authentic interactions, which may express hurtful sentiments, but ultimately build a more mutual understanding built upon respect and compassion. The more dutiful need of self-examination for questions of properly managed pride and willpower thus provides a thicker capacity for maintaining a progressive, deliberative project than does mechanistic forgiveness or thin, cultural niceties of love. Because its foundation is stronger in its self-awareness, Niebuhrian love borne of reflective humility is less likely to devolve into platitudes of love in politics. For Niebuhr, the will-to-power is all consuming and necessitates constant self-recrimination to avoid an abusive complacency of social norms. Without such self-restraint, symbolic appearances of magnanimity, forgiveness, and grace as social displays might become more important than their authentic expression.

⁹ Rees, Geoffrey. “The Anxiety of Inheritance: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Literal Truth of Original Sin” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 31. No. 1. (Spring 2003). 75-99

This complication of political life has important parallels to major trends in political theory, from a general understanding of collective action problems to specific cases of how to articulate distributive justice and democratic participation within a particular liberal or pragmatic framework of politics. The analogue of Niebuhr's political theology is therefore useful in addressing such particular political problems of distributive justice and democratic expression. These translational concerns across different theoretical frameworks drive the discussion of my argument. If we can understand Niebuhr's ontological framework as more relevant than a narrowly Christian account of epistemology, we can develop an understanding of how Niebuhr's politics dialogue with particular cases of these other traditions and serve to meaningfully inform their particular conclusions about politics.

In his rejection of strong forms of a political communities that would measure its own comparative magnanimity and selfishness in some ideal way, Niebuhr moves away from an impossible ideal, away from the Kingdom of God on Earth, or in Platonic terms, away from a city-in-speech put into action. Niebuhr considers such impossible ideals harmful both to individuals and to communities because the idealization of a community necessarily embodies a will-to-power of individuals utilizing other people in an exploitative way. Even in the most radical kinds of theocracies, for example, someone has the power to decide who in turn has the power to interpret and implement laws holy texts. People of power, for Niebuhr, are given to warlike sportsmanship and often behave like beasts of prey. Writing of humans in the early *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which Niebuhr never entirely abandons, "With only rare exceptions, his highest moral

attitude toward members of other groups is one of warlike sportsmanship toward those who equal his power and challenge it... his generosity is at once a display of his power and an expression of his pity.”¹⁰ Those individuals who do not behave in such a way, for Niebuhr, lack neither volition or motivation toward such actions, but only the conduit through which to personally channel and thereby actualize such sentiments. Each of us, given the proper position or circumstances, retains some measure of this bestial menace. Even in such cases where the veneer of selflessness reigns in a potentate, Niebuhr expects that the will of a community is really just a will that seeks to stifle alternative wills of political minorities, or worse, stifle all political dissent for the sake of egotism, partisanship, or tradition. Changes in political order do little to assuage these concerns for Niebuhr. “Whatever the defects of Nietzsche's perverse ethics, he is right in discerning the element of vindictiveness which expresses itself in the rebellion of the weak and the despised.”¹¹ In that regard, a Kingdom of God brought to earth in the form of a church, for Niebuhr, embraces ahistorical fantasy and encourages suboptimal social outcomes and relationships for individuals, as well as for those who inhabit identities situated between distinct political communities. If Augustine, in his contingent experience of vulnerability, tears down the Donatists and Pelagians severely enough with institutional pressure, their malice and resentment surely become more embittered and emboldened than any doctrinal differences would otherwise necessitate. Personal uncertainties therefore behoove humility with regard to political divisions. This acknowledgment of uncertainty is an idea that is particularly important in some

¹⁰ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960.) 13-14

¹¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 219

understandings of pragmatism, but it also makes deliberative participation in politics more tenable and more productive, as it widens the scope of participation for those whose participatory capacity as citizens might otherwise be questioned on grounds of schismatic divisions. Anxious positional experience thus offers a justification for reciprocal receptiveness, rather than affirming such a justification by way of traditional fiat or thought experiment, either of which would be outside of historical and personal experiences. Such alternatives are fundamentally unrealistic in their political justifications for Niebuhr's understanding.

Niebuhr's understanding of his own realistic, constrained view of of Augustinian ethics critiques constructions of political order beyond the manner in which Augustine's ideas have been practiced and extolled throughout much of the history of Christianity. With regard to the universal sinfulness of people and the reality of unequal social positions, "It must be admitted that it is difficult to retain and appreciate this 'Augustinian' emphasis in the Christian religion, without running the danger of depreciating genuine moral distinctions and of encouraging indifference toward moral striving."¹² For Niebuhr, the Kingdom of God is wholly otherworldly, but that distinction does not preclude the possibility of relative forces of progressive social justice, albeit with the acknowledgment of the fragility and contingency of such progress. To avoid indifference toward moral striving, Niebuhr believes that treating people as equals does not necessarily mean giving them equal treatment in all instances. Urging people in positions of extreme weakness to express humility as their primary and sole political virtue is not Niebuhr's aim. Positional circumstance of individual standing and

¹²Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 261

capabilities matters for Niebuhr for the judgment of individual ethics just as much as cultural history matters to him for understanding the ethics of a particular community. That is not to express an unqualified affirmation that the meek shall inherit the earth; rather, that because positional experience affects the individual structure of political anxiety, some people experience extreme humility as an existential nadir, and do not need Niebuhr to teach it to them, except if they experience incommensurate resentment. While people who inhabit dispossessed political lives may not be his primary audience given his emphasis on power and realism in politics, the utility of contextualizing one's pride and the reflection of a positional self still applies to dispossessed persons in important ways they can utilize, as I shall argue later. For now it suffices to say that while human experiences of power and suffering are distributed very unequally, no degree of well-heeled social status wholly escapes fundamental human anxieties of an indefinite existence, nor does any social station entirely diminish anxious pride. A vacuity of pretense provides comforting words to tell ourselves about our own relative importance in the world, but provides no orientation toward seriously addressing inevitable experiences of uncertainty and suffering that we may unknowingly face at times.

Given these strong criticisms of self-seeking, delusional cognitive biases that Niebuhr understands to follow from positional anxiety in politics, Niebuhr's political order is necessarily a secular one, though not the conventional one with which we may be more familiar in traditional justifications for liberal politics. Bluntly stated, Niebuhr is no intellectual heir of the Lockean Enlightenment, though his experiences and thoughts are nevertheless contingent upon the Enlightenment's impact on the history of political

thought. Ever skeptical of contractarian thought experiments, Niebuhr considers the history of political thought in slightly unconventional ways that I think are useful to the extent that they inform his practicable view of democratic participation in political discourse.

With regard to early modernity and its purported panaceas for mitigating contentious politics, Niebuhr does not focus specifically on the American and French revolutions as important outpourings of the ideologies of Locke and Rousseau. Instead, for Niebuhr, John Milton is one of the most important sources of the doctrine of civil liberty and freedom of individual conscience. Milton's *Areopagitica* is an early defense of the freedom of speech and in turn owes much to the ideals of the Reformation. Milton urges for a social understanding of tolerance toward diversity of opinion and speech. For Niebuhr, Milton is a seminal if imperfect champion of individual rights against institutional power. Locke, in contrast, offered an “individualistic social-contract,” which failed to account for “the realities of power.”¹³ Milton's understanding of liberty as freedom of conscience is Hobbesian in that sentiment of understanding the realities of power, though it differs from Hobbes in that it is not contractarian in its conclusions. Hobbes of course suffers from a similar and more extreme reverence toward power as a conduit of order than even Locke exhibits. Both are therefore problematic for Niebuhr's historical understanding of early individualistic liberalism.

Milton's tolerance did not extend to Catholics as he understood them, but it is worth noting that the institutional Catholic church was an extreme state power at this point in time that could pose an existential threat to the English government, which likely

¹³ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 26

affected Milton's attitudes. The Catholic Church of Milton's time Niebuhr would consider to have similarities aforementioned deficits with that of Augustine's time. Milton makes an important contribution in an impassioned defense of freedom of speech, arguing that a prejudicial verdict against a written text is absurd, and that an untrue claim is not necessarily harmful in and of itself. In contradistinction to Lockean contract, Milton “affirmed in effect that the transcendent freedom of the individual conscience must be recognized by the freedom which the community gives to the individual for the sake of affirming a higher loyalty than the loyalty defined by the 'Caesars' of the community.”¹⁴ In so arguing for a system of printing license that permits action and reaction in discourse, Milton espouses something like an early version of political pragmatism with a liberal underpinning. This justification of freedom of thought conflicts with the Catholic three step printing process, *imprimi potest, nihil obstat, imprimatur*, in that the latter censorship conflated political and ecclesiastical power. This justification also conflicts with Lockean liberalism, in which the ideological Caesar of the community is not a sovereign but Locke's problematic conception of property. Under the legal ideology of such a system, a person can even forfeit her or his own self in light of a perceived transgression against another person's right to their property, as I shall explain my chapter on contractarian thought. In short, Niebuhr shares a liberal emphasis on individual value, but not without the contextual and practical constraints of a workable community. I argue the example of Milton's reasonable, limited constraints on printing, merely that the author and publisher be discernible for a given text, demonstrates a kind of Niebuhrian pragmatism in which individuals are free to express themselves and affirm

¹⁴ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 26

their own values as meaningful from within on their own experiences and positions. Milton as a poet then is an author who embodies a basic normative ethic of humility, contingent and imperfect, but not afraid to express inspired ideas, even when they are unpopular ones. Others are then free to criticize those values or affirm their own as an ongoing dialectical process.

The importance here is that the Lockean and contractarian consensus is discarded in favor of a more candid and reasonable framework of political expression that does not hinge on a particular instrumental fetish drawn from an imaginative thought experiment. Milton as a creative alternative to Locke is therefore a useful consideration to keep in mind throughout my argument and specifically with regard to my conclusions.

Moreover, Milton focuses on introspection, freedom of conscience, and authentic self-affirmed political claims that do not require censorship for charitable reception from others. While historically this frame of reference has not been venerated to the degree that contractarian thought and its heirs have in early modernity, it is worth noting that Niebuhr considers this kind of positional and relational enlightenment a road not taken generally in the Lockean Enlightenment project, divergent from the dominant narratives of intellectual history, but nevertheless important for its creative potential in shaping political discourse.

With this understanding of structural power as a limitation of social contract theory, we can further consider specifics of Niebuhr's alternative using the steps of contextualization, positional anxiety, and humble introspection that I have outlined previously. Niebuhr's understanding of freedom of conscience respective of individuals

not only as legal entities in relation to a state but as unique persons of partial perspectives necessitates a secular political order, for which he offers an ardent and nuanced defense. Tolerance of a diversity of opinion and belief is not merely some kind of spiritual politeness or good manners on the part of Niebuhr. Rather, it is a critique of religious ethics of divine command and natural law, as well as the problems such ethics develop when their proponents seek universal acclaim or endorsement. Even in a strict theocracy, who decides whose authority commands interpretation of divine revelation, and on what grounds?

Even the most humble and of self-effacing of religious ethics cannot escape the impossible burden of justifying a wider political authority beyond the internal structures of a religious community. It is for this reason we should consider the utility of humility beyond its purely religious functions of contrition and perspective. With regard to secularism as a political reality, “The fanaticism of the various religions and various versions of the same religion frequently made no other solution in the modern democratic state possible.”¹⁵ With this affirmation, Niebuhr strictly qualifies his Augustinian sentiments for matters of distributive justice and deliberative speech. Niebuhr's agapic love is a heuristic in public life, not a zealous creed to market and push upon all citizens irrespective of their positions or beliefs. Niebuhr harbors a deep suspicion that Augustinian cupidity is the only relational form of love we can experience and express in political life, and that Augustinian charity is something of a divine ideal that exists only as an inchoate feeling or as a personal, spiritual experience. Indeed, following his

15 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 137

explanation and citation of Augustine's dual forms of love, Niebuhr critiques the dual love of Augustine, arguing that a priority of charity over cupidity paints over the nuance and gray areas of moral life. Love then becomes a radical, other-worldly kind of Augustinian political order: "It certainly tends very readily to a moral, social, and political indifferentism... Religion draws the bow of life so taut that it either snaps the string (defeatism) or overshoots the mark (fanaticism and asceticism)."¹⁶ These extremes reflect the concerns I have highlighted that Niebuhr considers with regard to the improper orientation of political anxiety. Defeatism and fanaticism for Niebuhr are radical expressions of the will-to-power, and at their extremes are fundamentally indistinguishable from Nietzsche's "last man," that is, they are a withdrawn and selfish response to nihilism, antithetical to a robust social life and the meaningful political expression of such a life. If Niebuhr is an Augustinian ethicist, he is a very cautious one with many caveats about basic Augustinian ideals. He has drawn the Augustinian Kingdom of God quite far off on the horizon and he cannot discern its hazy shape. Niebuhr seeks to find some moderate ground for a fruitful and somewhat stable political order, apart from credulous zeal or hopeless despondency. Citizens in this order, whether they are religious or nonreligious, should be given strong incentives to avoid political indifference. Indifference destroys public life.

David Novak provides us with insight as to why Niebuhr can appeal to people who are non-Christian or nonreligious. Novak argues that people outside of Niebuhr's faith tradition nevertheless often understand, "injustice they opposed is not only human error at the epistemological level, but human deceit at the ontological level...Niebuhr

¹⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960.) 70-71

gave their moral instinct a deeper and more hopeful intentionality.”¹⁷ As per Niebuhr's version of political realism, without participatory politics in a wide sense, the most selfish and willful people necessarily dominate. Without deliberative politics, we risk petty and universal selfishness as naïve expressions of transactional democracy. This fragile balancing act is at the core of Niebuhr's realism and it highlights the pragmatic tendencies nascent in his political theory.

On a more fundamental level, Niebuhr expresses an existential uncertainty regarding the basic stability of any given political order, especially one that seeks to prioritize democratic and individual expressions of moral sentiments. Drawing an analogy to the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus must navigate a narrow passage between two obstacles, Niebuhr cautions us against what he terms in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* to be the Scylla of despotism and the Charybdis of anarchy. He speaks against the ideal of the perpetual peace as an unrealistic fantasy, in criticism we can apply to of Emmanuel Kant and his contractarian heir, John Rawls. Subsequently, Niebuhr considers the more modest goal of politics, “a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent [our] common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster.”¹⁸ Enduring political institutions are more fragile than many liberal ideologies care to admit, or at least care to remind themselves frequently. While this explanation may sound like a modest or very conservative attitude toward general human flourishing, I do not think that Niebuhr intends his understanding of moral realism in political life to be interpreted in that way. Traditional institutions are more oppressive

17 Novak, David. “Defending Niebuhr from Hauerwas” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 40. No. 2. (June 2012). 281-295

18 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960.) 22

and foment more resentment than many conservative ideologies care to admit. Niebuhr's appeal is not then one of strict conservatism, as he understands Burkean prejudice as a potentially problematic. Niebuhr understands prejudice as perpetuating gross structural inequalities of political outcomes, as well as being a manifestation of selfish pride that powerful people push as values to the rest of society. Traditional preferences carry no universal ethical weight, and may in fact embellish and institutionalize destructive norms of greed, hatred, or fear. Instead of this conservatism, I think Niebuhr here expresses a plain awareness of the fragility of political institutions. Rather than an espousal of modern conservatism, this idea is probably closer to something like the Platonic cycle of decay of governments found in the Republic, or more generally an affirmation of comparative powerlessness if not complete ineptitude in the face of powerful and misunderstood relationships.

This is not to say that Niebuhr's ironic view of political contingencies are those of Plato's Socrates. While Niebuhr's understanding of situational contingency may seem classically Stoic here, he would chide the Stoic quest for self-control as just another fantastic, perfectionist illusion in face of systemic and personal hardship. Stoicism for Niebuhr is then something like an asocial contract, a contract made within an individual self. Plato's Socrates makes his amongst the parts of the tripartite soul, for example. For Niebuhr this is problematic because we may not be as transparent to our own desires, preferences, or motivations as we might think. Sailing between the Niebuhrian Scylla and Charybdis is never a settled matter, nor can we ever expect to settle it with any particular institution. Waves of uncertainty may batter us, but we can chart out better or

worse courses according to our abilities and capacity for authentic social expression.

Niebuhr goes so far as to establish a particular nomenclature that distinguishes his own understanding of individual experience and its significance in social theory. Niebuhr was highly critical of twentieth century materialism endemic to Lockean and Marxist ideologies. Specifically he directed this criticism toward nations that purport to adopt such beliefs as ideologically pure and desirable norms of political economy. Niebuhr cautions that we should consider individuals always contingent upon the historical process, immersed and enmeshed in it, despite a limited capacity for creative individual freedom. He argues against categorizing the rational mind as the individual building block of a political community, even as he wants to take individuals' claims seriously. Niebuhr considers in *The Irony of American History* that the individual capacity to reason, “is more intimately related to the anxieties and fears, the hopes and ambitions of the self as spirit and to the immediate necessities of the self as natural organism than the 'pure' reason of the natural scientist; for he observes forces of nature which do not essentially challenge the hopes and fears of the self.”¹⁹ Here the idea of spirit signifies unreasonable or fantastic goals that defy rational order. In a cycle of anxiety, we might set up self-destructive mechanisms. In game theoretic terms of preference, a money pump built out of fleeting comforts alleviates contingent, positional anxiety for a time, but it also ultimately may drain us of resources without correcting our poor choices. For Niebuhr, ideological political constructions of robust and sweeping claims serve this type of problematic function in many earnest political lives.

Along those lines of disorderly preferences, Niebuhr in this same passage then

¹⁹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1952). 82

identifies a Platonic psychology of human beings, with rational, emotional, and volitional elements. In Niebuhr's understanding, these contentious elements further make actions and attitudes historically relative for contextualizing relationships and ethical claims. We may not inhabit the radically divided selves of Plato's *Phaedrus* but we remain opaque to competing, conflicted interests within our minds. What delights our intellect one minute may bore us when fatigue sets in. What inspires us to valor may seem cliché or absurd in retrospect. What captures our attention in hunger becomes less interesting when we are full. History may not define all of our choices, but it provides a plausible context to indulge our whims. Niebuhr then explicitly defines a key Augustinian term in an unconventional way: "The inevitability of this confusion between the relative and the universal is exactly what is meant by original sin."²⁰ Here I discount the importance of "original" there as Niebuhr eventually did, but the rest of the thought matters for Niebuhr's basic ontological framework. Put differently in Niebuhr's magnum opus *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, a human possesses an "inclination to transmute his partial and finite self and his partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies his sin."²¹ In other words, the inability of individuals to contextualize their thoughts, passions, and desires within a framework of an ongoing and incalculable myriad of human relationships is the psychologically compelling aspect of sin and the root of human pride for Niebuhr. This pride seeks to address existential anxiety, but does so in an overly poor and politically destructive manner. Even if we could overcome the shortcoming of understanding and properly rationalizing our own motives, there remains

20 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1952). 83

21 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume I: Human Nature*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1941.1964). 122

the communication problem to address, as human language inherently sustains ambiguous speech and therefore personal misunderstandings.

Given this conception of human psychology, I see no particular reason why one must share in Niebuhr's theology or his Christianity more generally to understand the significance and novelty of his categorization of human experiences. If we consider his understanding of sin as contextualized in such a manner as to make it intelligible as a critique of philosophical ideals that came before it, we can utilize Niebuhr's political and moral realism even in cases where we do not necessarily accept his theology. Niebuhr's view of political anxiety and his prescriptive remedy in his ethic of humility follow from these experiences of contingent uncertainty.

Niebuhr's understanding of how people reinforce belief-statements as truths and utilize confirmation biases in political theory and his recommendation for tempering those tendencies is thus an important idea in the history of political thought. Of similar import is the kind of self-reflected vigilance borne of humility that Niebuhr suggests as a constraint on the veracity and social representations of such belief-statements. Consequently, following chapters will highlight the various contexts in which this analysis matters and how it matters. What follows is extensive criticism of various traditions in political theory, Augustinian theology, and Christian ethics as they related to Niebuhr's claims, as well as an analysis of the potential shortcomings of Niebuhr's claims on their own terms, after which I shall affirm my own positive alternative ethic of Niebuhrian participation in politics. This alternative I derive from my understanding of Niebuhr's ethic of humility in relation to ascendant strains of pragmatic and deliberative

thought. Finally, in my reflections and conclusions I will reiterate these findings and their general implications for deliberative practices in politics, founded on an ethic of humility, toward a more tenable civic life. In my conclusion, I utilize examples of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Adam Michnik, and others as examples of what forms a Niebuhrian ethic of political humility might take in diverse situations. With Niebuhr's view of contingency, anxiety, and humble self-reflection in mind, I now turn to the traditions with which my Niebuhrian ethic and its theoretical structure must contend.

Chapter 3: Inclusive Communicative Action Self-Critical of Its Rationality

I have stated previously that the importance of Niebuhr with regard to deliberative democracy. Specifically his understanding of political humility can serve as a model of political communication, which furthers the tradition of deliberative discourse. At this point I shall delineate Niebuhr's relevance to recent and ongoing debates about the proper role and scope of how particular worldviews can accept political pluralism and do so without necessarily sharing the theology of Niebuhr. It is my intent to use his understanding of political discourse as a model that facilitates a more harmonious religious pluralism than an ideal speech situation affords to us in the abstract.

Niebuhr's political theory is one very disillusioned with the idea of Enlightenment thought. He affirms this thought is, "still the creed of our day and is shared more or less by philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists...traditions and superstitions, which seemed to the eighteenth century to be the very root of injustice have been eliminated, without checking the constant growth of social injustice."²² Here Niebuhr anticipates later discussions that we see in arguments between twenty-first century naturalism and resilient religious orthodoxy, which seeks to critique the former as merely an extension of the Enlightenment ideal that Niebuhr rejects so strongly. While Niebuhr does not wholly discount basic claims of political liberalism, partly given its enduring historical relevance, he understands those claims to be often poorly presented without a proper perspective of selfishness in public life.

While we may often consider Niebuhr as a pessimistic theorist whose ontology expresses a consistent doom and gloom attitude, I argue in this work that such an

²² Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960.) 24

emphasis in Niebuhr offers an incomplete vision of his theoretical understanding of political discourse. While Niebuhr certainly expresses a negative view of human capacities to manipulate and harm one another, he also understood the Enlightenment project as a massive failure in the historical context of political thought. That perception underscores an overly pessimistic reading of his works. In other words, for Niebuhr, there are better and worse ways of evaluating and mitigating the impact of negative, selfish human tendencies in political life. For the recent centuries preceding Niebuhr's lifetime, Niebuhr understood that political ideologies had significant and insurmountable ontological shortcomings, deserving of consideration as structurally deficient arguments regarding the positional self. Particularly, he derided the materialistic understanding of contractarian and communitarian claims as being disruptive rather than creative expressions of rational freedom.²³ A chief goal of this work is to define, articulate, and defend an understanding of what a potential creative expression of rational freedom might look like for Niebuhr, given his strong caveats about negative human tendencies. Subsequently, I also wish to consider to what degree such an expression provides a positive political ethos within the context of deliberative discourse politics, a tradition I shall argue matches Niebuhr better than alternative ones.

To contextualize what a creative expression of rational freedom would look like for Niebuhr, as opposed to the disruptive one he critiques, I will establish his partial disconnection from the Enlightenment traditions that he disparages. While he would affirm that one cannot wholly dissociate political frameworks and ideals from a personal historical context, we can nevertheless conceive of creative alternatives to the disruptive

²³ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 58

force of the Enlightenment that better fit Niebuhr's ontological framework of human behavior. Langdon Gilkey has considered some of these questions in his work, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. I wish to build upon his understanding of Niebuhr with the inclusion of other relevant considerations of Niebuhr.

Ilsep Ahn, in *Position and Responsibility: Jürgen Habermas, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Co-Reconstruction of the Positional Imperative*, provides us with a supplemental understanding of Reinhold Niebuhr as he relates to Habermas's understanding of deliberative political discourse. Ahn's goal is to provide an account of Niebuhr's politics that works with the framework of Habermas's understanding of diverse political positions in a deliberative framework. His imperative is as follows: "Act in such a way that your positional actions not only meet the standard of the law but also anticipatorily receive the approval of all affected."²⁴ Implicit in this co-reconstruction of Niebuhr and Habermas is the notion that this positional imperative largely applies to people in positions of authority, in government, corporations, or other institutions. Niebuhr's political realism for Ahn resides primarily in venues of power. While Ahn's positional imperative presumably satisfies some requirements of something like Gilkey's creaturely creativity, it primarily speaks to people in positions of authority who may be in need of self-restraint. His work does not as often engage how the positional imperative that he delineates might facilitate a more broadly accessible positive expression of the creaturely creativity that Gilkey envisions as a central tenet of Niebuhr's understanding of politics. Ahn's citations of Gilkey serve instead primarily to explain Niebuhrian understandings of

²⁴ Ahn, Ilsep. *Position and Responsibility: Jürgen Habermas, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Co-Reconstruction of the Positional Imperative*. Pickwick Publications. Eugene, Oregon. (2009). 233

history, community, and paradox. With the insights of Gilkey and Ahn in mind, we can consider the usefulness of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in relation to ascendant modes of deliberative discourse.

Niebuhr understood much of the nuance of secularization and modernity decades before Habermas wrote *Between Naturalism and Religion*. Niebuhr's relationship to the kind of ideas set forth in this work are emphatic points, with which I argue that Niebuhr's relevance is roughly within this tradition. I argue this is the case given his somewhat similar understanding of secular and rational communications between scientific inquiry and religious expression in comparison to some expressions of Habermas. Habermas's *The Inclusion of the Other* is also another work that I shall consider in relation to Niebuhr's politics.

Using these textual references as a framework, I wish to take a broader view of the political ontology of being a positional self with an emphasis on personal creativity borne of one's self-reflection upon situated anxious pride, that is, taking seriously Ahn's concept of positionality and augmenting it with the creative power that Gilkey identifies as possible from personal reflection on the limited and partial nature of human experiences. I seek to postulate specific theoretical examples of that experience using Gilkey and Ahn in a conciliatory textual comparison. In other words, the positional imperative that Ahn considers applies most to people of privilege and power, but we can consider it more broadly as well. To sustain an inclusive and authentic experience of informal deliberative discourse with an emphasis on such notions as reciprocity and authenticity, a deliberative understanding of Gilkey's creaturely creativity as an

expressive experience provides a supplemental understanding of Niebuhrian creativity more generally.

I think such an explanation deserves a similar consideration to Ahn's positional imperative because it moves us toward a more authentic presentation of the self to the degree that it attempts to correct Niebuhr's more "disruptive" power of Enlightenment politics, the narrowly rational conception of politics that Niebuhr disdains. As this understanding differs from Ahn's in its emphasis on individual perspectives of more marginal vantages, it also differs from that of Gilkey to the extent that it emphasizes the deliberative and relational aspect of Niebuhr's political theology. In other words, a major concern of this project is to define Niebuhr's politics as I understand them, contextualize Niebuhr as a kind of deliberative and pragmatic democrat through a process of differentiation, and consider rebuttals and shortcomings in relation to relevant traditions. In addition to these tasks, I will evaluate and specify the particular nature and expression of Niebuhrian humility within the context of promoting a more expressive and authentically relational framework of deliberative discourse ethics.

For some subsequent chapters, utilizing Niebuhr's political ontology in dialogue with traditions outside of the deliberative democracy framework highlights his criticisms of those traditions and why I believe he fits most closely within a deliberative model of democratic participation and recognition between individuals. Among these, social contract theories, communitarian theories, and divergent accounts of Augustinian citizenship will be the traditions that I will consider for the sake of distinguishing Niebuhr's political salience. Following these distinctions, I will present my own

contribution to Niebuhrian thought and offer conclusions regarding Niebuhr's continual importance for understanding such concepts as Augustinian politics, deliberative politics, and pragmatic expression.

Niebuhr claims that his account of deliberative political participation restricts the will-to-power in putting it under an 'absolute will' critically, "imparting transcendent value on other human beings, whose life and needs thus achieve a higher claim upon the self."²⁵ He also in this chapter calls this kind of ethos a citadel of hope built upon the edge of despair, humility before the absolute but self-assertion in terms of the absolute. He accuses naturalist critiques of religion of a failure to understand this golden mean between self-affirmation and self-seeking behavior. I deeply appreciate the political nuance of Reinhold Niebuhr's political thought but I do not share his theology. Nevertheless, I believe that his message of a self-checking humility is an important critique of various strains of liberal thought and communitarian thought and can be appreciated from a secular perspective without discounting his religious experience. Having given an account of particular distinctions between Niebuhr and his alternatives, specifications of Niebuhr's robust deliberative ethic of humility, in the context of deliberative theory more generally, follows below.

Reinhold Niebuhr provides us with a fuller account of deliberative democratic theory because his intellectual position stood between a secular and a religious ontology, neither of which fully accepted him. Understanding Niebuhr helps us to understand and properly frame the problem of Habermas's contemporary tension of naturalism and religion in public life. In his essay within *An Awareness of What is Missing*, Habermas

²⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960.) 63

emphasizes, “it makes a difference whether we speak with one another or merely about one another. If we want to avoid the latter, two presuppositions must be fulfilled: the religious side must accept the authority of 'natural' reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the the judge concerning truths of faith.”²⁶ Given Niebuhr's emphasis on the historical, positional self and its correspondent ethic, Niebuhr's political theory is useful toward the end of justifying moral claims irrespective of specific claims of divine nature or eschatology. Creaturely creativity is Gilkey's interpretation of how to best respond to political anxieties borne of personal contingencies. That term is roughly a more general form of my Niebuhrian ethic of humility. It serves as a means of fulfilling this kind of dialogue that Habermas envisions as constructive and necessary in a world he sees increasingly imperiled by conflicts that arise from religious differences.

I have previously given some account of Habermas's concerns regarding naturalism and religion. Here I wish to offer more specific details to emphasize the importance of Niebuhr's political thought in Habermas's push for a more capacious form of deliberative discourse ethics. Following a theoretical account of this contribution, I shall consider practical examples of its use. Given the fact of a reasonable pluralism in a democratic society, Habermas argues in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, “A change in epistemic attitudes must occur if religious consciousness is to become reflexive and if the secularist mindset is to overcome its limitations. But these changes in mentality count as complimentary 'learning processes' only from the perspective of a specific normative self-

²⁶ Habermas, Jürgen, et all. *An Awareness of What Is Missing*. (Polity Press. 2010.) 16

understanding of modernity.”²⁷ Habermas's goal here is to consider the degree to which religious and secular claims can be mutually intelligible in a democratic society, wherein the use of public reason may remain contested between various groups of citizens.

Here I argue that Niebuhr's understanding of historical contextualization in conjunction with his understanding of humility in politics provides a specific and unique perspective for managing such claims. That is, Niebuhr's perspective of social possibilities, steeped in prophetic tradition, is not entirely modern. He provides an ethic that reaffirms the importance of people from different ontological and epistemological perspectives learning about specific political claims from each other. In other words, Niebuhr provides us a kind of postmetaphysical thinking that nevertheless maintains its specific traditions in a meaningful narrative of experiences. Niebuhr's dialogical method of pragmatic communication with an undergirding of humility provides a substantive expression of the kind of deliberative discourse between religious and nonreligious citizens, toward which Habermas aspires.

In the same work, Habermas later provides a pragmatic constraint on deliberative citizens, which must acknowledge different epistemological perspectives that they may not share. With regard to reciprocity and the testability of normative justice, “Whoever has only the *semantic* features of a universal norm in view, and then claims that it *cannot* do justice to the particularity of the case and to the context of the individual's life history, overlooks the *pragmatic* meaning of the 'universality' of democratically justified norms.”²⁸ This notion is similar to the criticism of Rawls that I will consider later from

²⁷ Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion*. (Polity Press. 2008). 144

²⁸ Ibid. 288-289

Habermas's *The Inclusion of the Other* in my argument in that Habermas and Niebuhr emphasize the indelible personal perspective that must remain the cornerstone of a robust and inclusive kind of liberal politics. The Rawlsian veil of ignorance cannot bear this burden. Here we should not merely concern ourselves with the reciprocal acknowledgment of political perspectives as Habermas would have it, but further acknowledge that our own motivations may obscure from us a positional understanding of ourselves in relation to political goods. Furthermore, the position and intellectual biases of a particular self-observed position may change over time. We should treat other perspectives that provide a reciprocal basic acceptance of difference as different rather than as mistaken because we can be confused regarding our own perspectives, given the individuated context of valid claims described by Niebuhr and promoted by Jeffrey Stout, as I shall argue later. It is for this reason that a positional understanding of politics that emphasizes humility demands a correspondent account of creative possibility as a method of mitigating and confronting social and historical uncertainties. Given this kind of pragmatic understanding of a humble, deliberative type of liberalism, we can consider specific arguments which serve to make it more participatory in its recognition and more capacious in its scope.

Returning to Gilkey, we see then how his formulation of Niebuhr's creaturely creativity works to preclude intolerant dogmatic claims as fundamentally illiberal claims. In some cases such claims may not be fit for deliberative discourse to the extent that they do not reflect the priority of humility as an ethic that can facilitate meaningful discourse. This humility is thoroughly enmeshed in Niebuhr's understanding of Christianity, and

arguably applies to Abrahamic religions more generally, given Niebuhr's emphasis on Hebraic prophets as loci of political insight. "For Niebuhr, no human word or action, institution or doctrine is absolute; all remain creaturely, finite, relative, and partial; none, therefore, unequivocally represent or could represent God. If such a claim is made, it is, in Niebuhr's words, an arrogant pretension, the ultimate 'self-deification'."²⁹ That is, for Niebuhr, spiritual pride is ostensibly impious and therefore unacceptable as a comprehensive religious claim. In that regard, Niebuhr gives us a tool not to only contextualize the validity of our own ontological claims, but also those who would claim to affirm an all-encompassing religious perspective that presents a theocratic challenge to democratic values. For Niebuhr, such theocrats always describe their own limited perspective, not a rational and perfectible expression of some transcendent value, simply because they claim to know what they cannot know as bound and finite persons of limited epistemological perspectives. Alternatively, for Niebuhr, transcendent value describes personal encounters in that it informs all creative potential in individual relationships. This individuated basis for discourse suggests its existential and pragmatic underpinnings, but it remains useful for facilitating the kind of reciprocity that Habermas envisions, wherein religious and secular perspectives can speak to one another, not merely about one another. To achieve this level of intersubjective personal recognition, we can utilize a sense of Niebuhr's political irony, which makes possible self-reflective constraints on anxious selfishness, which in turn augments personal beliefs to be more reasonable in plural presentation of worldviews. This kind of irony does not lack in the ability to make evaluative moral judgments as many of its critics like Stanley Hauerwas

29 Gilkey, Langdon. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2001). 239-240

and John Milbank might claim. According to Ruth Smith, “Whatever irony produces and reproduces entails a judgment of some kind, and part of irony's affinity with morality lies in its evaluative edge. Irony is not neutral but indicates the attitude of the ironists toward whatever they are ironic about.”³⁰ Irony is useful because it provides a mechanism for increasing our own self-consciousness of our political anxieties, which makes an ethic of humility more reasonable. Irony makes us aware of our limited perspectives and positional contingencies. I shall explore the importance of an ironically situated self in detail soon, but first I will give further consideration to Ilsup Ahn's co-reconstruction of the politics of Niebuhr and Habermas.

For Niebuhr, history is marked by an indeterminate character. Justice is tied, for Niebuhr, inexorably to our personal affections and sentiments. It is not a norm that stands on its own. Ahn's task in his co-reconstruction of Niebuhr and Habermas is to use a pragmatic evaluation of both Niebuhr and Habermas to develop a personal ethic of participation in politics. Toward that end, he argues for, “synthesis between 'discursive anticipation' (Habermas) and 'approximation of the ideal' (Niebuhr). For Niebuhr this ideal is a contingent understanding of love that depends on our personal relationships. Here Ahn, echoing the realist sentiments of Niebuhr, argues that the positional imperative he constructs is largely for those persons with political clout. It is, “a moral law all position holders are required to follow in managing and administering organizations and corporations.”³¹ That is, when someone necessary manages a position of responsibility, they must make claims against the values and interests of other people to lead a group,

30 Smith, Ruth. “Morals and Their Ironies” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 26. No. 2. (Fall 1998). 367-388

31 Ahn, Ilsup. *Position and Responsibility: Jürgen Habermas, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Co-Reconstruction of the Positional Imperative*. Pickwick Publications. Eugene, Oregon. (2009). 233

organization, or society. Ahn wants to commingle the minimal provision of Habermas to keep the law with Niebuhr's maximal provision of justice, to the degree that Niebuhrian self-reflection makes such a task possible.

Ahn emphasizes positional reflection for the sake of a more robust theory of deliberative discourse, which includes an approximation of a moral ideal of reciprocity, if not an absolute ideal of perfectible justice. In his argument for positionality, I worry that there is not enough focus in on those with viewpoints that might be overlooked in a purely procedural kind of deliberative discourse. Toward that end, I argue for a widely applicable understanding of Ahn's thoughtful positional framework. As we have seen from Niebuhr's understanding of history, those who do not hold positions of power may find themselves in such positions, sought or unsought, or may find a need to act boldly despite personal disenfranchisement. We also should not discount the transformational power of social movements that initially seem impossible. In Niebuhr's life, he long held this viewpoint regarding the civil rights movement. Having a realistic view of history means accounting for possibility in history. Such a view of realism must account for radical change in instances where it unexpectedly comes to fruition.

Deliberative and participatory democratic ideals seem complimentary in the abstract, but in reality, social barriers may exist that preclude or curtail participation in deliberative discourse. There are important works in political science that highlight this tension. In Diana Mutz's book, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*, she worries that people who feel crowded out of political life may devalue politics, pursue agreeable conversations within insular communities, or

devalue social relationships altogether.³² Mutz does not want a marketplace of ideas that only includes political elites. “Instead, we need instruction and explicit norms, for how political differences should be handled respectfully in informal discourse. How can one be a successful advocate of political ideas without isolating one's self from those whose ideas differ?”³³ Positional reflection, after Niebuhr's understanding of humility, helps underscore the idea that we should not fear informal political discourse, because from a pragmatic perspective, each of us does as well as we can with the information available to us. Pride and shame should not preclude basic participation or be a barrier to the attainment of political knowledge or the possibility of new ideas. Through a Niebuhrian reflection of humility, that no perspective enjoys permanent privilege, we can welcome more people to political discourse without undermining its basic norm of respecting the perspective of an individual as a unique participant with constrained life circumstances. It behooves us then to consider what kind of deliberative politics we might consider to be sincerely inclusive.

Iris Marion Young provides us with a more inclusive kind of deliberative politics than a disembodied universal ideal can achieve. We see this concern as an important one in the article, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy.” She expresses concerns that norms of deliberation, “tend falsely to identify objectivity with calm and absence of emotional expression. Thus expressions of anger, hurt, and passionate concern discount the claims and reasons they accompany.”³⁴ When we

32 Mutz, Diana C. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. (Cambridge, New York, 2006). 137

33 Mutz, Diana C. *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. (Cambridge, New York, 2006). 150

34 Benhabib, Seyla, editor. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ. (1996). 124

understand individual perspectives within the frame of positionality, we can understand that important political claims are not necessarily dispassionate or formal in their presentation. Rational speech might be too sterile to the extent that it crowds out certain political viewpoints that are nevertheless valid ones. Young argues that reasonable speech of divergent political narratives and stories permits us to speak respectfully about ourselves in others in a way that facilitates communicative action. This does not mean we will always be able to understand another point of view, but that we will be able to know enough about another point of view to respect our own ignorance of its experience. Young provides the example of someone explaining a position of disability, “the storytelling provides enough understanding of the situation of the wheelchair-bound by those who can walk for them to understand that they cannot share the experience.”³⁵ The humility of reflection as prescribed by Niebuhr, I argue, is a useful heuristic for understanding this kind of political discourse. In aspiring toward an ideal of understanding, we may never get there, but we may empathize with others more kindly if we come to realize that our individual position differs from their own, and so long as they cause us no harm, we cannot speak for that experience.

In another essay, “Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication,” Young further presents a positional argument for inclusive deliberative communication. Regarding citizens who occupy different positions and experiences in life, “They need not be committed to a common interest or common good; indeed, their stance of openness and mutual accountability requires them to attend to their particular differences

³⁵ Benhabib, Seyla, editor. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ. (1996). 131

in order to understand the situation and perspective of others.”³⁶ Again, this argument echoes the pragmatism of Niebuhr's self-reflection for humility in political deliberations. While individuals each experience a unique social situation, through the process of positional reflection, they can experience that position in a way that is less contingent upon how others will react to individual expressions of difference. Niebuhrian reflection, often in the form of self-recognition of personal irony, permits us to view ourselves more clearly and then in turn present that view to others in a more authentic way. Such a presentation of self addresses some of the psycho-social limitations of a disembodied, abstracted expression of deliberative discourse ethics.

Amartya Sen presents a conception of positionality in *The Idea of Justice*.

Positionality here is not only the observational perspective for constructing scientific and social beliefs. Moreover, “the role of positionality may be particularly crucial in interpreting systematic and persistent illusions that can significantly influence—and distort—social understanding and the assessment of public affairs.”³⁷ Much of the space I have devoted below to contractarian, communitarian, and Christian thought has been toward the end of considering such illusions to reaffirm instead a theory of positional selfhood from a self-critical perspective. Niebuhr then advances deliberative discourse theory because he provides an intellectual framework for presenting positional selfhood in a meaningful and affirmative way that anticipates and creates possibilities for increasing solidarity and reciprocity in the context of a plural political society.

With regard to the pragmatic aspect of Niebuhr's positional theory, and the manner

³⁶ Bohman, James and William Rehg, editors. *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA, London, England. (1997). 402

³⁷ Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 2009. 168

in which it in turn informs Jeffrey Stout's pragmatism of humility, we must evaluate what pragmatism in this context means. While Niebuhr's early political thought and his early academic thesis echoed the ideas of William James, his later disputes with John Dewey and his political theory more generally qualify his expression of pragmatism in important ways. Niebuhr is wary of pragmatism as an uncritical conduit of progressive reason. Horkheimer warns us against the instrumentalization of reason. Echoing Niebuhr's ontology, he emphasizes, "human intellect, which has biological and social origins, is not an absolute entity."³⁸ He goes on to describe a kind of political norm that reflect Niebuhr's understanding of the positional self as a condition for a workable kind of pragmatism. "An intelligent man is not one who can merely reason correctly, but one whose mind is open to perceiving objective contents, who is able to receive the impact of their essential structures and to render it in human language."³⁹ Horkheimer was concerned that a facile understanding of pragmatism can strip social inquiry of its ability to investigate evaluations of moral truth through utilitarian and instrumental conceptions of reason. Niebuhr was aware of instrumental reason and its problems for social theory. He acknowledges in *Faith and History*, "In its most naïve form modern rationalism identifies technical competence with rational profundity and sees in the conquest of nature a proof of man's capacity to bring the irrational stuff of human nature under control."⁴⁰ In my understanding, Niebuhr's self-reflective pragmatic ethic mitigates such a problem of instrumental reason to the extent that it likewise questions its premises without discounting pragmatic ethics more generally. One way of looking at this notion

38 Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse of Reason*. Continuum. New York and London. (1947, 2004). 37

39 Horkheimer, Max. *Eclipse of Reason*. Continuum. New York and London. (1947, 2004). 38

40 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*. (New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1949). 90

of objectivity is Niebuhr's account of political realism as a precondition for meaningful deliberative action. We need not discard our conceptions of truth for deliberative discourse, but we must acknowledge and respect that others may not universally share them as such. Nevertheless, given the uncertainties and contingencies of our experience of knowledge in that realistic ontology, humility still necessitates a kind of expressive pragmatic concern. The self-critical account of human creativity is thus the antithesis of an instrumentalized kind of reason. Niebuhr's political theory then takes seriously the idea that Horkheimer cautions us against, that philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, while still maintaining a pragmatic understanding of politics. We can consider then having strong evaluative norms of political communication to be essential to Niebuhr's argument for positional reflection and subsequent political participation. Niebuhr's relationship with pragmatic thought is therefore worthy of consideration.

Prior to *Democracy and Tradition*, a work I shall consider later at length, Jeffrey Stout made similar arguments regarding the role of humility for moral disagreement as early as *Ethics After Babel*. Stout seems to assuage some of the concerns of Mutz and Young that I considered earlier, namely that deliberative discourse can crowd out informal speech or effective participation from people who feel uncertain whether others will understand their moral language. Arguing for a more inclusive conception of political deliberation, Stout echoes the Niebuhrian positional understanding, "Humility does require recognition that some of our beliefs are surely wrong. But that is no reason, in itself, for withdrawing any particular truth-claim or for shunning the notion that people who disagree with a truth-claim we have made accept a falsehood."⁴¹ This concern for

41 Stout, Jeffrey. *Ethics After Babel*. Beacon Press. Boston. (1988). 25

humility in expressions of truth-claims is the central ethic to Stout's political pragmatism. It is the same for Niebuhr, though Niebuhr undergirds his ethic more in the framework of human contingencies with his the limitations that he believes imperfect revelation imposes on human beings. For Stout, the limitation is something closer to an epistemic defect driven by limitations of partial and narrowly situated positions in society. For my purposes, these two views provide functionally similar roles and offer mutually intelligible claims of democratic discourse. The key distinction is that Niebuhr's conception of creaturely creativity, as Gilkey terms it, speaks to a moral capacity for the self to consider limitations as a reflective action. Niebuhr's ethical realism precedes his political realism. In my reading, he focuses more on individual agency in the abstract. Stout concerns himself more with humility in the face of historically contingent positionality specifically toward the end of relating to others. Here humility is less an end in itself as we see for Niebuhr, but the prerequisite of a meaningful social identity. Niebuhr would also argue that political anxiety is a precondition for the kind of self-reflection that he encourages. This treatment of anxiety constitutes a useful addition to the psychology of contemporary pragmatic discourse. Political humility gives us, I shall argue, a mechanism for understanding the social psychology of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the pragmatic self-affirmation that Ellison affirms. For Stout, this psychological mechanism is less pronounced. Stout emphasizes the notion instead that our ignorance of others' positions should in turn drive our humility because of our own contextual life experiences. Regardless of these distinctions, the two arguments agree frequently even as they differ, and Niebuhr remains important for understanding the moral language that

informs the ontology of Stout's contemporary account of political pragmatism as it relates to traditional expressions of ethical values in deliberative discourse.

Stout later argues in *Ethics After Babel* that realism and constructivism are often argued to be contrasting schools of thought regarding whether truths are discovered or made. Stout calls us to be both realists and constructivists. We affirm moral truths, “coming to know the truth of a moral proposition consists in a kind of discovery... To say that candidates for truth and falsehood in ethics can be brought into being by the creative human effort of moral *bricolage* is not to deny that the candidates thus brought into being really possess truth-value or can be discovered to be true or false by rational means.”⁴² Here Stout argues for the validity of the kind of claims given informal constraints on experiences that may not be universally shared. The Iris Marion Young example of a person who can walk being unable to fully understand the experience of a wheelchair-bound person comes to mind. We each inhabit positions of being situated, in varying degrees of significance, which we may have difficulty explaining to other people. In short, creative exercises of mind, that which Stout here termed *bricolage*, are useful in politics not for grand contractarian or communitarian judgments regarding social life, but toward the end of affirming and reflecting upon the diverse perspectives positional selves. Such an affirmation expresses a kind of creative thinking that does not go beyond a descriptive acknowledgment of personal perspectives until discursive participants share an understanding that such different perspectives are always somewhat intellectually impenetrable.

Gabriel Fackre's *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr* draws further parallels

⁴² Stout, Jeffrey. *Ethics After Babel*. Beacon Press. Boston. (1988). 77

between this kind of positional perspective and that of Niebuhr. In his understanding, Niebuhr's work exists between naturalism and idealism. The parallels to Habermas are evident in Fackre's discussion. In arguing for the proper positioning of political will in Niebuhrian thought, "Naturalism locates the trouble in man's reason and therefore assumes that a plunge into or alignment with natural vitalities will cure his ailment. Idealism holds that evil lies in either a passion or an ignorance that can be corrected by larger doses of reason. Niebuhr, on the other hand, finds the sickness of man to be in the very freedom which rises above both nature and reason."⁴³ In addition to perfectible ideologies, we can consider religious radicalism or natural law to be such larger doses of reason in this context. The parallel to Habermas is therefore a useful one. Here we see Niebuhr's importance for understanding an ironic solution to the problem of talking past each other in deliberative discourse. Authentic positional identities must be both introspective and relational identities. It is not enough to judge ourselves when we notice ourselves rationalizing selfishness, but we must consider others' perspectives of us as well.

Positional reflection provides a healthy egoism but not one that overestimates the value or capabilities of the self. Niebuhr provides us with cautionary language against the Dunning-Kruger effect on the basis of our shared and mutual vulnerabilities that each person experiences regardless. According to Mark Douglas, "Niebuhr does not treat his personal experience as a trump...Niebuhr-the-pragmatist recognizes that experience is personal, but it never isolates the person from others, since the transactions between one

43 Fackre, Gabriel. *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr*. J.B. Lippincott Company. Philadelphia, New York. (1970). 39

person and another help to constitute personal experience in the first place.”⁴⁴ In the mind and to each other we must ask questions like these: What evidence do I have for my guilt or transgression in harming another person? What is your evidence that I have harmed you? Can you repeat what I said to you back to me as you understood it? Only when we utilize such interpersonal questions in a manner that prioritizes self-reflection against our own selfishness can we utilize positionality toward the end of a broader deliberative democratic ethic, thus couched in Niebuhr's creative, relational identity. Toward understanding the specifics of Niebuhr's framework for ironic reflection of the self in contemporary application, I now turn to various critical understandings of his political theory. Much of this discussion includes arguments in the traditions of modern and contemporary liberal and communitarian political thought, and explains Niebuhr's disagreements and reservations regarding the usefulness and limitations of such traditions.

44 Douglas, Mark. “Reinhold Niebuhr's Two Pragmatisms” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*. Volume 22. No. 3 (September 2001) 221-240

Chapter 4: Contractarians, Thought Experiments, and the Problem of Sublimation

One significant conduit for understanding the political theory of Reinhold Niebuhr is the contradistinction between his ideas and those of social contract theorists, both modern and contemporary. These theories are important to consider because in Niebuhr's understanding, they form the framework that shapes political liberalism, and also shape dialectical materialism as a correspondent reaction, from the twentieth century onward. At first glance some contractarian state of nature theories and the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr may appear to overlap in their intellectual outlooks of problems that arise when individuals affirm conflicting political wills, even if they differ in their conclusions. Whether we look at the most radically Hobbesian, pessimistic view of human behavior in its capacity for productive cooperation in draconian social order or the more palatable Rawlsian overlapping consensus that affords individuals more say, there is a cursory likeness to Niebuhr's political theology of humility and self-doubt, at least to the degree that each author calls us to reflect upon hypothetical relationships that presumably model political realities. However, these theories differ from Niebuhr's concept of positional reflection in the face of anxious political pride because they are often too far abstracted from the individual lives that people actually inhabit. In their generalized form, they effectively reduce political participants to interchangeable parts. For Niebuhr, the key distinction here is that these theories do not properly model reality because the particular perspective of each theorist crowds out alternative points of view. In contrast, Niebuhr provides a more self-limiting political ethos because of his emphasis on political humility as a virtue of social reflection in response to political anxiety. Such

an ethos takes seriously individual lives as bounded and insecure perspectives that operate from limited experiences of social knowledge.

In many well-known contractarian theories of liberalism, the behavioral model that comes from a state of nature seemingly parallels Niebuhr's understanding of sin as a psychological phenomenon rather than a religious doctrine. Niebuhr's symbolic consideration of sin perhaps parallels the ahistoric and imaginative nature of contractarian thought experiments, but there the similarity ends for reasons I have just highlighted. Therefore, given his historical understanding of individual experiences in politics, Niebuhr draws different conclusions than generally follow from contractarian models of politics. The key distinction is that the story of the biblical Fall for Niebuhr is not simply an origin story of creation that would parallel a description of supposedly natural humans as we might find in a state of nature theory. Instead, Niebuhr provides an ongoing account of specific human behaviors that are subject to historic contingencies and individual preferences. With regard to American politics, "The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue."⁴⁵ Contractarian theories often express difficulty accounting for such differences in personal position. Contractarian models of behavior, for Niebuhr, take a state of nature origin story as a universal psychological profile with a settled justification of human behavior. Niebuhr is very wary of this idealization of thought experiments toward the end of justifying a liberal political order. He maintains this wariness on

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1952). 133

grounds that such theories do not fully take seriously differences of individual perspective and personal position. Such a process invariably speaks more to the desires, wishes, and delusions of its author than it does to a contemporary, relevant analysis of distinct human experiences of social life.

Put another way, in consideration of early modern contractarian ideologies, the critical difference for Niebuhr is his divergent understanding of the utility of behavioral correction with regard to ordinal valuations of preferences. The best accounts of self-critical and self-correcting behavior must account for their own tendencies to rationalize selfish behavior from positions of social and economic privilege. The manifestation of the will-to-power present in Niebuhr's critique of social contract theory is incisive and important because it demonstrates the limited ability of such endeavors to check against selfishness as they seek impartiality. This analysis differs, for example, from a general Nietzschean critique of the same contractarian tradition because Niebuhr offers not an affirmation of uncontested personal will in response. Instead, Niebuhr seeks further to endorse individual and group level checks on the will-to-power that can proceed in a reciprocal manner for interpersonal good. Niebuhr's reflective self does not simply act for the affirmation of the self, but also with an other-regarding perspective that emerges from a kind of pragmatism that his humility imbues to political claims.

While Reinhold Niebuhr is highly critical of the social contract tradition within political theory, his criticism of this tradition may help us to see parallels and contrasts between Niebuhr's political realism and those authors who make analogous claims about the importance of thought experiments. That is, when we consider the political realism of

Reinhold Niebuhr, it gives us a lens for better understanding the limits of social contract theories and shows us how people from divergent political narratives can agree to basic terms of cooperation if they take the concept of positional humility seriously as a political ethic, rather than an idealized, interchangeable self with no personal or historical contingencies of insecure interest. Freedom among the constrained choices of one's circumstances as a theme in Niebuhr cannot be overstated. According to John Irwin, "For Niebuhr, the uniqueness of man is found in the radical freedom of the self, freedom over all the structures in which it may be provisionally enclosed."⁴⁶ Here we should note that radical freedom nevertheless remains bounded. With this framework in mind, specific examples from Niebuhr's writing will help us to better understand his critique of and his distinctions from contractarian thought.

Niebuhr's categorization of his religious belief is both unconventional and distinctive. It is also relevant to his understanding of contractarian liberal thought. When he considers the importance of an individual's religious perspective for mitigating and compromising with other people, he explains, "the truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realised by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted."⁴⁷ Stout's request that we be both realists and constructivists finds relevance here. While these notions may seem like a personal religious ethic or worse, a confirmation bias of self-rationalization, what I understand Niebuhr emphasizes here is the possibility of creativity political institutions as a conduit for his agapic sentiment.

⁴⁶ Irwin, John E. G. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Critique of :Freudian Psychoanalysis" *Journal of Religion and Health*. Volume 14. No. 4. (October 1975). 242-253

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 81

Niebuhr goes on to bracket this claim of truth in illusions on grounds that his understanding of these aforementioned visions of religion are most likely to find their significance and social value within religious communities, where the signaling of trust as a social cue and its subsequent reciprocity matter in a concrete, transactional way. We can see basic ethics of reciprocity in a broader, secular community in a similar light, though they may take on more multifarious forms.

What I wish to argue here is that this explanation of illusory visions actually shares quite fundamental commonalities with the social contract tradition of which Niebuhr is highly critical, but also in some ways represents a dramatic departure from it as well. That is certainly not to say that Niebuhr is himself a social contract theorist. Rather, the creative, imaginative element of both his particular understanding of religious vision and the yearning for an agreeable community of liberal citizens exhibit common ground in their skeptical views of human social capabilities and an aspiration for mutual intelligibility of political claims borne of self-reflection. Both also share an emphasis on individualism, though each treats matters of difference and contingency in alternative ways. They are divergent ontological narratives that share the same moral language. The yearning for a positive and social community in state of nature contractarian thought shares a similar tone with Niebuhr's conception of pervasive sin. These common emphases provide a useful conduit for people who want their religious claims respected in matters of public discourse without asserting those claims as universally binding or as strongly dominant against other worldviews. Such commonalities are also useful to pragmatists, realists, and liberals who do not share Niebuhr's tradition, as they give an

account of a religious ethos somewhat similar to Jeffrey Stout's secular pragmatism of humility, which I shall detail at length later. We should not be fooled that these parallels are the most important correspondence between Niebuhr and contractarian thought or that the two are overly similar. Whereas Niebuhr concerns himself with the present and workable solutions to political problems, contractarian thought is much more interested in a kind of legalistic narrative rooted fundamentally in its ahistorical past. Contractarian thought offers a justification of particular concerns that we can contextualize as the kind of selfish and uncritical thinking that Niebuhr distrusts.

Niebuhr's categorization of each early modern contract theorist is a traditional one that delineates such theories clearly on their own terms, but remains highly critical of their respective claims. For Hobbes the defining characteristic of the state of nature is one of paranoid anarchy. For Locke it is one of inconvenience, where people of relative goodwill are nevertheless tempted to act as judges in their own cases. On what grounds then does Niebuhr think his religious perception of humility drawn from his understanding of selfish anxiety can be superior to the state of nature illusions found in Hobbes and Locke? The primary problem that Niebuhr sees in the political theories of Hobbes and Locke comes from a surprising place. Communitarians, for all of their faults, can teach an important lesson to conventional contractarian liberals, specifically, advocates of political community as the locus of important political valuations acknowledge that personal context matters if we are to take individuals seriously as such.

Niebuhr chastises social contractarians with a skeptical but conditionally progressive understanding of historical human communities, as I shall explain soon.

Niebuhr is uncomfortable with the notion that a thought experiment as fantasy can fully rationalize social ills, corrupt institutions, and utopian ideologies. With regard to the state of nature and social contract theory in particular, Niebuhr considers these, "...a symbol of modern man's protest against his subordination to historical and natural ties in a traditional society, and an assertion of man's role as creator and agent in history. The myth vividly but erroneously gathers, into one discrete act of reason and will, all the gradual accretions of human freedom in the historical process."⁴⁸ In other words, the problem of any social contract theory is that it is utterly ahistorical in its misleading vividness. Rather than taking our identities as individuals seriously, such theories strip us of our identities, as Niebuhr understands them, given the complexities and conflicts within the self and amongst people who share a political space for a time. In my usage of "ahistorical" here, it does not only mean that the state of nature thought experiment of a given theory never actually happened in a particular time and place, but further that cultural contingencies and the way such contingencies augment and alter individual desires is not something that early modern contractarian theories properly address. As such, the ideas of Hobbes and Locke, perhaps unwittingly to them in their lives, say more about the experiences of the authors, their particular conception of political goods, than they do about human nature or the realities of political experiences that different people inhabit. Toward that end, Hobbes is particularly terrified of the English Civil War and values stable order for self-preservation above all else. Hobbes argues in *The Leviathan*, "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death...his desire is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the

48 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 56

other.”⁴⁹ He goes on immediately to describe how our love of inordinate praise, in which people “disposeth to counterfeit love, but really secret hatred; and puts a man into the estate of a desperate debtor.”⁵⁰ While Hobbes's pessimistic view of selfishness in people may not seem too far from Niebuhr's own view, the very contractarian nature of Hobbes's argument makes its conclusions untenable for Niebuhr. Hobbes here differs from Niebuhr primarily in that he makes an exception for the “counterfeit love” and “secret hatred” in his order-inducing sovereign, which for Niebuhr is problematic, given his distrusted of privileged positions of power.

Locke in turn even affirms deeper illiberal claims, that a person can through a crime of property forfeit individual freedom into a state of slavery, or forfeit one's life for the sake of a crime of property. Locke goes so far as to justify a rational actor becoming a judge in his own case, which is otherwise generally antithetical to his argument. “I have no reason to suppose, that he, who would *take away my Liberty*, would not when he had me in his Power, take away *everything else*. And therefore it is Lawful for me to treat him, as one who has put himself into a *State of War* with me, *i.e.* kill him if I can; for to that hazard does he justly expose himself.”⁵¹ Such an example of personal judgment toward ends of personal maintenance underscores Niebuhr's reluctance to take seriously contractarian claims without a historical and personal context of each instance of conflict. The person has decided for himself that he or she is in the right, to the point of killing someone else, ascribing incommensurate motivations and activities. Locke has put us back into the brutal Hobbesian state of nature, but with a stamp of approval, effectively

49 Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edwin Curley, editor. Hackett Publishing Company. Indianapolis, Cambridge. (1994). 58

50 Ibid. 59

51 Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Peter Laslett, editor. Cambridge University Press. (1960, 1988). 280

espousing a self-righteous kind of anarchy over Hobbes's absolutism. Neither contract therefore properly accounts for self-reflection and ironic self-improvement. In short, each theory speaks to its author's motivations, not to more general human capacities, rights, or needs.

Beyond these impossibilities of translating an origin story into universal political rationality, Niebuhr criticizes that Hobbes emphasizes disruptive, rather than creative, consequences of rational freedom.⁵² This understanding of disruptive vs. creative rational freedom is central to my argument. The juxtaposition of these two kinds of rational freedom sets Niebuhr against the rationalism of the Enlightenment and establishes a kind of departure from the potential for a dialectical Enlightenment project Niebuhr saw in someone like John Milton, as I argued earlier at length. A general purpose of my conclusions later in this text is a practicable account of what creative rational freedom outside of the contractarian framework might look like from a Niebuhrian viewpoint for contemporary political life. For now though, the problems and disqualifications of the Hobbesian disruption require further explanation before I can put forth an alternative.

The Hobbesian formulation of the prisoner's dilemma relies upon non-iterative presuppositions and only considers the most extreme cases of selfishness as valid personalities. In real life, we often function on a scale that does not permit us to discount future experiences, and we may not face on a daily basis as violent a political order as Hobbes encountered. Hobbes has boxed us into his own problems. In real life, the creative force of human beings in history is evident as well as the brutal civil war that Hobbes experienced. As social circumstances of political orders evolve over time, so do

⁵² Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 58

appropriate reactions where creative expressions of reciprocity become more successful and possible social strategies. Our history of technological progress, while ever tenuous and potentially apocalyptic, refutes basic assumptions of a Hobbesian contract as being far too fragile to sustain collaborative efforts in cooperative research, beyond the simplest kinds of cooperation. This process is not inevitable, but it has functioned after Hobbes's time even in instances where political succession and sovereignty were not clear cut. Specific formulations and limitations of “creative” alternatives to the radical pessimism of Hobbesian “disruption” I shall address later at length. Again, I stress, this is not to say that Niebuhr's view of Hobbes is entirely negative. In a basic sense, if we deny Hobbes and his heirs, we deny our own intellectual historical context, which would be a disastrous mistake for Niebuhr. We see in Niebuhr's *The Self and the Dramas of History*, for Hobbes, “reason was responsible for the inordinancy of all human desires.” Yet problematically, “The French Enlightenment managed to forget Hobbes' realistic account of human self-interest, to adopt his materialism, and to compound it with Cartesian rationalism. The result was a fanaticism in the name of 'reason and 'nature'.”⁵³ The problem then is not the framing of what Hobbes terms “rational appetite,” but rather how people apply that notion toward diverse ideological ends that consider humans as a gross category to be unreflective, intransigent, and immutable. Such a deterministic notion of human behavior precludes the kind of reflective irony of the self that Niebuhr wants to encourage through his political practice of humility toward a more deliberative political order. It also negates basic human experiences of transience, contingency, and misunderstanding of the self and others. Even the more formal construction of a neo-

53 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Self and the Dramas of History*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1955. 116-117

Hobbesian reformulation cedes this point, as we see in David Gauthier's *Morals By Agreement*, "What makes a being autonomous is his capacity to alter given preferences by rational, self-critical, reflective procedure, not a capacity to produce preferences with no prior basis."⁵⁴ Here I understand this claim as an imperative emphasis on the the historical, positional perspective of individuals that Niebuhr affirms. Further it highlights the need to constantly self-correct for imperfect valuations of preferences as our social standing, capacity to understand ourselves, and personal relationships shift our identities and bounded frame of reference over time.

More subtle than Hobbes, we see in Locke's emphasis on the inviolability of the state of nature as one that only entertains personal inconvenience as the greatest social ill. This notion struck Niebuhr as naïve and dangerous because it neglects to observe political opportunism and oppression as possibilities in a society built upon such a conception of the state of nature. Locke's theory of natural rights is therefore no substantive replacement for an unsubstantiated theory of natural law that preceded it. Toward that end, Locke largely discounts the harsh realities of the English Civil War and institutionalized slavery as Niebuhr notes.⁵⁵ We can therefore read the major theme of his second treatise as a defense of specific instances of entitlement, rather than a serious attempt at a general defense of a right to personal property, irrespective of position or privilege. Apart from this distinction, the criticism of Locke are somewhat similar to those of Hobbes. Though Locke's theory considers human beings less violent than that of Hobbes, in a way he does more violence to human experience. He has no conception of

54 Gauthier, David. *Morals By Agreement*. Clarendon Press. Oxford. (1986). 349

55 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 60

the disruptive powers of resentment or humiliation, setting claims to property of relational evaluations of human experience. This injustice erroneously categorizes property in cases where it does not apply, for example, to a native American group that values its land for its spiritual rather than its economic and material value.

If we are to consider Locke, we should further consider his supposed intellectual heirs. Somewhat similar to Edmund Burke, though arguably for different reasons, Niebuhr saw American founding fathers as “moderate realists” and drew a contradistinction with the French Revolution. In France, Niebuhr argued that pure “Lockean illusions” prevailed more extremely than in America. In other words, the practical outcome of unfettered and uncritical faith in contractarian reason is a political ideology that Niebuhr saw in the Reign of Terror and Napoleonic despotism. Lockean illusions empower the Committee of Public Safety. Lockean illusions are no more desirable than the disruptive rational capacity that Hobbes understood in his more blatantly pessimistic social contract. The project of early social contract theories for Niebuhr invariably leads to either political absolutism in Hobbes or chaotic atomization in Locke. The former is extremely oppressive, the latter is radically inegalitarian. Rousseau's inversion of the Lockean contract and the Marxist inversion of Hegelian history also follow Locke's materialist understanding of history in that they present naïve or utopian political dreams, but Niebuhr's categorization of them is similar enough to his explicit distaste for Locke that they do not require specific attention at this point in the discussion. Their relevance will become clear presently in my discussion of another of Niebuhr's works.

The errors of disruptive contractarians extend to other political ideologies that follow them and react to them. For Niebuhr's purposes, Marxist dialectical materialism was a co-heir of the same problematic disruptive forces of the Enlightenment. It shares the utopian failures of contractarian liberalism that Niebuhr observed. The realities of early 20th century Detroit and Soviet communes, the former in which Niebuhr lived and the latter in which he traveled extensively, left him with an an indelible sense of skepticism regarding overly decisive ideological claims as settled matters of social order. Niebuhr considered America and the Soviet Union to be adversarial heirs to a broader, common history of political idealism. He contrasts the pluralism and democracy of American culture with the “jealous creed”⁵⁶ of Marxism. Nevertheless, he also termed both ideologies “children of light,” though misguided ones, in contrast to totalitarian “children of darkness.” In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr is quite explicit in that title as a vivid contradistinction. What Niebuhr thought America and the Soviet Union shared was not simply a realpolitik notion of strategic competition on the global stage, but a political realism that relies upon Niebuhr's overall political theory and understanding of both individual psychology and state level actors. Both states purported a kind of civic religion and forms of nationalism that espoused, at least theoretically, various positive and negative forms of liberty. With regard to finite and indeterminate capacities for human freedom that Niebuhr saw both superpowers express, “They are always more limited than the projects of human imagination. They reveal that, while man may be universal as free spirit, he is always parochial and tribal in the

56 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 77

achievement of organized community.”⁵⁷ From this parallel, we see an fuller account of the imaginative desire in politics than early contractarian authors presented. While we can rationalize and explain an ideological program, we do not implement such programs in a political or cultural vacuum. Niebuhr saw that ideologies become tribal shorthands for shallow nationalism irrespective of any programmatic agenda. Cursory understandings of Niebuhr's own work led to his personal scrutiny at the hands of the FBI, as his daughter Elisabeth Sifton recounts in her memoir. Later, neoconservatives sought to appropriate him their own purposes as well. For Niebuhr, the pragmatism of working together with other people in daily life and the will-to-power that individuals exhibit do not in turn jibe well with aforementioned “Lockean illusions.” Nevertheless, such illusions predominate the ideological underpinning of political life in both 20th century American and Soviet political norms.

To further illustrate Niebuhr's categorizations of the limits of state of nature illusions endemic to the contractarian tradition, we should continue to discuss his correspondent work, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, which delineates divergent conceptions of contract-driven natural right and their limitations in political discourse. In Niebuhr's estimation, both the American and Soviet ideologies fall under the purview of what he terms the children of light. By children of light he means that each ideology has in general a positive ethos and an expansive goal of respecting and expanding human dignity and capabilities toward the end of a more humane and more just world. These ideals offer us choices between bad and worse, imperfect and misguided as Niebuhr considers them to be. They nevertheless express basically

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 83

acceptable if overzealous political aspirations. He finds flaw in the democratic ideal and in the Marxist ideal on grounds that the illusion of Lockean property is a common failing of both. Explicitly, “Neither understands property as a form of power which can be used in either its individual or its social form as an instrument of particular interest against the general interest.”⁵⁸ The Soviet communes Niebuhr visited were not radically more egalitarian than the harsh social climate of Niebuhr's Detroit. Even then, the profitable entrepreneur or the proletarian revolutionary, if they suddenly find themselves in positions of importance, are quick to forget that they might become once again dispossessed. I will discuss this idea further when I consider specific criticisms of an ethic of humility. For Niebuhr then, the salient aspect of a contractarian view of property is not in trying to reason back to some state of nature or constitutive founding, but in the potential for downfall and marginalization that we find in an uncertain future. The will-to-power is too strong in political leaders to either acknowledge ongoing or anticipated abuses of distributive economic justice. As a result, the belligerents that led in the Cold War in Niebuhr's view were both well-meaning but flawed in their respective political orientations toward each other and toward under-served members of their own nation-states. Without acknowledgment of the limited accomplishments of each ideology, essential for Niebuhr's politics, each of the states provides a misunderstood virtuous ideal of itself that it then uses to vilify the other. Adversarial histories for Niebuhr then are nearly inevitable, but not necessary outcomes of contentions among his so-called children of light.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 106

Niebuhr contrasts these groups with the crass cynicism of his children of darkness, who only use transactional politics for affirmation of an uncompromising and uncritical will-to-power. Indeed, the children of darkness exhibit a crass tribalism and wish to bring their illusions of a false history to reality. They desire to bring a dark and inegalitarian state of nature to life. Whereas Niebuhr's children of light began with a premise of improving lives of individuals and communities and in some cases even espoused a cosmopolitan ethic of compassion, the delusions of the children of darkness preclude and eclipse any conception of hope. Niebuhr chides, "It is no more possible for a mature and highly elaborated community to return to the unity of its tribal simplicity than for a mature man to escape the perils of maturity by a return to childhood."⁵⁹ For Niebuhr, the primitive fantasy exacerbates the darkness of fascism. It is a fallen ideal, worse than trying to bring a Hobbesian or Lockean state of nature to life, because it does not even presuppose a basic natural equality among human beings in the thought experiment. The state of nature fantasy in the eyes of totalitarianism includes explicit slaves and masters. A given nation or ethnicity is explicitly privileged as a matter of declaration. This outcome is something like a tainted social contract; imagination as domination rather than idealization. It is Hobbesian antagonism without the acknowledgment of reciprocal, shared vulnerability. The origin story for children of darkness is naked in its bigotry, rather than simply naïve of its own limitations.

For Niebuhr's children of light, the problem of illusions in state of nature theories is the natural right they espouse as a perfectible political good, a kind of benevolent

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 123

condescension for the sake of social cohesion. Using the example of racism, Niebuhr chides those who would merely champion minority rights in a reflexive manner, as though it were a social shibboleth for properly understanding human rights or inevitable, progressive history. This anxious social performance of race relations is the kind of narrative theme we see in reflexively progressive white characters within Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for example. Alternatively, Niebuhr posits, "It would be truer if we began with the truer assumption that there is no unprejudiced mind and no judgment which is not, at least partially, corrupted by pride."⁶⁰ This may sound like Burkean prejudice, but the association with corruption of pride renders Burkean comparisons fitting only if we first acknowledge the much more negative view of tradition for its own sake that Niebuhr takes in contrast to Burke. Burke's understanding of prejudice is as a useful heuristic for judging others for the sake of a community in a moment of critical action and social leadership. Burke argues that prejudice, "previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision."⁶¹ Prejudice for Burke is something of a well-honed and automatic virtue of discernment. By way of contradistinction, Niebuhr's view of prejudice is as a lamentable but ubiquitous human expression of unreasonable biases toward the end of self-aggrandizement. This method of measuring and accounting for prejudice in deliberative discourse is a unique political insight that we can develop from Niebuhr's political thought. We can do so while still maintaining some important aspects of individual liberal value of personal expression. Much of the chapter regarding

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 144

⁶¹ Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the French Revolution*. London, J.M. Dent & Sons, New York E.P. Dutton & Co. (1910, 1955). 84

deliberative politics and the conclusion of this work deal explicitly with that assumption of prejudice and how a Niebuhrian conception of humility addresses its limitations, letting citizens affirm claims to one another sincerely despite the communicative poverty of social contracts.

It was useful to give an account of Niebuhr's critique of early modern contract theorists because they frame Niebuhr's reaction to that tradition and highlight the way in which Niebuhr distinguishes creative rational freedom (as opposed to disruptive rational freedom) from imagination in social theory. With that context as my intellectual basis, I will now consider Niebuhr in light of later twentieth-century and later contract theory that followed him, rather than those that preceded him. This comparison helps us understand his relevance in contemporary political discourse, as contractarian liberalism and deliberative discourse are somewhat parallel traditions that sometimes come to similar conclusions regarding the structure and scope of an appropriate social order. With that background in mind, the Niebuhrian expression of political humility adds important nuance and criticism to John Rawls's reformulated original position, and encourages us to consider alternative theories of contemporary politics as being more useful, particularly those of deliberative democracy that we can construct with with pragmatist and realist caveats. Niebuhr's view of Rawls is one we can use to bolster Habermas's critique of Rawls, as I shall discuss.

Niebuhr's account of state of nature theories predates Rawls and the tradition that Rawls subsequently revived. If we take Rawls's revised original position from *Political Liberalism* and then add Niebuhr's caveats of personal anxiety, the confirmation bias of

pride, and the correspondent humility of contingent social claims, we have powerful tools at our disposal with which to scrutinize Rawls's contract. Rawls posits that positional selves can resign their pride, make an intellectual abandonment of one's known and current position. In the thought experiment of the original position, I would argue in Niebuhrian terms that our personal position provides an indelible prejudice that cannot really be readily discounted for the sake of fairness. Given Niebuhr's contextualized insight, we are left with a relatively bleak picture of people trying to exploit a Rawlsian thought experiment, as they might any other, for their own individual gain. This applies no less to presentations of comprehensive doctrines, either inside or beyond the original position, than it did to Hobbes's brutish state of nature. Rawls's famous analogy of making sure the person who divides a cake evenly is the last one to take a piece is an overly idealized understanding of distributive justice. The cake-cutter needs only to appear to divide the cake evenly to manipulate other people. Optical illusions, manipulative rhetoric, or other means of subterfuge equally achieve a semblance of this goal, all the while presenting a facade of equality and magnanimity.

That is not to say we should completely dispose with a Rawlsian progressive liberalism. In general, Niebuhr's view of human capabilities is not one that is xenophobic of technology or one that takes a dim view of human intellect. Technology is not sinful for Niebuhr. In contrast, Niebuhr understands human intellect as a utilitarian tool, a mercenary kind of cunning that is self-seeking and self-serving, even as it extols virtuous speech of an equality of basic rights among people. Such intellect exhibits a great capacity for expression, but for Niebuhr, checking against inordinate desires presents a

task in which humans are far less capable. Without such a check, our political expressions; however well-intentioned, suffer the temptations that the ambiguities and vagueness of language provide. Inordinate self-interest makes us into unreliable narrators in the political arguments that we each inhabit. The implications are personally grim and somewhat pessimistic for shared discourse. Even the most charitable ethic of citizenship or the most well-argued case for a compassionate distributive justice become suspect in Niebuhr's austere criticism.

If we look at analytical contractarian doctrine as settled political theory, this for Niebuhr is tantamount to a failure of creative imagination, a kind of privileged position in history and personal circumstance. “Even if natural-law concepts do not contain the ideological taint of a particular class or nation, they are bound to express the limited imagination of a particular epoch, which failed to take new historical possibilities into consideration.”⁶² This sentiment echos the kind of political pragmatism that I argue is central to Niebuhr, which we see, for example, in Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. In other words, we do not each engage in something like the original position as if we did not know our social standing because we cannot do so when asked to bracket our experiences. Behavior developed habitually through the experiences that we inhabit is not so easily dismissed. Such a request is tantamount to asking an adroit juggler to forget how to juggle. Instead of creating such a tabula rasa, we bargain in Rawls's experiment knowing full well our own social and political standing. The original position only affords us, at best, to form an agreement regarding a snapshot in time, not regarding

⁶² Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 74

grand questions of distributive justice that are subject to constraints of economic impacts of environmental degradation, a graying population, or technological innovation that supplants the need for human labor. We discount such phenomena in the face of evolving societies at our own peril.

That manner of thought experiment becomes, at its worst, a kind of lip service, something that people with social standing tell to each other to falsely present themselves as being disinterested in the selfishness of a will-to-power, which Niebuhr certainly saw as endemic to the uncertainties and selfishness of political life. It is the same problem we saw above with strong ideologies more generally and with insincere expressions of agapic love in politics. Such a coded linguistic ritual exhibits a dangerous desire that does not properly account for its own historical and psychological constraints, but nonetheless thinks that it can provide such an account as an enduring ideal. For Niebuhr as a political and moral realist, a person espousing a decisive understanding of an overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines, with significant and actual economic gains and losses at stake, is not necessarily to be trusted, because such a person is possibly naïve, performing a kind of ritualistic show, or has somehow cynically worked to manipulate circumstances for personal advantage in the context of whatever political, legal, or regulatory climate exists at the moment. One example of this phenomenon would include invocations of a flat tax to someone who will likely, over the course of her or his life, pay significantly more than she or he otherwise would. In Rawls's cake cutting hypothetical, we must be vigilant that the person cutting the cake does in fact actually take the last piece, as there are strong inclinations and incentives to do otherwise.

Just as the children of darkness could hijack earlier state of nature theories for their own tribal and totalitarian ends, Niebuhr would expect the same naked ambition from a cunning pseudo-Rawlsian.

Drawing specifically from Niebuhr's own explanation of the heirs of the Enlightenment in *The Irony of American History*, “The philosophy which generated this hope was intent both upon eliminating the natural hazards to comfort, security, and contentment; and upon reforming society so that the privileges of life would be shared equitably.”⁶³ But regrettably, Niebuhr sees that “moral pride” or “the spirit of rationalism” instead facilitate that, “we will inevitably claim more for our contribution to our prosperity than the facts warrant.”⁶⁴ In consideration of bounded selves that encounter others in anxious and selfish political lives, Niebuhr calls us to emphasize fortune and caprice in our calculations of moral desert. This recommendation may appear at first to be in line with a fundamental understanding of a Rawlsian original position. In fact what Niebuhr envisions is quite different. Whereas Rawls wants us to set aside and bracket our political privileges or resentments, effectively stripping us of them in an intellectual exercise, Niebuhr would argue that is not a proper way to acknowledge the impact that those experiences impress upon us, as it fundamentally seeks to eliminate those differences. Rawls inadvertently denies the factual impact of individual differences. The original position is the a kind of positional sterilization, rather than a proper interpersonal contextualization of political and economic differences, which could improve our livelihoods and relationships.

63 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1952). 43

64 Ibid. 48

To bolster Niebuhr's claims on these accounts, we need only look to *Political Liberalism*. There we find no necessary connection between the first and second principles of justice that Rawls delineates. "When fair terms are not honored, those mistreated will feel resentment or humiliation, and those who benefit must either recognize their fault and be troubled by it, or else regard those mistreated as deserving their loss. On both sides, the conditions of mutual respect are undermined."⁶⁵ Rawls then offers a constitutional framework of ideals, in which rights are conditional and associational in their justification, but in admitting this fragility, we need something like Niebuhrian self-reflection to develop a more authentic and enduring norm of political communication. Rawls goes on in his reply to Habermas to concede that his definition of what claims constitute reasonable beliefs remains inchoate.⁶⁶ If we cannot properly define reasonable beliefs, how can we affirm that we hold them and judge whether others hold them? With such foundational constraints, there is no way to properly judge what terms are fair, and whether resultant resentment and humiliation are warranted. We therefore need a more deliberative understanding of both political participation and reciprocity of reasonable worldviews than Rawls provides to us. A creative pragmatism that emphasizes humility and deliberation is one answer to these problems that I find compelling. Put another way, Rawls's fears of a political *modus vivendi* may be in some instances overblown insecurities in the face of social evolution.

I do not mean this criticism as a kind of glib or fashionable exercise in Rawls-bashing. Eric Gregory directs us to Rawls's undergraduate thesis, "A Brief Inquiry into

⁶⁵ Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. (Columbia University Press. 2005.) 338

⁶⁶ Ibid. 395

the Meaning of Sin and Faith: An Interpretation Based on the Concept of Community” as a way of gleaning insight into the ideas that influenced *A Theory of Justice* and later *Political Liberalism*. Augustinian theorist Eric Gregory identifies from Rawls's thesis, “the chief problem of politics is to work out some scheme of social arrangements which can so harness human sin as to make the natural correlates of community and personality possible.”⁶⁷ In this reading of the young Rawls, he was not unaware of the kind of language of sin that Niebuhr uses. While Rawls rejects Niebuhr's emphasis of anxiety as the major driving force of sin, Rawls's understanding of political egoism as sin remains relevant to his political theory. It nevertheless undergirds the political ontology of the idea of justice as fairness that he goes on to develop. Nevertheless, I argue that because Rawls breaks with Niebuhr on this important matter of political anxiety, he has difficulty in developing institutions that can properly police themselves, or see their own shortcomings relative to the input of other people who have different lived experiences, which individuals may themselves only understand in an inchoate manner or find difficulty in expressing in public deliberations.

Rawls attempts to account for the Niebuhrian critiques of the overlapping consensus that I have raised. He argues that a wide and general reflective equilibrium is the final step in which citizens can affirm mutually their individual beliefs. As I have argued, I do not believe Rawls properly accounts for individual differences because he discounts political anxiety too much. We can think of Habermas as offering an alternative, more interactive, discursive political order that stands in contrast to that of

⁶⁷ Gregory, Eric. “Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Volume 35. No. 2. (June 2007). 179-206

Rawls. Along lines of argument that account for people who maintain valuable and unique positions throughout the Rawlsian thought experiment, Habermas provides a rebuttal in *The Inclusion of the Other*. “Only a recursive application of the procedure can yield the anticipated result: all citizens, not just you and I, have to decide, from their own perspectives and understandings of the political world, whether there is a proposal that can meet with universal acceptance...The overlapping consensus results from everybody's deciding simultaneously, but each individual and for herself, whether the proposed conception fits into her own comprehensive doctrine.”⁶⁸ Even in circumstances contextualized thusly, the Rawlsian thought experiment remains ahistorical because it exhibits no sense of time or position beyond singular perspectives. It is for that reason politically objectionable as a realistic possibility. Political realism after the manner of Niebuhr therefore necessitates an ongoing dialectical process rather than such a brief political snapshot.

Given these considerations, indistinct and ambiguous experiences of cultural and historical contingency is therefore a continuing problem of contemporary contractarian ideals. The positional self of Niebuhr, wary against its own prejudices, is not of the kind that a communitarian like Michael Sandel would espouse, as I shall clarify later at length. Rather, Niebuhr's conception of the self does not merely belonging to a particular community in a place and time, so much as it affirms an individual ability to reflect upon and acknowledge the preconceptions that follow from those bounded limitations of perspective. From that acknowledgment, Niebuhr affirms an ethos and institutional preference to urge, though not mandate, that others can and will do the same. In short,

⁶⁸ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Inclusion of the Other*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. (1998). 90-91

political communities are instrumental to political judgments for Niebuhr, but not as decisive in determining individual attitudes or ideological illusions of virtue or habituation as communitarian theorists would indicate. In understanding points of departure from communitarian ideas, we can better understand Niebuhr's conception of the self in politics as a creature bounded within cultural and historical pressures. Only then can we understand how most forthrightly to bring our humility to political deliberations with other people. Toward that end, a differentiation of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility from ideas in communitarian thought follows.

Chapter 5: Communitarians, Tradition, and the Problem of Tribal Exceptionalism

Having given an account of a Niebuhrian understanding of liberal contractarian ideology, we can then consider Niebuhr in relation to other contemporary arguments for social organization toward the end of defining his distinguishable politics in contrast to other ascendant ideologies. The communitarian ideal is a common critique of contemporary liberalism, but its major advocates differ from Niebuhr's own understanding of politics in significant ways. At first glance, with his emphasis on contextualization of individuals in historical circumstance and physical space, Niebuhr might appear to uphold the basic affirmations of a communitarian ideal. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight why that alternative, communitarian view is not Niebuhr's and to rescue some degree of personal freedom and creative rational freedom from an otherwise too macrocosmic critique of contractarian liberalism. In this chapter I will also address mainstream civic republican viewpoints and compare those to communitarian viewpoints. Considering Philip Pettit's understanding of republicanism, for example, highlights communitarian elements of significant and central importance endemic to that intellectual tradition. The two traditions are similar enough for the purposes of their distinctions from Niebuhr to warrant a single chapter and framework of discussion, though most of the consideration I will give to communitarian thought. Nevertheless, the distinguishing and differing characteristics between communitarian and republican considerations are ones that I will acknowledge in my analysis, though their taxonomy is not my primary purpose or focus.

Communitarian arguments for political order could potentially seek to appropriate

Reinhold Niebuhr for their own purposes, despite his deep criticism of the capability for immorality of communities and nation states relative to individuals. In such a reading of Niebuhr, his understanding of politics conforms to a kind of situated-self ideal or an anti-humanist tendency that ascribes either a historical or social set of affirmative ties. In such a reading, those ties bind individual beliefs and freedoms in a supererogatory manner. For Niebuhr, I argue that this communitarian ideal remains problematic because it ascribes political importance to social and historical contingencies not for the sake of individual decision-making, but rather for the sake of diminishing or redirecting the will-to-power in what he would see as naïve channels. For Niebuhr, this formulation is an unrealistic caveat for human behavior because it requires unreasonable expectations of individuals. More often than not, a society for Niebuhr merely expresses its strongest wills, whether it is purportedly pluralistic in nature or not. Any attempt to redirect such ascendant wills in the best cases leads to experiences of ironic paradox, but more often for Niebuhr, it leads to instances of widespread hypocrisy.

Republican theories of social structure are no better for Niebuhr because they utilize major elements of communitarian ideals and then diminish them further with the constraint of tacit consent. Not only do strong wills crowd out politically dispossessed voices in Niebuhr's understanding of a political theory that values republicanism above all else in strong communities, but combined with the notion of tacit consent, such wills also bully marginal voices to affirm them as complicit in matters of corruption or injustice. For Niebuhr, this kind of behavior mixes the worst, contractual aspect of mainstream theories of liberalism with the oppressive structure of prioritizing entrenched

interests of a community over dissenting voices that could offer valuable political insight.

Reinhold Niebuhr's political realism is highly skeptical of communitarian solutions to political problems. If ascendant strains of liberal thought tend toward selfishness, then communities encourage making that solipsism public and manipulative. Niebuhr laments that common humanity is only recognizable generally “only in the uncommon and unique marks of a tribal 'we group,' which therefore come to be the basis of all parochial—or more recently, 'national'—communities in which the dignity of man is respected and rights are acknowledged and enforced.”⁶⁹ Rather than living a more cosmopolitan life that embraces a universal humanity, Niebuhr claims that people lacking obvious tribal signals of race, language, or culture, are “treated brutally as if they were not part a common human race.”⁷⁰ Every fence a community builds comes with a foreign side that inspires contempt. In short, communities as the measure of political life in and of themselves barely take us beyond the Hobbesian war of all against all. Belonging is always fraught with caveats and the veiled threat of dismissal. Communities are enclaves against brutality, but they do not make their residents any less brutal in their thoughts. Furthermore, they do not for Niebuhr cultivate a positive ethic of reciprocity inasmuch as they discourage harm, so long as leadership and customs are observed without the expression of dissent. For Niebuhr, “our success in world politics necessitates a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream, and a recognition of the values and virtues which enter into history in unpredictable ways.”⁷¹ Locking the doors to the monastery keeps invaders out, but it does not give a positive social identity to those

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 90-91

⁷⁰ Ibid. 90-91

⁷¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1952). 79

who have sequestered themselves within its walls. Simply acknowledging and affirming an individual position as a particular member of a community does not provide a meaningful and intelligent claim that individuals can sincerely adopt in the face of ever competing will-to-power claims. Too often such communities seek to affirm their endurance in unrealistic ways that deny their impermanence. They thereby discourage people from experiencing their radical contingency with authenticity, and make difficult all of the positional experiences and reflections that can follow.

After explaining how communities do more to create an out-group mentality than they do to solidify the ideals and plans of an in-group, Niebuhr then considers where a branch of philosophy first addressed the common concerns of humanity. He therefore turns his attention to Stoic sages, but then chides them for their naivete of the historic prejudices a community can imprint upon its individual members in their transnational relationships. In Niebuhr's view, not all prejudice is self-aware, even among particularly intelligent and analytical minds. Even in very magnanimous cases, nationalism tends to be a competing value that overwhelms positive identities that a community might provide. Those who defy nationalism may end up like Niebuhr's friend, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with an affirmation of the possibility of justice, but from within the context of such an awful place of injustice that rattled his moral sensibilities and furthermore costs him his life when he sought to alter his circumstances in an attempt on Hitler's life. The criticism Niebuhr presents against communitarian ideals is something that Adam Smith echoed in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, primarily the notion that we may intellectually express a universal sympathy to people far removed from our local or

national communities, but that we care disproportionately about our own suffering relative to that of someone outside of a local or national community, or even relative to those who share our community but remain physically or affectively distant from us. Smith provides a pessimistic treatment of casual empathy, arguing that an observer after a hypothetical, far-off earthquake, “when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquility as if no such accident had happened.”⁷² When we emphasize such a dividing line of family, community, or nation in our political lives, we face the constant temptation to utilize political difference with others for acts of calculated domination. Beyond these concerns, Niebuhr considers that communitarian ideals have a tendency to devolve into primitive magic, what he calls, “a kind of crude science which seeks to bend natural and cosmic forces to the human will.”⁷³ Confirmation biases for Niebuhr may come to define political ontology in dangerous ways. While we have heretofore discussed this problem with regard to individuals, it takes on a social narrative beyond the personal one in a political community. This process is particularly true in specific communities that seek to defend themselves from the harshness of the world, or worse, augment that harshness for others relative to their own experiences.

If we grant that tribal communities are effectively defense mechanisms against the cruelty of other groups of people, rather than intrinsically a positive social order, we can look deeper into Niebuhr's claims about how problematic communitarian ideals become

⁷² Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Prometheus Books. Amherst, New York. (2000). 193

⁷³ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 73

if we promote them as ascendant, normative goals for public life. Toward understanding how communitarian ideals critique contractarian ideals, I will now closely analyze Niebuhr's political and ethical realism concerning how individuals and communities differ. Subsequently, I will provide specific examples of communitarian arguments and highlight how those critiques of atomistic liberalism differ from Niebuhr's own particular critique of that same matter.

Niebuhr provides a nuanced and insightful discussion of tribalism and community, as distinguished from liberal political claims, in his discussion of prophecy and politics found in *Beyond Tragedy*. The role of the dispossessed political prophet as an existential conduit for social criticism in an ethic of humility is one I shall consider in detail. Although at this point in his thinking Niebuhr has somewhat abandoned his early socialism found in his understanding of a bifurcated society, he arguably still views political relationships as most salient when they occur between a powerful class or person in relation to a dispossessed class or an alienated individual. As he saw ideologies in this manner, so too did he see the competing claims of an individual vs. the larger political community. In Niebuhr's account of prophecy, he considers a given person not wholly divested of pride, but nevertheless expressive of enough legitimate concern for a community's well-being that he or she is willing to voice dissent in the face of severe personal hardship when that need arises. Such people rarely want to lead a community of their own accord. For Niebuhr, persons of such rare prophetic vision must endure misguided leaders, their sycophants, and easily mislead followers as the constituent components of a given political community. Niebuhrian prophetic, positional leaders

emphasize themselves first and foremost as willful expressions of Niebuhr's anxious politics. This understanding of community is the context for the relevant passage from *Beyond Tragedy* that I wish to consider below.

The central discussion here revolves around one individual who stands in conflict with his community, and the value of the ethical individual that becomes evident as one that Niebuhr embraces. *Beyond Tragedy* is largely a collection of sermons, but it is nevertheless structured in such a way as to convey a particular argument regarding the positional reflection of Niebuhr's political ontology. Niebuhr draws from his religious tradition, the first book of Kings. The king of Israel must decide whether to make an alliance with the king of Judah. The king of Judah desires assurance of their victory in battle and the king of Israel provides 400 prophets to reassure the king of Judah with their astrology, soothsaying, and divination. These 400 prophets agree unanimously regarding the outcome of a joint battle against a third party, Ramoth-Gilead. The king of Judah remains incredulous regarding the success of the alliance. He therefore requests a more authentic, less sensational prophet who is not an eager sycophant. The king of Israel reluctantly summons a man called Micaiah, who had prophesied against the king's fortune in the past. Micaiah acquiesced to the cheerful portents of the other 400 prophets. Because he is supposedly wiser or known to be more contrary than the previous participants, the king of Israel reprimands Micaiah for this diffident action, which seems out of character for him. Micaiah then points out that he has taught the king a lesson via a kind of pedagogy of indirection. He demonstrated to the king that everyone else was simply conforming to the king's will, and that what appears to be a community is actually

a kind of oligarchy or even a tyranny. Micaiah is subsequently imprisoned for his rude dissent, but his instructional point was made no less valid as a result of that judgment. We see here also that the catalyst for positional reflection need not inhabit a privileged space. Importantly for Niebuhr, following the Hebraic tradition, a prophet in contentious politics stands under her or his own judgment. I reiterate this point further in my discussion of Bonhoeffer elsewhere.

More familiar and immediate parallels spring to mind. The Stoic sage Socrates at his apologia, Thucydides's debate of whether Athens should ally with Corinth or Corcyra, and the subsequent Athenian appeal to fortune and divine favor in the later phases of the Peloponnesian war. In this story Niebuhr provides, prior to the so-called quarrel between Athens and Jerusalem in the history of intellectual thought, we see a narrative from religious life that paints the virtuous outsider as antithetical to the livelihood of a community. Niebuhr contrasts here what we might see as the rationality of nature with the contingency of nature as virtues of Jerusalem and Athens, respectively “the idea of the rationality of nature, which the western tradition draws from Greek thought, and the equally necessary idea of contingency in nature, which is drawn from the Christian idea of Creation.”⁷⁴ Still this particular story of the mischievous, creative prophet highlights an ancient account where perhaps this duality was more intuitively understood than it is today. While John Dewey and Niebuhr may have fought in a debate between the political orders of ancient Athens and Jerusalem, in this passage in the book of first Kings, ancient Jerusalem looks very much like some conceptions of ancient Athens.

In the face of an oppressive community that casts out one of its wisest members,

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1952). 119

“No cultural force, whether science, religion, or philosophy can ever be the prostitute of a particular cause, if it is only that.”⁷⁵ Specifically, “Sometimes the king is merely a symbol of such a community and articulates its pride. Sometimes the king has his own pride at the expense of the community... Against such pressure the prophet can set no force but his own courage.”⁷⁶ Years later, Niebuhr would see this form of dissent when his friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, plotted against Hitler, and thereby forfeited his life. In other words, this instance of prophecy is a kind of political insight for Niebuhr, with regard to how individuals relate to communities from self-critical experiences. Bonhoeffer was not self-righteous, but he still sought to kill Hitler as something that would make Germany more relatively just. He did not justify the conspiracy as something beyond reproach or judgment, but nor did his humility prevent him from acting. With such extreme dissent, Niebuhr's view of communities is therefore one that underscores their fractured nature, despite the presentation or the ideal of a more unified demeanor.

Discerning a means of expressing dissent is critical in such cases as the aforementioned one of Micaiah. Niebuhr therefore does not see a communitarian conception of Augustinian citizenship as a positive ideal. This reservation is his major point of departure from Augustine on matters of community. There is no emulation of the heavenly city on earth because many people will necessarily exist beyond its scope and its affirmations, regardless of whoever decides to set those parameters. It is in part for this reason that I consider Niebuhr's understanding of politics primarily as a liberal one,

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 79

⁷⁶ Ibid.83-84

despite his long-standing critiques of traditional liberal ideology as a deeply flawed inheritance of the Enlightenment. Instead, Niebuhr's theory more closely resembles one where individual persons affirm their own value with the caveat of their selfishness and respective positions, inasmuch as they can acknowledge those constraints. This expression is much closer to Habermas's deliberative discourse than it is Rawls's political liberalism, but with some important differences that I discuss in my reflections on Habermas. It suffices to say that an ethic of humility in deliberative politics is an important facilitator of political action and expression for Niebuhr that other liberal strains of thought have ignored often in favor of contractarian language.

Having given some account of Niebuhr's theoretical model of political dissent from communities, we should consider some of the practical cases of unfair and contentious social structures of community that he disdains. In practical terms, Niebuhr experiences the particular social struggles of his lifetime as the Cold War, race and gender relations in the United States, and the horrors of the Holocaust. For his understanding, each source of conflict expresses an instance in which privileged leaders of communities crowd out minority voices with sanctions of warfare, dispossession, or death. Niebuhr's own criteria for judgment of harsh community-driven political ontology is nevertheless more generalizable: "The real crime of any minority group is that it diverges from the dominant type; most of the accusations leveled at this groups are rationalizations of prejudice aroused by this divergence."⁷⁷ While Niebuhr here was discussing race relations in the United States, his claims appear transferable to other considerations of

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 140

what the strict demarcation belonging to a given community often entails. We can extrapolate these struggles for their analogous circumstances today, which in America take the additional form of struggles for gay, lesbian, and transgender rights in on questions of marriage recognition, and on matters of non-discrimination in housing or workplace environments. More broadly, such groups as religious and ethnic minorities and women still struggle for basic political tolerance as individuals in many states and political microcosms. Clearly, we can also read this critique as one that discounts Burkean prejudice as necessarily some received wisdom of the ages. Such wisdom too easily commingles with self-flattering bigotry for Niebuhr's liking. Revelation for Niebuhr serves to correct behavior through dialectical reproach, not reaffirm existing institutions through instrumental rationalizations.

We can express Niebuhrian abstract critiques of communitarian social theory in terms of specific examples, in a manner that I utilized for understanding differences from contractarian liberalism. Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel offer significant context for how Niebuhr's critique functions within a larger framework of communitarian political thought. I will analyze these particular authors as respective representatives more broadly of communitarian politics in relation and contrast to Niebuhr's own understanding of what the measure of a political community is and should be, given the qualifications of Niebuhr's pragmatic political realism, which takes individuals seriously as deliberative participants.

The closing of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* paints a very grim picture of human societies and capabilities of people as individuals within those societies. He laments,

“What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”⁷⁸ What horrors have brought him to this scathing and cloistered anxiety? In arguing against the Enlightenment and for a kind of Aristotelian concept of virtue in the face of Nietzschean will-to-power, “*either* one must follow through the aspirations and the collapse of the different versions of the Enlightenment proper until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic *or* one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place.”⁷⁹ He goes on to articulate that there is no third alternative, particularly for moral theories that rest on the bases of Hume, Kant, and Mill. MacIntyre's call to virtue ethics in the service of a community as a bastion of human reciprocity in the face of a cruel world carves out a kind of self-exception for positional power that Niebuhr would surely reject. Even within monastery walls, the politics of extreme self-interest continue unabated, until the community reflects its strongest and possibly most negative expressions of personal aggrandizement. To continue the Benedictine metaphor: the gossip, secrets, and excesses of the corrupt monks in Umberto Eco's medieval period novel, *The Name of the Rose*, come to mind.

Elsewhere, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre goes through great pains to argue that face-to-face personal relationships are essentially different from infusing the politics of the state into local communities. What is most relevant to this discussion is a

78 MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana. (1981, 2002). 263

79 MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana. (1981, 2002). 118

notion which he terms the communitarian mistake. He calls for comparative analysis of historically and geographically diverse communities of small scale, presumably to avoid the kind of national-level problems I have highlighted. MacIntyre argues that dependent and often unequal social relationships form the basis for self-respect, and that even the most capable members of a given society learn from its frailest members. Per MacIntyre, he concerns himself with the notion, "...if my ironic detachment is genuine and not mere pretense, it involves me putting in question not only my communal allegiances, but even what I have taken to be my self-knowledge."⁸⁰ He attempts to account for positional difference in a way that the original position supposedly does not, yet he is mistaken about the basic power structure of communities that I outlined from Niebuhr earlier. MacIntyre takes an idyllic view of ancient city-states and far off farms, "the politics of such communities, when they are at their best or are at least moving in the right direction, is not a politics of competing interests in the way in which the politics of the modern state is."⁸¹ He goes on to argue that competition can be limited through a somewhat egalitarian distributive justice within a small community, but dangerously for Niebuhr, argues that, "trying to live by Utopian standards is not Utopian, although it does involve a rejection of the economic goals of advanced capitalism."⁸² This material dialectic is problematic in Niebuhr's understanding of community, where will-to-power drives materialistic concerns, not the other way around as MacIntyre seems to see it. In other words, any attempt to ameliorate selfishness through subsidiarity creates the potential for little fiefdoms. This idea does little to address the underlying psychological problems that

80 MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need Virtues*. Carus Publishing Company. Peru, Illinois. (1999). 152-153

81 MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana. (1981, 2002). 144

82 Ibid. 145

make possible radical social inequalities, it merely changes their scope of reference.

MacIntyre's understanding of the notion of habituated ethics is also of importance to my argument, but it is not directly related to questions of community. I therefore address it elsewhere in my consideration of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.

Michael Sandel poses another communitarian critique to the contractarian project that is more narrow in focus than that of MacIntyre. It is more in line with the analytical tradition, explicitly as direct response to Rawls's own theory of justice. Within *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel highlights the difficulty of self-awareness in Rawls's original position, "The secret to the original position... lies not in what they *do* there but rather in what they *apprehend* there. What matters is not what they choose but what they see, not what they decide but what they discover. What goes on in the original position is not a contract after all, but the coming to self-awareness of an intersubjective being."⁸³ A Niebuhrian ethic would agree that the original position is more of an intellectual apprehension than it is an activity, but for a different justification than the one that Sandel provides. Here we should remember the Niebuhrian critique of the original position as an ahistorical thought exercise. It is a given from a Niebuhrian viewpoint that the original position does not constitute an active experience outside of self-reflection within the context of a specific, bounded community. The distinction between Niebuhr's community and Sandel's community is as follows. Chiefly, where Sandel sees a "constitutional conception" in lieu of a voluntary association, Niebuhr would question the overall utility of seeing a self with many facets in relation to the perceptions of others as

⁸³ Sandel, Michael. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney. (1982, 1989). 132

a valuable in and of itself, for aforementioned concerns of overly instrumental reason and the ever-present will-to-power. That is, it is not simply our ties to others and to a particular place or time that inform our social standing and attitudes. Moreover, our intersubjective identities are not as completely self-aware as Sandel affirms in a moment of discovery. They change with time and new experiences, hence the importance of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility as a constant reaffirmation toward the end of creating new social possibilities in reaction to new forms of political stress. We cannot have a single moment of discovery because we have multiple incomplete encounters where we agree to behavioral norms with others throughout our lives. Each social interaction and uncertain outcome presents us with a new experience to tweak our apprehension of the self-reflective critique of Rawls's original position. This dynamic political imagination is less definite than either contractarian or communitarian schools of thought espouse.

With regard to republican political theories, I have stated that I believe they are similar enough to communitarian theories of political order for Niebuhr's sake to fall under the purview of this chapter. With the example of Philip Pettit, in his major work, *Republicanism*, we see that he considers non-domination and non-interference as paramount communitarian goods upon which he builds his republican theory of government. For Pettit, the problem of liberalism of the Rawlsian kind is that “the language of non-interference does not reach beyond the sector of opinion and interest with which it was in the first place associated.”⁸⁴ This is a capacious and insightful criticism, not unlike that of Sandel. Pettit goes on to explain the self-serving nature of a Lockean shelter for entrenched interests, who have long linked themselves with the

84 Pettit, Philip. *Republicanism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford and New York. (1997). 132

Lockean fruit of industrial capitalism. “They could neglect the fact that in holding up such freedom as the supreme ideal, therefore, they were denying women and workers a language in which they could protest at the insecurity, the need for strategy, and the lack of status that went with their particular social location.”⁸⁵ Pettit's aim is to bring a transcendent definition of freedom as non-domination to people of diverse and unequal social positions. For Niebuhr, the problem with this rationale is the antagonistic nature of political differences that a particular ideology of neatly categorized and defined terms ultimately neglects. For Niebuhr, a concept like non-domination becomes an impossible ideal that collapses under its own weight. Non-domination does little for those with sufficiently diminished political capital. Political resentment in such cases as Pettit highlighted fosters repeated encounters of distrust and undermines the republican ideal as unrealistic. At most, we should aspire to less domination, or reasonably allocated and acknowledged domination under the auspices of imperfect leaders. We can work toward a more perfect conception of non-domination in political life but should not aspire to a unqualified perfect conception of that same goal. Even in cases of radical revolution, the over-zealousness of the newly empowered class of people, for Niebuhr, is too great a risk. Civil society simply will not function for Niebuhr as efficiently as Pettit envisions. There is further reason that Niebuhr distrusts republican ideals. Niebuhr further would be skeptical of the notion of non-domination as a universal normative measure of freedom because it historically has served socially dominant interests.

For Pettit, the enforcement mechanism of this society is an informal kind of legal sanction, a civil society of unwritten rules that serve to codify positive law as a

85 Pettit, Philip. *Republicanism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford and New York. (1997). 132

behavioral norm. Pettit carefully distinguishes this definition of enforcement from compliance and obedience.⁸⁶ The problem with this justification is that it requires a type of communitarian reciprocity of the kind most close to the one Niebuhr envisions in his radical critique of that tradition. More critically, republicanism for Niebuhr is a kind of emergent phenomenon, which does not necessarily maintain a universality in its respect of rights for individual citizens. Much in the same way Niebuhr would consider it naïve to look at Supreme Court appointees as apolitical actors, individual rights contingent upon the constitution of a community reflects too much bias of their leaders or of a narrow time-frame to serve as a politically viable ideology.

In short, the positive liberties that republicans envision do not necessarily materialize in many cases because there are insufficient incentives for people who inhabit powerful social positions to take them as serious. Habermas summarizes in *The Inclusion of the Other* the deliberative discourse criticism of republicanism, which is a similar criticism to that which Niebuhr makes. "...it is too idealistic in that it makes the democratic process dependent on the virtues of citizens devoted to the public weal. For politics is not concerned in the first place with questions of ethical self-understanding. The mistake of the republican view consists in an ethical foreshortening of political discourse."⁸⁷ In contradistinction, a deliberative discourse theory of socialization does not discount the embedded lives of individuals in communities. It can urge citizens to pursue self-reflection of the kind we discover in a Niebuhrian ethic of humility without discounting the priority of Niebuhr's political realism. Deliberative politics resist the

⁸⁶ Pettit, Philip. *Republicanism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford and New York. (1997). 249

⁸⁷ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Inclusion of the Other*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. (1998). 244

legalism of the republicanism found in the works of authors like Philip Pettit or James Fleming. Instead, Habermas advocates deliberative political theory, “that regards the political system neither as the peak nor the center, nor even as the structuring model of society, but as just *one* action system among others.”⁸⁸ These other systems include economic engines, communities of religious and secular thought, and more banal apolitical social networks, which Niebuhr does not discount in his political thinking. Experiences of a participatory social life, formal and informal, therefore help bolster a more general apprehension of deliberative democracy. My interpretation of Niebuhr ultimately comes close to Habermas in some ways because of this similar treatment of public space. I differ from Habermas's view in that I more strongly advocate for the importance of informal political life that can strengthen the breadth of participation in deliberative politics, sharing concerns of such critics of Habermas as Iris Marion Young and Diana Mutz. The different perspective of Niebuhr's ethic of political humility is a pragmatic and workable means of accounting for other social systems. Such an ethic can serve in concert with Habermas's deliberative democratic theory because both prioritize an understanding of people who continually inhabit different social experiences.

In the wake of the criticisms I have leveled against communitarian and republican arguments, I shall now close this chapter with a further presentation of Niebuhr's critiques of communitarianism. For Niebuhr, hypocrisy is the tribute that immorality pays to morality at the national level.⁸⁹ With regard to communitarian association and patriotism, “The social reality, comprehended in the existence of a nation, is too large to make a

88 Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion*. (Polity Press. 2008). 252

89 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 95

vivid impression upon the imagination of the citizen.” But at times of crisis, when communitarian fervor is most acute, “at such a time the nation's claim to uniqueness also comes in sharpest conflict with the generally accepted impression that the nation is the incarnation of universal values. This conflict can be resolved only by deception.”⁹⁰ In other words, the value of associational life, as defined in terms of a communitarian or republican understanding of social obligation, necessitates a priority of some soft nationalism as a good over the right of a supposedly shared and universal valuation of what is right. Such experiences of delusion inhibit a more authentic expression of interest or care from any given particular social perspective. In thus diminishing individual capacity, we may encounter a problem after the manner of the 400 to one juxtaposition that I suggested in this chapter, wherein conformation of patriotic sentiment undermines instances of authentic perceptions of political goods.

Implicit in my focus on the contrast of the 400 to one story of prophetic vision is an endorsement of individual conscience and liberty in the face of extreme oppression. Experiencing critical self-evaluations of one's political community frees one to consider other citizens or non-citizens in a candid and direct relationship without a communitarian filter. To summarize points in this chapter, I draw again from Niebuhr, “Government is thus at once the source of order and the root of injustice in a community. Thus the external peace between communities is marred by competitive strife and the internal peace by class domination.”⁹¹ Both intranational and international politics for Niebuhr are extremely agonistic in nature. This struggle for Niebuhr inevitably creates militaristic

⁹⁰ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960) 96

⁹¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 220

and oligarchic states that an individual should never fully trust, regardless of transparency and goodwill. Niebuhr's solution is not anarchism, but instead a radical kind of scrutiny that comes with a heightened self-awareness. While I have sought to determine that Niebuhr does not fit neatly into contractarian liberalism or communitarian ideals, I do believe he is important as a proponent of creative freethinking that values a dialectical encounter between individuals and societies.

If Niebuhr is not a traditional liberal, nor a communitarian, nor a republican, what political ethos remains for him? Ostensibly his political theory is one that values autonomous humans with a meticulous awareness of the specific societies in which they live, for the sake of workable communication and practical goals. Therefore, I will consider in subsequent chapters limitations of his understanding of social thought. Specifically, I will address critiques of his personal psychology for individual capabilities, consider to what degree his theological arguments hamper their own political scope, highlight alternative Christian and Augustinian viewpoints to Niebuhr's political claims that challenge his theology, and acknowledge to what degree Niebuhr's Christian eschatology diminishes the relevance of his arguments as a political realist who sets normative goals for historically contextualized persons. Each of these criticisms offers further insights into Niebuhr's political order and necessitates rebuttal or consideration as a valuable alternative tradition. If we are to arrive at a well-honed and specified articulation of how Niebuhr understands creative individuality within his heavily contextualized and contingent view of politics, we must acknowledge his intellectual critics to which I now turn.

Chapter 6: Too Much Humility? Self-Limiting Capabilities and Political Outsiders

A criticism may be levied that a Niebuhrian emphasis on humility in the face of pride, given the marginal experiences that bind and frame many lives, hampers an endorsement of Niebuhr as someone who promotes the freethinking instrumental to deliberative politics. In other words, one might contest that Niebuhr is so anti-humanist that historical circumstance and the self-deception in everyday self-presentation undermine diverse, expressive political positions simply because of a skeptical or pessimistic attitude about politics in general. If Niebuhr's call to humility only speaks to people in positions of power, what recommendations can we affirm beyond humility to speak to respective experiences of weakness or disenfranchisement? An exaggerated, pietistic kind of humility certainly permits abusers to trample on the personal values of dispossessed persons. In other words, a facile conception of humility might be seen as an implicit endorsement of the most negative aspects of any given status quo. For Niebuhr's ethic of humility to be relevant, we must distinguish his ideas from these. In attempting to circumvent the kind of Burkean prejudice that Niebuhr questions, an ethic of humility might inadvertently force that kind of social structure onto weaker individuals, if they take claims of humility seriously for public deliberation while those in positions of power ignore such pleas. It is no small coincidence that Niebuhr developed his political theory during the time Schattschneider wrote *The Semisovereign People* and C. Wright Mills wrote *The Power Elite*. Agonism and class were major, enduring themes of Niebuhr's works. This criticism of humility as narrow and diminishing is an important one and therefore deserves a strong consideration of its merits. Toward that end, Rebekah L.

Miles's *The Bonds of Freedom Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* is an important text that I shall discuss among others after I precisely distinguish Niebuhr's conception of humility from more mundane forms of humility.

Niebuhr's relational political ontology between citizens and their leaders provides important information for rebutting this concern. In another analogy from *Beyond Tragedy*, equally useful as the one from the previous chapter, Niebuhr draws upon a political distinction between king David and king Solomon. He does so to highlight the relative advantages and disadvantages of being a particular kind of political leader. David is a warrior king who marks his leadership on the battlefield. Solomon is a king whose wisdom resides in a temple. Niebuhr draws a distinction between the warrior's ark of David and the stately temple of Solomon. Niebuhr disdains, "the gods of the ark" that make warfare more terrible because they imbue self-righteousness to combatants. The god of each particular nation is also usually the creator of the world, as Niebuhr observes in this story. Such religious antagonism between nations for Niebuhr is absurd and abhorrent. King David's victories on the battlefield come with what Niebuhr sees as self-righteousness, which David encounters in what is a hotly contested and physically expansive political space.

Niebuhr goes on to identify the problem of privileged positions in deliberative politics, using David as his example. "How can a man involved in the conflicts of life build a temple to a God who transcends those conflicts and who judges the sins involved in our highest values?"⁹² The implicit answer that Niebuhr provides is that there is no acceptable, justifiable way to do so. Absolution is for personal transgressions, not for

⁹² Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 56

public whitewashing of unsavory killing in warfare. One solution is an appeal to novelty and youth of David's son as both a means of continuity. Such continuity still presents a insufficient break from the bloody past for Niebuhr's understanding of a government favorable to relative justice. This, in Niebuhr's view, is an unsatisfactory solution because David's son is not necessarily a morally superior person, but simply an untested and young one. Niebuhr argues the temple was built not by Solomon's goodness, but David's "uneasy conscience."⁹³ Solomon's temple then rests on something like a Platonic noble lie or a Machiavellian political virtue, wherein great leaders take a stain of criminality or dishonesty upon themselves for the sake of their communities. This kind of self-sacrificing politics Niebuhr sees merely as an excuse to act however a leader desires, as the larger political community is in Niebuhr's understanding capable of less moral efficacy than a well-trained individual of privileged experiences. Niebuhr is not agreeable to this unconscionable kind of politics, finding it very susceptible to will-to-power claimants and their overbearing authority. At the very least, the personal lineage is evidence of David's continued mark on the political order that follows him.

Niebuhr therefore distinguishes between priestly religion and prophetic religion as a more substantive break than we see in the story of David and Solomon, the latter of which offers a more capacious experience of participation in deliberative politics. The former kind of religion he associates with the trappings of ritual and other-worldliness, the latter with the discernment of truth for living together in the world as it is. According to David Bains, regarding Niebuhr's distinction of these kinds of religious expression, "He feared, however, the emphasis on the liturgical and institutional structures that

⁹³ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 60

defined the church would lead to a lack of self-criticism and transform the prophetic challenge of Protestantism into a religion of priestly satisfaction.”⁹⁴ Whether on the battlefield or in the temple, David and Solomon largely belong to the former category. A particular example of the latter we see in the aforementioned consideration of the 400 prophets vs. the singular prophet from the previous chapter. On that account, parallels to that story should signify a more substantive break than the one between David and Solomon. Taken together, these two stories highlight Niebuhr's sincere criticism of ascendant manifestations of political corruption and institutional venues of power. Legitimate political criticism is not merely formal or procedural for Niebuhr. It is stark in its candor and may have serious, personal repercussions. The Solomons of the world who inherit or augment the cruelties of an inegalitarian power structure or nation-state do not understand Niebuhrian humility. That humility is not a passive acceptance of political problems or diffidence in the face of oppression. Instead, it takes seriously the problem of how to properly orient one's self toward unfair political realities toward the end of reforming those realities to make a more relational experience of political deliberation possible. If powerful leaders tend not to embrace this kind of humility, what hope is there of changing their minds? And what hope is there for those on the margins of society?

With the framework of priestly sanctification vs. prophetic religion in mind, we can further parse individual political participation as it pertains to Niebuhr. While Niebuhr frequently analyzes the Hebraic prophetic tradition over modes of politics that

⁹⁴ Bains, David R. “Conduits of Faith: Reinhold Niebuhr's Liturgical Thought” *Church History*. Volume 73. No. 1 (March 2004). 168-194

solely pertain to Christianity, not all prophetic participation in politics is of equal value. He argues in *The Self and the Dramas of History*, “Christianity has been inferior to Hebraic prophetism in failing to observe a proper distance between the divine and the human, and not heeding prophetic warning.”⁹⁵ Within *Beyond Tragedy*, Niebuhr in detail distinguishes the notion of a true prophet vs. a false prophet, and the personal constraints that the former must endure. Niebuhr's political ontology cautions against people who use their personal confirmation biases of ideology or circumstance to impose their will-to-power on other people. “We will mistake our own dreams for the word of God. Sometimes sloth will tempt us to make a superficial analysis of the moral and social facts with which we are dealing; sometimes pride will tempt us to speak as if we had already attained or were already made perfect... The prophet himself stands under the judgment which he preaches. If he does not know that, he is a false prophet.”⁹⁶ Problematically, does the humility that Niebuhr seeks in political leadership go so far that it undercuts its own authority? How do we ensure that this kind of self-limiting behavior does not result in a radical kind of political disempowerment? This example of living under self-judgment is not a call to wither from political life, but can be thought of in radical and even violent, revolutionary ways. The acknowledgment of Bonhoeffer that his plot against Hitler transgresses the warning of living and dying by the sword is a very active category of political action that would certainly fit this intellectual framework, as I shall discuss in analysis of Niebuhr's conception of creative political action.

Niebuhr's true prophet sounds like a Stoic sage, but critically, the judgment he

⁹⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Self and the Dramas of History*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1955. 103

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 109-110

stands under is not only in his or her mind, but also with regard to the contingencies and prejudices in which the prophet is enmeshed. Niebuhr's archetype of a true prophet is as ironic as the Socrates of the Platonic *Apologia*, but is probably more self-aware of the structural order of social demands, which tend to dominate and punish individual preferences and personal interests when those come into conflict with elite-driven viewpoints. In this manner, people outside of power structures can use creative political forces in a Niebuhrian way, though admittedly at great personal risks and with no guarantees of a particular desired outcome of a more expansive or more fair conception of justice. This kind of courage is rare, but Niebuhr would argue it is available to most of us, if rarely utilized, given its potentially unpleasant consequences.

Apart from the examples of contrasting individual ethics of participation found in *Beyond Tragedy*, there are further examples of how Niebuhrian humility is not self-effacing to the point of absolute powerlessness. Self-doubt is a means of overcoming self-deception, not a tool for political paralysis of self-conscious actors. Elsewhere Niebuhr professes skepticism of, “the conflict of various schools and classes of idealists, who profess different ideals but exhibit a common conviction that their own ideals are perfect.”⁹⁷ What constraint prevents Niebuhr's own understanding of self-effacing political participation from falling into this category? If Niebuhr is to retain the mantle of a political realist, we must further consider this question and potential criticism that arises from such implications that Niebuhr's humility can become a tool of political will-to-power.

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1960). 152

Beyond the example in narrative that I previously have emphasized, we can assuage concerns of being overly self-effacing in a number of ways. First, there are practical tests of political action. Niebuhr contrasts two political narratives, “There was a difference between John Woolman, the Quaker saint, who felt the sorrows of the slaves as his own, and some pious slave-owner who used the Scripture to justify slavery and to obscure the indecency of one man owning another man as property.”⁹⁸ This kind of distinction contrasts an ascendant ideal of a humanitarian love with one that is the lip service that immorality pays to morality for the sake of a public facade of instrumental, hollow piety. Using the aforementioned distinction between priestly and prophetic religion, we see here that even Niebuhr's own Scripture can become its own kind of reflexive ritual, justifying the will-to-power of a false prophet. For Niebuhr, love is the law of life, but his understanding of love is less naïve than that of Augustine or other subsequent advocates of kinds of Augustinian citizenship because of his greater emphasis on the capacity for self-doubt and his distrust of institutional churches.

Niebuhr's understanding of humility is certainly religious in nature, but retains political salience beyond his particular tradition because his understanding offers insight into how we can produce a more nuanced and self-aware mode of deliberative discourse. “Religion is at one and the same time, humility before the absolute and self-assertion in terms of the absolute. Naturalists, who accuse religion of either too much pride or of too abject self-depreciation, fail to understand this paradox of the religious life.”⁹⁹ The ambiguity in the commingling of humility and self-affirmation is not something to

98 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 258

99 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 64

discount in this context, as it saves Niebuhr's central political concept from radical self-abnegation. Our moral claims may not be perfect, but in an acknowledgment of their imperfections, we can evade the paralysis of inaction and affirm them as valuable expressions for a specific claim at a specific time. I contend that this view need not only apply to religious citizens who have a particular theological concept of the absolute. On this matter, I differ from Niebuhr because I believe that a deliberative form of naturalism with a similar political realism to his own can understand this paradox and account for it if it shares a view of Niebuhrian irony in an ethical humility found in self-reflection.

To summarize, in Niebuhr's understanding, not all religious views are of equal merit. More central than the religious vs. secular divide is the divide of realism vs. idealism. Of religious idealists, Niebuhr cautions against the temptation to indifferentism in too radical an interpretation of sinfulness and total depravity. "Religion, in short, may be indifferent toward or despair of the politico-moral problem not only when it makes an unequivocal contrast between the divine and the human but when, remaining on the human and moral level, it adopts a rigorous perfectionism in stating its moral ideal."¹⁰⁰ This skepticism in the face of religious idealism very much disputes the notion that aspirational religiosity undercuts a humble Niebuhrian ethic of political action, because that kind of overly-pious humility is not Niebuhr's understanding of true humility. Humility as a means of achieving some reflexive perfectionism for Niebuhr indicates an overall lack of critical self-evaluation, rather than a legitimate concern that questions its own biases. To remain morally relevant and intelligible to a wide audience, Niebuhr's humility avoids despair and sentimentality inasmuch as he deems such a middle ground

100 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 76

possible.

Niebuhr's understanding of skepticism of overarching social projects, secular or religious, primarily speaks against entrenched interests of any ascendent ideology. He argues that when moral idealism exceeds an imagination that can be accurate and realistic, we develop social norms that improperly rationalize social inequalities through overt selfishness or an escapist abnegation of the real world. Niebuhr goes so far as to explicitly emphasize, "it is always possible for social privilege to justify itself, at least in its own eyes, in terms of the social function which it renders."¹⁰¹ In such instances, it becomes clear that Niebuhr's emphasis on humility only matters in cases where one has or seeks some express political power, either to mitigate an entrenched interest, or as a revolutionary force. While it is important to acknowledge the will-to-power in everyday life, Niebuhr does clearly not understand his call to humility as an invective against people who are struggling to establish themselves in a fundamental and self-affirming manner. His consistent, if qualified, embrace of victims of oppression throughout his career, his nuanced understanding of prophetic vs. priestly claims, and his skepticism that even prophetic claims are subject to personal abuse all serve to underscore this point.

Furthermore, Niebuhr argues against any particular form of injustice as a necessary evil, even as he is wary of idealistic and utopian understandings of politics. Using radical language Niebuhr claims of privileged classes, "those who hold special privileges in society are naturally unmindful of the effects of inequality upon the underprivileged, they have a natural complacency toward injustice. Every effort to disturb the peace, which incorporates the injustice, will therefore seem to them to spring

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 117

from unjustified malcontent.”¹⁰² Here Niebuhr makes a strong claim that his understanding of humility does not completely diminish a capacity to understand and defend an individually affirmed just cause that pertains to a person or category of people who face some form of political disenfranchisement. Some kind of deliberative discourse must underscore the rightfulness of a Niebuhrian political action, especially to mitigate violent politics that Niebuhr sees as a sometimes if infrequent legitimate alternative.

Niebuhr goes so far as to say that violence in class struggle is not politically immoral. He identifies two errors that those who oppose all political violence often display. “The one error is the belief that violence is a natural and inevitable expression of ill-will, and non-violence of good-will, and that violence is therefore intrinsically evil and non-violence intrinsically good.” “The second error by which violence comes to be regarded as unethical in intrinsic terms is due to an uncritical identification of traditionalised instrumental values with intrinsic moral values.”¹⁰³ Instead, Niebuhr seeks to constantly reevaluate moral claims and question their justification on a continual basis. Political deliberation for Niebuhr occurs on an ongoing basis and must question platitudes of intrasocial non-violence. We must constantly ask the question: whose interest does a particular instance of violence or peace serve at the moment? In other words, we must remember that Niebuhrian humility is not simply a reflexive mechanism of self-doubt, but a prelude to acting within our historical and personal constraints. It is an ethic that necessarily orients itself with regard to other people, social structures, and political circumstances. Niebuhr provides the caveat that in most instances, nonviolence

102 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1932, 1960). 129

103 Ibid. 171-173

is preferable in a good political order, but maintains that violence resistance is understandable if not often justifiable. For all the anti-humanist tendencies a reader may see in Niebuhr's work, he is not a writer that dehumanizes individuals or their perspectives, even in radical forms of political dissent, when such forms themselves might pose ethical concerns.

How then, do we reconcile Niebuhr's emphasis of humility in the face of human pride with his subsequent radical acceptance of violence as an acceptable and righteous tool of social change? Niebuhr sought to contextualize theoretical and general claims with bounded circumstance and personal contingency whenever possible. It is worth noting that Niebuhr was an advocate of political violence in the time and place in which he lived, under his specific conditions, particularly against the Nazis. According to Daniel Malotky, "Pacifism is discarded as otherworldly, since Niebuhr demonstrates that actual pacifist strategies fail to extricate us from the web of violence in a sinful world. Once this failure is recognized, moral deliberation is cut off from the non-violent ideal."¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr therefore did support inter-state violence as a necessary evil in the face of a greater evil. He abandoned pacifism in World War II for this reason. At times, that position included delivering the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh during heavy surface-to-air artillery fire. Niebuhr understood the ability of a powerful elite to manipulate a semblance of nonviolence to oppress and disempower particular categories of people across lines of statehood or class, and to paint opposition as overbearing or barbarous. He understood this concretely with regard to race and politics in America, as I have

¹⁰⁴ Malotky, Daniel James. "Reinhold Niebuhr's Paradox: Groundwork for Social Responsibility" *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 31 No. 1 (Spring 2003) 101-123

highlighted earlier. Questions of Niebuhr and feminism I shall address soon. Beyond those contexts, we can look at other critical views of Niebuhr to see whether other theories of politics with a Christian aspect think Niebuhr made a self-exception for his own norm of humility. Toward that goal, Langdon Gilkey offers insight into Niebuhr's psychology and highlights themes that may not be apparent upon a cursory reading of Niebuhr's works.

Gilkey presents creaturely anxiety as a central component of Niebuhr's understanding of social ontology. For Niebuhr, anxiety is a precondition to the moral transgressions that pride facilitates. Anxieties of personal livelihood and well-being are the anxieties of which we are most ever-presently aware. On the other hand, Gilkey argues, "We are probably less aware of anxieties about our truth and our goodness; but the effects of these anxieties in dogmatism and intolerance on the one hand and self-righteous disapproval and condemnation of the other are just as evident and just as harmful."¹⁰⁵ Even in cases where we seek to limit our selfishness, our anxieties compel us to such an extent that Niebuhr does not consider radical self-debasement to be a common political concern, outside of a radical kind of asceticism that escapes reality. For Niebuhr, even a radical ascetic refusal is its own kind of will-to-power, and therefore ultimately not a kind of disempowerment, but rather a self-absorbed sublimation of self-regard. There is for Niebuhr no complete refusal of creaturely anxiety that can provide an enduring effect on personal ego. Even in cases of extreme alienation, Niebuhr expects people to hold on to resentment and find personal strength in their affective experiences. In an essay entitled "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History," Gilkey explains that we

¹⁰⁵ Gilkey, Langdon. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2001). 105

cannot expect some perfectible system of justice in the face of disaffected persons, but rather “No matter how 'just' a social structure may become...it can only approximate, it can never be or achieve a community of love.”¹⁰⁶ This is not an admonishment against attempting to cultivate positive social change, but to be realistic about shortcomings potential in great shifts in economic systems. Niebuhr, for example, was an advocate of universal healthcare. He would nevertheless probably have favored Accountable Care Organizations for the reasonable and radical efficiencies they bring ensuring preventative care for extremely ill persons on Medicare and Medicaid. Lofty goals are fine, so long as incentives exist to help people utilize social programs in ways that maximize outcomes. We must never act naively, but must also not be so paralyzed by anxiety to take no major political action at all.

Another analogy of Niebuhr's gives us a deeper understanding of his political theory with regard to the relationship between the experience he defines as sin and its correspondent anxiety. Niebuhr's understanding of the tower of Babel is a useful example for expressing this connection between these two concepts. “Every language is irrational both in comparison with other languages and in terms of its own development. That any language is what it is, that it has this rather than that peculiarity of grammar and syntax, can be understood only if we retrace the history of a whole culture through a thousand vicissitudes.”¹⁰⁷ The imperfect ability of different languages to properly provide a universal, rational capacity for discourse undermines the strong desire to formulate and express conceptions of anxieties in terms of a mutually intelligible communicative

106 Gilkey, Langdon. “Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History” *The Journal of Religion*. Volume 54. No. 4. (October 1974). 360-386

107 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 42

rationality. This imperfection does not stop us from using ordinal placeholders for our thoughts to process and share ideas across diverse languages, but it does make us doubtful of our ability to communicate intelligibly with other people except on a continual and ever self-refining basis. Hence, the connection between expressive anxiety and the imperfection of contextualizing individual political experiences are mutually reinforcing experiences for Niebuhr, though the former is a precondition for the latter.¹⁰⁸ This limitation is not one to be overcome with perfectible modeling of behavior, but should instead aim for precise wording and continual contextualization of its definitive, constitutional elements. Toward that end, ordinal preferences must be individually defined when expressed. Aggregating such preferences is to do injustice to terminology that may not be mutually intelligible between two speakers. Thus each individual's anxious experience is personal and relevant for pragmatic bargaining when that individual brings that sentiment to a public space.

Anxiety then, for Niebuhr, is not primarily a paralyzing force that people develop along with humility, but instead an ontological experience of social lives. We can mitigate this experience with proper descriptive context, but we cannot erase it. In attempting to diminish its capacity for defining differences between individuals, we would then see a manipulation of anxieties for the sake of limiting some voices in favor of others. This manipulation is exactly what Niebuhr wants to avoid with his deliberative explanation of relational expressions of political anxiety.

A feminist critique of Niebuhr is another conduit through which we might

¹⁰⁸ Ahn, Il-sup. *Position and Responsibility: Jürgen Habermas, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Co-Reconstruction of the Positional Imperative*. Pickwick Publications. Eugene, Oregon. (2009). 164

question the appropriateness of his ethic of humility. Rebekah Miles's *The Bonds of Freedom* distinguishes feminist criticisms of Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of Christian and political realism. Miles seeks to put Reinhold Niebuhr, Rosemary Ruether, and Sharon Welch in dialogue with one another regarding their divergent understandings of political realism and what it entails. For Niebuhr the emphasis is Christian realism, for Ruether it is naturalistic moral realism, and for Welch it is relativist political realism. Miles seeks to address concerns that Niebuhr's understanding of humility amounts to little more than an idealization of self-sacrifice on the cross, which is therefore problematic for feminist thought. It is problematic because Niebuhr does not understand motherhood in an feminist manner that affirms a positive role for the biological experiences that many women inhabit.¹⁰⁹ It is also problematic because such an ethic of self-sacrifice, if we understand Niebuhr's humility as such, amounts to little more than a hagiographical appeal to martyrdom. Given these constraints, Miles seeks to reconstruct an understanding of Niebuhr's political realism that can address these negative perceptions of his politics.

Miles concludes that her feminist Christian realism is largely Niebuhrian but more expansive and explicable in its capacity to describe relational human experiences. In other words, she sets out to address the criticisms that Niebuhr's politics fundamentally are too atomistic or too ignorant of the lives that women inhabit. Miles's feminist Christian realism differs from Niebuhr's own, "Whereas Niebuhr's focus on the cross led him to elevate the norm of self-sacrificial love, the turn to a broader understanding of divine presence offers other norms as well... such as justice, liberation, and creative and

¹⁰⁹ Miles, Rebekah L. *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2001. 49

sustaining love. This shift not only responds to feminist criticisms but also reflects more fully both the biblical witness and a broader range of human experiences.”¹¹⁰ To discover this evaluation, she adds Ruether's emphasis on boundedness and Welch's emphasis on finite communities. I find these themes already present in Niebuhr's own writings, though perhaps comparatively inchoate, so I find Miles's reconstruction both convincing and useful for addressing feminist critiques of a Niebuhrian ethic of political humility. In addressing such critiques, we can underscore the inclusiveness of positional reflection as a pragmatic ethic developed from Niebuhr's writings, even if his lived experience of gender is an archaic or outmoded one for our contemporary considerations.

I have given an account of Niebuhrian political ontology of a self-affirming but somewhat heterodox understanding of political liberalism, which moreover affirms a particular kind of deliberative practice that depends upon an ethic of humility borne of contingency, anxiety, and contemplative reflection upon such constraints for authentic self-presentation. It is now incumbent for me to address critics close to Niebuhr's own theological tradition. In consideration of their rebuttals, we can see what aspects of Niebuhrian ethics need updating in light of changing times, and what elements withstand cultural and intellectual shifts in Christian ethics in recent decades. For example, one criticism of my understanding of Niebuhr is that alternative understandings of Augustinian political ethics, or of Christian public theology more general, are superior to the ethic of humility that I have identified in Niebuhr's thought. Alternatively, it may be that Niebuhr's theology is too imperative to translate beyond the ethos of a particular

110 Miles, Rebekah L. *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2001. 153-154

religious community. In the next chapter I shall provide specific consideration to such claims and offer rebuttal and acknowledgment where relevant. Major theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including others who have delivered Gifford Lectures on natural theology as Niebuhr did, constitute the focus of this discussion.

Chapter 7: Alternative Augustinian Ethics of Citizenship and Other Critics

Now that we have a relatively well-defined understanding of Niebuhr's political theory as it relates to other broad strains of political thought, I wish to offer a consideration of Niebuhr's political theology in contrast to other claims of political theology, which express different emphases and expressions for human communicative norms. Primarily the traditions under consideration are other political expressions of Augustinian thought, concurrent and subsequent political theologies that run distinct from Niebuhr's own, and secular perspectives that still maintain the importance of religious traditions in public life. I will therefore address these secular critics of Niebuhr who might disavow some of his political claims for being too religious to provide general utility to a secular polity, but whose political conclusions with regard to humility parallel those of Niebuhr. With each of these groups in mind, their criticisms of Niebuhr will be widely divergent among themselves, but nevertheless differ substantially from the core of Niebuhr's ethics that I have presented heretofore. More specifically, strains of critical thought here include divergent understandings of Augustinian and Christian ethics, postmodern affirmations of a Christian worldview as being intelligible as a narrative only to its community of believers, and secular considerations of religion in public spaces that focus on political pragmatism.

Niebuhr's political theory should be understood not only ontologically from its emphasis on humility, contingency, and anxiety, but also with regard to human creativity as a dialectical experience between individuals and within polities. For Niebuhr, human freedom in the context of personal contingency makes possible various forms of self-

realization, “vanity, the will-to-power, and the desire for a full selfhood, which must include always relations to neighbors and communities.”¹¹¹ Simultaneously, Niebuhr emphasizes, human freedom makes possible for a given person “infinite variety of relationships within his community, from social dependence to social creativity... an intricate relation of self-seeking and self-giving.”¹¹² In other words, Niebuhr's account of fulfillment of the self and the potential for human creativity as a positive social expression makes his expression of an Augustinian or Christian realist ethic accommodating for positive social goods and creative, social outcomes. Niebuhr's creative realism in this context is more productive and aspirational than it might otherwise suggest at a cursory glance. Elsewhere I delineate specific potential manifestations of what form a Niebuhrian ethic of humility might take with regard to Niebuhr's historical placement and our contemporary lives. Here, my primary task is distinguishing and defending the theoretical framework of creative realism for a Niebuhrian ethic of humility from alternative strains of thought.

Robin Lovin explains Niebuhr's account of human freedom in historical and political terms that make the scope of Niebuhr's understanding of political humility more intelligible beyond Niebuhr's own particular religious community. Clarifying Niebuhr's own concerns about miscommunication and mixed-motives that inform individual strategic choices, Lovin argues the goal of Christian realism is to:

“pursue the unlimited possibilities for moral achievement not in a single, grand scheme that purports to indicate the one better way beyond our present divisions and conflict, but in a multiplicity of experiments that test the limits of existing social virtues and give

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Man's Nature and His Communities*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. (1965, 2012). 106

¹¹² *Ibid.* 106

specificity and clarity to possibilities that are present only dimly glimpsed in the languages of myth. Properly understood, the Christian Realists claim that there are no limits to our moral achievements within history is not an invitation to pride, but to politics.”¹¹³

Here Lovin expresses the pragmatic aspect of Niebuhr's realism that commingles with his creative expressions of rational freedom to define a workable expression of liberal politics. This particular formulation takes seriously questions of social ties and personal contingencies in ways not usually offered in contractarian, communitarian, and republican traditions. Niebuhr understands that incremental expansions of justice resolve the dissonance of an ironic situation when a consensus of individuals forms within a political community. Niebuhr's understanding of realism is not thin or cynical, but rather, according to Lovin, “is not to talk about realistic limits, but to expand political imagination... Traditions that have been suppressed and kept out of the political discourse need to be explored, and new ways of leading and sharing power must be tried.”¹¹⁴ That is to say, one can have progressive theories and dreams of social order in a creative capacity for justice, beyond current experiences and expectations, because an important part of human experience is the capacity for planning and imagination, at least when that capacity is not utopian or otherwise misappropriated.

It should be clear at this point that I am somewhat sympathetic to accounts of Niebuhr that Gilkey, Lovin, and Ahn provide, at least in their general understanding of Niebuhr as a thinker who emphasizes a humble ethic of creativity from anxious and contingent political perspectives. Other advocates of Augustinian or Christian thought more broadly in public life have a different understanding of political liberalism that

¹¹³ Lovin, Robin. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*. (Cambridge University Press. 1995, 1997). 157

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 246

comparatively devalues Niebuhr's perspective of political life. These criticisms see Niebuhr's political realism and his understanding of creativity from human contingency as either an inferior form of Augustinianism, as the wrong kind of Christian ethics more generally, or as a kind of political pragmatism too narrow in its scope. Subsequently, I shall address some of their respective concerns and their divergent arguments that they put forth to suggest that Niebuhr's politics are in various ways outmoded.

Eric Gregory divides his account of Augustinian ethics into three broad categories. Specifically, these categories include realist ethics that emphasize hope, contractarian ethics that emphasize Rawlsian justice, and his own conception of civil liberalism that emphasizes love. According to Gregory, Robert Markus, Edmund Santurri, and Gregory himself are respective representatives of each Augustinian ethic in this formulation. It should be noted that Gregory identifies the tradition of Robert Markus as the same realist ethic of hope that he would say Niebuhr shares. Having addressed Rawls in relation to Augustinian ethics at length elsewhere, the realist and civil liberalism schools of Augustinian politics are the perspectives of primary focus in this context to draw a direct comparison between Niebuhr's concepts and those of Gregory.

Gregory uses Robert Markus's conception of realism as an analogue for that of Niebuhr. He criticizes this strain of thought that he has constructed, "There is no explicit treatment of love's relation to political engagement or hope. There is no explicit treatment of the dangers of love... as with Niebuhr, love seems forever deferred to the eschatological community."¹¹⁵ Gregory here emphasizes that Niebuhr's ethics

¹¹⁵ Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2008). 95

supposedly prioritize hope over love as an expressive force that makes possible human creativity. With regard to Gregory's other comment about deference to eschatology, I shall devote an entire chapter in consideration of Niebuhr's eschatology. For now, it suffices to say that Gregory sees Niebuhr primarily as pragmatic thinker who emphasizes social hope, not one who embraces a positive, relational ethic of reciprocity modeled on a qualified formulation of Augustinian agape or charity. Later, Gregory condemns both realist eschatological deference and Rawlsian liberalism that seeks to make love merely private. Both these forms of marginalization, he argues, “tend to valorize sin by highlighting this aspect of Augustine's thought as the most significant contribution of Augustinianism for liberal politics.”¹¹⁶ In contrast, Gregory purports his ethic of love as a meaningful and significant alternative to these categories of thinking about Augustinian political virtues. He is careful to say that his understanding of love is not a strict thematic replacement for sin and that love is not an idealistic replacement for various themes of Augustinian thought. He discourages us from replacing reason with emotion, or from replacing active social concern with intentional motivation.¹¹⁷ With this argument in mind, we should closely scrutinize the way love functions for Gregory in political life to glean from its nuanced framework whether his understanding of liberalism differs significantly from the realism that he critiques.

I shall offer my response to Gregory's claims soon, but first I want to emphasize the manner in which Gregory seeks to distinguish his own ethic of love from his understanding of Niebuhr's realism that I have just highlighted. Gregory claims at the

¹¹⁶ Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2008). 242

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 245.

core of his argument in contrast to his realist and Rawlsian taxonomies of political virtue, “Love must be trained and ordered or, better yet, always training and ordering. One's loves form one's character, and the loves of a society form its character as well.”¹¹⁸ Here the argument sounds somewhat like an Aristotelian conception of virtue ethics. If we take this ethic as a form of habituation significantly different from Niebuhr's self-critical humility, this construction of training love raises concerns that Niebuhr had for ascetic principles that I addressed earlier as a manifestation of anxiety, pride, or other-worldliness. Gregory is careful to clarify later that his understanding of an Augustinian ethic of love is not wholly under the auspices of deontological or ascetic rules. In Gregory's understanding of Augustine, “His emphasis on motivation is bound up with his conception of morality as formation in the creativity of charity, not slavish obedience to rules or the maximization of good outcomes. This does not mean, however, that the loving person in this life does not care about consistency in appeals to justice or the norms that govern social practices.”¹¹⁹ In my reading of this explanation, Gregory's understanding of an ethic of love is one that is subject to personal and historical contingencies that constrain freedom. Political practice here appears not as a disciplined habituation, but instead quite close to a political ethic of humility in political discourse as a positive expression of rational freedom that Niebuhr envisions. Focusing too much on habituation brings us closer to the kind of Aristotelian argument against Augustine in Alasdair MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* as I shall discuss later. Gregory's ethic is not radically ascetic and therefore is probably closer to a Niebuhrian

¹¹⁸ Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2008). 262

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 313

ethic of humility than he might realize.

I would argue that Gregory's understanding of Augustinian love in politics presupposes and necessitates Niebuhr's conception of human anxiety and selfishness. Gregory even goes so far as to claim that "Augustine was acutely aware of the human tendency to justify prideful domination in the name of love. Humility, then, is the preeminent virtue that attaches to proper love."¹²⁰ The distinction then, for Gregory from Niebuhr, is not a difference of virtues, but a priority of virtues. In this explicit emphasis of pride and humility, Gregory comes very close to the realist school of Augustine from which he wishes to distinguish his own understanding of Augustine. With regard to friendship and love, Gregory further affirms this connection to a Niebuhrian framework of personal contingency in the notion, "Augustine provides an early discussion on the proper relationship between cosmopolitanism and particularism as it relates to citizenship."¹²¹ Given these constraining parallels, it would be better then to consider Gregory's understanding of charity and civil liberalism as one expression of love among a potential myriad of creative formulations that the realist conception of Augustinian politics makes possible. In these parallels, we see that there is no particular emphasis on hopefulness as the primary virtue of political life. Indeed, hope marginally figures into Niebuhr's conception of politics in comparison to social contingency or human capabilities, categories that Gregory has also highlighted. The notion that Niebuhr treated hope as "an anesthetic" in the view of Mathewes that I discussed earlier is probably relevant here as a distinction worth making from Gregory's taxonomy of

120 Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2008). 324

121 Ibid. 354

Niebuhr.

In distinction from Gregory's views of Niebuhr, historian John Patrick Diggins offers an affirmation of why Niebuhr would scrutinize and qualify Eric Gregory's claims of the political priority of love. He cites from Niebuhr's review of Erich Fromm's *Man for Himself in Christianity and Society* (Spring 1948). "An insecure impoverished self is not made more secure by the admonition to be concerned for itself; for an excessive concern for its insecurity is the cause of its impoverishment. Nor is it made secure by the admonition to love others because that is precisely what it cannot do because of its anxiety about itself."¹²² In other words, in his skepticism of an admonition to love others, Niebuhr was aware of the criticism of the realist category of Augustinian ethics that Gregory later describes. Apart from that category though, rather than an ethic grounded grossly in hope, Niebuhr saw a particular set of ontological and social preconditions under which proper and relational loves can find grounds for personal affirmation and expression.

The context in which Diggins cites Niebuhr's hesitations about love as an ascendant political virtue is the civil rights movement. Diggins observes that Niebuhr probably would not have made a hopeful speech like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did, that he had seen the mountaintop and the coming of the glory of the Lord. Niebuhr certainly held negative views of the capacity for radical social change, but always considered such change possible if not probable. Given the realities of the success of the civil rights movement, we should be mindful of this context and discuss to what degree Niebuhr's political realism might not accurately reflect reality on its own terms. The purpose here

¹²² Diggins, John Patrick. *Why Niebuhr Now?* The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2011). 93

is to reaffirm, against Gregory's criticism, humility and its correspondent love as ascendant over hope in Niebuhr's thought. For now, it suffices to say that ironic recognition of social injustices and subsequent social anamnesis toward greater relative justice can occur in radical and seemingly impossible shifts, as per the historic successes of the civil rights movement. Niebuhr's understanding of realism must account for that possibility as an ostensible political reality. I will return to this topic in my discussion of hope in eschatology elsewhere. For now, I return to contrasting Niebuhr with alternative conceptions of religion in public life.

Charles Mathewes provides us with another distinctive account of Augustinian public life, but the political etiology for his argument is not to give a general account of Augustine in relation to one formulation of liberalism or another as was the case with many authors I have addressed. Alternatively, Mathewes affirms his understanding of political life primarily as an authentic and candid expression of his personal Christian beliefs. He affirms these politics toward the end of accounting what political norms his values endorse from his particular perspective. In this regard, he is more direct than many who seek to justify more universal political claims to bind everyone in a society who may not fully acknowledge their partial perspectives. His work's title, *A Theology of Public Life*, hints at this explicitly situated argument. Mathewes identifies liberal, communitarian, and republican theories and their shortcomings with a style and emphasis somewhat similar to that which I have discussed in this text. Critical of contemporary liberal theory, "Self-professed 'liberal' political theorists have sacrificed the breadth of pre-academic political thought for a narrow range of puzzles that are rigorously

articulable in their own analytic framework. In so doing they set a too comfortable task for thinkers and play a problematically restrictive role in public deliberation.”¹²³ This problem articulates an effective similarity to the one I have highlighted elsewhere, though my language places a greater emphasis on the Niebuhrian aspects of this theoretical shortcoming, concerning such traits as anxiety, pride, and self-perception. While slightly more sympathetic to communitarian and republican ideals, Mathewes exhibits reservations regarding those as well. Mathewes similarly distrusts communitarian understandings of political life on grounds that they tend to instrumentalize religious life and experiences in a habitual way. Mathewes expresses a further concern, “The 'communitarian' inclusion of religion in civil society often tends toward the monotheism of the state — a nationalist ideology that makes religion serve some immanent end.”¹²⁴ Religion then as a presentation of public virtue becomes a conditioning mechanism, not a personal value or experience for creative individualism that makes social claims. This relegated role is one that Mathewes finds unconscionable and repressive, even in comparison to the way in which liberalism sometimes tends to push religious concerns further into private life. Civic republicanism fares only slightly better. Using a different intellectual framework but a similar rationale, Mathewes compares the problems of republicanism to those of communitarianism as I did earlier. “Many republicans want commitment to the republic – the immanent 'public thing' – to be as absolute as any communitarian would. Indeed, individual republicans must be finally absolutely committed to the greatness of their *patria*... they must love their city more than their

123 Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 152

124 Ibid. 175

souls.”¹²⁵ This Machiavellian virtue further instrumentalizes not only religious expressions but all moral motivations into a subsuming understanding of the state as the bearer and conduit of each individual conscience. Mathewes goes on to express skepticism of what is, in his understanding, an apocalyptic tone that is as problematic for republican thought. Such a tone underscores an ahistorical fantasy as bad as those found in state of nature contractarian liberalism. With regard to republicans, “They are always tempted to presume that now, this time, at last, they have built a political order that will finally escape the Polybian cycle of birth in virtue, growth into greatness and glory, and decay through luxury into slavery and collapse. But because this cycle is identical with history itself, they thereby become enemies of history itself, warriors against time, hoping that history has reached its end in their republic, and trying to convince themselves that it really has.”¹²⁶ The parallel to Niebuhrian critiques of ahistorical formulations of politics and also to his particular understanding of pragmatic politics is evident. These critiques of these major traditions run parallel to the ones that I have developed in earlier chapters, though Mathewes's essential goal of his work differs from my own in that his is a personal affirmation of bringing faith to public life, whereas my concern is a reconstruction of civil liberalism through a developed theory of how to make deliberative politics more welcoming toward individual participation. To better understand how I differ from Mathewes, our common concern of the limitations of these traditions is important background information for my discussion of Mathewes's understanding of politics in relation to my own Niebuhrian view.

125 Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 179

126 Ibid.179

Mathewes offers an emphasis on particularity that is appealing and arguably Niebuhrian in nature. He defines his Augustinian ethic of charity, “How can one revitalize one's own beliefs? Rather than attempting to do it in language that looks to have pretensions to philosophical neutrality, Christians should employ the unapologetically local and particular dialect of Christian faith, particularly the importance of humility due to our own sinfulness and God's inherent transcendence.”¹²⁷ The problem with this particularity is that it does not address the limitations of consensus that a particular Christian view might face in the context of a plural and secular society. Mathewes echoes almost completely the primary concerns of Niebuhrian political life, but his articulation comes from a very different perspective on religious experience than the one that I inhabit. Does this difference matter for the sake of candid political affirmations? I think, if we were to judge solely by this context, it would not matter, so long as I can affirm my more secular affirmation of Niebuhrian politics as a pragmatic, creative liberalism from a perspective of equal respect. In short, I believe secular perspectives of political life can also abandon their philosophical neutrality and embrace an ethic of humility for its instrumental and relational value, regardless of appeals to divine transcendence.

More problematically for Niebuhrian politics, Mathewes emphasizes an understanding of charity that is not only agapic but also kenotic, that is, toward the end of a religious self-emptying for the sake of a divine fulfillment of love. In my perspective, this kenotic challenge is a political impossibility because there is no perfectible path of humility. Here Mathewes differs from my Niebuhrian ethic and comes closer to the kind

127 Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 281

of other-regarding Rawlsian experiment that he supposedly rejects. Asking us to diminish personal perspectives is similar to the Rawlsian original position. While Mathewes permits individual recognition and receptivity to personalized goals in a thought experiment than parallels that of Rawls, he does so with some distinctive alternations: “attending to the other as another, someone genuinely other than oneself, not just a screen upon which to project one's own agenda, nor simply a bit player in a story fundamentally about oneself. This loving engagement shows us that we are deceiving ourselves about the extent to which we care about ourselves; in fact, we care about others far more than we let ourselves believe.”¹²⁸ While I do not object strongly to the decisive caveats that Mathewes articulates here against the instrumental nature of Rawls's veil of ignorance, I do object to the notion that we can properly estimate in an ordinal way our particular ethic of care in attachment to others to a degree that is so self-abnegating. My understanding of politics therefore is more of an agonistic one than that which Mathewes defends, and probably less hopeful for the transformational value of love as a political virtue. While Mathewes's understanding of how political love functions has significant merit, we must be careful not to abandon ourselves in capricious self-satisfaction of our magnanimity in our endeavors.

To conclude my discussion of Charles Mathewes, I shall present his critiques of agonistic politics and then offer my rebuttal to these critiques drawn from my Niebuhrian framework. Mathewes perceives agonism as objectionable on grounds that “this very focus on accommodating conflict, and including all possible viewpoints, is premised on a prior exclusion of any positions that would imagine politics in radically different terms.

128 Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 291

Agonism is what happens when academic elites recognize the contestability of their positions but still hold on to the hope that there can be an essentially neutral and descriptive political philosophy within which such contestations can occur.”¹²⁹ Here I think that a potentially progressive understanding of an ethic of political humility does not make such radical exclusions traditional liberal ideas are wont to endorse in various conceptions of repressive tolerance. Indeed, bigotry and prejudice are endemic to free speech and extant under any reasonable, descriptive understanding of political discourse. Through the ironic process of self-recognition over time, individuals can come to dissolve such prejudices over time, though of course this process has no guarantee. A very limited hope expresses Niebuhr's conception of possibility in history. Affording a constrained understanding of reciprocity to fellow human beings allows for more self-doubt and hence more practicability than simply having a positive regard for others and perceiving that habituation as evidence of meaningful kenotic behavior as Mathewes terms it. Such kenotic behavior might fall prey to the whims of Niebuhrian sinfulness as an expression of individual will-to-power.

Mathewes continues his argument against political agonism, including its deliberative forms, on grounds that it merely gives a public face to private preferences, wherein conflict provides a veneer of civility to placate social appearances. “It realizes that public engagement can help move us towards a deeper and more capacious authenticity. But essentially it fails because it cannot see beyond the surface of public life: agonism is too trusting of public life's self-expression.”¹³⁰ This is not a confutation

129 Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 270

130 Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 273-274

of the reality of agonistic social life, but a disdain of it. Social life is inherently agonistic even when our self-expressions are imperfect. It just tends toward the favor of institutionalized power structures in such circumstances. This agonism nevertheless gives us the capacity to make choices that affect other people regardless of our individual position. We can do so under the auspices of empathy and love, or not, as we see fit. I therefore argue that to deny the agonism inherent in an Augustinian ethic of politics is to deny the context for what makes a political ethic of love valuable in the first place.

I do not see the reason for the mutual exclusivity of personally, internally contested political life with an ethic of positional creativity that prioritizes humility as a requisite context for reciprocity. Niebuhr largely expresses the kind of conflicted social order with which Mathewes disagrees, but he does so from a perspective of distrust of public self-expression as an unqualified good. Ever the purveyor of paradox, Niebuhr invites us a radically capacious ethic of political participation that acknowledges the social reality of conflict. Beyond personal ontological perspectives in our divergent moral narratives, it is in this emphasis of conflict that I significantly diverge from Charles Mathewes's understanding of Augustinian politics. Much like with Eric Gregory, the priority of virtues that inform political life is a key point of difference and accordingly informs my emphasis on realistic deliberative politics that prioritize humility as its own political virtue over other ethics of charity that emphasize love.

The conception of Christian political life that John Milbank espouses differs more philosophically from Niebuhr than the ones I have previously considered. Gregory offers a useful summary of Milbank's critique of Niebuhrian realism, specifically from

Theology and Social Theory, “For Milbank, much of what passes for Augustinian realism is a collection of cliches dressed up by religious sentiment or a pious mood borrowed from a secularized Christianity... It likes religious language, but it is conceptually atheistic.”¹³¹ Uncharitable interpretations of Niebuhr's understanding of his own faith notwithstanding, Milbank's critique of Niebuhr is nevertheless important to engage as an ontological point of contrast. This criticism certainly could certainly apply to my application of Niebuhr for a wide creative emphasis in deliberative discourse, were I to maintain the priority of Niebuhr's theology for politics. I am not sure that it is fair to categorize Niebuhr's theological understanding of himself in such a harsh way. Regardless, doing so does not diminish the utility of Niebuhr's political realism for other applications such as mine. Toward discussing these potential problems in Niebuhrian ethics as too divergent from orthodox views of Christianity, I will offer an account of what ideas underpin Milbank's criticism of Niebuhr and offer my reply to those concerns.

John Milbank is primarily concerned with a general rejection of modernity on grounds that the ontology of a particular religious claim, such as a creed, is intelligible solely to its adherents and that deviations from that signification represent at best a heterodox viewpoint or at worst a heretical one. This is a wider rejection of modernity than Niebuhr's distrust of disruptive forces of Enlightenment politics and its heirs. Milbank seeks to insulate particular orthodox claims of his religion from the kind of cultural or political appropriation that he believes muddles and redefines Christian theology toward violent and unethical ends. Primarily, Milbank sees ontological

131 Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 2008). 127

categories that diminish the credential or testimonial account of a religious life as causes for confusion. One example of this would be a dichotomous divide of faith and reason. This understanding has its premise in a very different kind of Augustinian experience, a reactionary one that emphasizes the Neoplatonist aspects of Augustine's thought. Specifically, Milbank's theology of creeds reaffirms a kind of religious semiotics found in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, wherein signs in proper orientation to their objects describe the kind of Christianity that Milbank espouses in the manner of a semiotic journey. Augustine affirms in book two of *On Christian Doctrine*, "to discuss the subject of signs, I lay down this direction, not to attend to what they are in themselves, but to the fact that they are signs, that is, to what they signify."¹³² Accordingly, I will consider Milbank's understanding of the experience of his particular Christian narrative and the limitations and problems it may pose for Niebuhrian political realism that expands deliberative discourse ethics.

Milbank provides a Christian response to Nietzsche's critique of Enlightenment politics that is quite different than the one that Niebuhr envisions. The ontological violence of the Enlightenment, for Milbank, is not merely an error in its selfish emphasis of disruption over creation as tools of limited rationality, as Niebuhr would put it. Rather, for Milbank, the Enlightenment presents a graver error in the sense that it separates an ascendant meta-narrative of secular ethics to the exclusion of all others, especially over Augustinian love and virtue ethics of classical thought. While I do not share Milbank's understanding of this ontological waywardness to the same degree, this categorization is

¹³² Augustine of Hippo. *The Confessions. The City of God. On Christian Doctrine*. J.F. Shaw, trans. William Benton. Chicago, London, Toronto. (1952). 636

an important framework for considering Milbank's Augustinian politics in contrast to those of Niebuhr. Each author rejects modern claims in very different ways and for different reasons. The most relevant part of Milbank's argument for my purposes is as follows:

“We can, indeed, desire only *simulacra* (and *simulacra* of the other's *simulacra*), but what if the mark of a non-possessive desire was precisely the refusal of the illusion of stepping behind the mirror to find more than a dream-world concealed there? Between the notion of a solipsistic, inventive desire on the one hand, and an always doomed and self-deceptive desire on the other hand, lies the possibility of a desire not betrayed by process and difference.”¹³³

“The non-antagonistic, peaceful mode of life of the city of God is grounded in a particular, historical and 'mythical' narrative, and in an ontology which explicates the beliefs implicit in this narrative. It is in fact the ontological priority of peace over conflict (which is arguably the key theme of his entire thought) that is the principle undergirding Augustine's critique.”¹³⁴

These particular aspects of Milbank's argument present to us an understanding of non-possessive desire. I believe such a desire is generally possible under the ironic understanding of progress that Niebuhr puts forth, but I would argue that the tension between Milbank's inventive and self-deceptive desires is of Niebuhrian origin, given Niebuhr's mechanism of guarding against pride in politics. Balancing such divergent desires should be the task of political life, not looking for some transcendent expression of them beyond discrete and contingent human experiences. Milbank's emphasis on historical contingency is also relevant in this case. The primary difference with relevant ideas of Niebuhr is one of narrative framework. Milbank's break from Enlightenment thought is purportedly one of complete anagnorisis of grand motives and tendencies in

133 Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory*. Blackwell Publishing. (Malden, MA, Oxford, Carlton, 1990, 2006). 325

134 Ibid. 392

history as morally objectionable. Niebuhr's own break is more conditional and, respective of its realism, is more accepting of ontological violence as a framework for bridging gaps between different people. A Niebuhrian ethic then is more historically realistic in the sense that it maintains an observable norm and stresses the insecurity of human psychology. Thus there is none of Milbank's "stepping behind the mirror" for Niebuhr because there is no way of assuring such an alternative narrative is not another selfish, personal construction set up to dominate other persons. This consideration does not relegate Niebuhr's theory to the "always doomed and self-deceptive desire" problem because the process of ironic recognition for Niebuhr escapes this category of tragic fatalism. Milbank posits the notion that, "Justice, in history, remains a contingent possibility: it is not on the agenda for some appointed time, after necessary ages of alienation. But political and liberation theologies subordinate justice to a 'natural' freedom, which emerges partly through a straightforward process of enlightenment... through the 'contradictory' process of dialectical becoming, in which each new stage forward before Utopia is at once a new stage in the release of freedom, and a more absolute degree of its tyrannical exercise."¹³⁵ While these criticisms hold for many such theories, I contest on Niebuhr's behalf that even relative justice is not inevitable, that peaceful dialectical processes are not inevitable, and that utopian ideals are impossible. In short, we can take the possibility of a broader social justice seriously without diminishing the importance of dialectical freedom when we take Niebuhr's formulations of these concepts seriously. Here Milbank paints with too broad a brush and in doing so, lumps Niebuhrian Augustinianism with more narrowly conceived understandings of

¹³⁵ Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory*. Blackwell Publishing. (Malden, MA, Oxford, Carlton, 1990, 2006). 248

liberal politics.

Building upon these distinctions, I wish to argue that we need not necessarily return to classical understandings of virtue ethics as the kind of ethical scrapyard that Milbank underscores, but that through the process of ironic recognition and self-criticism, we can develop an ethic of deliberative discourse that builds greater reciprocity than one that at its foundation emphasizes a huge ontological shift. In fact, this kind of ontological shift denigrates the legitimate claims that individuals make and seek to affirm to other people. Heretical exclusion does little to further an understanding of social theory for those that do not hold a given orthodox view, however that is defined in relation to a particular religious creed or religious self-identification. As Niebuhr argues in *Pious and Secular America*, “It is as rare an achievement for the pious man to be charitable as for the rational man to be 'reasonable.' Both achievements depend upon the recognition of the limited character of each one's vision of the truth.”¹³⁶ For Niebuhr, attempting to get at Milbank's dream world beyond his metaphorical mirror is dangerous because it presents an affective understanding of piety that does not take seriously personal positions of limited and conditional lives. Even the very creeds that Milbank wishes to protect were themselves the result of deliberative historical and political processes and we would do well to remember that particular context in which they arose. Enlightenment categories of thought are therefore not the only decisive point in the history of social thought, and in no cases must we consider any such decisions wholly irrevocable, regardless of their respective narrative frameworks.

Alasdair MacIntyre provides us with an Aristotelian and Thomistic criticism of

¹³⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Pious and Secular America*. New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. (1958). 6

Augustinian ethics in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. He sets them apart roughly in terms of a teleological understanding of intellect for Aristotle and a fatalistic emotivism for Augustine. Yet his understanding of Aristotelian thought does not significantly differ from a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in deliberative discourse ethics to the degree that it utilizes much of the same moral language. MacIntyre argues, “For Aristotle the intellect discovers itself in the actualization of its potentiality, an actualization moved by and towards those objects of knowledge to which the intellect in actualizing itself makes adequate.”¹³⁷ Augustinian politics in contrast relies primarily on encounters with God and people but also, “the mind's discovery of its inabilities and incapacities which are essential to its progress.”¹³⁸ He goes on to highlight the incompatibilities of these two traditions and sides with the Aristotelian tradition because he believes the fusion of the two incompatible traditions led to an incoherent philosophical Enlightenment, and that the Aristotelian perspective is the more rational of the two.

MacIntyre seeks to defend his tradition from genealogical and encyclopaedic understandings of moral discovery. MacIntyre disdains academic neutrality as a “fiction of the encyclopaedist” and also argues that from the perspective of the genealogist that rationality is, “no more than one of the provisional masks worn by those engaged in unmasking the pretensions to rationality of others.”¹³⁹ While Niebuhr would likely fit into MacIntyre's understanding of moral genealogy, we can argue from an Niebuhrian perspective that MacIntyre is too insistent that others share his narrative of truth. Indeed,

137 MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana. (1991, 2008). 109

138 Ibid. 109

139 Ibid. 117

MacIntyre acknowledges how unrealistic his ethical reconstruction is in that “The charge of utopianism, so it must appear, cannot be evaded.”¹⁴⁰ He defends against the charge by questioning “pragmatic realism” that “looks for immediate results” but with a proper understanding of Niebuhr's political realism, we know that there is another way of looking at unlikely social aspirations given a sober and reflective understanding of current behavioral norms and social contingencies. Thus MacIntyre as one of Augustine's greatest critics emulates one of Augustine's heirs in his political conception of creative and imaginative social deliberations. Critics of Niebuhr who represent a particular view of a Christian community comprise other views beyond those I have considered heretofore. With discussions of John Milbank and Alasdair MacIntyre complete, I turn my attention to another major theological critic of Reinhold Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas.

Stanley Hauerwas is a critic of Reinhold Niebuhr who offers insight into why some Christian perspectives consider Niebuhr's political realism to be an imperfect understanding of Christianity, of charity in public discourse, and of natural theology more broadly understood. He criticizes Niebuhr's political realism as being too focused on the individual and as being overly anthropocentric. His religious communitarian criticism requires consideration and rebuttal. Such criticism of Niebuhr primarily comes from Hauerwas's *With the Grain of the Universe*, the book that highlights his Gifford Lectures. In this volume he considers previous lecturers, William James, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Barth in contradistinction. He largely criticizes the political theology of James and Niebuhr while instead looking to Karl Barth as someone who more thoroughly presents a

140 MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana. (1991, 2008). 234

tenable understanding of theology, though he takes issue with the idea of theology as being “natural,” as per the preordained topic of the Gifford lectures, rather than theology as an individual or community expressing its witness to divinity.

In my consideration of Hauerwas's *With the Grain of the Universe*, I argue that Niebuhr's political realism, as an outgrowth of his understanding of theology and its social psychology, provides more broadly tenable political ideals that can speak to both Christians and non-Christians. I also argue that Hauerwas's emphasis on community-driven church witness over such virtues as humility and love merely asserts one kind of ethical habituation over another. It does not, as Hauerwas would like to affirm after the manner of Karl Barth, comprise a more robust theological understanding of public life because it is ultimately communitarian in its exclusive nature. Further, while Hauerwas claims to be undoing what he sees as the damage of the anthropocentric and epistemic pragmatism of James and Niebuhr respectively, his argument is still one that focuses on how expressive human behavior can impart norms of mutual understanding between different people. In short, I argue that Niebuhr does not make religious life radically private, a charge for which Hauerwas criticizes him. Neither does Hauerwas offer a more compelling account of public life in that the examples he offers in his discussion of witness are ultimately as anthropocentric as James's Niebuhr's own political works. To understand Hauerwas's argument about Niebuhr, we must consider Hauerwas's view of him in relation to William James and Karl Barth. Toward that end, I shall provide a brief account of Hauerwas's perspective of each author on his own terms and then address Hauerwas's reflections on the ascendancy of Barth over the others.

Hauerwas's understanding of William James is one that illustrates a progressive understanding of social history. Hauerwas finds concern in his understanding of William James's pragmatism, particularly in the notion that, "James clearly is not making just a descriptive case. He thinks the displacement of Christianity by democracy is a good thing. Moreover, he thinks democracy is not just a social and political arrangement but the very character of the emerging universe."¹⁴¹ This answers the question of why pragmatism should be concerned with individual expression and basic fairness. Hauerwas nevertheless disapproves of this viewpoint as a perspective on natural theology, the subject of the Gifford Lectures, because it privatizes and atomizes individual experiences of religious life. Hauerwas believes this viewpoint to be too sterilizing and too stifling for sincere expressions of religious faith in the form of an experience of personal witness and testament. Drawing on literature concerning American civil religion and Emerson, Hauerwas identifies in the work of Sydney Ahlstrom and Cornel West a perspective wherein, "the only sin is limitation, that as such sin can be overcome, and that it is a beautiful and good thing for sin to exist and to be overcome from this perspective."¹⁴² This viewpoint of Emerson, which provides insight on American civil religion, Hauerwas also identifies with James's own viewpoint. The problem for Hauerwas is that this viewpoint of sin is political and relational between people. It is fundamentally not focused on redemption in in Christian cross or in adoration of the Trinity. Hauerwas is an explicitly doctrinal Christian and therefore has reservations about civil religion supplanting traditional religion. In Hauerwas's view,

141 Hauerwas, Stanley. *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2001. 80

142 Ibid. 81

Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of politics follows closely with that of James, but Karl Barth's does not.

I contend that Niebuhr's politics differ significantly from those of James, whereas Hauerwas sees the critical distinction as one between Niebuhr and Barth. Mirroring the discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre within *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, Hauerwas considers the metaphor for universities in James's *Pragmatism* where James describes a corridor with many doors that represent various theories and modes of thought. Hauerwas writes of how Niebuhr's task is to create a kind of patrol for the corridors of thought that James envisions, "To expose the arbitrary power that pretends to be nonviolent is no easy task. Yet in the name of Christian truth, Reinhold Niebuhr took this task as his life work."¹⁴³ In understanding Hauerwas's view of Niebuhr, we can understand why Hauerwas believes Niebuhr fails at this task of self-criticism in pragmatic political thought, and on what grounds I find disagreement with this perspective.

Much of Hauerwas's discussion of Niebuhr proceeds from the question of whether Niebuhr's political theory ultimately distances itself from Christian theology. Hauerwas believes that Niebuhr's emphasis on political anxiety and human selfishness discounts the doctrine of the Trinity in that Niebuhr concerns himself much more with human psychology of sin than he does with offering even a basic Christian interpretation of the Holy Spirit. He draws upon criticisms of Robert Song and Rachel King who argue that Niebuhr's political psychology does not even require a Unitarian god at its foundation.

¹⁴³ Hauerwas, Stanley. *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2001. 86

He further agrees to a more dire criticism in subsequent paragraphs, “This ethical naturalism leads John Milbank to suggest rightly that Niebuhr's ethics is Stoicism restated in Christian terms.”¹⁴⁴ I address Milbank's concerns directly in my discussion of his own criticism of Niebuhr, but for Hauerwas, they are relevant primarily as background information for another concern, namely that Niebuhr sets himself against institutional religion and the church as a community. Several major concerns regarding Niebuhr arise from this view that Niebuhr's theology is merely a dressed up Stoicism:

“In contrast to James, Niebuhr thought that the great enemies of the moral life are those who seek to be holy...In neither his ethics nor his theology did Niebuhr provide an account of the church...Why go through Niebuhr's verbal gymnastics to save the 'symbols' of Christianity when James can give you everything Niebuhr wanted in a less confusing way?”¹⁴⁵

While my objective admittedly is not as Hauerwas's own of saving Christian symbols, I do believe an important difference distinguishes Niebuhr from James. Specifically, that is an emphasis on a relational identity that is not merely skeptical and self-scrutinizing, but moreover provides an ethical framework for humility as virtue that supersedes pragmatic skepticism. We see this idea adopted in the political theory of Jeffrey Stout, which I discuss in this text. Hauerwas's Barthian alternative to Niebuhr prioritizes religious institutional value as expressive church witness against the self-reflection of Reinhold Niebuhr.

Hauerwas's discussion of Karl Barth provides an account of individual witness as a potentially radical presentation of institutional church doctrine. For Hauerwas, this kind of church witness provides the essential aspect of what Hauerwas considers to be a

¹⁴⁴ Hauerwas, Stanley. *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2001. 133

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 135, 137, 139

proper religious social expression. Hauerwas seeks to present his perspective on this matter in contrast to what he considers to be Niebuhr's disguised Stoicism or Jamesian pragmatism. According to Hauerwas, "For Barth, theology is in the service of the church's witness to God's reconciling and redeeming work in Jesus Christ. If natural theology is to be a necessary feature of theology, it cannot pretend to be more than a part of the witness that is the church."¹⁴⁶ Here Hauerwas emphasizes individual expression of a lived religious experience over the religious institution's semblance. He goes on to emphasize this point elsewhere, "...individuals as witnesses are part of the larger witness of the church, and the church, as this witness, must be visible.....a church may be thoroughly orthodox in its doctrine...but it will cease to be the church if it lacks faithful witnesses."¹⁴⁷ Here Hauerwas identifies church witness is a matter of individuals living out religious experiences in an expressive relational identity that they testify to other people. Hauerwas identifies self-reflected authentic expressions of care for other people that follow from his understanding of theology. He utilizes Pope John Paul II and Dorothy Day as his examples. In my understanding these examples of ethical action do not wholly differ significantly from what Hauerwas attacks in Niebuhr's writings as disguised humanism. Roger Gustavsson takes issue with Hauerwas's emphasis on Christian doctrine as a prerequisite for using Christian ideas in social theory. "For Hauerwas, the Christian understanding of first importance regarding the doctrine of God is the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity...Suppose one thinks it is an expression, out of the language that was available to the ancient church, of a more basic idea. Suppose

¹⁴⁶ Hauerwas, Stanley. *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2001. 146

¹⁴⁷ Hauerwas, Stanley. *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2001. 199

especially one hesitates over the way that basic idea has been turned into a sort of metaphysical claim.”¹⁴⁸ Hauerwas has therefore defined the religious experiences and thoughts of others in an exclusive manner and done so too narrowly. I do not see how this understanding of public life and theology fundamentally differs from that of Niebuhr on matters of socially expressed religious experience. Furthermore I do not see how this understanding differs from the broader, secular political realism found in the ethic of humility that I have identified at length from Niebuhr's writing.

Barth's politics as an expression of his understanding of social theology, I argue below, leave Hauerwas's ideal of church witness as the measure of social religious expression closer to Niebuhr's view of political life than he might like to think.

Hauerwas uses Niebuhrian ethics in his caution against the nation-state as a kind of idolatry. Robin Lovin argues this point, “The case for responsibility must itself be a responsible choice, discerning the risks and possibilities of politics wherever we may find ourselves.”¹⁴⁹ In this understanding, responsible choices are never final, in responsibility there can be such criteria as judgment and proclamation of specific ideas, which Hauerwas values. Nevertheless, Hauerwas feels Niebuhr has lost the capacity for judgment and finds his theology squishy, yet in sharing Hauerwas's reservations about the unmitigated strength of a liberal state, Niebuhr has not lost his judgment, but has enabled Hauerwas to make such a valuation against such ascendent political norms that Hauerwas at times rejects.

Hauerwas highlights that both monastic escapes and acquiescence to secularity are

148 Gustavsson, Roger. “Hauerwas's *With the Grain of the Universe* and the Barthian Outlook” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. Volume 35. No. 1. (March 2007) 25-86

149 Lovin, Robin. “Christian Realism for the 21st Century” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Volume 37. No. 4. (December 2009). 669-682

problematic for both Barth and himself. “Both alternatives are closed to the Christian because each in its own way entails the loss of humility, modesty, and courage that must categorize Christian witness.”¹⁵⁰ This kind of golden mean of reflected action from personal belief that does not overreach or withdraw from life should be familiar to my reader as a theme that Niebuhr considers and endorses. To this I would respond that these ethics are neither exclusive to an understanding of Christian ethics driven by doctrinal witness, nor to Christian ethics more generally. Following the example of Jeffrey Stout, we see how these ethics that Niebuhr purports, which even Karl Barth and Stanley Hauerwas embrace to a point, provide a robust framework for political relationships between individuals and groups of different religious and social backgrounds. We can ascertain in Hauerwas's acknowledgment that religious asceticism or obsequiousness might be the only tenable responses to secularization some readers may accept, “Calling attention to the necessity of witnesses suggests to many people particularly those of a philosophical bent, the end of argument.”¹⁵¹ Hauerwas goes on to argue that in Christianity witness has a long tradition of being an invitation to argument. I argue instead that it is only reasonable to expect people to bring their particular perspectives of their ethical experiences to processes of political decision-making. That is, other experiences of witness apart from specific experiences of Christianity are also valid ones when we consider what ethical live experiences precede political discussions.

The religious experience is a personal one. What matters more from the perspective of institutional relationships, whether inside of a particular church or within a

150 Hauerwas, Stanley. *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology*. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2001. 201-202

151 Ibid. 207

deliberative body, is the degree to which the robustness of ideals like humility, modesty, and courage that Hauerwas identifies can find usefulness in self-situated and relational political identities. This process is not, as Hauerwas might worry, an obdurate kind of Stoic reaction to the world, but rather a capacious structuring of relationships between individuals that ultimately facilitates humility over skepticism. David Novak argues that Hauerwas misrepresents Niebuhr's own view of himself, who saw himself in opposition to strains of Stoicism endemic to natural law arguments that had persisted in the natural theology of the Catholic Church. Novak further provides us with useful insight on this aspect of Niebuhr's theory. "Niebuhr wanted to relate natural law to biblical ideas instead of grounding ethics in specific biblical commandments per se inasmuch as the latter option would limit the subjects of his ethics to those persons who have already accepted in faith the covenant for which they have been elected..."¹⁵² As someone concerned with covenants as an intersection of theology and social theory, Novak argues that not everyone within a particular faith tradition, at least in the context of Christianity and Judaism, understands covenants as rigidly as Hauerwas does.

Edmund Santurri puts it another way, that we should not consider theology as conventional historical Christian community but instead, "...truth or normativity is a function of relation to an ultimate reality that transcends the de facto conventions and practices of any given historical community."¹⁵³ Even if Christian witness is primarily intelligible to those sympathetic to its doctrine, Hauerwas's understanding of personal witness nevertheless exemplifies broader virtues of pragmatic humility in contingent

152 Novak, David. "Defending Niebuhr from Hauerwas" *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 40. No. 2. (June 2012). 281-295

153 Santurri, Edmund N. "The Neo-Barthian Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr" *Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol. 41. No. 3. (September 2013). 541-547

social relationships that largely originate in Niebuhr. I do not think; however, that this acknowledgment subsumes Hauerwas's theory into the charge of disguised humanism that he rejects outright. Rather, this understanding simply means that the notion of an experience of religious witness does not serve a particular formulation of Christian theology as witness to the exclusion of other understandings of theology or other utilities that witness may have with respect to alternative lived experiences more broadly. Such experiences produce convictions that specific people hold deeply and express in their social identities, regardless of how they define divinity or whether they hold a particular doctrinal affirmation. Hauerwas offers strong criticism for Niebuhr, and I have used extensive readings to defend Niebuhr's political views from him. His criticism is similar to that of John Milbank in that both men prioritize Christian communities over individual decision-making. Regardless, each differs to the degree that Hauerwas's rejection of Niebuhr's ideas is not as radical a rejection of modernity itself as it is for John Milbank. To the extent that he utilizes an understanding of positional responsibility to challenge conventional political norms, Stanley Hauerwas utilizes Niebuhrian self-reflection in his own understanding of ethics, even if he misidentifies Niebuhr narrowly as a Stoic. Here we see then the culmination of various Christian alternatives to Niebuhr's political theory. I can now attend to their secular contemporaries for points of distinction.

Having considered major Augustinian and Christian religious traditions of various viewpoints, I now wish to consider how a secular viewpoint somewhat sympathetic to Niebuhr's pragmatism might critique or augment my argument. Jeffrey Stout offers us a detailed account of a pragmatic understanding of politics that respects some forms of

religious claims in political life. In many respects, Stout's work in *Democracy and Tradition* comprises ideas with which I generally agree. His understanding of hope as a conditional social good is a complex one. He compares the kind of Niebuhrian ethic I envision favorably to the pragmatic existentialism of Ralph Ellison, "In the Ellisonian blues, good and evil, powers divine and satanic, are all mixed up both in our social situation and in ourselves and are to be dealt with by means of whatever this-worldly social magic and lyrical coping we can muster. Once Ellison embraced this quasi-religious outlook, he had no choice, on pain of despair, but to locate grounds for hope *in* the social situation itself."¹⁵⁴ Here we see a secular psychology that differs in its ontology from that of Niebuhr, but not in its tone. Stout's purpose is largely to provide a reasonable framework for accommodating discussions between the Niebuhrs and the Ellisons of the world, and to urge them to include others further outside of their respective traditions as participants in capacious and participatory forms of deliberative democracy. He does this with a reserved hopefulness as the hub in which increasingly divergent viewpoints can participate successfully from within their respective narrative claims. Toward understanding how my argument differs from Stout's own, I will consider relevant sections of his own work and compare them to my considerations of a Niebuhrian ethic of deliberative politics. Given Stout's ontological framework for pragmatic politics, I will express more points of detailed difference than radical disagreement regarding Stout's thoughts on such matters.

Jeffrey Stout's consideration of humility and realism provides the central relevance for him to my own argument. Stout argues that we inhabit different moral

¹⁵⁴ Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton University Press. Princeton and Oxford. (2004). 58

experiences, drawing upon Ignazio Silone's novel, *Bread and Wine*. In explaining a protagonist who has become secularized and lost his religious beliefs, Stout goes on to explain that such a protagonist does not fault superstitious peasants for their own beliefs, nor does he develop a contemptible attitude toward religious experiences. "Silone's novel illustrates the fact that there are important differences in what moral beliefs people in various contexts can justifiably accept."¹⁵⁵ Stout links the importance of personal and historical context with the relevance and relative power of respective moral claims, much as Niebuhr seeks to contextualize personal expressions of morality in the existential realities of a harsh world that assails different people with different problems and solutions based on their individual position. Stout's emphasis here is to distinguish vocabularies and styles of meaning we can justifiably accept as we seek to dialectically discern more universal moral truths. Nevertheless, his charitable treatment of self-criticism and his emphasis on humility as a pragmatic ethic parallel Niebuhr's understanding of political information as situational and limited. This level of particularity also affects Stout's judgment of a necessarily progressive history on grounds that "Our future selves deserve better treatment from us."¹⁵⁶ In that same passage, Stout considers our future selves and our heirs might have justifiable reasons for deviating widely from currently held moral beliefs, but not necessarily so, it follows that Stout here observes and articulates something like the ironic process of reasoning out historical and social paradoxes that Niebuhr envisioned throughout many of his works.

This comparison is especially relevant in consideration the language that Stout

¹⁵⁵ Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton University Press. Princeton and Oxford. (2004). 232

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 233

uses to explain and defend his workable minimalist conception of political discourse. Stout echoes the same ascendant political virtue that Niebuhr himself espoused as the lynchpin of a democratic and discursive framework. In his efforts to explain any given individual's rationality should not be settled or decided a priori, Stout affirms a particular ethic of humility that corresponds to his argument of individual political contextualization of expressive moral claims. Stout affirms, "Humility is the best policy. Humility I say; not skepticism. For I am not denying that we are justified in holding various moral beliefs, as moral skepticism does, by the definition assumed here. How can we claim to be justified in believing something and also suitably humble in what we claim to know?"¹⁵⁷ Stout subsequently addresses a connection between humility and charity. Stout distinguishes his pragmatism from that of Cornel West, claiming that he himself is closer to Ellison and that West is closer Niebuhr. Still, I argue it is quite clear from the citations I have made in fundamental sections of Stout's argument that Niebuhr figures quite prominently in the underpinnings of Stout's social theory if we have an adequate understanding of the way in which humility undergirds a respect for individual participation in deliberative political orders.

While Stout purports a kind of ethics without metaphysics, I argue that affirming the kind of argument that Stout makes as an explicitly Niebuhrian understanding of ethics is practical, useful, and illuminating for a proper perspective of the intellectual history of political pragmatism, of deliberative political practices, and of Augustinian thought. In my understanding of Niebuhr, we can consider his humility in the face of selfishness as a religious political theory, but a theory largely without discursively relevant metaphysics

¹⁵⁷ Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton University Press. Princeton and Oxford. (2004). 233-

for those who may not share Niebuhr's belief system. In thinking of Stout's argument as having stronger ties to Niebuhr, we can glean a deeper insight into the importance a Niebuhrian ethic of humility has in shaping Stout's understanding of tradition in dialogue with democracy. This consideration also affords us insight into the relevant intellectual history of the claims that Stout affirms. It provides a more mutually intelligible, widely understood framework for political discourse across charitable secular and religious ethics of liberal expressions of humility for workable public life.

We can contrast Richard Rorty as another kind of pragmatist who makes different claims from those of Stout. Renowned for his ironism in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty seems a pragmatic fit for understanding Niebuhr. Here I argue that Rorty's irony differs from that of Niebuhr in important ways. Rorty argues later in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, with regard to the public square, "The arguments that take place there, political arguments, are best thought of as neither religious nor nonreligious."¹⁵⁸ This speaks to a supposed neutrality of public spaces that presumably brackets political life. Near the end of that same book, Rorty further argues, "We pragmatists are not arguing that modern Europe has any superior insight into eternal, ahistorical realities. We do not claim any superior rationality."¹⁵⁹ Here we see some defense against the kind of concerns about neutral philosophy that Mathewes articulated. Problematically though, in my understanding of Niebuhr, asserting that public arguments are neither religious nor nonreligious is at odds with Rorty when he claims that his pragmatism is ahistorical in nature. Individuals bring their religious or nonreligious

158 Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin Books. (1999). 172

159 Ibid. 273

experiences to political deliberations as a matter of inhabiting those experiences in their respective lives. Alternatively, I suggest following Niebuhr's emphasis on inclusive deliberations, that we accept public arguments as both religious and nonreligious in their origin, to take personal expressions of individual contingencies more seriously as relevant to public discourse. Irony depends upon a thick reevaluation of the self, not the bracketing of individual concerns for the sake of translating one's values to another ethical narrative. Rorty's indifference here to whether one argument comes from a pulpit or a philosopher for the sake of public reason does not take those differences seriously. It results in a naïve kind of hope wherein solidarity between similar positions of different narrative origin can only persist so long as each ethical source of value are in accord with the other. Rorty's ultimate position that he later came to endorse is, I think, near Niebuhr's own, one suspicious of religious institutions but not hostile of religious ideas in public space as expressions of constructive public discourse. It should therefore be noted in he eventually modified his position¹⁶⁰ to be one that was more anti-clerical and anti-institutional in its criticism.

Alternative narratives of Christian citizenship have often emphasized a priority of love as a political virtue, with further accolades to other traditional virtues of hope and justice. I submit that within Niebuhr's ontological framework, these virtues become unworkable without the prerequisite of humility in matters of self-regard. This undesirable outcome occurs either because the vision of the community subsumes the experience of the individual. An institutional rather than personal religious ideal, like any

¹⁶⁰ Rorty, Richard. "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." *Journal of Religious Ethics*. (Vol. 31, No. 1. (Spring 2003).

other lived experience that may not take seriously the claims of individuals as such, risks discounting reality as a political experience. This problem highlights my major reservations that I have discussed regarding religious communitarian language that we see in the arguments of Milbank, MacIntyre, and Hauerwas.

I have at this point considered a wide variety of political traditions that address the theological underpinnings of Niebuhr's ethical claims, but a skeptical attitude toward Christianity in general might cause us to hesitate when we consider an aspiration toward imperfect, relative justice, which Niebuhrian deliberative practices from an ethic of humility inform. Are Niebuhr's Augustinian influences too other-worldly to take seriously? We must still contend with the notion that Niebuhr's understanding of Christian eschatology diminishes the emphasis that he places on political action as the consequential expression historically situated individuals. Other-worldly asceticism or spiritual yearning could potentially undermine historically situated selves in instances where the pragmatic concerns of daily life become objects of decreased, marginal importance. Though I have previously addressed the notion of errant asceticism as harmful in Niebuhr's viewpoint, I believe it is important enough to warrant a lengthy discussion with detailed specifics, because it deviates in content if not character from the kind of life Niebuhr views as both politically fruitful and socially just. One radical form of ascetic utopian thought is apocalyptic yearning. Given Niebuhr's understanding of Christian eschatology, a consideration follows of how an other-worldly understanding of hope and faith might serve to diminish Niebuhr's standing as a strong political realist.

Chapter 8: Affirming Our Experiences Regardless of Our Eschatology

Niebuhr's understanding of political life helps us to affirm authentic social lives in the world as it is, not as we would have it in a utopian dream or in a religious conception of the afterlife. Niebuhr's understanding of the Augustinian dual cities of God and of man dissuades his audience from identifying the former as translatable to the latter. However, the question remains to what degree Niebuhr escapes general fatalistic criticisms of Augustinian politics, specifically that such claims are utopian or otherworldly. If utopian, they might identify historical institutional churches with moral virtue. If otherworldly, they might deny any potential for a prosperous and sincere affective social world here and now or going forward. The consideration of a teleological goal of all history certainly serves to complicate the category of political action that Niebuhr envisions, as it presumably redirects intellectual and affective resources away from the workable, associational communication of everyday life. Therefore, in this chapter, I shall consider briefly to what degree Niebuhr's eschatology confuses or diminishes his overall arguments concerning an ethic of political humility.

Given his ontological perspective, Niebuhr's political realism must address the question of Christian eschatology. This worldview provides the larger context in which he affirms his particular political beliefs. Without this affirmative goal of Niebuhr's view of history, presumably his emphasis on individuated context for political participation would be less intelligible. Without hope, pessimism fills the gap. Niebuhr's understanding of historically contextualizing political experience and that experience's potential expressions of courage, selflessness, or humility only make sense in terms of

individual lives that affect the ideas and beliefs of others even after personal death. Therefore, Niebuhr affirms a practical experience that is agnostic about not only our future selves, but also how future knowledge will affect social values. Niebuhr reminds us that eschatology is in part what distinguishes his understanding of personal ethics as having a particular context beyond the individual. He contrasts his realistic polity from Plato's city-in-speech, whose present or future existence did not matter to Plato, "For the Greek, perfection remains in heaven because history is by its very character of temporality a corruption of it... Christianity is therefore less confident than Plato that the wise man will obey the vision of perfection which intrigues him; but it is more confident that God will be able to overrule the sinfulness of man."¹⁶¹ Niebuhr then hopes for a vindication of human creativity in human history and in the endurance of political institutions, but remains agnostic regarding the specific form that such a vindication will take because understanding its existence transcends human knowledge. Paradoxically, in shifting this focus away from Plato and toward a more inchoate teleology, rather than one that highlight's an individual's temporal tripartite soul as a source of dialectical virtue, Niebuhr diminishes ancient conceptions of virtue ethics as unmitigated goods. In doing so he affirms his political pragmatism. In his affirmation of a redemptive but unspecified hope for history, he does so without making his political realism an ultimately other-worldly exercise. We can acknowledge the tenuousness of institutional and deliberative goods without discounting their reality.

As a pretext to understanding Niebuhr's defense of the political relevance of his realism, it is useful to delineate a broader view of Augustinian eschatology that

¹⁶¹ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1937). 280-281

challenges concerns of other-worldliness or fantasy in religious yearning. Charles Mathewes agrees with Niebuhr on this point, given their somewhat similar understanding of Augustinian eschatology. His critiques of conventional Christian eschatology echoes Niebuhr's own. "Most believers do not know how to present their commitments in non-apocalyptic terms, in a way that invites their interlocutors into a conversation about the meaning and validity of those commitments. They thus become trapped into defending a particular understanding of their commitments at a particular time."¹⁶² In this instance, Mathewes critiques the defensiveness of identity politics, which is certainly not uniquely a Christian problem. Niebuhr critiques some formulations of contractarian thought experiments and communitarian utopias for an analogous reason, escapism. With that in mind, the politically salient aspect of any religious eschatology is not whether it informs individual political viewpoints, but whether its apocalyptic nature overwhelms all other concerns and personal preferences for deliberative and humble interactions. If I sincerely but erroneously believe the world is ending and that I understand how and when, I may attempt to exploit someone or become exploited by someone with better information than I possess. Mathewes goes so far as to explicitly condemn the "Left Behind" media series as an overly escapist and salacious experience, expressive of a profound despair of the physical world. One of Mathewes's immediate concerns is "coming to grips with the disappointment that motivates escapism rather than simply assaulting it. We should not look to have our desires satisfied, but look instead to see what prompts them."¹⁶³ While a Niebuhrian sense of human motivations might disagree with the notion that we can ever

¹⁶² Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. (Cambridge University Press. 2007). 205

¹⁶³ Ibid. 314

sufficiently divorce ourselves from our desires to clearly see what prompts them, the relevance of this passage is more simple here. It gives credence to the notion that realism, even Christian realism, is not necessarily separable from a materialist understanding of reality and of a robust psychology of political discourse. Indeed, any political ethos that affirms the cosmological principle and remains focused on present individuals and their psychological perspectives they bring to political life is one generally indistinguishable from naturalism for the practical and practicable purposes of political life. For Niebuhr, positional reflection calls us to more than a contest of instinctual political desires in relational encounters with other people, a notion not antithetical to Mathewes.

Langdon Gilkey devotes about a third of *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* explicitly to Niebuhr's understanding of political history, biblical history, and biblical eschatology in three corresponding chapters relevant to each of these topics. His understanding of Niebuhr is one that will largely frame much context of this chapter. The sociological views of Charles Lemert and historical views of John Diggins also contribute to this discussion from their respective works on Niebuhr's politics. This section also draws somewhat from Niebuhr's two volume work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. It does so because there we find the most detailed and nuanced proclamations that Niebuhr makes with regard to how we are to understand positional selves within the context of political history. These works give a particular context that explains Niebuhr's conception of history in a useful manner. This context promotes an account of his view of political agency in the face of what is ultimately an apocalyptic religion that risks the

obliteration of personal agency as part of its creed.

To understand how Niebuhr's eschatology is somewhat unconventional, we can also consider that his understanding of Christian doctrine overall differs greatly from the conventional understanding that would endure during and after Niebuhr's own lifetime. Specifically, Niebuhr believed that his contemporary American understanding of Christian sin was very much out of place with social norms and taboos, or more precisely that such taboos did not clearly understand the symbolic value of sin. Following the kind of discourse ethics that someone like Jeffrey Stout might espouse, Niebuhr spoke his views plainly while he withheld contempt and disrespect for alternative viewpoints. Niebuhr believed that sin and sexuality as a particular form of embodiment had been linked too closely for too long in the history of Christian values.

Niebuhr's understanding of sexuality and sensuality in relation to sin comes from his understanding of sin more generally speaking. Niebuhr explains his rationale as distinct from a more general sexual taboo, "The deification of the other is almost a literal description of many romantic sentiments in which attributes of perfection are assigned to the partner of love, beyond the capacities of any human being to bear, and therefore the cause of inevitable disillusionment."¹⁶⁴ Niebuhr's understanding of what it means to be an embodied being therefore hinges on an unconventional understanding of sin, which addresses theological problems of personal motivations, rather than merely provide an ascetic injunction for self-restraint and chaste modesty. This view stands in contrast to the kind of moralistic folk Christianity, wherein sex in general becomes strictly taboo as a

¹⁶⁴ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume I: Human Nature*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1941.1964). 237

matter of fiat, without the correspondent psychology of vulnerability, self-regard, and social orientation informing the relationship between sensuality and sin. This very different understanding of embodied beings managing relationships in contingent places has little purchasing power in the face of many denominations or individuals who would affirm a divine command understanding of sexual chastity. This pretext of difference gives us insight into how Niebuhr also understands human teleology in a correspondingly different manner. In short, Niebuhr's critical thinking sometimes comes far from popular understandings of his own tradition. Given his robust understanding of sinfulness as a relational flaw of human beings rather than some substantive inherited stain, his eschatology then must also provide a more robust account than a moral tallying of transgressions for the sake of some commutative final judgment.

Given Niebuhr's concept of embodied beings as sinful beings of complex psychological experiences, his eschatology also diverges in important ways from a conventional or folkloric understanding that serves to diminish the impact of critiques of other-worldliness. Toward understanding that distinction, Historian John Diggins provides us an important difference between Nietzsche's existential disappointment and that of Niebuhr. "Nietzsche would release sin from social ostracism; Niebuhr saw it already released and residing in comfort in a society that accepted it with a wink and a smile... Nietzsche thought Christianity gave civilization a bad conscience and an enfeebled will. Niebuhr thought Americans had an easy conscience and were too quick to absolve themselves of guilt. If Nietzsche's Germany was swamped by repression, Niebuhr's America skated away from responsibility."¹⁶⁵ This point of contrast actually

¹⁶⁵ Diggins, John Patrick. *Why Niebuhr Now?* The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2011). 40

demonstrates a similarity between both thinkers. Specifically, neither thought of the conventional language of sexual sin as particularly serious or salient for understanding human motivations or experiences. Further, both sought to afflict with deeper thought those people who they saw as too complacent. Their respective societies were either too egregious or too glib. Niebuhr draws upon Nietzsche's understanding of political power for his incisive critique of ethics that have become a hollow, rhetorical tool, a mechanism of social signaling that no longer communicates a specific value. Each man proposed his own alternative, self-expression in the case of Nietzsche and self-reflection in the case of Niebuhr, but both men were wholly disillusioned of the moral language in which they found themselves living. That language has certainly become dissociated from its original meaning and was simply a shorthanded shibboleth of appropriate social sentiments in both cases.

Niebuhr's politics are probably less futile and less puerile than those of Nietzsche. We can use this discussion of sexual morality of Niebuhr's time as an analogous tool for looking at ethical choices more generally. John Carlson discusses Niebuhr's ethic of humility in contradistinction to a stuffy sense of self-righteousness or carefree libidinous, "For with political humility, we *neither* embarrass from our power such that we preserve our moral purity at the expense of our political responsibility *nor* embrace a too confident sense of our moral strength that, unexpectedly, brings about its opposite."¹⁶⁶ What applies to overzealous moralists of Niebuhr's time, Carlson here uses to criticize choices leading up to the Iraq war, but the rationale is the same. Thus Niebuhr's politics stands

¹⁶⁶ Carlson, John D. "The Morality, Politics, and Irony of War" *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Volume 36. Issue 4. (December 2008). 619-651

beyond avoidant prudishness and wanton abandon.

We can further contextualize Niebuhr's life with historical analogues for his life. Diggins, who I have previously cited, compares Niebuhr to Henry Adams. His autobiographical work, *The Education of Henry Adams*, is a vivid coming of age account in a newly technical world. Adams contrasts himself with Augustine, arguing that his own confessions begin in unity and end in unmanageable, multiplied fragments. Diggins argues, "Niebuhr shared Adams's sense of irony but not his feelings of futility. He agreed with Augustine that the love of God is the essential ordering principle of the *civitas dei*. But he held that the conditions of the *civitas terrena* are set by the sinful self that remains a mystery to itself."¹⁶⁷ In other words, when we dedicate ourselves to an intransigent ideology, including a finality in our teleology of history or religion, we fix our understanding and thereby limit our self-perception and capacity for intellectual discourse with other people. In our stubbornness we may even discount future versions of ourselves, as Jeffrey Stout reminds us. Paradoxically, our inability to properly judge our own ends and the humility that such an inability recommends make more realistic the love of a more tangible ideal for actions in this world as it is. There is therefore no directly relevant experience of a city of God for political life. Eschatology exists on its own terms, completely outside of the human experience until human experience is no more. It is so other-worldly that it becomes ineffable though not unreliable. For this reason, I believe that Niebuhr's political theory functions similarly to kind of ethics without metaphysics that someone like Jeffrey Stout affirms. The morally relevant aspects of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility that I have formulated discount a certain,

¹⁶⁷ Diggins, John Patrick. *Why Niebuhr Now?* The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2011). 107

intelligible religious future of apocalyptic transformation without denigrating its value to those who share it, to the degree that such a separation is possible. Diggins provided a view of Niebuhr as a participant in intellectual history, but somewhat removed from popular ideas of cultural morality of his time. As a result, we see that his understanding of Christian eschatology is likewise unconventional in that it remains completely mysterious rather than a rational fulfillment of history. In short, a confusion of uncertain, eschatological reckoning with personal, punitive accounts of moral transgressions confuses human will with that of Niebuhr's God. A consideration of Niebuhr's views from other perspectives will further reinforce this point and its relation to Niebuhr's view of pride in political relationships.

Charles Lemert, in *Why Niebuhr Matters*, provides to us an account of Niebuhr that is more sociological than historical in its framing of Niebuhr's philosophy. Lemert compares our own contemporary experience with one of Augustine's own time. "Could Romans in 410 C.E. have experienced the sack of Rome as moderns experienced the fall of the twin towers on the morning of September 11, 2001? When social forms considered eternal or inherently good and true snap—or as was the case both in 410 and 2001, appear to be snapping—the shattering has a televisual effect. The image gets inside the brain in ways that pass all understanding... all kingdoms of this world are fragile."¹⁶⁸ In *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, poet Kenneth Goldsmith captures the awkward but banal moments when national tragedies strike and live news reporters must dramatically shift their tone and discourse. The disorientation and incredulity that results highlights the usefulness of Lemert's observation on this matter of vulnerability in

¹⁶⁸ Lemert, Charles. *Why Niebuhr Matters*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. (2011). 134

historical context. In other words, to understand Niebuhr's particular eschatology, we need not only to understand his intellectual relationship with his environment, and our own, but also the importance of the fragility of institutions and frames of reference for affirming ideas of relative justice and related civic virtues. Such frames of reference for Lemert, as for Niebuhr and Augustine, express a semiotic experience that is only partly intelligible to its participants as it is happening. Lemert reads Niebuhr with an emphasis on his existentialism rather than his religion, and his understanding of Niebuhr's eschatology reflects this perspective, "History is in human hands until it is not. The question to ask is how do we respond when it is not?"¹⁶⁹ Niebuhr's eschatology then reflects moments of weakness and powerlessness we must inhabit as a species more than it reflects a specific aspect of divine reckoning or apocalyptic judgment. Niebuhr's eschatology is not a particular moment in time, but an extreme understanding of how humans experience volatile shifts in the order our political circumstances, which hopes for something more stable than those shifts. More than anything, the importance of Niebuhr's eschatology is a check against false utopias, in our time, against those who would sell us a particular formulation of neoliberalism, globalization, or any other political program not as a limited lens for politics but as a universal and perfectible good. Niebuhr's eschatology reminds us that such ever-evolving human constructions depend upon our beliefs about their effectiveness to survive. For Niebuhr, possibility trumps necessity in understanding the relative strength and weakness of whether particular political institutions might endure.

Beyond our mutual vulnerabilities and contingencies of everyday life, the

¹⁶⁹ Lemert, Charles. *Why Niebuhr Matters*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. (2011). 203

question remains what this jarring realism signifies for Niebuhr's own understanding of his religion's eschatology. Lemert contrasts Niebuhr with utopian idealists of either liberal or Marxist varieties, "The end of history was not a *terminus ad quem*, a point toward which a temporal vector inexorably moved. His idea of End, like Augustine's, was more the hazard that at any given moment the course of history could be interrupted... To accept the morbidity of liveliness is not pessimism. It is, in a word, the realism that mocks our innocent optimisms."¹⁷⁰ Thus the importance of Niebuhr's eschatology exists more in the non-perfectibility of human activities than it does in some intelligible *deus ex machina*. The relevant fact is that our creativity as human beings is our fragile and contingent experience. Such creativity should not be utopian or complacent. Niebuhr's eschatology is therefore a reformulation of his call to humility in politics. The possibility of destruction beyond our own agency constrains our moral claims as much or more than other people who might contest them. With this fragility as a reference, Niebuhr provides an unpleasant but sincere background for political discourse. Jeffrey Stout contrasted participatory viewpoints for people of different social circumstances within the novel *Bread and Wine*, but social standing is not our only contingency. Niebuhr provides a somber reminder that our circumstances for discourse might explicitly be times of warfare, famine, tyranny, chaos, or terrorism. This affirmation is quite far from an other-worldly criticism that an overly eschatological Augustinian ethic must endure. Niebuhr urges us to live boldly in interrupted times.

Langdon Gilkey provides to us a more positive outlook of Niebuhr's eschatology. Rather than focus on the contingencies and circumstantial life that constrain human

¹⁷⁰ Lemert, Charles. *Why Niebuhr Matters*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. (2011). 159-161

beings, Gilkey discusses the possibilities and potentialities that humans maintain regardless of their personal and social limitations. Our experiences shape us, but in turn we shape new modes of life. According to Gilkey, “each new act of creativity also represents the temptation to regard it as final and ultimate... That admonishment is as relevant and persuasive in the light of each day's news that we can easily forget the very great confidence in creative human powers that it presupposes.”¹⁷¹ Here Gilkey offers an account of Niebuhrian eschatology that differs in tone from that of Lemert. I find these claims to be complementary, not contradictory. In his account of Niebuhrian eschatology, Gilkey affirms the potentiality that human beings possess toward improving their own social standing, technology, or self-expression. In other words, despite the reservations and harshness of Niebuhr's view that Lemert highlights, we need not discount the value of creaturely creativity, and need not discount a Niebuhrian ethic of humility as a particular kind of such creativity, toward the purpose of expressing and affirming moral claims with other people. In this affirmation, we create meaningful if ephemeral victories over confusion and disharmony in our ethical encounters with others. Thus Niebuhr's eschatology affirms his general ethic of a creative force of humility to mitigate whatever horrors befall us. This ethic then is no guarantee of social progress, but it allows us to approach others with a reasonable respect for their alternative frames of reference, even if we maintain strong claims in stark contrast to those differences.

Each of these aforementioned viewpoints, historical, sociological, and theological, serve as frames of reference for understanding Niebuhr's conception of eschatology. Niebuhr's own words provide greater insight for defining his distinctive view of

¹⁷¹ Gilkey, Langdon. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2001). 203

eschatology and the ways in which it facilitates humble discourse between individuals in the face of selfish intransigence. Heretofore I have not frequently cited *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr's great two-volume work based on his Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh. I have found this work most appropriate for use in this section in particular. Other works give an explicit and detailed account of Niebuhr's politics and esteem of other traditions, but his definitive account of the role of eschatology in his view of politics he states here more distinctly than anywhere else. Niebuhr was aware of his conception of eschatology that he wished to present his second volume of this text as he wrote the first volume.¹⁷² The structure of Niebuhr's arguments show that even before he had written his second volume, he did not consider his eschatology to be a trivial aspect of his argument, but rather a framework that informs his understanding of the more basic human contingencies within the first volume.

That first volume on human nature largely reflects the relationship between the human beings and their communities, ideas which I have discussed at length. The second volume on human destiny is the core of Niebuhr's eschatology. To properly understand Niebuhr's argument in relation to those others I have put forth in this chapter I will need to cite several times from across this volume to provide a comprehensive account of Niebuhr's ideas on this specific matter. Niebuhr's understanding of eschatology parallels his understanding of history in general. "We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice."¹⁷³ Here Niebuhr

172 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume I: Human Nature*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1941. 1964). 145

173 Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume II: Human Destiny*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1943, 1964). 284

implicitly protests against such an exercise as the soulcraft of the Platonic city-in-speech as a perfectionist dream unconcerned with actually producing greater justice in the world. This attitude is similar to Niebuhr's skepticism of kenosis as an ideal form of love. This indictment further includes Niebuhr's critique of modernity as well, as he disagrees with modern conflation of growth with progress, "The belief that man could solve either by an escape from history or the historical process itself is a mistake which is partly prompted by the most universal of all 'ideological' taints: the pride not of particular men and cultures, but of man as man."¹⁷⁴ The end of history serves as a contextual justification of history and serves the important function for Niebuhr of ensuring that we do not dismiss possibilities of justice with the quickness and whimsy that Plato's Socrates dismisses the city-in-speech of the Republic. Without aspirational potential beyond our own expectations, whatever they may be, we fall victim to either the tragedy of hubris or the complacency of intellectual isolation. It is only when we properly contextualize ourselves as agents in history with finite beginnings and ends to our life experiences that we can appreciate our historical contingency in a manner that prepares us for political action. Forward-looking or backward-looking religious or ideological fervor may detract us from cognizance of the enmeshed interval that defines each of our our individual lives.

I have at this point addressed concerns of contractarian and communitarian political thought relative to that of Niebuhr. I have also considered various religious ethics of citizenship from Augustinian and other Christian viewpoints. I have explored the potential shortcomings of Niebuhr's politics from perspectives of critiques that

¹⁷⁴ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume II: Human Destiny*. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York. 1943, 1964). 320

humility may be an inappropriate virtue for some people, or that Niebuhr's Christianity makes practical political discourse other-worldly or unsustainable. In the face of these discussions and criticisms, we can conclude what practicable value an ethic of humility provides to a more capacious and workable deliberative political order, given the reality of political anxiety and given the impermanent contingencies of our lives. I now in my conclusion turn my discussion to the actualization and efficacy of Niebuhr's reflective understanding of political participation as they inform specific examples of deliberative practices. Toward that end, examples such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Adam Michnik provide real world examples of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in action under diverse but intensely stressful historical circumstances.

Chapter 9: Actualizing Political Expression from Humble Self-Reflection

Reinhold Niebuhr expresses a theory of deliberative politics that takes into account his understanding of human ontological constraints and contingencies and his view of positional anxiety that creates opportunities for pride or asceticism to overwhelm critical self-evaluation. He therefore argues for an ethic of self-reflection as a means of cultivating humility toward the end of communicating political preferences to others or otherwise taking action in contentious situations. He does this partly on pragmatic grounds that reflect his understanding of epistemology in politics. Beyond that expression, he also seeks to affirm an unorthodox articulation of liberal democracy, on grounds of his personal understanding of Christian realism, and the ethical and political realism that inhabit that belief. With these concepts in mind, we can now reiterate specific aspects of how to interpret Niebuhr's psychology of humility in politics and thereafter conclude the usefulness of Niebuhr's ethic of humility in analyzing political institutions and informing individual political actors in more informal practices of social deliberation.

Niebuhr worried to a great degree regarding instances where people attempt to put ideals into action. He had reservations regarding ways in which such attempts might be not only harmful but also, “lost their virtue in the process of rationalization.”¹⁷⁵ Toward rectifying that ideological error, Niebuhr envisions a more relational and individual expression of personal viewpoints in politics, one which affirms norms of broad and informal discourse ethics as I have argued in my discussion of such figures as Iris Marion

¹⁷⁵ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*. (New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1949). 21

Young, John Milton, Jürgen Habermas, Langdon Gilkey, Jeffrey Stout, and others. A recapitulation of understanding an Niebuhrian ethic of humility in the context of Niebuhr's political realism and specific recommendations for its practical use follow here.

In a mature essay on Augustinian political realism found in *Christian Realism and Power Politics*, Niebuhr praises Hobbes and parallels him to Augustine to the extent that both understood that the mind and its desires largely shape the circumstances of human experiences and rationalizations in political life. Nevertheless, he is critical of this so-called realist school, as well as pragmatic and liberal ideologies as conceptions of political life often articulated with too narrow a focus. He subsequently distinguishes his own viewpoint from those schools with which Niebuhrian thought is nevertheless often associated. According to Niebuhr, “Modern 'realists' know the power of collective self-interest as Augustine did; but they do not understand its blindness. Modern pragmatists understood the irrelevance of fixed and detailed norms; but they do not understand that love must take the place as the final norm for these inadequate norms. Modern liberal Christians know that love is the final norm for man; but they fall into sentimentality because they fail to measure the power and persistence of self-love.”¹⁷⁶ Here we see three schools of political thought that I have considered and criticized throughout this text that we should consider as important for Niebuhr's mature view of political realism, with its pragmatic and deliberative liberal elements. I believe my Niebuhrian ethic of humility bolsters each of these cases. A major effort of this work has been to utilize a Niebuhrian ethic of humility to teach the circumspect Augustinian to be skeptical of institutional power and norms, to teach love born of humility to the pragmatist, and to teach self-

¹⁷⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Christian Realism and Political Problems*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons. 1953. 146

criticism to the liberal Christian.

The dangers of collective self-interest are endemic to communal activities, in Niebuhr's view. Realism he largely takes as a given in international relations. Beyond this consideration, Niebuhr nevertheless provides an important contribution to the history of liberal and pragmatic thought that we might otherwise overlook if we focus solely on realism in international politics. A theoretical mixture of the second and third norms of pragmatism and liberalism largely removes their defects, respectively lovelessness and self-deception, as I understand Niebuhr's arguments. The anti-collectivist strain of thought in Niebuhr is probably too strong to rescue completely "realistic collective self-interest," except as an extension of the pragmatic and liberal ideals, informal and inclusive as my understanding of Niebuhr would have it. Niebuhr seeks to mitigate the norm of self-love in strains of liberalism through the use of self-criticism. He also seeks to add a social love, something like an agapic love, to pragmatism, wherein an ethic of love makes pragmatic discourse more fruitful because it conveys a mental framework for how humility can stop individual claims from discounting the positional claim of another participant. I have therefore argued at length that a relational perspective of Niebuhr's social psychology of humility is his primary means of accomplishing this task in such cases where competing political claims reflect uncertain, tenuous outcomes. Put another way, in the words of Mark Haas, the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr affirm, "In short, what was needed was an examination of consequences in order to apply best a deontologically-derived goal."¹⁷⁷ What then does this deliberative interaction toward the end of relational

¹⁷⁷ Haas, Mark L. Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Christian Pragmatism': A Principled Alternative to Consequentialism" *The Review of Politics*. Volume 61. No. 4. (Autumn 1999) 605- 636

creativity look like in everyday life? We are now ready to conclude with specific forms of deliberative political practices that reflect a Niebuhrian ethic of humility. We can consider these forms at both the institutional level and individual level as I shall describe.

As Niebuhr expresses his understanding of political possibility, he defines the context in which social paradigms can potentially shift. While there is no necessary connection between a robust and egalitarian democracy and a progressive perspective of history for Niebuhr, radical and positive shifts in social order nevertheless can become part of history, just as institutions can face ruin, chaos, or upheaval. In Niebuhr's *Reflections on the End of an Era*, a work that exhibits Niebuhr's understanding of the vulnerability and fragility of institutions as a kind of political eschatology, he argues that “there is always the possibility that the ability to comprehend the needs of others, though not strong enough to initiate new social policies, will be strong enough to accept what has been accomplished. One may never hope that an entire class, group, or nation will voluntarily accept a new social situation which destroys old and cherished privileges.”¹⁷⁸ Decades later, Niebuhr would see this shift at the end of his own lifetime with the advent and successes of the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism. Though Niebuhr's relationship to feminism with his emphasis on self-sacrificial love is more contentious than his understanding of civil rights, I have sought to defend him with Rebekah Miles's *The Bonds of Freedom*. Niebuhr's view generally was that while legalistic protections cannot destroy unjust treatment of specific categories of people, or diminish claims of undue privileges, they are nevertheless important beyond legal protections because that they become a public expression of a new social norm, which

¹⁷⁸ Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Reflections on the End of an Era*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York and London. 1934. 256

acknowledges more broadly diverse, non-harmful positions in life as having greater validity. Niebuhr's viewpoint is also prescient for our own time. The advent of increasingly public shaming for bigoted viewpoints reflects the application of such positional reflection for our own age, whether in published journalism, Internet forums, or casual face-to-face political discussions. Continued questions of racial equality and gender parity follow in the wake of such circumstances as the experiences of employment termination, housing discrimination, or marriage discrimination for many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender citizens. We cannot discern with certain inevitability whether greater protections will come in the future against these discriminatory experiences, but because of particular instances of public dialogue, through people coming out to their friends, taking a public stand through appellate litigation, or taking direct action, particular instances of undue privileges necessarily recede, although they do so begrudgingly.

These kinds of social transformation are not inevitable, but in following Niebuhr's understanding of prophetic politics, they become more possible. This is not to discount the transformational power of political institutions, for example, in important rulings of the Supreme Court on matters of social justice. While institutions and laws matter for the adjustment of such norms in matters of crime and punishment, positional reflection makes possible a broader conception of egalitarian and participatory deliberation in politics, a realistic conception of goodwill and respect that is necessary to sustain the substance of institutional decisions regarding just and fair social outcomes respective of difference and position.

Understanding contingent, positional action for Niebuhr requires that we understand his attitude toward social obligations and responsibilities. He expressed an ambivalence in regard to the role of responsibility in ethical behavior. As Niebuhr's biographer Richard Fox notes, "Responsibility connoted for Niebuhr a simultaneous engagement and retrenchment, a giving of commitment and a holding back, a willingness to act but only within the tragic boundaries of human life."¹⁷⁹ Elsewhere we see that even Niebuhr's attitude toward biography itself reiterates this point of contingent and circumstantial actions, that memoirs are in his view narcissistic, pretentious, only fitfully honest.¹⁸⁰ With such constraints on self-aggrandizement as a likely outcome of self-reflection, understanding examples of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility at the individual level seems a difficult task. A giving self acknowledges personal delusions or cognitive biases as a possibility, even if they are not always intelligible without the insights of other people or through practices of deliberative discourse. The self-scrutiny of Niebuhr's creative, deliberative political order therefore requires a relational identity discovered in encounters with other people for proper expression and flourishing. Robin Lovin reminds us, "...even our most original conclusions must rest on ideas that we share with others. Many of those ideas will disappear from history's stage along with our generation, but that does not excuse us from acting."¹⁸¹ Though Lovin writes here of to what degree Niebuhr's own ideas are dated because he is a product of his particular place and time, the point regarding finding the courage to take calculated but well-meaning action remains salient. Such encounters reflect the kind of humility in pragmatic

¹⁷⁹ Fox, Richard. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. Pantheon Books, New York. (1985). 216

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 262

¹⁸¹ Lovin, Robin. "Reinhold Niebuhr in Contemporary Scholarship: A Review Essay" *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 31. No. 3. (Winter 2003). 487-505

deliberation that we see in the ethics of Jeffrey Stout, and in inclusive, informal understandings of deliberative politics more broadly understood as Iris Marion Young provides to us.

Robin Lovin understands responsibility in Niebuhr's thought with a different emphasis. Instead of emphasizing the ambivalence of commitments as contingent participation, Lovin considers the choice among personal constraints of a bounded existence to be more significant than the relational ontology of pragmatic discourse. I do not believe this emphasis discounts the moral ambivalence in Niebuhr's understanding of responsibility. Rather, it follows from Niebuhr's understanding of self-deceptions that political questions often force us to choose between bad and worse options. Lovin contends regarding Niebuhr, "Responsibility as he understands it involves a willingness to make discriminating choices between greater and lesser evils, and this, too, seems to be threatened by an understanding that sin is a pervasive feature of every human life and every system of ideas that people create to organize their power and explain their injustices."¹⁸² What Niebuhr terms sin, which I can more generally call cognitive bias, pride, or delusion, may be inevitable but it is not a necessary outcome of deliberative proceedings. We may each experience delusions in ideological claims, but such claims are of better or worse kinds that we can discuss and evaluate with comparative judgments. Pragmatic deliberation helps us to sort out such questions without discounting future possibilities of a more inclusive understanding of social justice, but without the assurance that our current capacity to seek out improved institutions is indefatigable.

¹⁸² Lovin, Robin. *Reinhold Niebuhr*. Abingdon Press. (2007). 20

If we can reflectively understand the pervasiveness of individual or national conceits and vanities, we have a better frame of reference for comparing our own shortcomings with those of others in a charitable encounter. Thus it is improper to consider that Niebuhr's expression of Christian realism validates political establishments and norms of power as completely just. As Lovin affirms, "Hope is not based on a utopian transformation of human nature or an apocalyptic abolition of governments and institutional structures. Hope is a demand for new institutions that will allow the things people envision as possible for themselves, precisely as the human beings they are, to come into being."¹⁸³ Here we see the most productive and radical formulation of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility, one that is radical, transformational, and dialectical in nature. There is no necessity of such transformation, but for Niebuhr it always remains a realistic if unlikely possibility. Substantively, there is of course no specific constitutive political program to these claims of Niebuhr beyond a more workable and inclusive relational identity that strengthens social bonds. Given the realities of the structural powers of entrenched institutions, Lovin considers in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, "The question for ethics, however, is whether the normative implications of this study of the dialectic of justice come to something more than a warning to pay attention to the details."¹⁸⁴ While I agree with Lovin that Niebuhr's realism is both political and moral, I differ from Lovin in his emphasis on the ethic of love. I find humility to be more central, salient, and universal in Niebuhr's thought, to press the point that Niebuhr is not only a Christian realist but also a pragmatist who offers a compelling account of self-

183 Lovin, Robin. *Reinhold Niebuhr*. Abingdon Press. (2007). 65

184 Lovin, Robin. *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*. (Cambridge University Press. 1995, 1997). 211

contextualization for political discourse. Charles Lemert argues that an ethic of love needs to guard itself against perfectionist tendencies, that political love is not enough for stable and inclusive political norms, “Beings of our species are not by nature opposed to others so much as they are excessively *for* themselves.”¹⁸⁵ Paying attention to details is then not done merely for its own sake, or as a conduit for a loving ethic, but to gain insight for how to better relate to others. That process maintains both an ethical and political dimension. Niebuhr wants us to live this ethic without delusions about the nature of a given personal or public relationship, which makes the loving ethic more tenable and realistic as an attainable but bracketed norm.

As Gilkey states, for Niebuhr the one major positive aspect of modernity is, “that history manifests a dynamic thrust into novelty, that new possibilities of different modes of order appear continuously, or, as he usually puts this, that there are indeterminate possibilities in history for new and for even higher forms of cultural and social life.”¹⁸⁶ Such a consideration of partial, relative, contingent, transient perspectives offers the possibility of developmental and progressive political institutions, though it is by no means a given outcome. Thus humility as Niebuhr understands it is not only reflexive but relational and offers a modest foundation of a more robust deliberative democratic ethic of politics.

With this frame of reference in mind, we can consider specific examples of what Niebuhr's contingent ethical action entails on an individual level. While Ilsup Ahn has, in his co-reconstruction of Niebuhr and Habermas, argued for a particular understanding of

185 Lemert, Charles. *Why Niebuhr Matters*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London. (2011). 99

186 Gilkey, Langdon. *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2001). 164

relatively just authority in Niebuhrian context, Niebuhr's political and moral realism retains utility beyond that specific context. Beyond some categorization of a positional imperative that expresses the best possible just use of power and social responsibility, everyone else experiences choices of ethical importance and consequential outcomes made in everyday life. This process is not always easy and in Niebuhr's understanding, few people attain true authenticity in their moral understanding of themselves and in their discussions with other people. Nevertheless, Niebuhr's conception of ethical action is useful in that it recommends to us ways of developing personal perspectives as part of a relational identity. We can then measure our political claims against extreme examples for guidance in our less extreme cases, where maintenance of personal safety or access to participation is not at stake to the same degree. Social cleavages of race and gender provide some of the most enduring prejudices and are worth considering for Niebuhr's understanding of positional life. Additionally, extreme cases of political disenfranchisement also provide us with perspectives on proper political action in the scope of Niebuhr's ethic, and are therefore also worthy of consideration beyond experiences of race and gender. Toward the end of understanding how individual actors articulate a Niebuhrian ethic of humility in public discourse, I now offer the examples of Ralph Ellison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Adam Michnik as cases particularly edifying to the conclusion of my argument.

Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, provides us with a kind of creative self-affirmation that takes self-reflection seriously. In this case of a socially marginalized protagonist who faces racist institutions, we see Niebuhrian positional reflection not as a

self-criticism primarily of pride in the self as a lording of authority, but rather a pride in the self's conformation to social expectations. In the novel, the protagonist has been careful to distance himself from aspects of his contingent experiences from his racialized life in the South while living in New York. The racism that he encounters there is more subtle. Specifically, he worries what others expect of him in his manifestation relational identity as it relates to norms of stereotypical consumption. The protagonist is overcome by a sense of freedom, "But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? The very idea annoyed me. How could you know? It involved a problem of choice."¹⁸⁷ Such an experience highlights the necessity of self-reflection in anxious choices of bounded experiences as Niebuhr describes. The political presentation of an authentic self in such cases becomes quite difficult. Nevertheless it at least values whatever authentic expression one ultimately settles upon as a pragmatic expression of sincere but imperfect participation in deliberative social experience. This experience of anxious and constrained choice fits well with Niebuhr's concept of managing self-presentation in political discourse.

Ralph Ellison argues in his essay "Society, Morality, and the Novel," we should appreciate that, "the novel seeks to communicate a vision of experience. Therefore, whatever else it achieve artistically, it is basically a form of communication."¹⁸⁸ While in and of itself, a novel such as Ellison's *Invisible Man* might constitute a rhetorical

187 Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. Vintage International. Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, New York. (1947, 1995). 266

188 Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of*, John F. Callahan, editor. The Modern Library, New York. (2003). 700

exercise, beyond that experience it communicates Ellison's dialogical viewpoint in a way that embraces and affirms a Niebuhrian ethic of humility. It has real value beyond its own narrative world because its psychology is real. When we see the psychological anguish of the eponymous invisible man, for example in his indecision over how eating a particularly prepared yam would make him look relative to various peers, we see his desire to understand his personal preferences in light of social pressures and personal conceits. Ellison's novel therein provides a more robust and participatory form of deliberative discourse that someone like Diane Mutz or Iris Marion Young would affirm. Beyond Ellison's presentation of discursive practices in forms of literary and related communication, we can consider more radical expressions of Niebuhr's ethic of creativity in humility as well. Toward that end we can consider individuals enmeshed in violent and contentious conflicts.

Niebuhr's student and friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer demonstrates an extreme yet important example of action in a contingent political life, shaped by history and personal position. After returning from the United States to Germany during World War II because his conscience compelled him to confront the grim political realities of his home country, Bonhoeffer lived a very Niebuhrian life that emphasized hope against hope and the importance of possibility over resignation. He foreswore his pacifism and became part of a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945. Putting Niebuhr's pragmatism in to action, "Bonhoeffer taught that ethics is derived not from the lessons one draws from religious texts but from the decisions one makes in the trials of life."¹⁸⁹ Ironically, this decisive action does not curtail the scriptural concern that

¹⁸⁹ Diggins, John Patrick. *Why Niebuhr Now?* The University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (2011). 88

Bonhoeffer exhibited in his life, nor absolve him from judgment of his actions. In thus contextualizing Bonhoeffer's decisions, we can understand the scope and usefulness of a Niebuhrian ethic of humility, which seeks to diminish self-deceptions in ethical choices. In understanding Bonhoeffer's self-reflection as a social tool, we can understand those moments in our lives where our morality may shift toward a new experience, in moments of dissent either small or dire. The earlier discussion of prophetic religious experience as distinct from priestly sanctification here I maintain is an important and insightful one.

Reinhold Niebuhr's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, discusses Bonhoeffer in her work *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*. Here her task is in part biography of her father and in part a personal memoir. Beyond that, she concerns herself with her father's famous serenity prayer and specifically relates it to Bonhoeffer's personal struggle upon his return to Germany. Echoing the line from the famous prayer in the context of Bonhoeffer's reflection, "Where *is* the line that separates what 'cannot be changed' from what 'must be changed'?" (Sifton 219). Specifically about Bonhoeffer in that same section, Sifton discusses Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and recounts a conversation between him and Bonhoeffer. "One evening Dohnanyi asked Bonhoeffer 'what he thought about the New Testament passage 'all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (Matthew 26:52). Bonhoeffer replied that this held true for their circle as well. They would have to accept that they were subject to that judgment'."¹⁹⁰

This discourse among these two people, and their implicit recommendation that others act similarly to self-scrutinize, provides a strong example of the kind of deliberative practices

¹⁹⁰ Sifton, Elisabeth. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, London. (2003). 219

my Niebuhrian ethic of humility endorses. For Niebuhr then, the political prophet is the insightful political actor who values self-reflection and accepts the judgment of his or her truth-valuation as applicable to himself or herself. In doing so, such a person participates in a self-aware, self-critical practice of deliberative discourse. As I have discussed elsewhere in the contradistinction between the 400 and the one for the prophet Micaiah, it is not always a comfortable experience, but importantly for Niebuhr it is a self-aware one that one can acknowledge and relate to other people. Regarding her father's ethic of political participation Sifton explains, "His concern was with the messy, often painful, and frequent compromises that history, and sin, force on responsible people who *do* live in history, who live in real time. And he had a natural skepticism about the kind of people who are armored with the certain conviction that they are in the company of pure in heart who will prevail in the end. How were they so sure?"¹⁹¹ This pragmatic and existential skepticism against idealism informs the kind of ethic of humility that Niebuhr espouses. When we prioritize humility over love in political and moral realism, we ensure that love does not become a password for an exclusive community or denigrate love as conventional platitude. In examining the selfishness endemic to imperfect affective love in social ethics, we can take our political commitments more seriously and articulate that love and its constraints more truthfully. This is the kind of moral possibility that Niebuhr envisions toward a human approximation of justice, not a perfection of justice. We can consider Adam Michnik's view of politics in Poland as another example of deliberative politics in action, from a different perspective than either

¹⁹¹ Sifton, Elisabeth. *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, London. (2003). 236

Ellison or Bonhoeffer experienced.

Adam Michnik, within *The Church and the Left*, illustrates how an institutional religious body and a largely secular progressive movement can communicate with one another in productive ways. He understands the deliberative and discursive relationship between Poland's secular left and the Catholic Church as an encounter with God, with institutional Christianity, and with Christianity as a system of values.¹⁹² While the secular left's encounter with the Christian God is fairly limited for Michnik, the relationship with the institutional church is more robust. Michnik argues for a pragmatic and charitable discursive treatment of those who share a common interest against totalitarianism and who oppose radical abnegation of human dignity. He argues that the secular left and the Church must learn to respect one another. The secular left and the Church for Michnik cannot judge one another on the basis of apostolic missions and religious participation respectively, but rather, "This can only be avoided if both sides accept pluralism as a lasting component of Polish reality."¹⁹³ I argue that this attitudinal consideration is one that reflects a Niebuhrian ethic of humility borne of political insecurity, positional anxiety, and a reflective attitude toward managing that anxiety in relation to other people who inhabit a different vocabulary of meaning but who are in fact not ultimately adversaries on matters of substantive, contentious politics. Thus Michnik provides to us another workable example of how one can participate in deliberative practices. As he does so from a secular perspective, he offers a useful complement to Bonhoeffer's understanding of a Niebuhrian ethic humility. Michnik thus engages in a similar kind of

192 Michnik, Adam. *The Church and the Left*. Trans. by David Ost. University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (1993). 192
193 Ibid. 200

Niebuhrian political socialization though his understanding of religion and of Christianity is very different from that of Bonhoeffer.

In Michnik's consideration of misunderstandings between the secular left and the Catholic Church in Poland he discusses a kind of existential crisis that Niebuhr would envision as endemic and poisonous to political questions. Michnik in turn offers a positive and affirmative ethic of humility that he borrows directly from Bonhoeffer's own exemplary hardship. Michnik's own awareness of Bonhoeffer is worth noting as a point of comparison toward understanding deliberative practices grounded in an ethic of political humility. Michnik laments, "We live as prisoners of our myths and patterns... We do not even have the courage to quarrel honestly among ourselves, for every polemic is censored, every criticism takes on a new and unintended meaning, and every critical voice can become like clean water poured into a dirty glass."¹⁹⁴ Here we have a Niebuhrian view of the problem of political circumstances, and of human anxious pride that facilitates miscommunications and frustrations. Michnik's own practical exemplar is Bonhoeffer. Citing from "After Ten Years" in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Michnik extol's Bonhoeffer's words as an encounter with Christian values that may provide broader use in practices of deliberative politics. "The responsible man seeks to make his whole life a response to the question and call of God." Michnik concludes in response, "No one can answer for me. No one can absolve me from my responsibility."¹⁹⁵ Here then we see that a deliberative ethic of humility takes seriously positions of dissent, acting from a responsible but marginal position, and also takes

¹⁹⁴Michnik, Adam. *The Church and the Left*. Trans. by David Ost. University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. (1993). 213

¹⁹⁵Ibid. 214

seriously the informal and subversive political activities that make such actions possible. I consider these practices to reflect a basic tenet of liberal political theory because these actors exemplify so much emphasis on individual participation and individual responsibility. That aspect of liberalism is distinctly a component of a Niebuhrian ethic of public life and should be understood as such. The fierce individuality of Ellison, Bonhoeffer, and Michnik in gives a participatory and real face to the kind of deliberative practices I envision for a Niebuhrian ethic of political humility. Humility here does not make them conceited, craven, or naïve, but instead brave. Their expressions of dissent and nonconformity are utterly authentic to themselves and their deep commitments to engaging complementary but different points of view. This engagement is the essence of practical deliberative politics.

That is, Niebuhr's existential insecurity, his political realism, his ethic of humility, and his call to participation in radical if informal political deliberations are each important for the sake of bolstering arguments for a more capacious deliberative discourse in democratic thought. Toward that goal, this is the kind of politics that Habermas seeks in place of Kant's kingdom of ends: "The guiding images of successful forms of life that could meet morality halfway strike us, even without the certainty of divine assistance, as both an enabling and a constraining horizon of action. However, unlike Kant's ethical community, they do not arise in the singular and they are not forced into the rigid mold of what is morally required."¹⁹⁶ This capacity for self-aware, responsible expression of pragmatic politics in the face of enabling but constraining horizons is one that wholly identifies Niebuhr with an augmentation of deliberative

¹⁹⁶ Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion*. (Polity Press. 2008.) 227

politics that is expansive in its inclusive participation. Reinhold Niebuhr remains important for reformulating a relational understanding of morality. The notion of an equally enabling and constraining horizon of action also provides to us an alternative to disruptive forces of Enlightenment thought. Here we should recall my much earlier discussion of John Milton as an advocate of free and discursive speech and his stand against institutional censorship. His understanding of responsible conscience in political life has much in common with the kind of participation we see in Ellison, Bonhoeffer, and Michnik. They are exemplars of responsible, self-aware human freedom. I believe Niebuhr was correct in identifying and advocating Milton's capacity for and defense of expressive thought over the rigidity of narrow Lockean contractual language. Such deliberative practices as the examples I have provided remain relevant in contemporary struggles, but remain too often overlooked in the history of political thought.

In Niebuhr's thought, disillusionment is the wellspring of human creativity that provides a more robust sense of self and a more capacious relational identity toward the end of a more tenable, relative experience of justice. Revelation of a more auspicious understanding of one's perspective in political discourse makes democratic evaluations more robust. An awareness of the transient and contingent reality of political claims and of our own personal prejudices and conceits prepares us to relate to one another in a more workable manner. In like manner, an ethic of humility assuages the experience of pettiness in deliberative politics. Reinhold Niebuhr understood these things well and thus remains relevant for understanding their importance for the deliberative discourse and the political participation of people who inhabit diverse and often afflicted experiences. If

we forgo such tools of a well-honed political ethic of humility that we can bring to our deliberations with other groups of people, we may remain at the mercy of our inhabited anxieties, personal conceits, naïve ideals, or cynical withdrawal.

With these considerations in mind, hopefully we can internalize an ethic of a responsible individual after the manner of a Bonhoeffer or a Michnik. This task should be easier when we do not face immediate threats of execution and imprisonment. In narrower and in smaller struggles of political discourse where we have the benefits of democratic protections and institutions, it remains important that we are able to recognize our own contingencies and our own biases borne of our fears and insecurities, that we look for those same things in others, and encourage others to likewise reflect on those fears and insecurities with responsible conviction toward the end of more self-aware, sincere, and realistic political claims. Niebuhr's insightful political psychology thus provides to each of us important tools for the development of more lucid and responsible political order if we should seek to develop it.

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