John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr, and democratic virtue

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JOHN DEWEY, REINHOLD NIEBUHR, AND DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

by

Daniel A. Morris

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religious Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Diana Fritz Cates
ABSTRACT

I offer an interpretation of John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr that highlights the role of virtue in the visions of democracy that both writers articulated. Based on this interpretation, I argue that Dewey and Niebuhr both implied that virtue is necessary for democracy to thrive, despite the fact that they spent much of their careers in intellectual conflict with each other. Specifically, I claim that they were both committed to the value of humility and mutuality for democratic society. Humility and mutuality are virtues with profound importance for democracy that logically flow from Dewey’s framework of American pragmatism and Niebuhr’s Augustinian Christian theology. I argue that their ironic and unnoticed commitment to humility and mutuality as democratic virtues helps us to understand their shared critique of capitalism. For Niebuhr and Dewey, the democratic self stands in contrast with the capitalist self: the moral agent required and rewarded by capitalism is one who is severely deficient in humility and mutuality. I contend that the conception of democratic virtue that Dewey and Niebuhr shared, which informed their common critique of capitalism, led them to revise socially-inherited notions of property ownership, enact political solidarity with the working class, support the struggles of labor unions. This virtue-ethical interpretation demonstrates that two writers with deeply conflicting worldviews can both hold that democracy and capitalism are irreconcilable at the level of the moral agent.

Abstract Approved: _____________________________________________

Thesis Supervisor

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Title and Department

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Date
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Religious Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

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To Mom, Dad, Jason, Kate, and Parker
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INTRODUCTION

Sydney Hook, whose admiration for and intellectual debts to John Dewey were so profound that he considered himself “Dewey’s bulldog,” had little love for Reinhold Niebuhr.¹ Hook’s distaste for Niebuhr was likely due in part to Niebuhr’s feud with Dewey. Unrelenting critics of Dewey, such as Niebuhr, would hear a bark from the bulldog in defense of the master. On one occasion, Hook growled that “logically, not a single one of Reinhold Niebuhr’s social, political, and ethical views can be derived from his theology. This is demonstrable: his theology and metaphysics are perfectly compatible with the opposite of his own views of secular themes.”² Such was the territorial woofing among the public intellectuals of the early- and mid-20th century.

Hook’s critique of Niebuhr is overstated: of course Niebuhr’s “social, political, and ethical views can be derived from his theology.” This act of deriving political conclusions from theological premises was a task to which Niebuhr consistently returned throughout his career. Nor would Hook’s suggestion that “social, political, and ethical views” are exclusively “secular themes” hold up under scrutiny. However, Hook’s critique of Niebuhr is not without value. It illuminates the fact that the relationship between a theological (or philosophical) worldview and a political conclusion can be deeply ironic. Although the particular irony that Hook perceives—that Niebuhr’s political stances cannot be derived from his theological premises—does not apply to Niebuhr’s work, I will argue that the converse of Hook’s observation is true. A central claim of this dissertation attends to a different irony that marks the relationship between theological and philosophical worldviews and political conclusions. Niebuhr and Dewey, whose theological and


philosophical perspectives stood in stark contrast, derived from their respective worldviews some strikingly similar “social, political, and ethical views.” While Hook argues that Niebuhr’s theology is capable of yielding political positions that are the opposite of those that Niebuhr actually endorsed, I argue that a philosophical perspective that is the opposite of Niebuhr’s theology can yield many of the same political conclusions that Niebuhr endorsed. One of the central theses of this dissertation is that, despite their public argument, Dewey and Niebuhr failed to notice their agreement on certain political questions; especially those of democratic virtue and the urgent challenges of *laissez-faire* economics.

The role of this argument in my inquiry into the political ethics of Niebuhr and Dewey will become clear as I explain the four basic objectives of this dissertation. First, I want to highlight the value of attending to the “virtue ethics” implications of Dewey’s philosophy, Niebuhr’s theology, and the public interaction between the two writers. In attending to the virtue ethics implications of their work, my primary argument is that these two writers imply a common conception of democratic virtue. As Christine Swanton explains, a virtue “is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within a field or fields in an excellent or good enough way.”[^3] The many virtues that a person possesses, to one degree or another, comprise his or her character, and determine the kind of person that he or she is. Thus, “the fundamental questions of virtue ethics” are: “What kind of person do I, or we, want to be? How have others answered that question, and what can be learned from their answers? How do I, or we, actually attain the desired character? What moral habits are necessary, and how can they be cultivated?”[^4] When the term “virtue” is qualified by the adjective “democratic,” the focus of the analysis turns to the qualities of character needed to


sustain democracy. Thus the most basic question becomes: what kind of people must we be for
democracy to succeed? Although neither Dewey nor Niebuhr were “virtue ethicists” properly
speaking, I argue that they offered clear and compelling answers to this question. Both
understood humility and mutuality, in particular, to be essential for the success of democratic
life. In Chapter 1 I draw on Aristotle to elucidate the important features of virtue theory. In this
chapter I also offer working definitions of the specific virtues of humility and mutuality, and
anticipate and respond to some hypothetical objections to my project.

In order to make the case for this “democratic virtue” interpretation of Dewey and
Niebuhr, I give close readings of both writers, in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. I explore certain
elements of their comprehensive doctrines (a term I use synonymously with “worldviews”) in
detail for three reasons. One reason is that only through a detailed examination of their
comprehensive doctrines can a virtue ethical reading be justified. The claim that both thinkers
imply a conception of democratic virtue requires an examination of their treatments of
anthropology and ethics. Therefore I explore (in Chapter 2) Dewey’s ideas of experience, habit,
inquiry, communication, and growth. Likewise, I examine (in Chapter 3) Niebuhr’s doctrines of
finitude and freedom, sin, love, and justice. A second reason is that a detailed examination of
their comprehensive doctrines allows us to understand that, although both writers are reflecting
on the nature and value of “people rule,” their contrasting comprehensive doctrines lead them

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5 I borrow the term “comprehensive doctrine” from John Rawls. A comprehensive doctrine is a worldview
that, whether “religious or secular, aspires to cover all of life.” See the 1998 Commonweal Interview with
University Press, 1999). Rawls contrasts comprehensive doctrines with a “political conception,” and holds
that the latter is restricted to addressing issues of common life: “It just applies to the basic structures of
society, its institutions, constitutional essentials, matters of basic justice and property, and so on” (both
quotations are from Collected Papers, 617). By using the term “comprehensive doctrines,” I do not intend
to endorse any of the content of Rawls’ philosophy. Nor do I claim that my close readings of Dewey and
Niebuhr account for every feature of their respective comprehensive doctrines. Due to limits of space, I
must select the features of their comprehensive doctrines that are most important to understand their
thick theories of democracy. In making these selections, some features of their comprehensive doctrines
will go untreated.
to imagine this political ideal in different ways. In order to think clearly about the common
ground and the argument between Niebuhr and Dewey, I make a distinction between “thick”
and “thin” descriptions of democracy in the work of both writers. By “thick description of
democracy,” I mean an idea of democracy that is informed by, takes account of, and makes
reference to a well-defined comprehensive doctrine. By “thin description of democracy,” I mean
an idea of democracy that is superficial enough not to require such reference to any
comprehensive doctrine. With their anthropologies, ethics, and political theories in mind, we
are well-equipped to draw out the “democratic virtue” implications of both writers’ work. As I
mentioned above, I read both Dewey and Niebuhr as prescribing the virtues of humility and
mutuality as necessary (but not sufficient) for the success of democracy. A third reason is that
only a detailed examination of their respective comprehensive doctrines will allow us to
appreciate the irreducible argument that marked their public interaction from 1932 until
Dewey’s death in 1952. This public disagreement, which is the subject of Chapter 4, sharpens
the irony that accompanies the political resonance between the two writers.

A second objective of this dissertation is to show that this common image of the
democratic moral agent informed the critique of laissez-faire economics that Dewey and
Niebuhr shared. Both Dewey and Niebuhr articulated serious challenges to capitalism
throughout their careers. I hold that their shared but unnoticed conception of democratic virtue
informed their parallel critique of capitalism. Of course, they were both critical of the social
consequences to which capitalism leads. But I argue that they were not concerned only with
consequences; they were also critical of the qualities of character that they saw guiding moral
agents in free-market economies. Attention to virtue will show that their critique of capitalism
was, in part, a “democratic virtue” challenge, in that the moral norms, social conditions, and
practices of capitalism require and reward moral agents who are deficient in the democratic
virtues of humility and mutuality. This approach also illuminates the consequentialist aspects of their critique of capitalism, in that the virtue interpretation reveals new reasons for their opposition to free market economic theory, and therefore paints a more complete picture of their common argument. My thesis about their democratic virtue critique of capitalism develops a corollary argument, as well. The entire complex of ideas at play in the comprehensive doctrines of Dewey and Niebuhr, in the quarrel between the two, and in their shared critique of capitalism, reveals deep fissures within “liberalism.” Throughout this project, I will explain the relationship of each ethical vision (Dewey’s pragmatism, Niebuhr’s Augustinian Protestantism, and capitalism’s market morality) to liberalism. This nest of conversations shows that there is a wide variety of “liberals,” and that it is helpful to specify what we mean by liberalism when we characterize the work of other writers as liberal. I suspect that Stanley Hauerwas would find this project to be a useless and pedantic exercise, because he has shown reluctance to make such distinctions in similar conversations. However, failure to aim for precision will obscure deep divisions and irreconcilable conflicts between proponents of various species of liberalism. It will also hinder one’s ability to defend a position in the conversation about democracy and capitalism that continues today.

A third goal of this project is to show that, despite their compelling visions of democratic virtue and incisive critiques of capitalism, Dewey and Niebuhr failed to exhibit democratic tolerance in their public interaction with each other. I believe Dewey and Niebuhr’s respective cases for democracy were both highly successful in a number of ways. If one accepts the premises that underlie Dewey’s political theory, I think one can easily find his call for a renewal of democratic habits, his hope for the coalescence of new publics, and his critique of capitalism
all very persuasive. Similarly, if one accepts Niebuhr’s premises, I think one can find his
democratic vision and the critique of capitalism it engenders very compelling. (Of course, their
respective comprehensive doctrines and political stances are not immune from critique. Nor
should they be. I will examine and evaluate objections they made to each other’s intellectual
frameworks in Chapter 4, and will also consider the African-American philosophical reception of
Dewey in Chapter 2, and the feminist critique of Niebuhr in Chapter 3.) Despite all their
successes, though, I contend that Niebuhr and Dewey failed to practice democratic tolerance in
their public, written engagements of each other. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I argue
that they may have met the minimal standards of a libertarian tolerance in dealing with each
other, but they fell short of the requirements that democratic tolerance makes of moral agents
in a pluralistic society.

The fourth goal of this project is one that I will not take time to pursue explicitly. Rather,
it is my hope that this goal will be attained as a byproduct of early 21st century readers’
encounter with Dewey and Niebuhr. My hope is that people who read my interpretations of
Dewey and Niebuhr find their moral and political visions compelling. I am interested in calling
attention to certain features of Dewey and Niebuhr’s work, and to certain features of their
engagement of each other’s work, which can speak to important moral and political problems in
the early 21st century. Specifically, I hope that any contemporary Augustinian Christian who
might read this project would find thought-provoking Niebuhr’s case for and endorsement of
democracy, implied vision of democratic virtue, and challenges to capitalism. Likewise, my hope
is that any contemporary “empirical naturalist” who might read this project would be attracted
to Dewey’s case for and endorsement of democracy, implied vision of democratic virtue, and
challenges to capitalism. In addition, I would hope that both hypothetical readers would
consider each other an ally in the quests for a democratic political society and for reform of free market moral norms and social conditions.

My method in pursuing these goals is ethical analysis, in both descriptive and interpretive forms. I examine several crucial components of Dewey and Niebuhr’s respective systems of thought in order to explain—but not evaluate—their justifications for the moral and political stances they hold. This approach highlights the reasons that Dewey and Niebuhr have for their particular responses to political life broadly speaking, and to economic issues more specifically. In order to understand the reasons that writers like Niebuhr and Dewey have for the positions they hold, one must attend to their visions of the nature of human life, their conceptions of experience, freedom, finitude, communication, and so on. In short, one must attend to their comprehensive doctrines in order to understand their politics. The method of descriptive ethical analysis performs this task well, as it examines the component parts of both writers’ intellectual frameworks, relates the parts to the whole, and explains how political conclusions are derived from this whole. My analysis will also, when appropriate, refer to influential writers whose work informed that of Dewey and Niebuhr. In my descriptive analyses of the comprehensive doctrines of Dewey and Niebuhr, it is not my task to judge the adequacy of their epistemologies, moral psychologies, or anthropologies. Rather, I seek to explain these basic premises which inform their intellectual frameworks. My analysis moves from a descriptive to an interpretive mode as I argue for certain ethical and political implications that follow from these preliminary assumptions (Chapters 2, 3, and 5), evaluate the critiques that Dewey and Niebuhr made of each other (Chapter 4), and argue that both writers failed to exhibit the virtue of democratic tolerance in their dealings with each other (Conclusions). These arguments and evaluations on ethical and political questions comprise my original contribution to scholarly discussions on Niebuhr, Dewey, democracy, and capitalism, but they require extensive
descriptive analysis of Niebuhr and Dewey in order to be responsible and persuasive. I use the present tense in my ethical analysis of Dewey and Niebuhr in Chapters 2-4 because their philosophical and theological frameworks (and the various visions of human life and experience that these frameworks contain) continue to exist as live options for readers today. Dewey and Niebuhr are still relevant today because the intellectual and social conditions to which they responded are still with us, and because many people share the basic premises about human existence from which they reasoned toward political conclusions.

Although my primary method is ethical analysis, this project also occasionally operates in a mode of intellectual history. This is the case in Chapter 5, in which I focus on the reactions that Dewey and Niebuhr made to particular historical events and persons in economic life. As intellectual history focuses on the development and influence of ideas in their historical contexts, this method is appropriate for my discussion of the social, moral, and political ideas that Dewey and Niebuhr put forward in response to the vicissitudes of the free market in the early- and mid-20th century. This subtle change in content, from comprehensive doctrines and general theories of political life (Chapters 2-4) to concrete political conclusions embedded in historical contexts (Chapter 5) calls for this shift in method, from ethical analysis to intellectual history. I use past tense on occasion in Chapter 5 to signal that Dewey and Niebuhr offered the political arguments in question as responses to particular issues that were embedded in the historical periods in which they lived.

Finally, the content of this project shares common territory with the content of certain approaches to historical scholarship, especially the New Labor History associated with Herbert G. Gutman and David Montgomery. These scholars initiated a new focus in the field of labor history, in which scholarly attention shifted from institutions, political leaders, parties, elections, and other high-visibility subjects to the lives and motivations of working class people.
themselves. Writers of New Labor History asked what led members of the working class to form and join unions, work and vote as they did, relate to their families, co-workers, managers, and employers in distinctive ways, and so forth. In a 1966 article, Gutman explained this shift in scholarly attention, writing, “the ‘mind’ of the worker—the modes of thought and perception through which he confronted the industrialization process and which helped shape his behavior—has received scant and inadequate attention.”

For Montgomery, “[b]oth ‘history from the bottom up’ and the common fixation on great leaders have obscured the decisive role of those whom twentieth-century syndicalists have called the ‘militant minority’; the men and women who endeavored to weld their workmates and neighbors into a self-aware and purposeful working class.” In his analysis of what motivated these men and women, Montgomery describes an “ethical code to govern [workers’] conduct,” and identifies the ideals of “the stint,” “brotherhood,” and a “code of mutualism” as moral norms that led members of the working class to behave as they did. Gutman notes that “Christianity motivated so many labor leaders who organized the reaction against the radical transition from preindustrial to industrial America,” and that Christianity served “to condemn particular aspects of that new society and its ideology.” Of course, neither Niebuhr nor Dewey were members of the working class on which scholars of the New Labor History write. Nor would these workers have had the


9 Ibid., 17.

10 Ibid., 17–8.

11 Ibid., 18–9.

12 Ibid., 39.

time or leisure to articulate their comprehensive doctrines in the level of detail that Dewey and Niebuhr did. But it is clear that members of the working class derived reasons from their worldviews, whether secular, Christian, or of some other variety, that justified their objections to free market society, and that led them to seek its reform. Dewey and Niebuhr also derived such reasons from their comprehensive doctrines. Insofar as this project pays close attention to the reasons that these two writers had for endorsing democracy and critiquing capitalism, I find that the content of my work and the New Labor History share significant common ground. In addition, I expect that the topic of democratic virtue can provide a fruitful category for interdisciplinary conversation between religious ethicists and labor historians who seek to understand how and why working class people came to possess the qualities of character that shape their conduct. In this project I focus on humility, mutuality, and tolerance, but other democratic virtues (such as courage, justice, and solidarity) could also be studied by labor historians and scholars of religious ethics in order to understand more fully the lives and motivations of working people who value democracy.
CHAPTER I

VIRTUE, MUTUALITY, HUMILITY, AND CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES

The student of politics, then, must study the soul.

*Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*

The primary thesis of this project is that John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr shared a conception of the kind of moral agent that is required to maintain a successful democracy. That moral agent, I argue, is one who possesses the virtues of mutuality and humility. This chapter will begin to make that case by turning to Aristotle for a full picture of what is meant by virtue, by offering some preliminary, working definitions of mutuality and humility in particular, and by anticipating certain objections that Alasdair MacIntyre might have to the method and content of my project. MacIntyre’s anticipated objections must be considered here because the premises, content, and arguments of this dissertation contradict many of the highly influential theses that MacIntyre has advanced throughout his career.

In seeking to understand fully and in detail the ethical category of virtue, a turn to Aristotle serves us well. Aristotle’s theory of virtue has enduring appeal. It continues to guide religious and philosophical ethicists in contemporary scholarship more than two millennia after Aristotle lived and wrote. For Aristotle, virtue is one of the necessary elements in the life of *eudaimonia*, the final end of human existence, which all people seek to attain. Before exploring the meaning of this central concept in Aristotle’s moral theory, we should note the difficulties that come with any attempts to translate such terminology from Greek to English. Most translations and discussions of Aristotle’s ethics mark the challenges of communicating in a word or short phrase the full meaning of *eudaimonia* in English. Although the term is often

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rendered as “happiness,” this English word can imply a superficial sense of pleasure or a temporary elevation of emotion. Such an implication would fall short of capturing the significance of the Greek term. “Human flourishing” approximates the full meaning of the Greek word while avoiding the temporary and superficial connotations that accompany the English word “happiness.” However, this term can be awkward in situations calling for its repeated use. Some scholars, such as Martha C. Nussbaum, obviate these issues by leaving the term in the original Greek. Because scholars and translators variously employ “happiness,” “human flourishing,” “well-being,” and eudaimonia in the context of Aristotle’s ethics, I will use all four terms interchangeably.

According to Aristotle, eudaimonia is the highest good available to human beings. He has three ways of explaining the nature of this highest good. First, he argues in the Nicomachean Ethics that the ends of human action are the “goods achievable” by the specific action in question: we do the things that we do partly in order to achieve ends, which are the goods that we desire. While some goods that we pursue (such as money and tools) appear to be ends of our actions, they are in fact means to higher ends (such as the food and clothing we would buy with money, or the furniture we would make with the tools). An end that is a means to another end, according to Aristotle, is necessarily lesser in value relative to the latter.

“Therefore if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more

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3 This point is made in Diana Fritz Cates, Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends (Notre Dame, I.N.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 5; Martha C. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy, Rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6 (note).

than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking” (1097a28-30). The ultimate end sought by all human beings is *eudaimonia*.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself (1097a37-1097b7).

Happiness is, then, an end in itself and not a means to any other end, and this description proves its status as the highest human good. But Aristotle also claims, as a second way of explaining the nature of human flourishing, that it is the excellent performance of the distinctive function befitting the human being *qua* human being. To understand what makes the human animal distinctive in Aristotle’s eyes, one must understand his conception of the soul.

The human animal, according to Aristotle, has both a body and a soul. The human soul is one, and has both rational and irrational components, powers, or functions. The irrational component contains both nutritive and appetitive elements (1102a26-1102b35). The nutritive element of the irrational component of the soul is responsible for nutrition and growth; because human beings share this power with plants and other living things, the nutritive function is not distinctively human. The appetitive element of the irrational soul (which “shares in [the rational soul] in so far as it listens to and obeys it” [1102b31-32]) is responsible for such motions as desire and impulse; these motions arrive at their objects by perception. But because animals share with human beings the ability to perceive, this function in its irrational form is ruled out as the distinctively human (1098a1-2). Unlike plants and animals, though, human beings possess a rational element of the soul, which performs the function of reasoning, toward the end of

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5 All references to Aristotle’s ethics are from *Nicomachean Ethics*, found in his *Basic Works*. See above, note 1 for full bibliographical information on this collection. All subsequent quotations will be cited with in text parenthetical citations, using paragraph and line number.
knowing. Rationality can function both as pure activity of the human mind (sophia or the excellent state of the rational element of the human soul called “theoretical wisdom”) and also as reasoned guidance of the appetitive power of the soul (an activity that issues in various other forms of excellence in thought, action, and feeling). Because human beings are unlike any other animal in our ability to combine rational with irrational powers of the soul, this is our distinctive function. Therefore, Aristotle concludes, eudaimonia is the excellent performance of rational activities, and particularly the highest of these: “human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (1098a17-19).

A third way that Aristotle articulates eudaimonia summarizes the previous two in brief terms. The person who has achieved eudaimonia both lives well, in performing the distinctively human function(s) excellently, and acts well, in pursuing through action toward various penultimate ends that which is the means to no other end. In short, “the happy man lives well and does well; for we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action” (1098b20-22). Although “living well” and “acting well” appear to be separate here, these two ways of describing the life of human flourishing should be understood as distinct for the purposes of complete description of eudaimonia, but inseparable in the life of human excellence.

Before considering the role of virtue in this picture of human flourishing, we should note the life of happiness has a number of basic, constitutive elements without which flourishing becomes deeply difficult to achieve. Nussbaum has argued that to live and to do the humanly good, one must enjoy certain modest goods the possession of which unfortunately cannot be

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6 This articulation of human flourishing is controversial for reasons I will explain later.

7 Primarily in The Fragility of Goodness.
assumed for all human beings. Human goodness, Nussbaum persuasively shows, is deeply fragile because it is so contingent on elements of life over which moral agents cannot exert complete control, such as disease, poverty, hunger, and the sexual, racial, and ethnic identities assigned to people at birth and despised by social and cultural norms. Each of these factors, and indeed various others, deny many people the basic resources necessary to perform distinctively human functions at all, let alone excellently. This is not to say that happiness and virtue are out of reach for such people; it is only to say that social, cultural, and historical factors can provide immense challenges to individuals who pursue the Aristotelian goal of performing excellently the distinctively human functions. If one was born black in the southeastern United States in the 1820s, for example, one would have severely limited opportunities and resources to achieve an Aristotelian standard of sophia. Those people who have little hope of escaping poverty and hunger are likely to be so consumed with the pursuit of resources necessary for mere survival that they will not have the luxury of meeting a standard of contemplative excellence. As I will explain shortly, Aristotle held that virtue is one of the keys to living and doing the humanly good—but Nussbaum argues that Aristotle was acutely aware of certain limitations placed on human development by contingencies such as social contexts, resource availability, and cultural norms.8

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8 Nussbaum has attended in recent years to the contingencies that limit the ability of human beings to live and to do the humanly good. She has focused especially on the limitations facing women in India. Nussbaum has attempted to formulate universally applicable moral norms that will provide a framework for the establishment of basic political rights and remove people from the limitations to flourishing that come with luck and contingency. With the economist Amartya Sen, she calls on ethicists and politicians to examine “capabilities” of persons rather than economic indicators of national well-being such as GDP, which can obscure the experiences of individuals in need. Basic capabilities that Nussbaum hopes to secure through political rights for all people include bodily health (“Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter”), emotions (“Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence”), practical reason (“Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life”) and others. See Martha Nussbaum, “Women’s Capabilities and Social Justice,” Journal of Human Development 1, no. 2 (July 2000): 219–247; Martha
The issue of fragile goodness and socio-political limitations on the capacities of persons to pursue and to realize their full humanity brings up the thorny problem of Aristotle’s own perspective on women and slaves. Despite his belief that all people desire their own distinctively human flourishing as an end in itself, Aristotle inscribed into his moral philosophy cultural norms of his time that run counter to this universalistic conception of human beings’ pursuit of flourishing. These norms, embodied in social practices, severely limited the potential for women and slaves to pursue their happiness fully. In Aristotle’s moral philosophy, this inscription is evident in the belief that the excellences available to slaves and women are diminished because of their diminished capacity for deliberation relative to that of free men. As a result, Aristotle holds that husband/wife and slave/master relationships are naturally subject to dynamics of authority and obedience. These positions are and should be deeply unsettling to modern readers of Aristotle who are committed to basic principles of justice such as freedom and equality. But are they assumptions that are necessary to the structure of his moral philosophy? Do they render his ethical and political writings unusable? I follow several contemporary scholars of Aristotelian ethics in answering these questions in the negative. Nussbaum argues that, on the question of the social and political status of women and slaves, Aristotle failed to employ his own method, which directs critical inquiry toward “appearances,” on his own assumptions. By this argument, Aristotle’s politics and ethics offer more opportunities to establish and protect human equality than he realized. Diana Fritz Cates opts for “generous-minded interpolation” in light of the “immense contemporary relevance for both women and


men” that Aristotle’s theory of virtue holds.\textsuperscript{11} Rosalind Hursthouse considers herself a “neo-Aristotelian” while also concluding that Aristotle is “just plain wrong on slaves and women.”\textsuperscript{12} With these scholars, I find that Aristotle’s positions on slavery and domestic power dynamics are accidental, and not essential to his articulation of the structure of virtue, and that his theories of virtue and human flourishing are important enough to salvage while jettisoning the outdated political assumptions he imbibed from his culture.

With these caveats in mind, we can return to Aristotle’s notion of virtue, which holds central importance for his theory of human happiness outlined above. However, to understand this notion of virtue, we must recall Aristotle’s description of the human soul that I touched on previously, especially the fact that the human soul is composed of both rational and irrational components. Within the irrational component, he distinguishes a nutritive or vegetative element from an appetitive element. The vegetative element “causes nutrition and growth” (1102a34-36). This element of the irrational component of the human soul does not participate in human reason at all. The appetitive element of the irrational component of the human soul contributes to perception, desire, wish, and local movement.\textsuperscript{13} This element of the soul shares in human reason, “in so far as it listens to it and obeys it” (1102b31-32). Aristotle distinguishes between scientific and calculative parts of the rational soul; the scientific part contemplates invariable things, and the calculative part contemplates variable things (1139a1-16). Both elements of the rational soul are capable of directing the appetitive element of the irrational soul. Prior to his discussion of the irrational component of the soul, Aristotle gives readers a window into the meaning of virtue: “By human virtue we mean not that of the body but that of

\textsuperscript{11} Cates, \textit{Choosing to Feel}, 242–3, note 27.


the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of the soul” (1102a15-16). Thus, according to this formulation, virtues are habits that dispose us to excellent activities, or “states,” of the human soul according to its distinctive function. Furthermore, Aristotle specifies that the vegetative element of the irrational soul is not implied in discussions of human virtue, because “the excellence of this seems to be common to all species and not specifically human” (1102b4-5).

Human virtue, then, is habit that orients its possessor to excellent activity of the appetitive element of the irrational component of the soul and of the rational soul in both its elements. It is necessary to attend to this formulation, insofar as it helps to explain the distinction that Aristotle makes between “moral/character” and “intellectual” virtues. The formulation allows him to isolate habits that incline their possessor to excellent states of the appetitive component of the soul, which contribute to good human action and feeling (moral/character virtues) from habits that incline their possessor toward excellent states of the rational element of the soul, which contribute to good human thinking (intellectual virtues) (1102a14-18, 1138b35-36).

From this preliminary distinction between intellectual and moral virtues, Aristotle goes on to discuss examples and implications of both types. His analysis of character virtue will be particularly important to consider here, as it provides three indispensable details about the nature of virtue that will guide my future reflections. To understand these details, we should look more closely at the details of Aristotle’s full definition of character virtue. As we do so, though, we must also keep in mind that, though the two types of virtue may be distinct, they do not function in isolation from each other in the good human life. The virtue of practical wisdom, in particular, demonstrates the inter-related nature of moral and intellectual virtue. Practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue by which its possessors exhibit a capacity to act in relation to what is good for human beings (1140a27-31, 1140b1-6, 1140b20-30). Moral virtue cannot function in the absence of practical wisdom, which itself behaves at times like an intellectual
virtue (because it is a disposition to think well), and at other times like a character virtue (because it is concerned with appropriate action). Therefore, while I will attend here to certain features that Aristotle ascribes to moral virtue, I do not suggest that moral virtue can be exercised without intellectual virtue, particularly practical wisdom. Aristotle’s definition of moral virtue reiterates this connection between moral virtue and practical wisdom. He defines moral virtue as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (1107a1). For our purposes, three elements of this definition are worth explanation: 1) state of character; 2) choice, and; 3) the mean.

When he says that moral virtue is a “state of character,” Aristotle is saying that it is a stable disposition to act and to feel in certain ways given certain contexts. The Greek word for “state of character” is hexis, which can also be translated as “active condition” or as “possession.” Some scholars translate this element of Aristotle’s definition of moral virtue as “habitual disposition.”¹⁴ Moral virtue is a disposition insofar as it inclines its possessor to respond to relevant situations with certain appropriate actions and feelings. Moral virtue is “habitual” insofar as it is cultivated through regular practice (1102a14-18) and demonstrated with a high degree of stability and consistency. While the term “habit” has popular connotations of repetitive and perhaps uncritical behavior, in Aristotelian moral theory, virtue is not to be understood as thoughtless repetition. Part of the “stability” of these habitual dispositions is that they resist change over time. In order to possess a particular character virtue, moral agents must learn from those members of the moral community who already possess the virtue in question, and they must practice the virtue whenever circumstances call for it. In this way the disposition to act and to feel becomes engrained in the moral agent, so much so that the trait

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becomes part of the agent’s identity. When the question “who is she?” is asked in reference to a virtuous agent, the answerer can respond partly by invoking the character traits she possesses. According to Aristotle, we are always being trained in character virtue by those virtuous members of the moral community into which we are born; we learn appropriate modes of feeling and action “from our infancy” (1105a1).

The habitual dispositions possessed by moral agents are also, for Aristotle, a matter of choice. People who possess moral virtues are people who choose to act and to feel in appropriate ways. In Aristotelian moral philosophy, scholars often describe the process of choice through reference to a type of argument called a practical syllogism. A practical syllogism is a form of reasoning composed of two premises and a conclusion. The first premise in a practical syllogism is the major premise, and it communicates the end desired by the moral agent. The second premise is the minor premise, and it is a belief or perception about the means that will bring about the desired end. The conclusion of a practical syllogism is the moral agent’s decision to act in accordance with the belief and/or perception of the minor premise. As Nancy Sherman writes, “it is not too far-fetched to say the conclusion is an intention or commitment to act.”¹⁵ (We should modify this statement to include the commitment to feel along with the commitment to act.) For John M. Cooper, the practical syllogism is “the link by which a course of deliberation, yielding a decision to act...is enabled to produce an action in furtherance of this decision.”¹⁶ Cates and Sherman both show that the desire represented by the major premise and the belief and/or perception represented by the minor premise cannot be isolated from each other as the structure of the syllogism might suggest. As Cates writes, “[j]ust as belief and perception, represented by the minor premise of the practical syllogism, contribute to the

¹⁵ The Fabric of Character, 61.

¹⁶ Reason and Human Good in Aristotle, 46.
formation of the major premise, desire, represented by the major premise, contributes to the formation of the minor premise. 

Choosing to act and to feel in the appropriate ways—the result of desiderative deliberation and passionate perception—is essential to a moral agent’s possession of character virtue. Such choice allows for the formation of virtue in the first place, and expresses virtue in the second place.

A third important component of Aristotle’s definition of character virtue is that the habitual disposition concerned with choice must lead the moral agent to act and to feel in accordance with “the mean.” For Aristotle, virtuous feeling and action avoid excess and deficiency. Action and feeling that are excessive or deficient are not virtuous. For example, if I possess the virtue of compassion, I am habitually disposed to respond to situations in which those around me are suffering by choosing to act and to feel in ways that avoid excess and deficiency. This would mean that upon hearing the news that a friend’s beloved dog has died, I would, as a compassionate person, choose to feel my friend’s grief and to comport myself with sufficient respect and solemnity so as to share that grief. If I felt no pain and refused to share my friend’s grief, and if I acted as though he had suffered no experience calling for mourning, my chosen actions and feelings would likely be deficient. They would therefore fall short of feelings and actions befitting one who possesses the virtue of compassion. On the other hand, if my chosen actions included shaving my head, donning sackcloth, and eating ashes, and if my chosen feelings included such profound despair that I remained depressed for months on end, my choices to feel and to act would likely be excessive given the circumstances. Like the deficient responses, these too would be choices unbefitting one who possesses the virtue of compassion.

For Aristotle, moral virtue—habit that disposes an agent to act and to feel in accordance with the mean—is a matter of the appropriate response “at the right times, with reference to the

\[17\] Choosing to Feel, 9. See also Sherman, The Fabric of Character, 40.
right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way” (1106b20-22). These specifications describe actions and feelings in accordance with the mean.

The distinction that Aristotle makes between moral/character virtue and intellectual virtue allows us to keep these three important features of character virtue (habit, choice, and the mean) in mind as we read the reflections of Dewey and Niebuhr on democracy. However, I do not want to suggest that the democratic virtues that Dewey and Niebuhr implied are strictly “moral virtues.” As I read their theories of democracy, I find Dewey and Niebuhr advocating conceptions of humility and mutuality that guide moral agents in all human activities, including thought, action, and feeling. My interpretations of Dewey and Niebuhr will therefore utilize the Aristotelian ideas of habit, choice, the mean, and so forth, without suggesting that humility and mutuality are neatly isolable to any one specific sphere of human activity, such as “action,” apart from others, such as “thought” or “feeling.”

In addition to these three components of Aristotle’s definition, there is another element of his theory of moral virtue that is important for my purposes. Aristotle holds that the human being is a social animal, which means that for the most part moral virtues are habitual dispositions to choose to act and feel in accordance with the mean within contexts of social relations. The claim that the human being is fundamentally a social organism is made clearly and unequivocally throughout Aristotle’s works.¹⁸ Virtue is related to human beings’ fundamental sociality in two ways. On the one hand, virtue is a product of social relationships, as human beings must be trained in the development of habitual dispositions to choose the good from those in the moral community who already possess virtue. On the other hand, some relationships and networks of relationships require certain moral virtues for their continuation and success. For example, the virtue of justice is a necessary quality of character for the network

¹⁸ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see for example 1094b5-11, 1097b10-12, 1155a1-10. In the *Politics*, see for example 1252b27-32.
of social relationships that comprise the self-sufficient community. One might argue that compassion is a virtue that is necessary for continued success of “character friendship.” When certain virtues are required for the flourishing of specific social relationships and networks, those virtues can be described as such by using an adjective appropriate to the relationship in question. So justice could be a “civic virtue.” If one wanted to argue that compassion is a necessary quality of character for parties in a moral friendship, one would call compassion a “moral friendship virtue” (although this would certainly not restrict the habit of compassion feeling and action only to such relationships).

These Aristotelian points about the social nature of virtue are directly relevant to the extension of virtue theory into political ethics in general, and into reflection on democracy in particular. When one argues that certain virtues are necessary for the continued success of the web of social and political relationships known as democracy or “people-rule,” as I claim Dewey and Niebuhr did, one refers to those virtues as “democratic virtues.” Aristotle’s reflection on the role of virtue in human sociality provides us with an opportunity to consider democracy as a political (and therefore social) arrangement that some theorists think requires certain virtues to maintain orderly functioning. Why would virtues be important for the smooth functioning of this particular social arrangement? Who must possess these virtues in the political structure of people rule? To whom must these virtues be extended? Answers to these questions will help us envision more clearly the particular details of democratic virtue. As I suggest preliminary answers to these questions, I will leave my understanding of democracy as broad and general as possible. For the purposes of this preliminary inquiry into democratic virtue, democracy is the political structure which aspires to the norm of “people rule.” Leaving this definition so broad

19 Of course, Aristotle did not share the high praise and positive evaluation that Dewey and Niebuhr gave to democracy. On his conception of people rule, see: Aristotle, Politics, in The Basic Works of Aristotle, Book III, chs. 7–9.
and general is helpful at this point in my inquiry because it a) allows us to refrain from identifying democracy too closely with any one of its particular historical manifestations, and b) leaves the “thick description” of democracy to Dewey and Niebuhr (in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively).

First, those theorists who hold that virtue is a necessary feature of democratic social and political orders (as I argue that Dewey and Niebuhr do) make this claim because certain character traits are necessary for the attainment of the specific goals pursued by the socio-political order in question. In the case of democracy, the primary goal is that the people rule themselves. Various tactics have been utilized in historical examples of democracies as means to achieve this ideal, including popular suffrage, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, freedom to peaceably assemble, and so forth. A theorist who considers virtue to be necessary to the achievement of the broad goal of people rule may argue that this goal itself requires certain traits of character, or she may argue that the particular tactics used to pursue this goal require specific dispositions. In either case, the deficiencies in virtue will frustrate the pursuit of democratic goals and the implementation of democratic tactics, because the people who must make such pursuits and implement such tactics will not possess the habits necessary to do so. In addition, the democratic task of self-legislation requires virtue. Democracy requires that the people join in consensus to author the law that will govern them; or at least to support the creation of good law by their elected officials. Lacking the relevant habits, the people will not be equipped to think, act, and feel in the ways necessary to support such self-legislation.

Second, in a democratic political society, the people and those they elect to perform the activities of governance must all possess democratic virtues. This is because—ideally—the people are sovereign, and their power must be exerted in accordance with good habits of feeling, thought, and action. Short of such exertion, they will fail in maintaining a democratic
polis; the political order will be marked by exclusion of the vulnerable, and will therefore be undemocratic. Representatives must also possess these virtues, insofar as they do the work of policy making. Representatives who possess democratic virtue will be inclined to include all people in the law’s creation, and will be disposed to write law that serves democratic ends.

Third, democratic virtues must be exercised toward all people who would be included in the relationship characterized as democratic. This includes, most obviously and immediately, one’s fellow citizens in a democratic nation. Therefore, if one holds that justice is a democratic virtue necessary for American democracy, one claims that justice must be extended by all citizens and representatives to all other members of American society. This is especially true of relationships between citizens in which imbalances of power obtain; democratic virtues are particularly important in relationships between men and women, European- and African-Americans, the working class and those who own the means of production, and so forth. Failure to exhibit democratic virtue in these relationships will augment division, resentment, and suffering, and will therefore hinder the possibilities of consensus necessary for the people to rule themselves.

This overview of Aristotle’s definition of virtue and minor tangent into the particular details of virtue in democratic society should suffice as an explanation of what is meant by the terms. When reading Dewey and Niebuhr, I will offer an ethical analysis that calls attention to virtue in two ways. First, I will suggest that although Dewey and Niebuhr were not “virtue ethicists” in the technical sense of the term that has developed in the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st, a “virtue ethical” reading of their work is valid. I will highlight the elements of their moral writings that resonate with essential components of Aristotle’s theory of virtue such as “habit,” “disposition,” an ethical sense of “the mean,” and so forth. Where we find extended use of these or closely related concepts, it is justifiable to say
that we are on the terrain of virtue discourse, broadly construed. Second, I will read their work with the basic questions of virtue ethics in mind. As Ann Mongoven explains, “the fundamental questions of virtue ethics” are “What kind of person do I, or we, want to be? How have others answered that question, and what can be learned from their answers? How do I, or we, actually attain the desired character? What moral habits are necessary, and how can they be cultivated?”

One of the fundamental questions of virtue ethics is the question of “what kind of person I, or we, want to be” because, as we have seen, virtues are inclinations so deeply ingrained in their possessors that they become part of the moral agent’s identity. When reading the democratic theories of Dewey and Niebuhr, I will ask them a variation of this question: “what kind of person is necessary for this picture of democracy to work?” I find strong answers to this question rising clearly to surface in works by Dewey and Niebuhr.

Before moving on to outlines of mutuality and humility in particular, the preceding discussion of Aristotle’s conception of human beings’ fundamental social nature requires that I acknowledge one final debate about his theory of eudaimonia and virtue. In a number of passages (mainly in the Nicomachean Ethics), Aristotle claims that the life of philosophical contemplation in accordance with theoretical wisdom, or sophia, is by itself equivalent to eudaimonia. This suggestion is made in Book I, Chapter 7, a section I referred to previously in defining virtue. There Aristotle claims that

> if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say ‘a so-and-so’ and ‘a good so-and-so’ have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of the lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, [and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well

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performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. (1098a8-19)

Because the “best and most complete” virtue is that which corresponds to the most characteristically human element of the soul, this virtue would be the habit guiding the activity of the highest element of the rational soul. Thus the suggestion here is that the active exercise of *sophia* is the equivalent of the human good.

Elsewhere Aristotle makes this claim more directly. In Book X, Chapters 6-8, Aristotle explicitly argues that the life of contemplation in accordance with theoretical, rather than practical, wisdom is the highest form of human happiness. “Happiness extends, then, just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy, not as a mere concomitant but in virtue of the contemplation; for this in itself is precious. Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation” (1178b28-32).

The claim that the exercise of theoretical wisdom is the equivalent of human flourishing has puzzled analysts of Aristotle’s ethics for quite some time. Some scholars have advanced “intellectualist” or “exclusivist” interpretations of Aristotle’s ethics, which take Book X, Chapters 6-8 as indicative of Aristotle’s position on *eudaimonia*. These interpretations advocate the conclusion that Aristotle was committed to the idea that the practice of theoretical wisdom comprises by itself human flourishing.21 Others disagree, arguing that Aristotle’s theory of human flourishing includes much more than the activity of theoretical contemplation and the attainment of *sophia* alone. Cooper speaks for a number of scholars from this second group when, in his discussion of Book X, Chapters 6-8 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues “that despite a certain initial plausibility such an intellectualist interpretation cannot make coherent

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sense of Aristotle’s theory in the *Nicomachean Ethics* taken as a whole.” Cooper demonstrates that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* “certain passages, particularly in the sixth book, suggest that Aristotle’s real view of what it is for a human being to flourish includes much more than merely intellectual activity.” Scholars such as Cooper consider the intellectualist/exclusivist interpretation of Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* to be inconsistent with the rest of Aristotle’s ethics for (at least) two reasons.

One reason why scholars such as Nussbaum hold that the intellectualist interpretation needs qualification is that a conception of human flourishing that elevates *sophia* to such a degree seems to advocate a life of solitary isolation. To exercise the rational soul in accordance with excellent theoretical wisdom is to live the life of contemplation. Such a life seems unlikely to be one in which meaningful amounts of time are spent engaged with other people. This type of life seems contradictory to Aristotle’s strong insistence that the human being is a social animal whose good can be realized only in relationships with other people. Indeed, the important social relationships that Aristotle stresses are conceived of as intrinsically good, and not as means to other goods. As Nussbaum points out, “Book IX...expressly rules out a solitary *eudaimonia* as lacking in an important intrinsic value; the conclusion is that, lacking *philia*, it is not really *eudaimonia* at all, since it is not complete.”

Scholars reject the intellectualist interpretation and qualify the claims of Book X, Chapter 6-8 for another reason, too: the intellectualist interpretation mistakenly holds theoretical wisdom as the only virtue that constitutes human happiness, while in fact, Aristotle meant the entire life of virtue to constitute *eudaimonia*. In this life *sophia* is an important player, but it is not the only player. The exercise of theoretical wisdom is partly constitutive of

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22 *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, 90.

23 *The Fragility of Goodness*, 376.
eudaimonia, as is the practice of the other moral and intellectual virtues. For J.L. Ackrill, virtuous feeling and action are not a means to the subsequent end of human flourishing; rather they are, with theoretical thinking, partly constitutive of human flourishing. Several passages in the Nicomachean Ethics support this interpretation. In Book I Aristotle asks rhetorically why “should we not say that he is happy who is active in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life” (1101a14-17)? Here the intellectualist interpretation that stresses Book X, Chapters 6-8 finds a challenge: theoretical wisdom cannot be the sole component of human flourishing because a basic level of material satisfaction is necessary, as is “complete virtue,” including moral virtues and practical wisdom. Indeed, Aristotle supports this conclusion elsewhere: the happy person “will be engaged in virtuous action and contemplation” (1100b19-20). Ackrill’s point that the fullness of virtue—not merely sophia—is necessary for a human life to qualify as one of eudaimonia finds strong support in passages like these. On the question of the life of virtue and the role of theoretical wisdom in human flourishing, I find Nussbaum’s explanation and imagery persuasive:

Aristotle claims that sophia is one part of eudaimonia...and also that it is in some way the best part. It is, as it were, the biggest and brightest jewel in a crown full of valuable jewels, in which each jewel has intrinsic value in itself, and the whole composition (made by practical wisdom) also adds to the value of each.  


25 The Fragility of Goodness, 374. Some scholars, including Nussbaum, find the intellectualist argument in Book X, Chapters 6-8 of Nicomachean Ethics to be so foreign to the rest of the tenor of the treatise that they suggest other explanations are needed to account for this jarring discrepancy. Nussbaum points out that “the text of EN X seems to be oddly composed, giving rise to suspicion that Chapters 6-8 are not originally parts of the same whole” (Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, 376ff). Cooper acknowledges that other analysts have suggested these passages are reflections of Aristotle’s early adherence to Platonic models of human intellect and virtue. Although Cooper disagrees with this suggestion, he too, has to account for the serious discrepancy between Book X, chapters 6-8 and the rest of the Nicomachean Ethics. He does so by claiming that “the intellectualist strain in the NE is altogether a late development in Aristotle’s moral theory” (Reason and Human Good in Aristotle, 148–9, note 5).
Now, from the general to the particular: having sketched this broad picture of Aristotelian virtue, we can take up the specific examples of mutuality and humility. Mutuality is difficult to define, and I will construct my working definition of it through reference to figures and concepts in Christian ethics, especially the work of Gene Outka and Søren Kierkegaard. More specifically, my working definition of mutuality takes as its starting point Christian ethical reflection on *agape*. Mutuality has often been understood in the realm of Christian ethics as a variant of love, typically one discussed in comparison (and sometimes also in contrast) with the religious and ethical ideal of *agape* love. To understand mutuality, then, we can turn first to Christian reflection on the concept of “mutual love” in light of the religious and ethical norm of *agape*. *Agape* is a Christian ethical ideal of enormous importance. Its centrality is due in part to the emphasis Jesus gives to the dual love command in the synoptic gospels. In response to a Pharisee who asks him “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest,” Jesus replies, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22: 36-40). Jesus’ summary was, of course, a distillation of religious and ethical norms from Hebrew scripture and tradition; the first commandment calling for love of God is recorded in Deuteronomy’s famous *shema* prayer (6: 4-5), and the second commandment calling for neighbor love is written in Leviticus (19: 18). Most basically, love of neighbor means benevolence and beneficence: wishing and doing well for one’s neighbor. It can also mean “other regard,” and/or affection. At this point in our inquiry, we can safely adhere to a working definition of *agape* as benevolence and beneficence, and attend more directly to the features of

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26 Other versions of Jesus’ formulation of the dual love command are found in Mark 12: 28-34 and Luke 10: 25-28. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
agapic love that will facilitate an understanding of mutuality. As agape, love has a number of important constitutive features that set it apart from other types of love and that illuminate the character of mutual love and thus the virtue of mutuality.\(^\text{27}\) I will address three of these elements—equality of extension, independence of response, and self-giving/self-sacrifice—in order to explain what I mean by mutuality.\(^\text{28}\)

One of the features that many Christian ethicists consistently ascribe to the ideal of neighbor love is that agape is extended to all neighbors equally, irrespective of any particularity on the part of the neighbor recipient.\(^\text{29}\) The object of agape is the neighbor qua neighbor. The Christian loves all people because they are children of God, and not because they have particular characteristics or merits. This means that the agapic lover extends neighbor love to the enemy as well as to the lover and the friend. Søren Kierkegaard articulated this radical

\(^{\text{27}}\) The primary concern of this dissertation is ethics, rather than theology, insofar as those two categories can be distinguished. Therefore, the following discussion of agape will focus on the second part of the dual love command (“neighbor love”) rather than the first (“love of God”). Though my primary concern is with ethics, this dissertation will take up theological themes when necessary (see, for example, Augustine’s understanding of humility and the incarnation below). Indeed, no treatment of Reinhold Niebuhr’s thought would be adequate without at least partial engagement of his theological views. I am aware that many writers in theology and ethics, such as Anders Nygren, would say that such focus on ethics at the expense of theology is already doomed to misunderstand the nature of agape because agape is the divine love extended to the human realm. Nygren’s position, which he attributes to Paul and Martin Luther as well, is that God’s love for human beings—depicted most clearly on the cross—flows through those human beings who grasp God’s love in faith toward their neighbors. Therefore, Nygren would likely say that neighbor love is and must be “God’s love” understood soteriologically, and that for this reason a project like mine can only misconstrue agape because its primary focus is not on God’s love expressed on the cross. See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S Watson (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 1982), especially 75–103.

\(^{\text{28}}\) These three elements do not exhaust the substantive content of agape.

\(^{\text{29}}\) Here I identify agape as an “ideal,” rather than as a virtue, because identifying agape as a virtue requires a response to those theologians who define it exclusively as “God’s love for creation,” and who object to the suggestion that human agency is involved in extending love to one’s neighbor. Again, Nygren is an example of such a theologian. While Nygren’s position is interesting for the political habits it may inculcate, I have insufficient space to examine and address it here. And although my rendering of agape as an “ideal” rather than as a “virtue” may seem like equivocation and avoidance, I don’t think it is necessary to take a stand in this conversation in order to: a) identify the salient features of agape that allow us to construct a working definition of mutuality; b) argue that mutuality can and should be understood as a virtue, and; c) do so in such a way that sheds new light on the democratic theories of Dewey and Niebuhr.
equality of neighbor love well, and contrasted this feature of *agape* with typically human ways of loving. For Kierkegaard, human beings are inclined to take into account the particularity of love’s recipient. Indeed, human love is motivated by such particularity, in contrast with *agape*.

“Erotic love…is defined by the object; friendship is defined by the object; only love for the neighbor is defined by love.”

For Kierkegaard, this stark difference between preferential human love and universally-extended *agape* is one of the defining features of Christianity, and also one reason why Christianity is so infinitely difficult and demanding, though not impossible with divine assistance. “Christianity is neither blind nor one-sided, with the calmness of eternity it surveys equably all the dissimilarities of earthly life but does not divisively take sides with any single one….Christianity, then, does not want to take away the dissimilarity, neither of high rank nor of lowliness. But, on the other hand, there is no temporal dissimilarity, neither the lowest nor the most acceptable in the eyes of the world, with which Christianity sides in partiality.”

Love’s disregard for particularities among the loved also elevates love beyond the realm of change and flux. Because the extension of *agape* is not dependent on the neighbor’s particularity, neighbor love does not change if and when the neighbor changes.

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31 Ibid., 70–1. Interpreters of Kierkegaard face a number of important challenges in light of his penchant for irony, and because of his practice of writing under pseudonyms. Both the ironic tone and the pseudonymous authorship generate uncertainty about what ethical, religious, and/or philosophical position is actually the one espoused by Kierkegaard. I assume that Kierkegaard’s religious and ethical perspective in *Works of Love* is not ironic, and that it can be understood as consistent in meaning with pseudonymous works such as Anti-Climacus’ *Sickness Unto Death*. It is certainly possible to disagree with this assumption: see, for example, Daniel Berthold, “Kierkegaard’s Seductions: The Ethics of Authorship,” *Modern Language Notes* 120, no. 5 (December 2005): 1044–1065. Berthold argues that Kierkegaard’s strategy of concealing the author through the use of pseudonyms amounts to seduction, and as such is indicative of the aesthetic way of life. I will refer to pseudonymous authors in the text of this dissertation when appropriate (e.g., any discussion of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* will refer to the positions and claims of Johannes Climacus, not Kierkegaard), in accordance with Kierkegaard’s stated desire: Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, 1: Kierkegaard’s Writings Vol. 12.1*, trans. Howard H. and Edna V. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 625–7. However, footnotes and bibliographical entries will list Kierkegaard as the author, even of pseudonymous works, to avoid confusion and in keeping with traditional practices for citing works in the Kierkegaardian corpus.
claims, the unalterable nature of *agape* means that neighbor love “involves permanent stability.”

The second crucial feature of *agape* relates to the first. Neighbor love is extended by the Christian to all people without the condition that a certain response must follow. *Agape*’s disregard for particularity on the part of the loved neighbor can extend to include the particular response, or lack thereof, that the neighbor demonstrates. In this sense, love’s independence of response can be considered a corollary of love’s universality/impartiality. However, it is helpful to separate equality of extension and independence of response as distinct but related aspects of *agape*, especially when comparing it to mutual love. Independence of response means that there are no conditions to which the neighbor is subject in the Christian’s extension of *agape*. Neighbor love does not engage in fine calculations that attempt to balance extension and response, and such love does not “seek its own.” Outka notes that this independence of response apparently opens up a problem for theories of neighbor love, in which the Christian who loves is subject to exploitation: if the lover extends love to the beloved without any conditions that the beloved’s intentions and behavior respond in kind, what is to stop the beloved from taking advantage of the extended love? Could the beloved remain indifferent to the extension of benevolence and beneficence? Worse, could the beloved use the lover as a means to his or her own ends, knowing that the love will continue to be extended no matter what? Outka answers these concerns by showing that the extension of love without the condition of a loving response can protect against exploitation if we recall that “equal regard” does not necessarily mean “equal treatment.” As Christians love all their neighbors equally and without condition, they also take into account the particular needs and circumstances of each particular neighbor. Some neighbors may need love to be expressed in a different way from

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others. In addition, *agape* does not simply issue a “blank check” because the lover will continue to love unconditionally while resisting his or her own exploitation either a) for the sake of the neighbor’s well-being; b) for the sake of some third party’s well-being, or; c) for the sake of the lover’s own well-being. Such concerns and forms of resistance do not indicate the withdrawal of love; it is not true that the *agapic* lover fails to extend beneficence to the beloved merely because the former refuses to comply with the wishes of the latter. These concerns and forms of resistance indicate only a change in thought and behavior in line with practical wisdom.33 Outka also explains that some theologians and ethicists claim that while neighbor love is not extended with any conditions requiring a return of love in kind, the lover can still be interested in receiving a loving response.34 In any case, *agape* is properly understood as freely-given love, independent of the kind of response offered by the beloved.

The third crucial element of *agape* is self-giving/self-sacrifice, and is related to the love’s independence of response. For many theorists of Christian neighbor love, *agape* means love in which the lover engages in self-sacrificial regard and/or conduct on behalf of the beloved. For these theorists, neighbor love means a renunciation or denial of self-love and self-interest. Indeed, self-love is considered to be the major problem facing human beings. In this view, love of self cannot coexist with *agape*, which demands that the lover sacrifice himself or herself to the beloved in the act of love. Anders Nygren espouses this position. For Nygren, neighbor love “excludes all self-love. Christianity does not recognise self-love as a legitimate form of love. Christian love moves in two directions, towards God and towards [the] neighbor; and in self-love it finds its chief adversary which must be fought and conquered.”35 Part of Nygren’s reason for

33 Ibid., 21–4.

34 Ibid., 34–44.

35 *Agape and Eros*, 217.
advocating this stark opposition between love of self and love of God/neighbor is that he holds that all natural human love is self-serving and acquisitive. Nygren’s position is that *agape* is not possible unless this self-serving drive for acquisition is given up, and to give this self-love up in response to God’s gift is precisely what is meant by self-sacrifice. Outka surveys some Christian theologians and ethicists for whom this opposition between self-love and *agape* is too strong. For these thinkers, the language of “self-giving” is more appropriate. Outka explains that Karl Barth offers an example of this approach, in part because Barth’s notion of *agape* “is preoccupied not so much with loss to the self as with gain for the other.” Whether the language is of self-sacrifice or self-giving, and whether the formulation conceives of self-love and love of neighbor/God as oppositional or as capable of being reconciled, *agape* includes an element of gratuitous extension of one’s very being to the neighbor in benevolence and beneficence.

These features of *agape* will help us understand the Christian ethical ideal of mutual love, and thus allow us to formulate a working definition of the virtue of mutuality. While *agape* is universally extended, unconditional, self-sacrificing (or self-giving) benevolence and beneficence, the dominant features of mutual love are more modest. While it is still love, and therefore is still a form of benevolence and beneficence, the fact that it is “mutual” indicates a number of important differences. The first difference is that, as “mutual,” it is a form of love that is given and received in rough equality over time between the parties involved. Therefore, mutual love cannot be universally extended as is *agape*. Neighbor love is extended to all neighbors, including those who cannot and do not respond in kind. Mutual love, on the other hand, can be achieved only when the parties involved are aware of the extension, reception,

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36 See, for example, his discussion of the Gospel of Mark, Ibid., 92.

37 *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, 209.
and response in love’s exchange. Mutual love is a form of benevolence and beneficence that is more common to relationships of family members, friends, intimate/romantic lovers, and fellow community members than it is to the “neighbor relationship” as the latter is conceived in much Christian ethics. Secondly, mutual love is more interested in equality of extension and response between parties to the love relation than is agape. Although love may not be extended on the condition that it is returned in kind, the lover in a relationship of mutual love is interested in achieving a rough equality of exchange with the beloved over time. If such equality in the exchange of benevolence and beneficence is not achieved, the lover who finds herself giving a disproportionately high amount may consult with the beloved who is perceived to take a disproportionately high amount. In such consultation the friendship may be renewed if the friends recommit to a relationship of truly mutual love, or they may decide that they cannot meet each other’s needs and so change the status of their relationship to something other than “friendship.” Thirdly, unlike agape, it is highly problematic to characterize mutual love as “self-sacrificial” and to oppose mutual love to “self-love,” as some theorists of agape do. Because self-sacrifice is such an extreme form of extending love, it is less likely that such an expression of benevolence and beneficence could be matched in response. And because mutual love is not conditioned upon immediate reciprocity, but seeks rough equality of exchange over time between the parties involved, it retains a measure of benevolence and beneficence directed toward the self. In sum, mutual love is interested in the achievement of equality of exchange over time, and so strives for more modest goals than does agape, but also provides more meaningful safeguards against the lover’s exploitation than are present in agape. Mutual love is a kind of compromise between love and justice, that virtue by which each is rendered his or her due.
For the purposes of my dissertation, the important aspect of mutual love to consider is “how” exchange is made, not “what” is exchanged. In other words, as I read Dewey and Niebuhr in search of democratic virtue, I will focus on the element of “mutuality” and not on the element of “love.” This is the case for two reasons: first, both writers are interested in social and political exchanges characterized by rough equality over time, and these exchanges often are not exchanges of benevolence or beneficence. Often, in a democratic political society with an accompanying modern economic order, the exchanges are not primarily “other regarding,” but are primarily “self regarding.” When governed by the virtue of mutuality, moral agents would work toward rough equality of exchange in even these dynamics. Second, while Christian love is an operative concept in Niebuhr’s thought, it would be misleading to suggest that Dewey was invested in Christian love, as his perspective was a philosophical, and not a Christian theological one. Therefore, my working definition of the virtue of mutuality emphasizes the interest in equal interaction rather than the good given and received: mutuality is the habitual disposition to seek and to value relationships in which both (or all) moral agents involved are guided by an interest in achieving approximate equality in terms of goods exchanged. As will become clear in the following chapters, I think this working definition applies well to the democratic theories of both Niebuhr and Dewey, although they would certainly identify their own details in a virtue of mutuality and emphasize their own reasons for advocating such a virtue.

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38 Having said this about the inapplicability of Christian theological and ethical concepts to Dewey’s work, I am not sure that one can separate his life and writing completely from Christian thought. I find interesting overlap, for example, between Dewey’s conception of experience (and American pragmatism’s attention to experience more generally) and that of American liberal Protestantism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. On experience in American liberal Protestantism in this time period, see especially Gary J. Dorrien, The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950, 1st ed. (Louisville, K.Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Dewey’s affinities with American Christianity have been noticed by other analysts as well; in 1953 R.E. Fitch saw fit to call him the “Last Protestant.” See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Role in American Political Thought and Life,” in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, ed. Charles W. Kegley, Revised Updated ed. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 194, note 6. Due to constraints of space, however, an exploration of Dewey’s identity as a Protestant thinker will have to wait for another project.
While mutuality is a virtue that takes some explanation and is best understood in relation to the Christian ideal of *agape*, the virtue of humility requires less contextualization, and is at home in both philosophical and theological reflection. My working definition of humility is a variation of the one offered by political theorist Mark Button. Humility is the quality of character by which a moral agent habitually avoids self-estimation that engages in excessive claims of merit and goodness and, instead, acknowledges the fact that incompleteness, contingency, and even evil mark the moral life of humankind in general, and individuals in particular. While this definition of humility is relatively straightforward, it will help to consider in greater detail two accounts of this quality of character, one from philosophical ethical reflection, and the other from theological discourse.

In philosophical ethics, Aristotle’s reflections on humility provide a helpful introduction to the nature of this character state. His ethics treats humility in the context of *megalopsuchia*, which has been translated variously as “magnanimity,” “greatness of soul,” and “pride.” For Aristotle, *megalopsuchia* (also transliterated as *megalopsychia*) is a moral virtue that indicates both greatness on the part of the possessor, and also an accurate knowledge or assessment of that greatness (1123a33-1125a35). The greatness of the magnanimous person consists in

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39 Button describes humility as “a cultivated sensibility toward the incompleteness and contingency of both one’s personal moral powers and commitments, and of the particular forms, laws, and institutions that structure one’s political and social life with others.” See “‘A Monkish Kind of Virtue’? For and Against Humility,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 6 (December 2005): 841. Button’s definition and analysis of humility in this article have been helpful for at least two reasons. First, he argues that humility is a highly valuable virtue for pluralistic, democratic societies. Second, no doubt because of his attention to pluralistic democracy, his definition of humility is broad enough to accommodate a number of different religious and cultural perspectives. The breadth of Button’s definition makes it appealing for a study of humility that will attempt to articulate Deweyan and Niebuhrian versions of the virtue.

40 Kristján Kristjánsson notes these alternatives in his “Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle’s ‘Megalopsychia’,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 1, no. 4 (December 1, 1998): 397–422. He elects to leave the term in the Greek transliteration because “available English translations...are either too cumbersome or do not capture well the spirit of the virtue” (398). In the version of *Nicomachean Ethics* included in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, W.D. Ross translates *megalopsuchia* as “pride.”
“being worthy of great things,” including external goods, and chief among these is honor (1123b1-23). The accuracy of the moral agent’s self-assessment is simply appropriate recognition of this worthiness. Aristotle explains that these dual elements make megalopsuchia something of an outlier within the category of moral virtue because magnanimity includes, paradoxically, both an extreme and a mean. “The proud man, then, is an extreme in respect of the greatness of his claims, but a mean in respect of the rightness of them; for he claims what is in accordance with his merits, while the others go to excess or fall short” (1123b12-15). The moral agent who claims a greater worthiness than he or she actually possesses exhibits the excessive vice in the area of self-assessment, and is vain and foolish. The moral agent who claims to be less worthy than he or she actually is exhibits the deficient vice, mikropsuchia, in the area of self-assessment. According to the Ross translation, Aristotle holds that this person who is deficient in self-assessment is “unduly humble” (1123b8-12). Other interpreters, however, do not employ the qualifier that Ross uses: for these scholars, the deficient vice in the area of self-assessment is simply “humility.” Clearly the stakes are high as translators present Aristotle’s argument with or without the qualifier “unduly.” If viciously deficient self-assessment is an example of “unduly humble” feeling, action, and thought, then

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41 Howard Curzer acknowledges that these twin elements of megalopsuchia introduce a confusion of categories into Aristotle’s analysis: although Aristotle discusses it under the heading of moral virtue, the element of self-knowledge suggests megalopsuchia should belong to the category of intellectual virtue. Like practical wisdom, megalopsuchia seems to exhibit behaviors that could qualify it for either moral or intellectual virtue, or both. See “A Great Philosopher’s Not so Great Account of Great Virtue: Aristotle’s Treatment of ‘Greatness of Soul’,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 20, no. 4 (December 1, 1990): 517–537.

42 Jacob Howland argues that, when taken in the context of “the Ethics as a whole,” Aristotle’s magnanimous moral agent’s “self-understanding is defective just to the extent that he uncritically absorbs the community’s estimation of the absolute value of his saving virtue.” “Aristotle’s Great-Souled Man,” The Review of Politics 64, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 27–56. It is not within the bounds of my project to engage this claim, but it seems to disregard the central elements of megalopsuchia as presented in Nicomachean Ethics Book IV, Chapter 3.

43 See, for example, Curzer, “A Great Philosopher’s Not so Great Account of Great Virtue,” 533.
perhaps Aristotle conceived of the magnanimous person as “appropriately humble.” However, if the qualifier is abandoned, then Aristotle’s presentation conceives of humility as a vice, pure and simple. Ultimately, though, whether or not Aristotle considered humility a virtue or a vice is less important than his explanation of the central features of this quality of character. In praising the magnanimous person, Aristotle conceived of the virtue of megalopsuchia as avoiding both excessive and deficient self-assessment. Whether he understood it as a mean or as a vice, Aristotle held that humility is a character state that, based on an examination of the particularities of the moral agent’s circumstances, leads the moral agent to shun overstated claims of one’s own merit in favor of a relatively low estimation of self-worth.

For my purposes, there are two particular features of Aristotle’s virtue of megalopsuchia that merit remarking. First, whether Aristotle allows for appropriate humility, or considers all humility to be deficient self-evaluation, his articulation of megalopsuchia cautions moral agents against self-evaluation that is disproportionately negative. As always, Aristotle seeks the mean in feeling, action, and thought. Though arrogance, vanity, and foolishness are to be avoided, so too is overly-harsh self-evaluation. And second, Aristotle explicitly calls for the moral agent who undergoes self-evaluation to attend to the particularities of his or her life. For Aristotle, one’s merits are partly determinative of whether or not one possesses the virtue of megalopsuchia. In light of this observation, I take it that consideration of particularity including merits, efforts, talents, and external goods should be part of any conversation about humility, especially insofar as great amounts of skill, wealth, or beauty can often lead one to arrogance, vanity, or foolishness. (Although this problem is not one that seems to have troubled Aristotle much; in

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44 Another alternative for translating and interpreting mikropsuchia also suggests that Aristotle thought that the magnanimous person is also “appropriately humble.” J.A.K. Thomson and Hugh Tredennick render the term as “pusillanimous” and “pusillanimity,” rather than invoking any type of humility. This leaves open the possibility that Aristotle conceived of humility as an acceptable, and perhaps even desirable, character trait that the magnanimous person could possess. See Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. J.A.K. Thomson and Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin, 2004).
the *Nicomachean Ethics* he writes, “undue humility is more opposed to pride [megalopsuchia] than vanity is; for it is both commoner and worse” [1125a32-33].)

In contrast with Aristotle, Augustine of Hippo explored the nature and value of humility in a theological context, and communicated much more decisively than did Aristotle humility’s status as a virtue; indeed, the former held that the cultivation of this particular virtue is an urgent need for all people. For Augustine, the Fall of humankind depicted in Genesis 3 resulted in the fundamental inclination of all beings to love improperly, meaning to do so in disordered ways. The objects of distorted human love are many, according to Augustine, but one of the common themes in fallen humanity’s misguided adventures in love is that the self is the ultimate object of love, and therefore it is loved improperly. In an explanation of the fatal and universal consequences of the behavior of Adam and Eve, Augustine links inordinate love of self with disobedience to the divine command: “no member of this race would ever have died had not the first two...merited this death by disobedience. The sin which they committed was so great that it impaired all human nature—in this sense, that the nature has been transmitted to posterity with a propensity to sin and a necessity to die.”

In a later passage, Augustine notes that this fatal disobedience was spurred, in its original expression and ever after, by inordinate love of self.

Actually, their bad deed could not have been done had not bad will preceded it; what is more, the root of their bad will was nothing else than pride. For, “pride is the beginning of all sin.” And what is pride but an appetite for inordinate exaltation? Now, exaltation is inordinate when the soul cuts itself off from the very Source to which it should keep close and somehow makes itself and becomes an end to itself.

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46 Ibid., Book XIV, Chapter 13.
This inclination for human beings to exalt ourselves and to deny the true source of our being manifests itself, according to Augustine, in innumerable ways. We tend to self-aggrandize and pursue our own glorification in sexual relationships,\textsuperscript{47} learning and education,\textsuperscript{48} and socio-political dynamics,\textsuperscript{49} among other contexts. Our inclination to self-aggrandizement continues to guide our behavior even after we realize that we are so inclined: Augustine explains in vivid detail that, prior to his conversion to Christianity, he sought to unify his divided will through his own volitional activity, rather than through reliance on the only power that could possibly repair his broken will.\textsuperscript{50}

Given the basic state of postlapsarian human inclinations, Augustine considers humility to be a highly important religious and ethical ideal for many reasons. For Augustine, it is imperative that human beings recognize our basic inclination to inordinate love of self. This recognition is a primary part of an Augustinian conception of humility; in part, humility means an understanding of one’s own proclivity to pride and self-aggrandizement. However, this recognition alone is not sufficient. Human beings must recognize also that the fractured will cannot repair itself and direct love wholeheartedly toward the proper object in the proper way. Only God’s gracious act of self-humbling in the Incarnation can repair the broken wills of human beings. Here humility takes on overtly theological valence in addition to its ethical significance.


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., Book VII, Chapter 20 (26).

\textsuperscript{49} Augustine, \textit{City of God}, Book XIV, Chapter 28. Augustine’s reflections on sin, pride, and \textit{libido dominandi} will be considered in greater detail in chapter 3, in the context of Reinhold Niebuhr’s political theology.

In his discussion of the inadequacies of the “books of the Platonists,” Augustine articulates the Christian conception of the divine humility that he found lacking in Platonic discourse.

But that “he took on himself the form of a servant and emptied himself, was made in the likeness of men and found to behave as a man, and humbled himself being made obedient to death, even the death of the Cross so that God exalted him” from the dead “and gave him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of celestial, terrestrial, and infernal beings, and every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord in the glory of the Father” (Phil. 2: 6-11)—that these books do not have.\(^{51}\)

In this context, humility is a theological-ethical ideal that juxtaposes divine power and mercy with humanity’s finitude and offensive, disobedient pride. Thus an Augustinian conception of humility emphasizes the absolute contrast between divine and human and highlights the divine act of self-humbling. In the Augustinian framework, these Christological and soteriological elements of humility are meant to inspire humble gratitude in which love turns from the self toward God and neighbor. In addition, Augustine holds that humility is required for human beings to hear God’s communication to humankind in the incarnation. For Augustine, one cannot hear the Word unless one is sufficiently humble. “To possess my God, the humble Jesus,” he writes of his period of neo-Platonic searching, “I was not yet humble enough.”\(^{52}\) Of course, no amount of humility could earn God’s grace, according to Augustine.\(^{53}\) But the grace that God freely gives can be neither encountered nor accepted unless one is sufficiently humble. In sum, Augustine’s conception of humility holds that: 1) human beings must recognize our inclination to inordinate love of self in humility; 2) God humbled Godself in the incarnation for the purpose

\(^{51}\) Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, Chapter 9 (13).

\(^{52}\) Ibid., Book VII, Chapter 18 (24).

\(^{53}\) In his retelling of his conversion to Christianity, Augustine recalls that at the crucial moment, “Lady Continence” reminded him that faith is not a human achievement. “Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done? Do you think them capable of achieving this by their own resources and not by the Lord their God? Their Lord God gave me to them.” See Ibid., Book VIII, Chapter xi (27).
of saving fallen humankind, and; 3) this divine humbling can only be encountered and accepted by those who possess the virtue of humility.

Aristotle and Augustine are studies in contrast when it comes to the virtue of humility for many reasons. Obviously, Aristotle’s discussion of humility and *megalopsuchia* takes place in a philosophical treatise on ethics, while Augustine explains the virtue in the context of Christian theological reflection. In addition, Aristotle holds that undue humility was a serious problem for the moral life, while for Augustine, a disproportionately low self-evaluation is not enough of a threat to human goodness to merit extended consideration. Related to this difference is the fact that Augustine does not go out of his way to warn readers against disproportionately negative self-assessment.\(^{54}\) However, other differences between the two are more important than these for my working understanding of humility. Unlike Aristotle, who claims that *megalopsuchia* must attend to the particulars of a moral agent’s life, Augustine highlights universal human nature in calling for humility. The cultivation of humility must respond to the universal condition of sin, more than the particular merits and/or defects of an individual. Another key difference between the two is that Augustine calls attention to the human capacity for evil during his treatments of humility, while the Aristotelian conception of *megalopsuchia* does not take up the question of humanity’s capacity for evil in the context of the “great-souled” moral agent.

I highlight these contrasts for this reason: any theoretical definition of humility must be broad enough to account for these differences between various philosophical and theological conceptions of the virtue. This is so because, as much as Aristotle and Augustine disagree on the

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\(^{54}\) This element of Augustine’s articulation of humility is controversial and involves a detailed discussion of his stance on self-love. Whether or not Augustine held that there can be an appropriate level of self-love is a debated topic. It is also a topic with extraordinarily high stakes for feminist and African-American theologians and ethicists, some of whom argue that women and African-Americans have internalized socially-transmitted notions of their inferiority and even lack of value. For these writers, Christian theology that equates sin with self-love and doesn’t allow for any amount of love of self is deeply problematic because it a) misunderstands the basic problem facing oppressed social groups and b) reinforces a debilitating social message with theological doctrine. I will address this issue in greater detail in Chapter 3, during my discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr’s writing and its reception.
particular details of this character trait, they are ultimately still both talking in part about a
habitual disposition that avoids self-assessment that is so high as to be an inaccurate statement
on the capacities and value of human beings in general or of particular individuals. Button’s
definition of humility, which I follow, is broad enough to account for such differences, whether
they mark the distance between the ethics of Aristotle and Augustine, or the ethics of Dewey
and Niebuhr.

I have selected humility and mutuality for special attention as democratic virtues in the
thought of Dewey and Niebuhr because close readings of these authors conducted over the
span of many years suggest to me that their written work justifies my argument. However, I
have also come to see that, generally speaking, humility and mutuality function together as a
complementary pair of democratic virtues. More specifically, mutuality protects against certain
anti-democratic tendencies that accompany the virtue of humility in the absence of mutuality.
Absent mutuality, the humble person may not be motivated to notice or call attention to
inequalities of exchange from which he or she suffers in social, political, or economic
relationships. The humble person may refrain from calling powerful people who exploit him or
her to account, and may allow unequal social exchanges that afflict him or her to persist. But
when his or her humility is paired with mutuality, the humble person has a safeguard against
this danger. Guided by mutuality, the humble person will confidently call attention to unequal
exchanges from which he or she suffers, and will make efforts to rectify these inequalities.

Insofar as democracy is the socio-political structure of “people rule,” and insofar as this norm
requires that people claim their own equality in order to participate in self-governance, this
work of mutuality in complementing humility is democratic.

But humility complements mutuality as a democratic virtue, as well. More specifically,
humility adds important elements of other-regard to the pursuits of mutuality. Absent humility,
a moral agent may focus exclusively on attaining mutuality for himself of herself in those relationships in which he or she gives more than he or she receives. As it is the habitual inclination to avoid excessive claims of merit for the self, humility will motivate its possessors to consider merits of others. This includes the merits of those parties with whom the self exchanges goods, and also the merits of third parties with whom the self does not exchange any goods. The person whose quest for mutuality is guided by humility will consider whether or not he or she has exploited partners in exchange (“Have I taken more from her than I’ve given?”) and whether or not a third party has been exploited (“Is my neighbor suffering from an unequal exchange?”). When the moral agent possesses humility along with mutuality, he or she will seek and value the correction of unequal exchanges beyond those from which he or she suffers.

Insofar as democracy is the socio-political structure that aspires to people-rule, and insofar as people-rule requires that participants in this structure value the equal participation of others in self-governance, this work of humility in complementing mutuality is democratic. In short, humility and mutuality are complementary virtues; each virtue protects against potential dangers to which the moral agent who possesses the other alone is subject.

With these understandings of virtue, mutuality, and humility in mind, we have a foundation upon which an interpretation of Dewey and Niebuhr on democratic virtue can stand. However, before proceeding to such an interpretation, I would like to anticipate and respond to some objections to my project that could be raised in light of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who proposed a number of highly influential theses regarding the state of moral discourse in the modern West, and more particularly regarding the status of “virtue talk.” Among the spokespeople for the revival of virtue ethics from the middle of the 20th century into the 21st century, MacIntyre is one of the most prominent. The revival of virtue ethics during this time frame is generally thought to have started with G.E.M. Anscombe’s publication of an essay
entitled "Modern Moral Philosophy" in 1958. In this article, Anscombe questions the coherence of several strands of ethical reflection in the modern West, and argues that much of what has passed for moral reflection since Kant is fragmentary beyond intelligibility. The terminology of modern moral discourse, according to Anscombe, echoes that of earlier, coherent ethical frameworks, but cannot make sense apart from those frameworks. In light of this reality, she calls for a moratorium on the usage of the terms in question: “the concepts of obligation, and duty—moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say—and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of ‘ought,’ ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it.”55 For Anscombe, one of the most important historical developments in the transition to modernity is that Aristotelian understandings of the virtues became blunted as they were associated with Christian moral thought, especially the Christian notion that the moral life is largely a matter of human beings obeying a Divine Law-Giver.56 When modern moral philosophy abandoned the notion of a Divine Law-Giver, all that remained was the imprecise language of “ought.” Apart from a Christian framework of Divine Law, the injunction lacks authority, according to Anscombe, and without reference to a particular conception of what qualities of character are indicative of living well and doing the humanly good (which were supplied by Aristotle, but marginalized in the amalgamation of Greek moral philosophy and Christian thought), “ought” language lacks the specificity required to tell us anything helpful about why particular thoughts, feelings, and actions are worthy of praise or blame. Although his theses about modern moral philosophy and the status of virtue talk vary from those of Anscombe in certain details, MacIntyre follows her in


56 Ibid., 5.
arguing that ethical discourse in the modern West is fragmentary and incoherent, and (or in part because) the language of virtue had been largely abandoned. Indeed, for Anscombe and MacIntyre, the language of virtue cannot be meaningful in the modern West because the theoretical framework in which such language belongs has been largely rejected.

The work of Anscombe and MacIntyre has been highly influential in renewing the interests of ethicists in virtue. Nussbaum agrees that “a corrective was...overdue” in Anglo-American moral philosophy by the mid-20th century, because of a general lack of attention to the questions of “virtue ethics,” and that “turning to the Greeks would help us to make the changes that were needed.” Anscombe and MacIntyre provided much of the scholarship that helped return ethical attention to Greek thought on the virtues. My own work has benefitted greatly from their scholarship; indeed, it is unlikely that I would pursue the arguments that are central to this project if Anscombe and MacIntyre had not called for a renewal in Greek virtue ethics when they did. However, I have reason to believe that my project would not sit well with MacIntyre, in part because of the method I utilize, and in part because Dewey and Niebuhr do not conform to a number of his theses about ethics in the modern West.

MacIntyre would likely object to the preceding discussion in which I outlined the important aspects of Aristotle’s theory of virtue and arrived at working definitions of mutuality and humility. On the method I employed in doing so, I imagine he would express two objections in particular. First, he would likely balk at my argument that one can find in Dewey and Niebuhr an endorsement of a concept of virtue that resembles that of Aristotle. I imagine this because MacIntyre holds that the language, texts, and values of a moral tradition are so determined by


58 Ibid., especially Chapter 9.

social and historical context that the moral tradition resists easy translation into the idiom of a different time and place.\textsuperscript{60} MacIntyre might say that I have assumed too simplistically that Aristotle’s conception of virtue could be translated into the landscape of 20\textsuperscript{th} century American political philosophy and theology. Dewey and Niebuhr, moral theorists of the modern West that they are, are too foreign to Aristotle’s tradition of inquiry to provide a hospitable environment for his concept of virtue. Indeed, my assumption that Aristotle’s theory of virtue could be so easily translated might be itself a marker of “cosmopolitan modernity,” according to MacIntyre.\textsuperscript{61}

However, this objection would be unwarranted, because I do not assume that Aristotle’s virtue theory can be easily translated into the moral landscape of 20\textsuperscript{th} century American thought. On this issue, my argument is more modest than this hypothetical objection allows. I argue that “virtue” played an important part in the political thought of Dewey and Niebuhr; both of them offered theories of democracy that implied particular virtues as critically important. Because Aristotle’s theory of virtue is one of the most important, enduring, and complete in the history of moral philosophy, I draw on Aristotle for guidance on the question of what virtue is. Nor do I claim that Dewey and Niebuhr were Aristotelians; rather, I argue that they, like Aristotle, were deeply concerned with the question of habitual dispositions that guide moral agents toward choosing the good. I agree with MacIntyre’s point that attempts to translate elements of a moral tradition into a foreign context can lead to distortion. That is why I will note, throughout this project, the central differences in social and historical context and in normative goals between any thinkers whose work I may compare.


\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 327, 385.
Second, I anticipate that he would be unsettled with my appeal to both Aristotle and Augustine in an attempt to arrive at a broad, working definition of humility. This objection would proceed along the same lines as the previous one: Aristotle and Augustine were both so fully formed by their particular social and historical locations, and understood the world in such radically different ways, that whatever they meant by “humility,” they cannot have meant anything close to the same thing, as examining them together for the purposes of arriving at a working definition suggests. Simply put, their conceptions of humility cannot be translated into mutual agreement. An appeal to both of them while defining humility naively suggests they meant the same thing by humility, and thus distorts both of their moral frameworks.

This objection is unwarranted as well, because I do not assume that Aristotle and Augustine can be translated into mutual agreement on the issue of humility, because their concerns and values are so radically different, as I noted in my examination of them above. Indeed, it is because of their radical difference on the issue of humility that I find appeal to both of them to be so helpful. Both theorists highlight different elements of the character state in question. Therefore, both offer different strengths as we attempt to formulate a broad understanding of the habitual disposition of humility, which can accommodate a variety of particular approaches to the subject. But their differences are not so great as to necessitate the conclusion that the two writers were analyzing incommensurable qualities of character. Because both discuss the character trait that avoids overstated claims about one’s merit, I take both to be concerned with humility in the passages I cited. Any conceptual definition of humility—or any other quality of character—would need to be broad enough to account for the insights of a variety of different theorists on the virtue in question. The genus of humility must include Augustinian, Aristotelian, Deweyan, and Niebuhrian species. My working definition of humility, which can apply to the work of Aristotle, Augustine, Dewey, and Niebuhr alike, meets these
needs without hazarding the reductive suggestion that these theorists can be translated into mutual agreement on the virtue in question.

In addition to these two hypothetical, but unwarranted, objections to the methodological dimensions of my project, I imagine that my project will conflict with MacIntyre’s arguments for another reason. My readings of Dewey and Niebuhr lead me to the conclusion that these two writers defy a number of MacIntyre’s theses about modern moral discourse. Niebuhr and Dewey are widely considered to be representatives of quintessentially “modern” or “liberal” approaches to theological and philosophical ethics, and yet their writing does not exhibit many of the tendencies that MacIntyre claims are central to modern moral discourse. For example, MacIntyre argues that: 1) the political ethics of modernity claims to be neutral about “the good” (though in fact it is not so neutral); 2) modern ethics implies a moral agent who can, and indeed must, separate different spheres of life, and prioritize the goods native to each sphere in a process of “compartmentalization;” 3) political and economic liberalism both posit a moral agent governed primarily by “preference,” whose basic activity in public interactions is “bargaining,” and; 4) the ethics of modernity presume a moral agent who is unencumbered by social contexts and roles. Niebuhr and Dewey are considered spokespeople for “modern liberalism” but their ethical writings do not advance any of these

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62 On Niebuhr’s identity as a “modern liberal theologian,” see especially Stanley Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Brazos Press, 2001), chap. 4–5. Identifying Dewey’s work as characteristic of a “modern liberal” is, I think, less controversial than doing the same for Niebuhr, and Dewey’s identity as a “modern liberal” philosopher is widely accepted. For a good discussion of Dewey as a liberal thinker, see the essay entitled “Dewey’s Liberalism and Ours,” in Michael J. Sandel, Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2006).


64 After Virtue, 204; Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, 337.


four claims that MacIntyre argues are central to modern moral discourse. On these and other topics, the modern liberalisms of Dewey and Niebuhr run into direct opposition against the modern liberalisms of other writers who apparently are spokespeople for modernity as well.

More importantly, though, Dewey and Niebuhr defy MacIntyre’s analysis of modern moral discourse on two other points. First, they do not divorce inquiry about human nature from inquiry about morality, as MacIntyre claims modern ethicists do. In After Virtue, MacIntyre explains that teleological ethics—the norm in the West until the commencement of the Enlightenment revolution in moral theory—involves a tripartite framework of “untutored human nature, man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other.”67 At the heart of the move from pre-modern to modern moral theory, according to MacIntyre, was a departure from this tripartite scheme. “Detach morality from that framework and you will no longer have morality; or, at the very least, you will have radically transformed its character. This change of character” results “from the disappearance of any connection between the precepts of morality and the facts of human nature.”68 This disappeared connection that MacIntyre takes to be a defining feature of modern ethics is most closely associated with David Hume, whose skepticism about the possibility of deriving “ought” statements from “is” premises continues to generate ethical commentary. However, not all modern ethicists endorse the dissolution of the connection between a doctrine of “human nature,” and “moral precepts.” Neither Dewey nor Niebuhr assume the severance of this connection. Both writers connect their doctrines of human nature with their moral theories quite self-consciously. For this reason, Aristotle’s quotation invoked at the beginning of this chapter (“The student of politics, then, must study the soul”) is more than merely an

67 After Virtue, 54.

68 Ibid., 56. MacIntyre reiterates this point later; see especially After Virtue, 84.
introduction to his thought; it is a dictum with which Dewey and Niebuhr would agree. Dewey’s moral theory sought to establish a more empirically-grounded and fully integrated human psychology as the foundation for ethics.\textsuperscript{69} Niebuhr famously quipped that “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{70} Granted, Dewey’s conception of human nature departs dramatically from Aristotelian and Augustinian projects. And Niebuhr’s understanding of human nature is very different from that of Aristotle. But both writers grounded their moral theories in what they took to be basic facts about human nature; a decidedly unmodern move, by MacIntyre’s thesis, for two highly “modern liberal” moral theorists. But this point begins to predict the content of the next two chapters, parts of which will demonstrate the connection between human nature and moral precepts for Dewey and Niebuhr.

Second, Dewey and Niebuhr do not abandon the category of “virtue” as MacIntyre claims distinctively “modern” moral theorists do. As he expresses his preference for the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche over the characteristically modern approaches to ethical reflection (and, of course, his preference for Aristotelian moral theory over both the former and the latter), MacIntyre draws on Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls to demonstrate that modern moral discourse emphasizes rule-following at the expense of the category of virtue.

It is yet another of Nietzsche’s merits that he joins to his critique of Enlightenment moralities a sense of their failure to address adequately, let alone to answer the question: what sort of person am I to become? This is in a way an inescapable question in that an answer to it is given \textit{in practice} in each human life. But for characteristically modern moralities it is a question to be approached only by indirection. The primary question from their standpoint has

\textsuperscript{69} This effort is present to varying degrees throughout Dewey’s ethical writings, but is perhaps communicated most clearly in \textit{Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology} (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2008); \textit{Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education}, Complete and Unabridged. (Lexington, K.Y.: Feather Trail Press, 2009).

concerned rules: what rules ought we to follow? And why ought we to obey them? And that this has been the primary question is unsurprising when we recall the consequences of the expulsion of Aristotelian teleology from the moral world...Rules become the primary concept of the moral life. Qualities of character then generally come to be prized only because they will lead us to follow the right set of rules.\footnote{\textit{After Virtue}, 118–119. Italics in original.}

Dewey and Niebuhr have both been described as “modern liberal” thinkers. And yet, this thesis about virtue and rule-following is far from an apt analysis of their thought. Dewey and Niebuhr did not prioritize rule-following in the moral life. They neither avoided the question of “what sort of person [one is] to become,” nor did they answer it only indirectly.\footnote{MacIntyre’s thesis also fails to account for other modern ethical thinkers as well; John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr are not the only “modern moral theorists” whose work challenges this characterization. Other scholars, such as Nussbaum and Jeffrey Stout, have argued against MacIntyre’s narrative on the diminution of virtue in modern moral discourse. See Nussbaum, “Virtue Ethics,” especially 163–167; Jeffrey Stout, \textit{Democracy and Tradition} (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), Chapter 1.} In the following two chapters, I will demonstrate that a virtue-ethical interpretation of Dewey and Niebuhr is not an unwarranted imposition on their work. Rather, they provide answers to the question of “what sort of person one is to become” in relation to the American project of democracy clearly and consistently throughout their reflections on the moral life. It is to these answers that I now turn.
CHAPTER II

JOHN DEWEY AND DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

The question I would raise concerns why we prefer democratic and humane arrangements to those which are autocratic and harsh...Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience?

John Dewey, *Experience and Education*¹

This chapter aims to explore, analyze, and interpret John Dewey’s understanding of democracy. With his ideal of democracy in mind, I will argue that humility and mutuality are qualities of character which moral agents must possess in order for a Deweyan model of democracy to be successful. Before making this argument, though, I will turn to five components of Dewey’s thought with which one must reckon if his idea of democracy is to be intelligible. These components of Dewey’s thought are experience, habit, inquiry (which I will also refer to as “intelligence”), communication, and growth.² I will conclude by suggesting that the positive reception Dewey has received in African-American ethics and religious thought signals the enduring relevance of his philosophy and theory of democracy.

A cursory glance at the titles of Dewey’s publications will reveal that the idea of experience holds a central place in his thought. To understand any element of Dewey’s

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¹ *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 34.

² Throughout this chapter, I draw on the work of the “mature” Dewey, rather than the younger Dewey who was still developing his philosophical framework in major and dramatic ways. After graduating from Johns Hopkins in 1884, the young Dewey was committed to the Hegelian absolute idealism he had absorbed from Professor George Sylvester Morris. Scholarly consensus is that around the time of his appointment to the faculty of the University of Chicago in 1894, he departed from neo-Hegelianism and moved to the pragmatism that would mark the rest of his career, even if his thought would continue to undergo subtle modifications. Jennifer Welchman chronicles this trajectory in her book *Dewey’s Ethical Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995). For Welchman, the major transition occurred between the years 1894 and 1903. Herbert W. Schneider argues that Dewey’s philosophical maturation took place more quickly, and was complete by 1896; see Herbert W. Schneider, “Dewey’s Psychology,” in *Guide to the Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, I.L.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 1–14. For a concise and engaging narrative of this intellectual transition, see Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), Chapter 1, “The Hegelian Bacillus.”
philosophical program, including democracy, one must attend to his conception of experience. His most thorough theoretical treatment of experience comes in *Experience and Nature*. In this book Dewey explains (in the first sentence of chapter one) that his philosophical method in articulating a doctrine of experience is “empirical naturalism or naturalistic empiricism.”

Elsewhere Dewey notes that he sees himself as the philosophical heir of David Hume in many respects, and this methodological approach is likely one of the respects in which he follows Hume. Hume utilizes a type of empiricism in his inquiry into human morality, and attempts to restrict his analysis to observation of the “natural” world. This restriction leads Hume to avoid positing causes and capacities beyond and/or apart from the natural world as he deals with perceptions, impressions, and ideas. Dewey’s consideration of experience through the method he calls naturalistic empiricism follows these leads. Like Hume, his naturalism leads him to restrict his discussion to the “natural” world: Dewey studiously tries to avoid positing any supernatural causes or capacities in his analysis of morality. Thus, the “naturalistic” element of Dewey’s approach to philosophy is the focus he applies to the natural, rather than the supernatural world. Dewey’s empiricism consists in observation and experience of the subject matter under consideration. In *Experience and Nature*, one of his stated goals is “[t]o discover some of [the] general features of experienced things.” As an empiricist, he does so through the

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3 *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 1. Many studies of Dewey follow the citation practice of referring to his Collected Works, rather than to the titles of each separate essay or monograph. Although this practice produces a more concise bibliographical section, I find it has the unfortunate effect of interrupting the reader’s focus so that he or she can look up which specific book is under consideration. In order to avoid this problem, I will cite each book and essay by title in the footnotes.


6 Ibid., 3.
methods of observation and experience. To do this by the method of naturalistic empiricism means to observe and experience human experience.\(^7\) Throughout his career and across his prolific writings, Dewey claimed that this method is consistent with, and an extension of, the scientific method. I will revisit this point about Dewey’s endorsement of scientific method when I examine his doctrine of inquiry and intelligence later in this chapter.

What does Dewey mean by experience, that crucially important subject matter that he will study as a natural phenomenon, by means of observation and experience? Most simply, experience is the term that Dewey uses to indicate interaction between an organism and its environment. The assertions that organisms exist, and that they interact with the world around them, are the premises that Dewey uses to begin his philosophical inquiries. They are not first principles, whose truth is accepted \textit{a priori}. As will become clear in my treatment of Dewey’s theory of inquiry, Dewey takes all premises to be subject to revision, especially when they begin to be doubtful or cease to facilitate our desired interactions with the world around us. These two assertions—that there are organisms, and that they interact with the world around them—inform all of Dewey’s philosophical work, and they comprise the minimal content of his conception of experience. In his 1931 Harvard lectures on Philosophy of Art, Dewey summarized these assertions briefly, claiming: “Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.”\(^8\) Technically speaking, all organisms “experience,” at all times, as they are always interacting with their particular environments.\(^9\) In the cases of human beings and other “social” organisms, though,

\(^7\) Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, 5; Dewey, \textit{Experience and Education}, 25.

\(^8\) \textit{Art as Experience} (New York: Perigee Trade, 2005), 36.

\(^9\) Welchman, \textit{Dewey’s Ethical Thought}, 100–101. The experience of non-human animals is a worthwhile topic to consider, and one for which Dewey’s thought can provide promising resources. However, as my
the term “environment” includes both natural and social contexts. This means that while these organisms interact with the natural world (the material environment including air, soil, flora and fauna, and so on), they also interact with their social world (the other organisms of their kind with which they live, and to which they relate). All such interactions qualify as experience.

Dewey frequently employs different terms to express his basic conception of experience. Often the language he uses to indicate the “experiencer” varies from “organism” to some other term, as when he writes, “[a]n experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment.” In other discussions the language referring to the “environment” changes, as in this passage from Democracy and Education: “[e]xperience, in short...is a single continuous interaction of a great diversity (literally countless in number) of energies.” Dewey’s alterations of terminology do not complicate the basic dynamic of experience which is central to his thought, and so they need not give us pause, as long as this picture of experience is clear.

Dewey intends this picture to be, in part, a rebuttal of certain psychological theories of experience that he thought posited an unwarranted and misleading picture of the human being. In an essay entitled “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”—published in 1896, it was one of his earliest and most enduring statements on the nature of human experience—Dewey argues that the “stimulus/response” model of human experience en vogue in the late 19th century reflects problematic “older dualisms” and “rigid distinctions” that need to be reevaluated. When

cconcern is Dewey’s understanding of human political association and human virtue, I cannot take that topic up in the present context.

10 Dewey, Experience and Education, 43–4.

represented by this model, experience is chopped up into a “series of jerks.”¹² “The sensory
stimulus is one thing, the central activity, standing for the idea, is another thing, and the motor
discharge, standing for the act proper, is a third. As a result, the reflex arc is not a
comprehensive, or organic unity, but a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction
of unallied processes.”¹³ The stimulus/response model of human experience mistakenly posits a
hard distinction between sensation, thought, and act, according to Dewey, and fails to account
for the fact that in every moment of human experience, all three “functioning factors” are at
work, complementing, influencing, and informing each other at all times. As an example, he
invokes a child grasping at the flame of a candle. The stimulus/response model of experience
claims that the act begins with sensation (light from the candle hits the child’s eyes), moves to
idealization (the child thinks that grasping at the light is worthwhile), and culminates in an act
(the arm and hand reach out for the light, triggered by the brain). Another set of stimuli and
responses follow from this isolable chain: sensation (burning) leads to idea (“this hurts!”) and
subsequently an act (the hand is quickly withdrawn).

For Dewey, the stimulus/response model of experience relies upon unnecessary and
problematic distinctions between capacities within the human organism. Dewey points out that
the initial moment of sensation, in fact, involves acts (such as motions of the head and eye) and
is influenced by thoughts and ideas (such as expectations resulting from the context and
previous experience: “Light means warmth!” or “I’ve seen my father pass his finger through that
before!”). Therefore philosophical conceptions of human experience should avoid holding to
hard and fast distinctions between such categories as sensation, thought, and activity. In
addition, Dewey claims that these hard and fast distinctions lead to a picture of the human


¹³ Ibid., 358.
being that is all too passive. If we are guided too much by the dynamics of the
stimulus/response model, we may understand the human organism as a mere passive recipient
of sense data, when in fact, the human being is always actively moving and thinking during the
process of experiential interaction through the senses with the environment. For Dewey, the
interaction between the human organism and its natural and social environments always
involves both “active” and “passive” elements. Indeed, the words “active” and “passive” are so
misleading in a philosophical treatment of experience that Dewey often prefers other language.
A passage from Reconstruction in Philosophy, originally published in 1920, utilizes language that
Dewey finds more helpful than “active and passive,” and demonstrates continuity with the
conception of experience that he articulates in “The Reflex Arc.”

The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex,
upon its surroundings. As a consequence the changes produced in the
environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature
undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection
between doing and suffering or undergoing is what we call experience.
Disconnected doing and disconnected suffering are neither of them
experiences.\(^{14}\)

In other treatments of the topic, Dewey offers still more varied language to describe the
intimate relation between organism and environment, and the complex interplay between
sensation, thought, and act. In one of his most direct discussions of experience, Dewey writes
that it “includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe, and endure, and
also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy,
see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of experiencing.”\(^{15}\) Elsewhere he captures this

\(^{14}\) Reconstruction in Philosophy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 86. On the need for philosophy to recognize
both active and passive elements of experience, see also Democracy and Education, Chapter 11.

\(^{15}\) Experience and Nature, 10. Italics in the original. Dewey’s use of masculine pronouns is one example of
a habit that he possessed that has rightly fallen out of favor in today’s scholarly world. Other writers
whose work I consider, including Niebuhr, exhibit the same tendency. Rather than change the language,
dynamic with the term “situation.” “The statement that individuals live in a world means, in the concrete, that they live in a series of situations…It means, once more, that interaction is going on between an individual and objects or other persons. The conceptions of situation and interaction are inseparable from each other.” These passages show that Dewey’s idea of experience is one that seeks to correct other philosophical and psychological approaches by advancing a picture of the human organism in which processes of sensation, thought, and action are integrated. Just as Dewey’s conception of experience integrates the moral agent at the level of these capacities, it integrates the human being with the social and natural environments in which it lives as well. Dewey’s doctrine of experience integrates organism and environment in that both act and undergo in relation to each other, mutually influencing each other through the processes of experience. In the 1896 essay, Dewey notes that his empirical, naturalistic, and integrating picture of experience is one that stresses “coordination” and replaces the “reflex arc” with a conception of experience as an “organic circuit.” This doctrine of experience shaped Dewey’s entire philosophical project from its initial articulation in 1896 until Dewey’s latest works. Many scholars argue that “The Reflex Arc” marks the moment at which Dewey

[16] Experience and Education, 43. Jerome Paul Soneson notes that Dewey uses the term “context” in much the same way that he uses other terms which invoke his idea of experience. Context “is equivalent in meaning to a number of other words he often uses: ‘situation,’ ‘interaction,’ ‘affair,’ ‘event,’ and ‘history.’” Jerome Paul Soneson, Pragmatism and Pluralism: John Dewey’s Significance for Theology, Harvard Dissertations in Religion no. 30 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 52. I have highlighted the term “interaction” in my discussion of Dewey’s conception of experience, but it is equally accurate to proceed with one of the other terms that Soneson lists. For my purposes, it is important to note that experience can be defined in terms of a “situation,” because this is the terminology that Dewey uses in his discussion of inquiry, as will become apparent later in this chapter.


[18] Ibid., 363.
established his scholarly reputation, and turned decisively from the Hegelian idealism of his youth to the naturalistic pragmatism that is his major intellectual legacy.\textsuperscript{19}

Dewey is not content to let his doctrine of experience rest with the assertions that a human organism demonstrates integrity both within itself (through the mutually influential processes of sensation, thought, and action) and also between itself and its environments (as it interacts with natural and social worlds in active and receptive ways). As I noted previously, he attempts to identify “some of [the] general features of experienced things.”\textsuperscript{20} For Dewey, it is both possible and desirable to discern a number of characteristics that mark all human experience. From a close reading of \textit{Experience and Nature}, James Gouinlock summarizes five features that Dewey argues are present in all human interaction with natural and social environments. These five features are “the stable,” “the precarious,” “quality,” “ends,” and “histories.”\textsuperscript{21} “It is Dewey’s position,” Gouinlock writes, “that these five traits are characteristic of every situation. He insists that the generic traits of primary experience amount to at least these.”\textsuperscript{22} A full understanding of Dewey’s doctrine of experience demands that I briefly review each of these traits, which I will clarify using examples from my own experience of skiing. I select skiing as an explanatory tool both because it has provided me with numerous “consummatory experiences,” and because a discussion of this activity will honor the Vermont roots that Dewey and I share.

\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, Schneider, “Dewey’s Psychology,” 6; Westbrook, \textit{John Dewey and American Democracy}, 67–71; Louis Menand, \textit{The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America}, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 324–30. According to Westbrook, the article “marked a watershed in the course of his thinking.” For Menand, the essay is “the key to his thought...The ‘Reflex Arc’ paper is the essential expression of Dewey’s particular mode of intelligence.”

\textsuperscript{20} Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, 5.

\textsuperscript{21} James Gouinlock, \textit{John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value} (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 60.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 64. I will explain the term “primary experience” later in this chapter.
In claiming that all experience is marked by “stability,” Dewey holds that all interactions between human beings and their environments possess a measure of surety, predictability, coherence, and consistency. Gouinlock explains that “[t]he stable, in Dewey’s thought, refers to whatever in the situation has a known structure, a cognitive status...This trait implies...that nature possesses relations and knowable structures. These are found in all situations of experience.” The stability of experience indicates that some knowledge of the world is possible—indeed, if it were not stable, we could never perform even the most basic functions that help to secure our survival—and that interactions between organisms and environments are never completely characterized by chaos, randomness, and unpredictability.

However, the stability of experience is, according to Dewey, always complemented by the trait of precariousness that colors all interaction between organism and environment. “Man finds himself living in an aleatory world,” Dewey writes, “his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons.” Dewey uses “the contingent” as a synonym for “the precarious,” and holds that no one could possibly deny that human experience is shot through with contingency. Interaction between the human organism and its environment is deeply dependent on unpredictable forces beyond human control. Randomness and uncertainty exist in all human situations. For Dewey, religious rites and cultural narratives often demonstrate a profound awareness of the unavoidable contingency of human experience. But he reminds readers not to overemphasize either of these complementary traits of experience; precariousness and stability are present in all

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23 Ibid., 61.

24 Experience and Nature, 38.

25 Ibid.
interactions between organism and environment. Experience “is such as to involve permanent and general objects of reference as well as temporally changing events; the possibility of truth as well as error; conclusive objects and goods as well as things whose purport and nature is determinable only in an indeterminate future.”

The stability and precariousness of experience were palpable in my earliest skiing adventures with my mother and brother, Jason. My mother took me skiing for the first time when I was three years old, and we had a standing tradition of going to the tiny, intimate, and child-friendly Cochran’s Ski Area with my brother every Saturday of every winter until Jason and I were old enough to go off on our own to a bigger, more challenging mountain. My mom enjoys reminding us that we resisted these trips every Saturday morning, and that we complained about how we would rather stay in bed and watch cartoons than ski. I am not proud that this was the case. But our complaints reveal what Dewey means by the “precariousness” of experience. It was not clear to me at that young age that the experience of skiing would be preferable to the experience of watching cartoons. The experience was doubtful; my enjoyment was contingent upon so many factors that apparently lay beyond my control. I could get cold, fall and hurt myself, fail to live up to some standard of excellence set by my family members, and so forth. On the other hand, my eventual willingness to leave the cartoons behind speaks to what Dewey means by the “stability” of experience. Despite my doubts, I could be fairly confident that I would be safe and have a good time at Cochran’s. I could be confident that my mom and Jason would stay with me. I could be confident that my needs for food and warmth would be met. My early ski experiences thus contained both the stability and the precariousness that Dewey identifies as common to all experiences.

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26 Ibid., 53.
For Dewey, religion has historically expressed an ironic awareness of the stability and precariousness of experience. Although he admits that religious ritual and cultural narrative express awareness of both precarious and stable elements of experience, Dewey nevertheless bemoans the fact that such expressions are misunderstood by the very people who make them. Instead of finding these traits in natural human experience, religious thought and practice very often separate the two features, relegating the stable to a realm beyond nature, and locating the precarious fully and exclusively in the worldly sphere, according to Dewey. Nor was philosophy exempt from this problematic impulse. Dewey levied a sweeping critique of Western thought along these lines. Spurred by the natural mixture of stable and precarious, theological and philosophical thinkers search for—and often find—real wisdom in the form of insights about the nature of human experience. However, these thinkers very often disown the fruits of their own reflections: “the result of the search is converted into a metaphysics which denies or conceals from acknowledgment the very characters of existence which initiated it and which give significance to its conclusions.”

For Dewey, theological and philosophical reflection since Plato has exhibited the ironic impulse to deny the conditions of its genesis. “The form assumed by the denial is, most frequently, that striking division into a superior true realm of being and a lower illusory, insignificant or phenomenal realm which characterizes metaphysical systems as unlike as those of Plato and Democritus, St. Thomas and Spinoza, Aristotle and Kant, Descartes and Comte, Haeckel and Mrs. Eddy.” Dewey consistently argues against the inclination of Western thought, in both its philosophical and theological modes, to divide reality into natural and supernatural realms, and to assert that uncertainty and contingency mark life in the natural

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27 Ibid., 52.

28 Ibid.
world, while certainty and stability correspond to the supernatural sphere. In this element of Dewey’s work, there is an echo of Marx’s critique of religion as projection: both Dewey and Marx point out the irony in play when religious or philosophical reflection correctly identifies important dynamics of human experience, but incorrectly projects these dynamics onto a world beyond the natural realm.

A third feature of all human experience is what Dewey calls “quality.” By this trait, Dewey means that the experienced elements in an environment, which act upon human beings and upon which human beings act in turn, have definite features. “In every event there is something obdurate, self-sufficient, wholly immediate, neither a relation nor an element in a relational whole, but terminal and exclusive.” These terminal and exclusive elements of experience possess, according to Dewey, “irreducible, infinitely plural, undefinable and indescribable qualities, which a thing must have in order to be, and in order to be capable of becoming the subject of relations and a theme of discourse.”

“Isness” implies some manner of “suchness,” and it is this suchness that is suffered and acted upon in human experience. The qualities of an experience are always qualities felt by the experiencing agent. The empirical fact

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29 See, for example, Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, xii, 24, ; John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929), 14–16, 58–60. As the preceding quotation suggests, there were not many thinkers who escaped this Deweyan charge. Unfortunately I do not have enough space to evaluate here whether or not Dewey was justified in applying this critique to the thinkers he chose to single out. It will be important for me to touch on critiques that both Dewey and Niebuhr make of other thinkers in order to gain a more full understanding of their intellectual frameworks, but assessment of whether or not their claims were justified, or based on sufficiently charitable readings of those thinkers, would take my discussion too far afield. However, I will weigh in on the validity of the critiques Dewey and Niebuhr made of each other in Chapter 4, so as to provide a more comprehensive account of their public engagement.


31 *Experience and Nature*, 73. Italics in the original. On this quotation, Gouinlock writes, “[t]o say that qualities are ‘undefinable and indescribable’ refers to the fact that immediate experience is neither discursive nor cognitive; hence any conceptual description of that experience must be different than the experience itself.” *John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value*, 63, note 6.
that all experienced objects have qualities leads to a corresponding fact: because they have
qualities, all experienced objects necessarily have value, whether positive or negative, for the
experiencing agent. “Empirically, the existence of objects of direct grasp, possession, use and
enjoyment cannot be denied. Empirically, things are poignant, tragic, beautiful, humorous,
settled, disturbed, comfortable, annoying, barren, harsh, consoling, splendid, fearful; are such
immediately and in their own right and behalf.”\textsuperscript{32}

Like stability and precariousness, the trait of “quality” was present in my childhood trips
to Cochran’s Ski Area. My interaction with the natural environment was saturated with
“suchness,” and the qualities that comprised that “suchness” had value for me, the experiencing
agent. The cold wind stinging my cheeks could be refreshing, or painful, depending on the
temperature and my speed. The snow could be icy and fear-inducing, or it could be soft, deep,
and forgiving. The experience of removing my heavy boots at the end of the day, and putting on
light, warm sneakers invariably had a quality of relief, and thus was an experience that I valued
highly, and to which I looked forward at the end of every day on the mountain. My social
environment also provided experiences with qualities. Conversation with Jason and my mom on
the chairlift had a relaxing quality, and therefore I valued and sought it. Competition with
friends about who could ski best or fastest could be fun or anxiety-producing. In either case, the
experience carried both a felt quality and also a value (though the value could be positive or
negative) for me, the experiencing agent.

The next trait common to all human experience is what Dewey calls “ends.” This term
has multiple meanings for Dewey, and also moves Dewey to a significant amount of discussion
in order to differentiate his meaning of “ends” from other understandings of “ends,” especially
in philosophical and theological ethics. In the context of his identification of common features of

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Experience and Nature}, 81.
all human experience, Dewey speaks of both “natural ends,” which have a chronological meaning, and “ends-in-view,” which have a moral meaning. Gouinlock’s summary of Dewey’s five traits of experience only mentions the former, likely because of the relation between “natural ends” and “histories,” the fifth and final feature of the Deweyan conception of experience. Here I will briefly explain the meaning of natural ends as a trait of experience; ends-in-view will come up again in the context of habits and intelligence. For Dewey, all experience has natural ends because all elements of the social and natural environment have qualities. Natural ends are moments of change in quality. “Acknowledgment of nature as a scene of incessant beginnings and endings presents itself as the source of philosophic enlightenment. It enables thought to apprehend causal mechanisms and temporal finalities as phases of the same natural processes, instead of as competitors where the gain of one is the loss of the other.” Qualities of elements in the natural and social environment change. As qualities change, experience is marked by natural ends. However, this change does not carry any necessary moral value independent of the human’s experience. A quality that begins at the moment of another quality’s ending is neither necessarily superior nor necessarily inferior to the previous quality, in and of itself. To make this point, Dewey offers an example: “a man is not a man until after he is a boy, but childhood does not exist for the sake of maturity.” Dewey calls this idea of natural ends “neutral, not eulogistic; temporal, not absolute.”

My experience at Cochran’s Ski Area offers numerous examples of what Dewey means by “natural ends.” In the context of the natural environment, we could perceive a natural end in

33 Gouinlock, John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value, 63.
34 Experience and Nature, 83.
35 Ibid., 84.
36 Ibid., 83.
the experience of skiing at the moment when the sun hits a trail for the first time during a particular day. While the quality of the snow had previously been slick, fast, and enjoyable to a young skier who desires to race his brother, now the snow turns warm, soft, and slow. A natural end has occurred; one felt quality gives way to another. Jason and I decide to seek another trail that will facilitate faster runs. In the context of the social environment, we could perceive a natural end in the experience of skiing at the time of day when the mountain becomes crowded with families and beginner skiers. Around mid-morning, the mountain becomes heavily populated with skiers of varying abilities. While earlier in the morning, Jason and I had enjoyed a particular trail all to ourselves, now we have to dodge small children as we ski that same trail. The felt quality of emptiness on this ski trail, which we valued highly, has come to a natural end, as the felt quality of crowding emerges. Seeking solitude, Jason and I depart for a different trail.

The fifth trait common to all human experience is what Dewey calls “histories.” This term indicates the process by which an element in the natural or social environment enacts and undergoes natural endings and natural beginnings. Each element that does this in interaction with its environment has a “history:” “the thing which is a close of one history is always the beginning of another, and in this capacity the thing in question is transitive and dynamic.” On a broader scale, the social and natural environments contain a plurality of these beginnings and endings, and witness to a vast chronological sweep of these processes of change. Dewey writes, “[e]mpirically, however, there is a history which is a succession of histories, and in which any event is at once both beginning of one course and close of another; is both transitive and static.” Elsewhere he captures the dynamic and deterministic nature and also the broad sweep

37 Ibid., 85.

38 Ibid.
of these processes of qualitative change by writing, “nature is an affair of affairs, wherein each one, no matter how linked up it may be with others, has its own quality.”

The ski trail which transitioned from shade to sun has a history. As its conditions changed, so too did its felt qualities change; the snow went from fast and fun to slow and boring. As the sun descends again in the late afternoon, the falling temperatures will cause the soft snow to freeze into ice. At that point, the felt quality would be extremely slick and hard, qualities of low value to one who seeks to control his or her trajectory on skis. All of these changes in condition and quality comprise what Dewey would call the trail’s history during the span of the day. A skier also has a history over the course of a day and a lifetime. Over the course of a day, the skier experiences a collection of natural ends, as energy levels and abilities wax and wane. The skier’s day-long history would chart these changes and note the changing values and levels of enjoyment that accompany them. Over the course of a lifetime, a skier experiences natural endings in terms of learning how to ski new terrain. She moves from flat, groomed trails to steep bumps and powder. As her abilities grow over the course of the years, her ski history testifies to new possibilities, new levels of danger and risk, and also new joys and fulfillments.

In sum, Dewey’s doctrine of experience holds that all interactions between human organisms and their natural and social environments are marked by stability, precariousness, quality, ends, and histories. But these assertions about the generic features of all human experience highlight a tension within Dewey’s project, which has received considerable attention from other scholars. How can Dewey make these assertions about the nature of human experience in one breath, and then marshal such a sweeping critique of Western

39 Ibid., 82–3.
metaphysical philosophy with another? Isn’t the development of a list of “general features of experienced things” a project in the metaphysical tone that Dewey and pragmatism more generally find so misguided? Perhaps not. Even though he labels his methodological approach as “empirical naturalism,” Dewey still allows that his work involves an effort in “naturalist metaphysics.” For Dewey, “metaphysics” is “a statement of the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds without regard to their differentiation into physical and mental.” He is willing to proceed with such statements if they are supported by the method of “naturalistic empiricism” which he explains in the early pages of *Experience and Nature*.

Some scholars balk at his assertions about the necessary features of all human experience, and at his claim that such assertions can be justified through inquiry in the method of “empirical naturalism.” Richard Rorty, following George Santayana, argues that Dewey’s metaphysical impulses conflict in deep ways with his broadly pragmatic critique of philosophies of “being.” Indeed, Rorty agrees with Santayana’s quip that “‘naturalistic metaphysics’ is a contradiction in terms.” While he wishes that Dewey would have avoided such forays into metaphysics because of its preoccupation with an “atemporal world,” he concludes that “Dewey did his best to help us get rid of [this atemporal world], and he should not be blamed if he

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40 He makes this wide-ranging critique, as I have mentioned before, in such works as *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *The Quest for Certainty* (see note 29 above.) In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey demands that philosophy be “released from vain metaphysics and idle epistemology” (124). In these works, Dewey is highly critical of the philosophical project of inquiry into the nature of “being,” which is, as Van A. Harvey notes, the defining feature of metaphysical philosophy and theology: Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms: Their Meaning and Background Exposed in Over 300 Articles* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 149–50.


42 Ibid., 334.

occasionally came down with the disease he was trying to cure.” Other scholars have different reactions to Dewey’s metaphysics. Sidney Hook, for example, points out that Dewey tried to abandon metaphysics entirely, especially later in his life. Gouinlock argues against this interpretation, and writes that “Dewey’s intention...was to protest the fact that his use of ‘metaphysical’ was too frequently misread; and to avoid confusion he would never use it again.”

The basic point made by Rorty and Santayana is valid: there does seem to be a major tension in Dewey’s work regarding the nature and status of metaphysics. Dewey seems to be able to cast himself as a metaphysician in part because of the difference between his definition of metaphysics and a more standard one. While Dewey held that any statement on “generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds” qualified as metaphysics, a more traditional definition of this branch of philosophy—such as Harvey’s—would hold that metaphysics is a technical term that indicates an inquiry into the nature of “being” on the basis of pure reason, rather than on the basis of a kind of Darwinian empiricism. Perhaps Dewey’s choice of language and attempted redefinition are unfortunate and inessential to his overall philosophical framework. However, it is possible to read Dewey’s ventures into metaphysics in a different way, one that is not explored by Rorty, Santayana, Hook, and Gouinlock. That way of reading Dewey’s metaphysical statements on the nature of experience would emphasize that the traits he ascribes to experience are not to be understood as final, unrevisable truths about what human experience is and always will be. Rather, they are premises from which an empirical philosophy can begin its inquiry. In keeping with Dewey’s theory of inquiry (outlined below), we

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44 Ibid., 88.

45 Summarized in Gouinlock, John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value, 55.

46 Ibid.
could say that these premises are subject to revision whenever we have reason to doubt them; that is, whenever they cease to facilitate our desired interactions with and in a contingent world. Such an understanding of Dewey’s metaphysical traits of experience allows us to recognize that, in appealing to these traits, Dewey was simultaneously outlining certain premises in order to facilitate future inquiry, and also opening those premises up for philosophical critique in the event that they lose their usefulness under future conditions. To dwell overmuch on the status of these traits may be to violate the pragmatists’ dictum that one must not block the road to inquiry. I take this view of Dewey’s statements on the generic traits of experience to be preferable to those of Rorty, Santayana, Gouinlock, and Hook because it is consistent with his theory of knowledge, and reduces the jarring incongruity that Rorty and Santayana find in the term “naturalistic metaphysics.”

More remains to be said about Dewey’s idea of experience. So far I have surveyed what he meant by experience, and have examined five features that he thought were present in all human experience. However, we must note that Dewey also distinguishes between types of experience, based on the degree to which reflection is involved in the process of interaction, and based on the effect of the experience on the human being(s) involved. An examination of these two distinctions will complete my exploration of Dewey’s doctrine of experience.

First, Dewey distinguishes between what he calls primary and secondary experience. After his explanation of the naturalistic empirical method, he moves to “the contrast between gross, macroscopic, crude subject-matters in primary experience and the refined, derived objects of reflection. The distinction is one between what is experienced as the result of a minimum of incidental reflection and what is experienced in consequence of continued and

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47 I am thankful to Jerome Paul Soneson for his helpful insights on the subject of Dewey’s metaphysics. (Personal conversation, 10/27/2011.)
regulated reflective inquiry.”

My explanation of the meaning and features of Deweyan experience has, to this point, been a treatment of primary experience, but for Dewey, reflection on this “gross, macroscopic, crude” experience qualifies as a kind of experience that is different enough from the first kind to warrant a different name and definition. As Gouinlock writes, “gross, primary experience...is simply the ordinary commonsense experience of the workaday world,” while “reflective or refined experience...refers to the precisely conceptualized materials of the intellectual disciplines.”

However, Gouinlock’s association of secondary or reflective experience with “the intellectual disciplines” fails to make reference to an important idea that is pivotal in Dewey’s distinction between primary and secondary experience. For Dewey, reflective or refined experience is different from primary experience because it considers meaning. In reflection, human beings develop theories and ideas (“objects of secondary experience”) that explain primary experience and allow us to grasp these elements of crude, macroscopic experience “with understanding.” The objects of reflective experience do this as “they define or lay out a path by which return to experienced things is of such a sort that the meaning, the significant content, of what is experienced gains an enriched and expanded force.” Later Dewey explains that the meaning of an object of experience is its potential consequences in the future relationship between the object and the experiencing human. “To perceive is to acknowledge unattained possibilities; it is to refer the present to consequences.” As Soneson notes,

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49 Gouinlock, John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value, 28.

50 Experience and Nature, 7.

51 Ibid., 8.

52 Ibid., 151.
meaning “emerges and is established in historical interaction.” Primary experience brings organisms and environments into interactivity, and this interaction has a multitude of potential effects for the organism. But in secondary experience, the human organism reflects on these potential consequences, which is another way of saying that the human being considers the meaning of primary experience in reflective experience. Welchman explains that this impulse to consider consequences, or to engage in secondary experience, is what separates human beings from all other experiencing organisms, in the Deweyan view:

oysters and infants are similar in that each lives in a world of immediate experience, organized by the percipient’s impulsive activity. Neither creature experiences the world as meaningful. The similarity is of course superficial, because the infant has, in addition to the impulses shared with the oyster, the impulse to idealize or define experience. In addition to this distinction between primary/gross and secondary/reflective experience, Dewey also distinguishes between experiences based on their differing effects in the life of the experiencer. The possible effects of human experience, according to the distinction that Dewey makes, are two: either the experience is “consummatory,” meaning that through it the human organism is brought by, and brings, the experience to a state of fulfillment or completion; or it is not consummatory, meaning that the interaction remains unfulfilling and incomplete. Enacting and undergoing secondary experience is always a necessary, but insufficient element of any consummatory experience. Dewey uses a variety of terms and images to describe what he means by “consummatory;” I will briefly explain two of his approaches to this topic here.

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53 Soneson, Pragmatism and Pluralism, 41.

54 Welchman, Dewey’s Ethical Thought, 100–101.

55 For uses of the language of consummation, completion, and fulfillment see for example: Experience and Nature, 167, 298–305.
One way that Dewey approaches the subject of consummatory experience is with the language of education. For Dewey, experience can be either “educative” or “miseducative.” To be educative, experience must fulfill the principles of continuity and interaction. “Continuity” indicates that experiences follow, influence, and inform each other as the human being moves through life. “Just as no man lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences.”

“Interaction” indicates the two components—environment and organism—present in any and all experience. Interaction “assigns equal rights to both factors in experience—objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions.” In fact, all experiences are guided by the principles of continuity and interaction, according to Dewey. However, one or both of these principles can be unfulfilled in actual experience. Continuity can be unfulfilled if, for example, experiences seem to have no relation to each other. Interaction can be unfulfilled if, for example, either the organism or the environment is emphasized in reflection on experience to the exclusion of the other component. Dewey sees these misleading possibilities at work in formal academic education. Because the principles of continuity and interaction are misunderstood in educational processes, students have experiences that are “miseducative.” Miseducative experiences are disagreeable, and they do not awaken and engage the senses, thoughts, and actions of the experiencer. They close the human being off from future experiences. Educative experiences, on the other hand, fulfill the principles of continuity and interaction. They engage the human being’s senses, thoughts, and

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56 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 27.

57 Ibid., 42.

actions. They open the experiencer up for more and richer experiences.\textsuperscript{59} In short, educative experiences are consummatory, while miseducative experiences are not.

Another way that Dewey explains his idea of consummatory experience is through the language of art. In \textit{Art as Experience}, Dewey contrasts “inchoate” experiences with consummatory experience. Echoing his description of a miseducative experience as one that violates the principles of continuity and interaction, he explains inchoate experience. “There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get are at odds with each other...In contrast with such experience, we have \textit{an} experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{60} When one has what Dewey calls “\textit{an} experience,” there is both engagement of the total organism in the interaction, and also a unity of moments along the chronological continuum of experience. Here he likens consummatory experience to a flight of stairs,\textsuperscript{61} or waves on a stormy ocean.\textsuperscript{62} Both images capture the singularity of a fulfilled and fulfilling experience and the simultaneous integration of these moments into a larger whole. In these consummatory experiences, the precarious and the stable fully engage the human organism. The individual’s interaction with environments featuring both the stable and the precarious comes to a unity over time, with each experience building on those that came before. According to Dewey, this successful navigation of the stable and the precarious toward successful completion is distilled most clearly in art. He explains that art is created in the artist’s interaction with a world marked by stability and order, union and disintegration. The artist “cares in a peculiar way for the phase of experience in which union is

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 25–29.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Art as Experience}, 36. Italics in the original.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 39.
achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake, but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total.” The artist is one who dramatizes these experiences and brings them to fulfillment by expressing them creatively and by recreating them in those who view the artistic creation. Artistic expression, for Dewey, is the perfect example of consummatory experience.

This interpretive examination of Dewey’s idea of experience will suffice as I move on to consider his conception of democracy and argue that the Deweyan democratic moral agent must possess certain virtues. To recap, experience is the active and receptive interaction between an organism and its social and natural environments through the integrated interplay of sensation, thought, and act. Experience is always marked by stability, precariousness, qualities, ends, and histories. Human beings engage in secondary, refined experience when we reflect on this interaction by considering the meaning (potential consequences) of this gross experience. Consummatory experience is the completion or fulfillment of the experience and the organism in which the principles of continuity and interaction are recognized and lived out. Because Dewey regards experience as the source for human habits and human knowledge, I will turn first to Dewey’s doctrine of “mental and emotional disposition of behavior,” and next to his conception of intelligence and inquiry.

Consistent with his method of naturalistic empiricism, Dewey takes it as a matter of fact, derived from observation and experience of experience, that the human organism has habits. Habits, for Dewey, are “definite dispositions...a habit is a form of executive skill, of efficiency in

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63 Ibid., 14.

64 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 12.
While dispositions to act are important in Dewey’s discussion of habit, they are not the only kinds of habit that humans possess. Echoing Aristotle’s distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, Dewey continues. “The significance of habit is not exhausted, however, in its executive and motor phase. It means formation of intellectual and emotional disposition as well as an increase in ease, economy, and efficiency in action.”

“Attitude” functions as a rough equivalent for habit in Dewey’s lexicon, as do “disposition” and “inclination.” Each individual possesses a wide array of habits, all of which determine the way we act, feel, and think. In any given act, a vast number of dispositions to think, feel, and act are engaged together, and influence each other. Dewey calls this collection of mutually-influencing attitudes “character.”

“Were it not for the continued operation of all habits in every act, no such thing as character could exist. There would be simply a bundle, an untied bundle at that, of isolated acts. Character is the interpenetration of habits.”

According to Dewey, human beings acquire habits through interaction with natural and social environments, which is another way of saying that we come to possess habits through experience. In keeping with his empirical naturalism, much of Dewey’s reflection on habit acquisition comes in the form of general discussion of infant development. Here we should recall Dewey’s contention that nature possesses ends that human beings experience as we interact with our environments. In the previous discussion of experience, “ends” meant the termination of one quality of a certain natural phenomenon, which gives rise to the beginning of

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65 Ibid., 27.
66 Ibid., 28.
68 Ibid., 18.
69 Dewey, Reconstruction in Philosophy, 79.
another. In Dewey’s doctrine of the traits of nature in experience (especially as Gouinlock summarizes them), the term “ends” indicates this ever-present process of changing qualities in the natural world. However, in Dewey’s discussion of habits, the term carries an additional meaning. Here, “ends” are aims and objects of action, thought, and feeling. They are responses to the natural ends or values that human beings find in experience. In the formation of habits, which begins at the very moment in which an infant begins to interact with its surroundings, natural and social environments present the human organism with ends. For example, an infant naturally desires food, and notices a pattern in which the getting of food chronologically follows the act of crying. After repeated instances of this pattern, the infant develops a certain habit of action (crying) in order to achieve an end (getting food) presented to it by both the natural and social environments. This habit of action in relation to a world of natural, social values and ends is never developed without accompanying habits of thought and emotion. This basic dynamic of habit formation as part of the process of interaction between human organism and environment continues from infancy through adulthood. This summary example contains two issues that are important enough to Dewey’s conception of habits that they merit further consideration: the generation and modification of habits; and the social, moral nature of ends.

First, Dewey explains that habits are born from interaction with social and natural environments. An infant’s interaction with its social environment, including most notably parents and family, channels its impulses (which Dewey also calls “instincts” and “native tendencies”) into habits. “In the life of the individual, instinctive activity comes first. But an individual begins life as a baby, and babies are dependent beings. Their activities could continue at most for only a few hours were it not for the presence and aid of adults with their formed

70 For examples of Dewey’s generalized reflection on habit formation in infants’ experience, see Democracy and Education, 10, 22, 26–27; Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology, 32, 35.
habits.” Dewey holds that impulses are manifold in human life; they include instincts to eat, procreate, preserve one’s life, feel fear, and so forth. They are an outgrowth of the interaction between the organism and the ends it encounters in its social and natural environments. However, these impulses are molded immediately in the life of the human organism by the habits of the social group around it. For example, the infant has a “native tendency” to excrete waste after eating. But the social environment around it imparts habits of thinking, feeling, and acting that modify this instinct. Habit is born, in this case, as the organism develops the dispositions to excrete waste in private, not to talk about the act in the company of strangers, and so forth. Habit is so normative that Dewey claims that “[i]n conduct, the acquired is the primitive. Impulses although first in time are never primary in fact; they are secondary and dependent.”

Habits acquired through social experience so deeply shape the conduct of the human organism that Dewey argues that they become primary to impulse. But this does not mean that habits cannot change. Indeed, for Dewey, impulse not only supplies the raw material to be channeled by social habit, it also serves as a modifying, “rejuvenating” force in the organism’s set of habits. Habitual conduct can conflict with an impulse in any number of ways: an impulse can offer a new end of activity that conflicts with habitually pursued ends; an impulse can offer a new way of pursuing the same ends that are habitually pursued; changing environmental conditions can supply an impulse to act in new ways and/or toward new ends; and so forth. Dewey’s broad point, though, is that although habit becomes the dominant, normative source for human conduct, impulses never depart fully from the scene, and their influence on habit continues. “Impulses are the pivots upon which the reorganization of activities turn, they are

72 Ibid.
agencies of deviation, for giving new directions to old habits and changing their quality."\(^{73}\) In the example of the infant who develops certain habits around the activity of waste excretion, we can imagine new developments giving rise to impulses that modify existing habits. A teenager goes camping for the first time, and learns that in this context, discussion of fecal issues is permitted by social custom, or even required by social custom, so that other members of the camping party know where the impromptu latrine is. Or a young man and woman have their first child, and are therefore participants in a new social milieu in which discussion of feces is now socially appropriate. Dewey holds that habits constantly renew themselves through this natural process of impulsive rejuvenation, and welcomes this renewal: "what makes a bad habit is enslavement to old ruts."\(^{74}\)

Second, Dewey insists on the social nature of habits consistently in his treatment of disposition and conduct. This insistence has important ramifications for his ethical thought, and illuminates his departure from a number of other ethical theories. One important consequence that Dewey’s doctrine of habits imparts to his ethical thought is that moral norms are, for Dewey, a social creation. His empirical naturalism takes as a matter of fact that human organisms gain certain habits as a result of social experience. Furthermore, these habits contain moral norms that are specific to the cultural and historical location of the social group.\(^{75}\) The moral agent does not discern transcendent laws of God or nature by revelation or pure reason.\(^{76}\)


\(^{74}\) *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, 37, 108. For Dewey, intelligence plays a major role in the rejuvenation of habit. I will save a discussion of intelligence and the revision of habit for the treatment of inquiry below.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 5. On the variation of moral norms with respect to culture and history, see 56.

\(^{76}\) It is important to note that, for Dewey, the fact that moral norms have their source in social custom rather than in divine or natural law does not imply their diminished authority: Ibid., 45–47.
Rather, the moral agent absorbs moral norms from the social customs at work around her. Another ethical implication of Dewey’s notion of habits is that moral norms change and evolve. As impulses and changing conditions create variations in the ways we enact our habits and in the ends our habits pursue, moral norms must necessarily evolve and develop as well. The rejuvenation of habit for which Dewey calls necessarily entails revision of social custom and morality.77

When Dewey argues that habits—and thus moral norms—are the evolving creation of social experiences and impulses, he distances himself radically from a number of dominant ethical schools of thought. Although his naturalistic empiricism is indebted to the work of David Hume, Dewey wants to complicate what he takes to be Hume’s rigid distinction between “is” premises and “ought” conclusions. This survey of Dewey’s doctrine of habits shows that Dewey regards moral norms as the natural products of social experience. Morality is a natural part of human life; any “ought” conclusion implicitly restates a natural reality of human social life, whether the conclusion reflects a status quo moral sensibility, or a newly emerging habit. Therefore, Dewey finds hard distinctions between “facts” and “values” to be misleading.78 While Hume is not mentioned by name in this context, Dewey does explicitly critique Aristotle on the basis of this notion of experience and habit. For Dewey, Aristotle’s moral theory fails to account for the facts that ends develop naturally in human experience, and change with new impulses and fluctuating environments. Dewey takes Aristotle to be guilty of setting “fixed ends” for human moral life.

77 Ibid., 70, 80.

78 Ibid., 124. Gouinlock reads Dewey differently on this question. While Gouinlock admits that Dewey breaks down the dualistic separation of fact and value, insofar as Dewey locates value in human interaction with social and natural environments, Gouinlock claims that Dewey upholds the Humean distinction between “is” and “ought,” on the basis of a distinction between “value” and moral obligation (“ought”). Gouinlock, John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value, 137–40.
When men believed that fixed ends existed for all normal changes in nature, the conception of similar ends for men was but a special case of a general belief. If the changes in a tree from acorn to full grown oak were regulated by an end which was somehow immanent or potential in all the less perfect forms, and if change was simply the effort to realize a perfect or complete form, then the acceptance of a like view for human conduct was consonant with the rest of what passed for science.\textsuperscript{79}

In rejecting fixed ends as the goal of human moral and physical development, Dewey demonstrates his attempt to apply Charles Darwin’s insights to human morality: the moral ends approved by social custom develop and change due to impulse and environmental change, just as much as genetic and physiological traits of organisms develop and change. Dewey’s concept of habit also distanced him from Kant’s moral philosophy, as well. In claiming that socially-transmitted habit shapes our desired ends and the ways in which we pursue them, Dewey makes a deeply anti-Kantian move. In particular, Dewey rejects Kant’s claim that the free, rational will—which exists in the noumenal realm, apart from change, flux, and determinism—chooses the good.\textsuperscript{80} Dewey’s insistence that ends are the result of natural processes of experience and habituation reaches an apex in his rejection of Kant’s free, rational, noumenal will: “habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they \textit{are} will.”\textsuperscript{81} I highlight his differences from the moral philosophies of these three writers in order to show that, with Dewey’s doctrine of habit we begin to encounter a moral philosophy that was singular in its time in terms of its impulse to “naturalize” and its rejection of received ethical wisdom.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology}, 149.

\textsuperscript{80} Jennifer K. Uleman, \textit{An Introduction to Kant’s Moral Philosophy} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology}, 10, see also 21. Dewey’s most radical statement on the naturalization of moral psychology comes in his article “The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James,” \textit{The Journal of Philosophy} 37, no. 22 (October 24, 1940): 589–599. There he argues that there is no “self,” in any technical or abstract sense of the term that might be found in moral philosophy. Rather, he holds that there is a physiological organism that enacts and undergoes social and natural experiences including processes of nervous system functions, and interaction with moral custom.
Before turning to Dewey’s conception of inquiry and intelligence, I will conclude this section on “executive, emotional, and intellectual dispositions” by noting that his discussion of habits justifies the conclusion that Dewey has a doctrine of virtue in his ethical theory. As we saw in the previous chapter of this project, the classic, Aristotelian notion of virtue defines the term with reference to a “state of character” or a “habitual disposition.” Although Dewey rejects much Aristotelian anthropology and metaphysics (as the previous paragraph explains), he certainly agrees with Aristotle that human beings possess habits, and he even echoes Aristotle’s division of categories within the virtues. While Aristotle divides the virtues into moral (which includes habits of action and feeling) and intellectual, Dewey maintains that habits guide the distinct, but related activities of action, feeling, and thought. In addition, Dewey summarizes the primary goal of ethical reflection in a way that virtue ethicists will find very familiar. “What sort of an agent,” he writes, “of a person, shall he be? This is the question finally at stake in any genuinely moral situation: What shall the agent be? What sort of character shall he assume?”

He reiterates on multiple occasions throughout his corpus that this is and should be the guiding question of moral thought. We will recall from the previous chapter that MacIntyre considers this question to be the hallmark of a virtue ethical theory. I do not claim to be the only student of Dewey to find a doctrine of virtue in his work. Many fine works have made this case, and have identified different particular virtues that resonate with a Deweyan ethical perspective.

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However, it is an overstatement to say that Dewey belongs in the “virtue ethics” category, or either of the other two categories of modern moral thought (deontology and utilitarianism), technically speaking. While he does offer a doctrine of habits, and he does call for focus on the agent in ethical reflection, his approach is too idiosyncratic to warrant one of these labels. In his Ethics, Dewey argues that all categories that seem to define these camps (such as virtue, duty, utility, and so forth) deserve consideration in moral reflection, and that attention to one of these categories need not require exclusion of another. He draws on significant representatives from the major frameworks of modern ethical philosophy: Mill and Bentham, Aristotle, and Kant. In 1930, Dewey gave a speech to the French Philosophical Society that calls for the dismantling of separate ethical theories that highlight one category of moral reflection to the exclusion of all others. “Three Independent Factors in Morals” makes a plea for ethicists to consider ends/happiness, right/duty, and praise/blame all together. The thesis of this essay bears a remarkable resemblance to that of an article by Martha Nussbaum, which was written almost 70 years later; both call for a relaxation of rigid distinctions between approaches to moral philosophy. In short, one must recognize that Dewey offered a concept of virtue, but one must also avoid labeling him as a virtue ethicist (or as a deontologist or utilitarian, for that matter).

If Dewey argues that experience is the source of human habits, he also claims that experience is the source for human knowledge. He denies any view that isolates one human

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capacity or factor, such as sensation or rationality, as the sole source of knowledge.\textsuperscript{88} Dewey recalls one of his major points in the “Reflex Arc” essay in his theory of knowledge, and argues that senses, thought, and action are always at work together in the experiences that produce knowledge. The active, experiential locus of human knowledge is evident as Dewey writes, for example, “no knowing takes place without an overt act of taking and employing things on the basis of their meanings.”\textsuperscript{89} To understand this claim well, however, we must contextualize Dewey’s conception of experiential knowledge through an exploration of his ideas of inquiry and intelligence.

For Dewey, the technical term for the refined, secondary experience that produces knowledge is “inquiry,” which he defines as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the element of the original situation into a unified whole.”\textsuperscript{90} In other words, inquiry is a human action that takes place in response to an experience that yields cognitive indeterminacy; it responds to “the disturbed relation of organism-environment (which defines doubt).”\textsuperscript{91} When an interaction between human being(s) and the social and natural environments is indeterminate or doubtful, the organism enacts and undergoes secondary, refined experience, or reflection. Specifically, the organism reflects on the meaning of the objects or events of experience, and we will recall that “meaning,” for Dewey, is a term that indicates “potential consequences.” In a passage that deals indirectly with the resolution of doubt in indeterminate situations, he writes, “observation alone is not enough. We have to

\textsuperscript{88} Experience and Nature, 110–115; The Quest for Certainty, 170–2.

\textsuperscript{89} Experience and Nature, 269.


\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 35.
understand the *significance* of what we see, hear, and touch. The significance consists of the consequences that will result when what is seen is acted upon." In inquiry resolves doubt by identifying the problematic element(s) in an indeterminate situation, observing possible ways in which the situation might be made determinate, and weighing these “ideas” against each other based on perceptions of the situation by means of “reasoning” through hypotheses. A situation is made determinate when one of these hypotheses is accepted as most likely to produce meaning from a situation in which meaning is in doubt. Every step of this process is partly determined by pre-existing habits of thought, feeling, and act. Well-performed inquiry is itself a habit that must be acquired, according to Dewey. 

When inquiry resolves doubt by determining the meaning or potential consequences of a situation, knowledge is the result. Dewey offers two tests for us to use as we try to determine whether or not an idea or proposition is actionable as “knowledge.” First is the test of instrumentality, which may be the best-known feature of Dewey’s theory of knowledge. According to the principle of instrumentality, an idea must prove itself in action by performing its promised function in order to be considered reliable, actionable knowledge. Most generally, the promised function of any idea is that it will render determinate a doubtful experience. More specifically, these ideas will perform vastly different functions based on the context of the experience. “If ideas, meanings, conceptions, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganization of the given environment, to a removal of some specific trouble and perplexity, then the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work.”

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92 *Experience and Education*, 68.


94 Ibid., 31.

95 *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 156. See also *Art as Experience*, 302.
guide that Dewey offers to test the validity of an idea is that of coherence. According to the principle of coherence, an idea must not contradict other ideas whose validity is widely accepted; if such conflict occurs, one or both of the ideas must be re-evaluated. When “the consequences which follow from acting upon [an idea] entangle and confuse the other consequences which follow from the causes” of the idea, one idea is “cognitively invalid.” This means inquiry must continue until the various meanings of an indeterminate situation cohere with each other. Both tests to determine the validity of a result of inquiry proceed along experimental lines, which means that inquiry is a) both activity and thought, not merely thought alone, and b) progressive, in that the results of inquiry build on each other, but are always regarded as hypotheses subject to further evaluation.

When an idea passes these tests, according to Dewey, it qualifies as knowledge, and is “true.” However, it is important to note that Dewey’s definition of truth is one that rejects “correspondence” theories, and instead stresses the role of knowledge in guiding human experience and action. When discussing the outcome of inquiry as a true idea, Dewey finds the phrase “warranted assertion” preferable to “knowledge” and “truth.” This is in part because Dewey thinks that these terms carry metaphysical and epistemological connotations that suggest knowledge can be abstracted away from the process of inquiry. This abstraction of knowledge from the experiential processes of inquiry suggests to Dewey a dualistic view of the human knower’s relation to the known world. For Dewey, this dualistic abstraction is a hallmark of correspondence theories of truth, which hold that an idea is true insofar as it corresponds to a reality that exists prior to and independent of human experience. Correspondence theories of

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96 Experience and Nature, 263.

97 The Quest for Certainty, Chapter 6; Reconstruction in Philosophy, 92–95.

98 Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, 8–9.
truth, according to Dewey, rely on “assumptions which first make a division where none exists, and then resort to an artifice to restore the connection which has been willfully destroyed.” In contrast with a dualistic notion of knowledge and truth, Dewey’s idea of truth stresses that the assertions our inquiry yields are deeply rooted in active interaction with the environments, and are oriented toward the facilitation of future interactions. “That which guides us is truly true,” he writes, “demonstrated capacity for such guidance is precisely what is meant by truth.” In a similar passage he defines truth as “processes of change so directed that they achieve an intended consummation.”

At this point I would like to call attention to an important feature of Dewey’s theory of knowledge. For Dewey, the warranted assertions that result from inquiry are always fallible, and therefore subject to revision. New situations of inquiry give rise to doubts that have never before been considered. New truths in one particular field of inquiry can jeopardize the “warrantability” of assertions in a related field. In addition, the precarious and contingent nature of all human experience renders all human knowledge precarious and contingent, insofar as knowledge is a product of experience. “There is no knowledge self-guaranteed to be infallible,” Dewey reminds us, “since all knowledge is the product of special acts of inquiry. Agnosticism as confession of ignorance about special matters, in the absence of adequate evidence, is not only in place under such circumstances but is an act of intellectual honesty.” Dewey’s reminder that all knowledge is subject to revision implied the revisability of his own assertions, as well; in his Logic he calls for “others to undertake the long cooperative work

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99 *Experience and Nature*, 231, see also 115.

100 *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 156.

101 *Experience and Nature*, 133–134.

102 *The Quest for Certainty*, 193. See also *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 145.
(never-ending in any case as long as inquiry continues) needed to test and fill in the framework which is outlined in this book.\textsuperscript{103} This willingness on Dewey’s part to revise any and all human knowledge as new doubts emerge was thoroughgoing and radical. Recall from the beginning of this chapter our discussion of Dewey’s preliminary premises, which posited an organism and natural and social environments with which that organism interacts. Even these assertions could be revised if, in some future situation, they become doubtful and fail to pass the tests of coherence and instrumentality. Therefore, it is wrong to think of these premises as “foundations” on which Dewey builds a philosophical system. Dewey’s epistemology is anti-foundational, meaning that he does not hold out hope that philosophy can discover an eternally true and non-controvertible truth (such as the cogito of Descartes) on which to erect all knowledge. Rather, he accepts some premises as adequate assumptions from which to begin addressing human needs, understanding at all times that these assumptions may need to be changed at any time.

For Dewey, scientific method is the pinnacle of experimental inquiry that yields instrumental, revisable knowledge. Scientific method enacts its inquiry and pursues its results in large part based on the two tests by which Dewey evaluated cognitive candidates for truth. Welchman explains Dewey’s summary of scientific processes of verification, writing,

\begin{quote}
the method by which scientists construct and confirm their judgments about the principles of design of natural objects and events includes (1) provisional warranting of hypothetical judgments by their coherence with antecedent judgments (i.e., warranting for further investigation) and (2) the warranting proper of a hypothetical judgment by the experimental confirmation of the predictions it yields.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{103} Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, 40.

\textsuperscript{104} Dewey’s Ethical Thought, 150.
These two tests to evaluate the validity of an assertion are precisely those of Dewey’s theory of knowledge: coherence and instrumentality. In addition, the conclusions of scientific method are both fallible and revisable. The irony about the revisability of the claims of science was that this feature was lost on many who inaugurated the method. Some of the earliest practitioners of the new science misunderstood the nature of their inquiry, according to Dewey, because they continued to believe that they were formulating ideas that correspond to a pre-existing, fixed reality. Nevertheless, Dewey points out that the history of scientific thought attests to the revisability of its conclusions; if any doubt this, Dewey reminds us of the evolving, changing history of atomic theories. So enamored with scientific inquiry is Dewey that he often uses “intelligence” as a synonym. Intelligence is the means by which doubtful situations are rendered determinate and knowledge is gained.

Of course, Dewey’s notion of intelligence has important implications for his moral thought; here I will briefly explain three ways in which his model of inquiry informs his ethics. First, we have seen that in the human interaction with nature, ends or aims of action develop naturally. Under the guidance of intelligent inquiry, though, the human organism can imagine new ends, compare these with ends previously pursued, and project the consequences of pursuing one or the other. Intelligence allows human beings to re-imagine the ends of their action. When he discusses ends that are conceived and pursued under the guidance of intelligence, Dewey uses the term “ends-in-view.” Like the ends pursued by non-intelligent organisms, these are still “internal” to experience and action, and they still change and progress (as opposed to the “fixed, transcendent” ends of other moral philosophies that Dewey

105 The Quest for Certainty, 95.

106 Ibid., 191.

107 Reconstruction in Philosophy, 92–96; Experience and Education, Chapter 7.
denounces). The difference is that intelligence allows human beings more control over the selection and pursuit of ends. Dewey defines these ends-in-view as “those foreseen consequences which influence present deliberation and which finally bring it to rest by furnishing an adequate stimulus to overt action.”

Second, intelligence interacts with habit in important ways in the Deweyan scheme. Habit, for Dewey, partly determines inquiry; the way we think is always influenced by our habits of feeling and acting. But intelligence can always modify habits, as well. When an impulse disrupts our habits, intelligence can take the opportunity to inquire into the possibility of modifying old habits or developing new ones. Inquiry weighs the consequences of maintaining one habit, modifying it, or attempting to form a new one altogether. This picture of intelligence reforming habit becomes complicated when Dewey declares that knowing is itself a habit. One must be educated in intelligence, according to Dewey’s moral vision, in order to critically assess one’s habits. But assessment and modification are possible. At times Dewey suggests that this intelligent modification ought to be the primary goal of the moral life: “[w]hat is necessary is that habits be formed which are more intelligent, more sensitively perceiving, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current.” Dewey even recognizes that intelligence can modify the habit of knowing—one of his aphorisms in the context of educational theory is that students “learn to learn.”

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110 Reconstruction in Philosophy, 122.

111 Ibid., 81.

112 Democracy and Education, 27.
Third, intelligence informs the moral process of deliberation. For Dewey, deliberation is “dramatic rehearsal.” When confronted with mutually exclusive goods, or impulses that run counter to habits, the intelligent moral agent imagines “competing lines of action.” “Thought runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure and disaster. An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable.” Intelligence is required to engage in this process. Those who possess habitual intelligence are capable of imagining actions and consequences that have not taken place. According to Dewey, choice is “[s]imply hitting in imagination upon an object which furnishes an adequate stimulus to the recovery of overt action.” Deliberation is unreasonable if it fixates on one possible good and its attendant line of action, and reasonable if it weighs all goods well, without this fixation. “Reason,” he writes, “signifies the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions...to follow things through.” Reason is a disposition resulting from intelligent inquiry, according to Dewey. He prefers to make “intelligence,” rather than “reason,” the engine of moral reflection and deliberation in part because he finds “reason” to be unfortunately associated with moral theories that posit a cognitive faculty that exists beyond the realm of human action.

Keeping Dewey’s notions of experience, habit, and inquiry in mind, we can move to his theory of communication. To this point my reconstruction of Dewey’s ideas has generally focused on an individual experiencer. I say generally because the fact that the individual always exists in a social environment means that she never experiences anything alone. In any case, the

114 Ibid., 127.
115 Ibid., 128–130. For a clear account of Dewey’s notion of dramatic rehearsal, see Fesmire, John Dewey and Moral Imagination.
116 Reconstruction in Philosophy, viii–ix.
idea of communication provides an opportunity for us to consider more fully the social nature of human experience. Any analysis of Dewey’s ideal of democracy must consider this topic. Although it has received less attention than it deserves in treatments of Dewey’s ethics, communication plays a pivotal role in his moral reflection. Indeed, Dewey claims that, “[o]f all affairs, communication is the most wonderful,”\(^{117}\) and that it “is the greatest of human goods.”\(^{118}\) And as I will explain shortly, Dewey argues that the success of democracy is directly dependent on communication.

What is communication, according to Dewey? It is an interaction carried out and undergone by human beings with their social environment, in which the participants exchange experience with each other.\(^{119}\) In saying that communication exchanges experience, Dewey means that all factors derived from experience can be and are exchanged in this process. Communication is accomplished through the transmissions of signs and gestures, which we endow with meaning.\(^{120}\) Vocal language is an important, but not the exclusive, means by which human beings communicate.\(^{121}\) Like all other human activities, communication is influenced by the dispositions that the agents possess. For Dewey, communication is both “consummatory as well as instrumental;”\(^{122}\) it is both an end in itself and a means to other desired ends.

Communication is a means to other ends, according to Dewey, because the act of exchanging experience with other human beings brings about new and more desirable states of experience for all parties involved. One end that communication achieves is that it makes things

\(^{117}\) *Experience and Nature*, 138.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 167.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 141; *Democracy and Education*, 118.

\(^{120}\) *Experience and Nature*, 146.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 144.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 167.
common between people; through the exchange of different components of experience, what
was once the possession of only one person becomes the possession of all parties involved in
the exchange. This means that as one communicates, one’s interests, beliefs, and
understanding all become common possessions as experience is exchanged. A second end
that communication achieves is that it creates knowledge. I have already explained the
Deweyan vision of the process that leads to knowledge. But this process never takes place for
any solitary individual, according to Dewey: “knowledge is a function of association and
communication.” Dewey explains the relation of communication to the formation of
knowledge, writing: “Record and communication are indispensable to knowledge. Knowledge
coopéd up in private consciousness is a myth, and knowledge of social phenomena is peculiarly
dependent upon dissemination, for only by distribution can such knowledge be either obtained
or tested.” Given that solitary inquiry is an impossibility, communication is a means to
knowledge. A third end that communication achieves is that it modifies the habits of the parties
involved. Like impulse and intelligence, communication does the valuable work of changing
one’s dispositions. It does so in both a general and a particular way. Communication changes
habits in general because as experience is exchanged between two or more people, both
communicators come to understand which particular habits their neighbors value, and which
they find problematic. And communication changes one habit in particular: those who

123 Democracy and Education, 118.
124 Reconstruction in Philosophy, 92.
125 Democracy and Education, 6.
127 Ibid., 176–7.
128 Experience and Nature, 228–9; Democracy and Education, 102.
communicate develop a “social disposition,” by which they are inclined to communicate more fully and more often with their neighbors.129

However, communication is also an end in itself, according to Dewey, because it is itself part of the consummation of experience. Experience cannot be fulfilled without communication.130 For Dewey, there is something inherently pleasing about exchanging experience with one’s neighbors: “[c]ommunication is also an immediate enhancement of life, enjoyed for its own sake.”131 This exchange is a fundamental component of what it is to be human, and as such, developing the skill of such communication is desirable in and of itself. “To learn to be human is to develop through give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community.”132 In this quotation, and in his theory of communication more generally, we see the development of inter-subjectivity in Dewey’s moral vision. In communication, two or more agents meet. Each knows the existence of the other through experience, and each is a center of experience, bearing his or her own history. In communication, there is a recognition of the value of the other’s experience, based on the understanding that the other center of experience is capable of reflective, secondary experience, projecting consequences, conducting inquiry, revising knowledge, and so forth. Based on this recognition of value, parties to Deweyan communication also possess an openness to the possibility of being changed through the process of sharing experience. Thus it is through the concept of communication that Dewey accounts for inter-subjective connection, in which the existence and value of the other is recognized.

129 Democracy and Education, 8.

130 Art as Experience, 22.

131 Experience and Nature, 152.

132 The Public and Its Problems, 154.
All that remains to be considered prior to an examination of Dewey’s reflections on democracy is his concept of growth. Dewey indicates the importance of growth for his ethical perspective by writing, “[g]rowth itself is the only moral ‘end.’” By “growth,” Dewey means that dispositions have been revised as a result of intelligent social exchange of experience. This growth occurs as individuals communicate intelligently with each other and form new habits by envisioning new desired consequences (or “meanings”) of conduct. Generally speaking, society always passes down the dispositions and desired consequences it values to new generations. But when this process takes place by the means of intelligent communication, society revises its valued ends and dispositions. For Dewey, this intelligent revision of social habit is growth, and it is the proper goal of education, broadly construed.

Dewey’s doctrine of growth may seem to make him vulnerable to the critique that his ultimate “moral end” affirms only a formal value, and does not offer any substantive moral norms about what, specifically, growth entails. But Dewey does, in fact, give such guidance on the substantive moral direction growth must take. To qualify as growth that is consistent with Dewey’s vision of the moral life, the revision of habits that occurs must facilitate future experience. This means that the revision of habit must not “set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities

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133 Reconstruction in Philosophy, 177.

134 Democracy and Education, 27.

135 Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology, 188.

136 Democracy and Education, chapters 1 and 2.

137 Ibid., 31; Experience and Education, 25, 30.

138 This is what Paul Tillich suggests when he recounts a conversation he had with Dewey in which he apparently convinced Dewey that his norm-less philosophy offers no substantive reasons to resist totalitarianism. See Paul Tillich, Political Expectation, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 138.
for continuing growth in new directions.” As Gouinlock points out, the facilitation of future experience means that growth must enable a person or group of persons to participate more fully in and with social and natural environments. This means that growth has not occurred wherever habit facilitates dominance of a human being by the social and/or natural environments. Soneson notes that growth necessarily implies that human beings develop dispositions that move them toward greater social inclusivity. These points—made by Dewey and by his interpreters—establish that the concept of growth contains specific moral content, and that when growth occurs, experiences that are more participatory and inclusive are the result.

With Dewey’s doctrines of experience, habit, inquiry, communication, and growth in mind, we are prepared to understand his conception of democracy, and thus to ask him the question of democratic virtue. What kind of people must we be in order for Dewey’s conception of democracy to flourish? Before reconstructing a Deweyan answer to this question, I will explore the details of Dewey’s idea of democracy, which includes both a “thin,” or particularly political meaning, and also a “thick,” or general social meaning.

First, Dewey’s “thin” conception of democracy holds that it is a particular kind of political structure. For Dewey, the state comes into being as a result of indirect consequences that follow from human interactions. All interactions between human beings carry consequences that have effects for the parties directly involved, but some interactions have effects for other people, who are not directly involved in the interaction. The state, according to Dewey, is born from this dynamic. The purpose of the state is to regulate the effects of

\[\text{experience and education}, 36.\]

\[\text{john dewey's philosophy of value}, 238-41.\]

\[\text{pragmatism and pluralism}, 87.\]
interactions suffered by people not directly involved in the interactions; in other words, the state’s aim is to pursue the interests of these people. When a group of people who are all similarly touched by indirect consequences of actions coheres and seeks this regulation, a public is born. In an effort to alleviate the effects of these indirect interactions, the public will seek out officials and endow them with the office and power to regulate affairs. Dewey’s specifically political definition of democracy must be taken in relation to this general view of the origin and function of the state: “Democracy is a word of many meanings...one of the meanings is distinctly political, for it denotes a mode of government, a specified practice in selecting officials and regulating their conduct as officials.” The way political democracy does this is through the authority of the people. The strength of political democracy, for Dewey, lies in its ability to address two problems that have long plagued political life. Democracy makes “an effort in the first place to counteract the forces that have so largely determined the possession of rule by accidental and irrelevant factors, and in the second place an effort to counteract the tendency to employ political power to serve private instead of public ends.” Political democracy addresses these problems through the diffusion of power in checks and balances between governmental institutions, popular suffrage, a free press, and so forth.

Second, in addition to democracy’s “thin” political meaning, it also has a “thick,” moral meaning that applies to the lives of individuals and societies alike. It is this latter sense of the

142 The Public and Its Problems, 12–16.
143 Ibid., 15–16.
144 Ibid., 82.
145 Ibid., 83.
146 Reconstruction in Philosophy, 186. This distinction can be misleading; Dewey does not want to suggest that “the political” is wholly separate from “the moral.” In the context of his discussion of democracy, these terms serve to highlight the basic fact that Dewey cares about forms of democracy that are not restricted to political structures.
term democracy that occupies Dewey’s attention most. “It is, as we often say, though perhaps without appreciating all that is involved in the saying, a way of life, social and individual.”¹⁴⁷ This sense of democracy as “a way of life,” to which I will now turn, may be distinct from the political sense, but the two are very much related, insofar as they are mutually-influencing. The success of publics in regulating the indirect consequences that they suffer depends on the establishment of democracy as a way of life. And political democracy carries the promise of serving the interests of more and more people and publics who suffer indirect consequences of actions. When these interests are served, and troublesome indirect consequences are regulated, the publics in question enjoy a greater possibility to pursue democracy as a social and individual way of life.

If the two types of democracy relate to each other in this kind of feedback cycle, what specifically does Dewey mean when he says “democracy is a way of life”? He explains this phrase with reference to the five doctrines I examined in the preceding pages. Here it will be helpful to explore the relation of Dewey’s “thick,” “way of life” conception of democracy to these five doctrines in reverse order of their previous presentation: how does democracy in its general sense relate to Dewey’s ideas of growth, communication, intelligence, habit, and experience?

Often when Dewey describes what he calls “way of life” democracy, he does so in terms of growth. We will recall that growth indicates the revision of individual habits on a social scale toward the end of more fulfilling experiences. Dewey claims that growth will never “shut off the person who has grown” from new stimuli and opportunities that await in the social environment. Rather, growth opens one up to these elements of future experience. Dewey

scholars argue that growth necessarily means deeper participation in a social environment, or adherence to a moral principle, such as inclusivity. Dewey echoes these components of his theory of growth when discussing his general sense of democracy. “Morally,” he writes, democracy “is the effective embodiment of the moral idea of a good which consists in the development of all the social capacities of every individual member of society.”

This definition of democracy resonates deeply with his concept of growth: in both ideas, people in society modify their habits so as to increase their fulfilling interactions with their social environment. Here democracy is the social embodiment of “the only moral end” that individuals and society seek through education. Elsewhere he links this thick, “way of life” meaning of democracy with the political sense of democracy and with the dynamics of growth at the same time. “Democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.”

Both of the quotations in the preceding paragraph add substance to Dewey’s thick conception of democracy by defining it in terms of his concept of growth, but they also demonstrate the deeply liberal tendencies of his philosophy. Another way of framing the value of growth is by defining it in terms of the development of the freedoms and capacities of individuals, which Dewey does in these passages. This emphasis on the development of the individual’s freedoms and capacities is a marker of liberal philosophy and political theory, and Dewey prioritizes the individual’s development strongly throughout his work. As Michael Sandel notes, the ideal of freedom at the center of Dewey’s liberalism reserved a robust role for the community to play. “Central to Dewey’s liberalism was the idea that freedom consists in


149 Reconstruction in Philosophy, 186.
participating in a common life that enables individuals to realize their distinctive capacities." This robust role reserved for the community may have separated Dewey’s liberalism from others who lived and wrote after his death, but his strong emphasis on the development of the individual’s freedoms and capacities justifies calling him a liberal nonetheless. Other liberal impulses in Dewey’s philosophy include his reverence for intelligence and education, and his reluctance to submit to external authorities in the areas of epistemology, morality, and politics.

Communication and inquiry are also central ideas for Dewey as he describes democracy in its thick, “way of life” sense. Inquiry, as explained above, is the process of rendering any doubtful situation determinate and thereby gaining knowledge that passes the tests of coherence and instrumentality. Dewey’s conception of democracy depends on the application of this method of inquiry to social life, and requires that people act in light of the moral problems that this process exposes. (Here we see another instance in which Dewey departs from a strict separation of “is” premises and “ought” conclusions. For Dewey, inquiry can illuminate the social experiences of neglected publics, or what “is” for these people in their public lives, and this process can establish clear “ought” answers that indicate appropriate conduct and policy.) But this intelligent inquiry directed toward social moral ends cannot become effective, Dewey holds, unless its results are disseminated widely to all members of society. The experience of inquiry and the truths it gathers must be shared with the relevant publics. As we’ve seen previously, this sharing of experience is communication. Therefore, democracy in both its thin and thick meanings depends upon the communication of socially applied intelligence. One of the major obstacles that Dewey sees standing in the way of this


151 The Public and Its Problems, 166, 175–177. See also Gouinlock, John Dewey’s Philosophy of Value, 351.
freely distributed inquiry is the industrial economic order, which stifles politics and controls the media.

The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it. When the machine age has thus perfected its machinery it will be a means of life and not a despotic master. Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.¹⁵²

“Way of life” democracy depends on this communication of intelligent inquiry into social problems because people must encounter the interests of their neighbors in order to develop and modify the appropriate habits for interacting with their particular social and natural environments. Political democracy requires this communication of the results of social inquiry because publics can coalesce and be protected by the state only if they are aware of the indirect effects afflicting them, and only if these effects are revealed by communicated intelligence. Dewey identifies the free communication of the results of intelligent inquiry as the major prerequisite necessary for the formation of a democratic public. He calls this public the “Great Community,” and seeks its arrival, which will signal the welcome and natural demise of the Great Society. “Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication alone can create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.”¹⁵³ The construction of the Great Community was synonymous in Dewey’s thought with the development of “way of life” democracy, and this project would be stillborn without free communication of the results of intelligent inquiry.

¹⁵² The Public and Its Problems, 184. See also Democracy and Education, 56.

When Dewey defines democracy in both its meanings in terms of growth, communication, and inquiry, the role of habit in these definitions is usually implied. But he makes this role explicit on occasion, as well. Growth and the communication of the results of socially-applied inquiry serve the purpose of modifying existing habits toward new ones that facilitate more and more consummatory interactions between human beings and their various environments. Describing two defining features of democracy in his theory of education, Dewey explains that the first involves communication and shared interests, while “the second means not only freer interaction between social groups...but change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse. And these two traits are precisely what characterize the democratically constituted society.”

Insofar as the modification of social custom and individual habit are part of the processes of growth and the communication of social inquiry, this adjustment of custom and habit are integral to the formation of both thin political and thick “way of life” democracy.

Of course, it is clear from this brief assessment of the relation of democracy to growth, communication, inquiry, and habit that experience is the source for all the factors of social and political life that contribute to democracy. Experience provides the habits and knowledge, according to Dewey, from which people work as they attempt to create more democratic ways of life and political structures. However, it should also be clear that Dewey’s ethical perspective envisions experience as the goal of democratic life and politics as well. Now we are prepared to reconsider the quotation that supplied the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter: when it comes to justifying the reformation of ends, habits, and knowledge accumulated by experience, Dewey points to the prospect of better future experience. “The question I would raise concerns why we prefer democratic and humane arrangements to those which are autocratic and

harsh...Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience?¹⁵⁵ There are no fixed, transcendent ends, existing apart from human experience that democracy is particularly well-suited to envision and pursue. Rather, it is experience itself that democracy serves, because democratic growth means the constant revision and improvement of natural ends. It also facilitates those experiences that Dewey finds inherently agreeable, such as communication and associated living. In short, experience supplies both the source and the goal of democratic life and politics according to Dewey’s vision of democracy.

Now we are prepared to pose a Deweyan question to this vision of democracy: what kind of people must we be in order for this “way of life” and this political structure to thrive? What kind of selves are in the making as society becomes more democratic? What habits does democracy demand that we possess? Dewey’s presentation of democracy, rooted in his doctrines of experience, habits, inquiry, communication, and growth, implies that moral agents in democratic society must possess the virtues of humility and mutuality.

We must be humble for Dewey’s vision of democracy to thrive because of the revisable nature of knowledge, habit, and moral ends. We will recall that all social habits and all knowledge, according to Dewey, are generated from experience. This includes moral knowledge. No matter how stable human experience may be, it is always marked by the precarious and the contingent as well. Because precariousness and contingency characterize experience and its byproducts, social custom and moral knowledge are fallible and subject to revision. If we, as democratic moral agents, are to understand our habits and moral aims in this way, we must possess the virtue of humility. In humility, moral agents recognize the limitations of our knowledge, motivations, capacity for goodness, and other elements of our moral lives.

¹⁵⁵ Experience and Education, 34.
This is precisely what Dewey’s democracy requires: the humble moral agent is the one who recognizes that habits and moral ends are not endowed with final, undeniable truth. In light of this recognition, the humble moral agent maintains a willingness to revise all her knowledge and habits, especially those pertaining to social, moral issues. And although habit and ends are fallible and revisable products of precarious experience, democratic moral agents cannot take this fallibility as a reason for inaction: “humility is not a caddish self-deprecation,” Dewey writes. “It is the sense of our slight inability even with our best intelligence and effort to command events; a sense of our dependence on forces that go their way without our wish and plan. Its purport is not to relax effort but to make us prize every opportunity for present growth.” Simply put, Dewey’s conception of democracy requires an epistemological humility that recognizes the revisability of received habit and moral wisdom, but doesn’t incapacitate the democratic agent.

While democratic humility is primarily an intellectual virtue in this Deweyan political theory, it also functions like a “character/moral” virtue. This is because it guides moral agents not only in thought, but also in feeling and action. Democratic moral agents must possess the humility necessary to feel in ways that habitually avoid self-estimation that engages in excessive claims of merit and goodness. Lacking humility, a moral agent can come to feel that his or her experiences, habits, and knowledge are the final standards of human goodness. Such feelings would prevent one from recognizing that all these possessions are subject to revision, and indeed that they must be so revised if the Great Society is to move toward the Great Community. Likewise, democratic humility imparts to the moral agent habits of action that are conducive to the creation of the Great Community. Of course, Dewey would reject the idea that thought and feeling are somehow separable from action in the first place, and so he would likely

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say that humble thought and feeling are already forms of humble conduct. However, we can allow the distinction between thought/feeling and action in order to recognize that the coalescence of the Great Community requires bodily movement and physical interaction between neighbors in order to occur. Dewey calls on people to physically go to their neighbors’ houses and interact with them in order to realize a democratic public. “How well do we understand, I wonder, our next door neighbors?” he asks. “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.”  

I submit that this type of conduct requires the moral virtue of humility. One must adopt a humble posture in order to enter the home of one’s neighbor; one cannot be welcomed into the home of another without first being guided in conduct by the virtue by which moral agents avoid self-estimation that engages in excessive claims of merit and goodness.

In addition, we must possess the virtue of mutuality for Dewey’s vision of democracy to thrive because inequalities in communication will prevent the coalescence of the public. Communication, the sharing of experience and the results of inquiry, is the crucial process by which people identify the indirect consequences of others’ actions that they suffer in common. This process also illuminates habits and ends that need revision; without communication, one may never realize the ways in which one’s valued ends and unexplored habits carry consequences for one’s neighbors. Communication reveals challenges to social growth and forces people to address these challenges intelligently. However, communication must be mutual for the process to be effective. If one individual or group of individuals insists on communicating grievances without encountering the grievances of others, revision of ends and habits (and thus growth) could occur at best only in the direction of the interests of a relatively small public. All publics must engage in communication evenly with all others. This Deweyan

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admonition is especially relevant for individuals and groups with surpluses in power. Dewey might say that democratic failures in the West are partly a result of uneven communication between publics: individuals and groups with surplus power have made their grievances known without encountering the needs of less powerful individuals and groups. For communication to occur in this even, balanced, and equal way that is a prerequisite of Deweyan democracy, moral agents must possess the virtue of mutuality. We must be inclined to value and to seek relationships in which exchanges—including those in which needs are communicated—are characterized by a rough equality over time. Dewey summarizes his vision of growth and affirms this important role of democratic mutuality in that vision when he writes,

> the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education...the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth. Now this idea cannot be applied to all the members of a society except where intercourse of man with man is mutual, and except where there is adequate provision for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests. And this means a democratic society.\(^{158}\)

Other scholars agree that communication must be mutual, even if they do not regard mutuality as a democratic virtue in the Deweyan vision.\(^{159}\)

Notice, though, that although this account of the democratic virtue of mutuality seems to be confined to excellent habits of conduct, in reality, this virtue will also guide moral agents in thought and feeling as well. As is the case with humility, Deweyan democratic mutuality is a virtue with both intellectual and moral components. While the act of communication must be guided by the virtue of mutuality, one must also cultivate a commitment to equality of exchange mentally and emotionally in order to act accordingly. If I am to communicate with my neighbor in ways that achieve a rough equality over time, I must develop the habit of valuing intellectually

\(^{158}\) *Democracy and Education*, 56.

and emotionally such equality of exchange. This means apprehending the value of equal exchange as an intellectual exercise; thus the democratic moral agent will inquire into the value of equal exchange, be convinced of this value, and hold to it. In addition, the democratic moral agent will undergo a positive emotional movement when confronted with the value of equal exchange, and will suffer from negative feelings at the prospect of grossly unequal relationships. Mutuality, therefore, is a habit of feeling and of thought as well as of action, and the Deweyan democratic moral agent will be guided by this virtue in all three of these human capacities in order to communicate well with her neighbors. Moral agents, in short, must possess the intellectual and moral virtues of mutuality and humility for a Deweyan conception of democracy to flourish. As Dewey himself counsels, “in a democratic society...so much depends upon personal disposition.”

Having considered the important details and also the broad-strokes picture of Dewey’s philosophy, we may ask ourselves, as a concluding question, about the relevance of Dewey’s thought in the early 21st century. Dewey died in 1952. Are his moral philosophy and his theory of democracy still relevant for those of who live 60 years later? Yes. I take as a measure of Dewey’s enduring relevance the positive reception that his work has received in African-American ethics and religious thought. His work has been warmly received, updated, and applied to new problems by the scholarship of Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., in particular.

The reception of Dewey’s thought in black religion and ethics began in 1982 with West’s landmark work, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, a masterful synthesis of prophetic black Christianity, Marxist thought, and Deweyan pragmatism. In that text, and in much of West’s work thereafter, components of Dewey’s philosophy and political theory receive high praise from

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160 *Democracy and Education*, 192.

West and obviously inform the author’s position. More specifically, Dewey’s philosophy appeals to West for its anti-foundationalism, its anti-dualistic conception of experience, its commitment to the revisability of all knowledge, and its insistence that the task of philosophy is “cultural criticism,” or the attempt to address and to solve the real problems of human beings. This last component of Dewey’s thought—that the proper task of philosophical inquiry is to address and solve real human problems—is one with special appeal to West. *Prophesy Deliverance!* uses quotations from Dewey’s work as epigraphs to three chapters, and each quotation reminds the reader that philosophy must attend to “America’s needs” and peoples’ “social and moral strifes.” In addition, West has consistently drawn on Deweyan political theory from the publication of *Prophesy Deliverance!* through his later career. Democracy, with notably pragmatic trappings, is a normative ideal that shapes much of West’s writing. West explains his own “way of life” approach to democracy, explaining that his

> [p]rophetic criticism is first and foremost an intellectual inquiry constitutive of existential democracy—a self-critical and self-corrective enterprise for human ‘self-making’ for the preserving and expanding of human empathy and compassion...John Dewey’s pragmatism (and democratic socialism) is a leading example of the political aspects of existential democracy.

Of course, West’s reception of Dewey is not wholly and unqualifiedly positive. He argues that Dewey neglected the “tragic sense” of life, and the challenge that Abraham Lincoln issued to his

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listeners to face up to human evil.\textsuperscript{168} In addition, West faults Dewey (and other pragmatists) for failing to address white racism and the systematic oppression of African-Americans fully and directly.\textsuperscript{169} Correcting this oversight is one of West’s major intellectual goals. He applies Dewey’s philosophy to the problems of racism and white supremacy that Dewey’s democratic ethics are so well-suited to address, but to which Dewey never dedicated sustained, direct attention.

Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. is another prominent scholar of African-American religion and ethics who has been influenced heavily by Dewey. The influence of pragmatism in general, and Dewey’s work in particular, was evident in Glaude’s Exodus! (2000) and was more fully articulated in his recent book, In a Shade of Blue (2007). Glaude appreciates the same philosophical commitments that West values in Dewey. He cites approvingly Dewey’s anti-foundationalism,\textsuperscript{170} anti-dualistic theory of experience,\textsuperscript{171} understanding of knowledge as revisable,\textsuperscript{172} and call for philosophy to attend to human needs and problems.\textsuperscript{173} Like West, Glaude values the normative status Dewey assigns to democracy,\textsuperscript{174} and laments the fact that Dewey never explored the immense implications his theory of democracy has for issues of white racism and black oppression.\textsuperscript{175} However, Glaude parts ways with West by defending Dewey

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 108–13.
\item \textsuperscript{169} West, Prophesy Deliverance!, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Eddie S. Glaude, Jr, In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 5.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 84.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 55.
\item \textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 39–46.
\item \textsuperscript{174} Ibid., chap. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 3.
\end{itemize}
from the charge that the latter lacks a tragic sensibility.\textsuperscript{176} In addition, Glaude’s scholarly use of Dewey is much more varied than that of West. While West extends and applies Dewey’s philosophy in his own theological and ethical project, Glaude often uses Deweyan insights as interpretive tools for the study of literature (he offers an insightful Deweyan reading of Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved}\textsuperscript{177}) and African-American religious history (he argues that the black church was a “public” that sought to regulate indirect consequences from which its members suffered,\textsuperscript{178} and he claims that part of David Walker’s case against slavery involved a critique of the ossified habits of servility that the institution established and maintained in African-American slaves\textsuperscript{179}). In short, Glaude utilizes concepts from Dewey’s work to interpret African-American agency, suffering, and history, and also to push forward the project of democracy that Dewey envisioned, but failed to apply to the problems of American race relations.

In their positive receptions of Dewey’s work, West and Glaude indicate that Dewey’s philosophy, ethics, and theory of democracy contain valuable resources that can still assist readers in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. They find in Dewey’s philosophy guidance for navigating the intellectual conditions that marked his time and continue to mark our own. Dewey offered many observations to give us such guidance. For Glaude and West, the most important of these observations are that it is not possible to find \textit{a priori}, incontrovertible foundations on which to build philosophical systems (nor, say Dewey, West, and Glaude, is the search for these foundations desirable), that the integrated experience of the human being is the primary source for knowledge, and that this knowledge does not achieve a status that puts it beyond revision.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 30–9.

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 39–46.


\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 39.
They find in Dewey’s ethics the warrantable assertions that the proper task of philosophy is to address real human problems, and that we should strive to revise our habits of conduct through intelligent inquiry. And they find in Dewey’s theory of democracy the praiseworthy goal of pursuing the Great Community, even if the work of racial justice and reconciliation entailed in that pursuit was not done by Dewey himself, and must be taken up by thinkers who follow in his footsteps. I find in their hospitable reception and application of Deweyan pragmatism a testament to the enduring relevance of Dewey’s moral philosophy and democratic vision.
CHAPTER III

REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*¹

This chapter turns to Reinhold Niebuhr’s understanding of democracy, and argues that a Niebuhrian model of democratic government and society requires moral agents to possess the virtues of humility and mutuality. Although Niebuhr was not a virtue ethicist in the conventional sense of the term, his political theology does justify such a reading of his work. In order to understand his reflections on democracy, though, we must first consider his theological anthropology. His doctrine of human nature demands attention to such concepts as finitude and freedom, sin, love and justice. With these ideas in mind, his thick and thin understandings of democracy become intelligible, and the case can be made for interpreting his work through the lens of democratic virtue. When appropriate, I will compare Niebuhr’s theological reflections with those of Christian thinkers who preceded him, and I will note some important critiques that his work has attracted.²

Before considering the salient features of his theological anthropology, though, it will be helpful to make explicit his commitments and assumptions about authoritative sources for


² As is the case with my treatment of Dewey, this interpretation of Niebuhr looks to his “mature” work. Scholarly consensus holds that Niebuhr’s mature period begins sometime in the late-1910s and 1920s. Prior to this period, Niebuhr’s evangelicalism produced a basically “liberal” social ethic, meaning that he posited Christian love as the answer to social problems such as the conflict between capital and labor. In the late 1910s and 1920s, a series of events shifted Niebuhr’s theology and social ethics away from this liberalism: World War I, a pastorate in Detroit that introduced him to racial conflict and industrial capitalism, and the Great Depression all contributed to the formation of Niebuhr’s mature theological perspective. I assume that, although his thought continued to evolve in subtle ways, the foundations of his theological framework were in place by the writing of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932. On Niebuhr’s intellectual development, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), chap. 1–6.
theological knowledge, and about his interpretive method. An understanding of Niebuhr’s approach to sources will help us understand how he derives his theological knowledge, what kind of authority he attributes to that knowledge, and also how to classify his thought in general. Thinkers who work in the fields of Christian theology and ethics often address questions of sources prior to reflecting on questions such as doctrine of God, creation, sin, ecclesiology and so forth. They typically explain why they consider certain sources to be normative, and others to be less authoritative. Traditional sources for theological and ethical knowledge include revelation, reason, experience, and the teaching of the churches in their various denominations. Niebuhr did not address the question of sources explicitly, but it is possible to reconstruct his position on this topic from his prolific body of written work.

Throughout Niebuhr’s work, experience consistently establishes itself as the primary source for theological and ethical knowledge. When articulating his positions on such questions as human nature, moral knowledge, and political history, Niebuhr appeals to experience as the authoritative source that justifies the stances he takes. Just as he neglects to explain why he values one source above all others, so too does he fail to articulate what exactly experience is. We can safely assume, though, that experience means for Niebuhr the interaction between a human being and her surroundings, which might include social, natural, and mental milieus. Often his appeals to experience as the authoritative source for theological and ethical knowledge claim (or assume) a universal status for experience. Niebuhr presents the truths that

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5 *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence*, 16.
he finds in experience on such issues as human nature and moral knowledge to be common to all human experience. Elsewhere he suggests that no reasonable person could dispute the knowledge that he gleans from experience, as when he writes about the “facts of history” that reveal certain important truths about human nature and comportment. His high regard for experience as a source of theological and ethical knowledge is evident in these attributions of universality and indisputability to many of his claims.

Niebuhr subsumes the category of “general revelation” under the heading of experience. Typically general revelation is a subset under the broader source of revelation, and stands in contrast with “special revelation.” The former includes knowledge that God reveals about Godself that is accessible to all people and given in and through the natural world. The latter includes knowledge that God reveals about Godself through historically and culturally specific phenomenon, such as the Bible and the person and work of Jesus. However, Niebuhr suggests that the data communicated by general revelation actually belong to the source of experience, rather than revelation. Niebuhr writes that because all men have, in some fashion, the experience of a reality beyond themselves, they are able to entertain the more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God as they come to them in the most significant experiences of prophetic history. Private revelation is, in a sense, synonymous with ‘general’ revelation, without the presuppositions of which there could be no ‘special’ revelation. It is no less universal for being private.

He goes on to identify such experiences of general revelation as “unqualified dependence” (explicitly drawing on Schleiermacher), judgment, the uniqueness of others’ personalities, and the feelings of reverence, dependence, obligation, and forgiveness that accompany human

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7 The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 16.

beings’ interaction with “creation.” While he occasionally uses the language of “general revelation” in his discussion of these phenomena, he persistently demonstrates his preference to treat them as elements of experience.

For Niebuhr, reason is an important source for theological and ethical knowledge, but is secondary and supplementary to experience. Reason, which he defines in minimal terms as “the ability to form general concepts,” has a role to play in Niebuhr’s vision of the human apprehension of theological and ethical knowledge, but its role is mainly contingent upon the data given by experience; “reason can deal only with the stuff of experience,” he writes. Where the material of experience must be related to the larger context of one’s broader experience and previously gained knowledge, reason does the work of relating the particular to the general. And where experience yields data that produce internal conflict, reason performs the task of bringing order to the conflict. In performing these two functions (relating particular concepts to general ones, and ordering internal conflict among concepts), reason clearly does more than simply “form concepts,” as Niebuhr understands it. Reason also applies concepts to the data of experience, revises concepts that need modification, and works to bring coherence to the whole body of conceptual knowledge. As it performs all of these functions, Niebuhr’s doctrine of reason can be said to derive conclusions from premises gathered by experience. Although he does not explicitly attribute these general properties to reason, I think we are justified in inferring that Niebuhr implies them in his doctrine of reason, and therefore in saying

9 Ibid., 127–36.

10 Ibid., 1–2.


12 *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 66.

that, for Niebuhr, reason is more than merely “concept formation.” Although reason is clearly an important source for theological and ethical knowledge in Niebuhr’s vision, it is also secondary to experience as such a source, insofar as experience gathers the relevant materials and data that reason works to order and apply. Furthermore, reason’s role and value is limited because it also fails to escape the particular biases that attend the historical and cultural locations of the people who use it, and because it often serves the self-interest of moral agents who claim to be rational. We will explore these two points about reason’s biases and justification of self-interest more fully later in this chapter. It is also worth noting that while Niebuhr tends to subsume the category of general revelation under the heading of experience, he does not make this same move with the category of reason. That is, he does not suggest that “reasoning” is a form of experience. It is unclear why he does not take up the question of whether or not reasoning is a form of experience; perhaps Niebuhr intends his distinction between the two categories to be of heuristic value, even if it is ultimately one that is artificially imposed on two sources of knowledge that cannot be completely distinguished.

In addition to experience and reason, Niebuhr affirms the value of another, more particularly Christian source, which might belong under the heading of “special revelation:” he takes “biblical faith” to be a trustworthy fount for theological and ethical knowledge. Biblical faith is, for Niebuhr, “the tremendous assertion that in Biblical revelation, culminating in the revelation of Christ, man has made contact with divine power, which is able to overcome not only the ambiguity in which all human life and history is involved but also the evils of history which are due to man’s abortive efforts to overcome them himself by his own resources.”

14 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 66.

15 Moral Man and Immoral Society, 41.
significance of the second element of this quotation, which explains that which is overcome by
the divine power, will become clear later in this chapter. For now, though, it is important to
realize only that what Niebuhr calls “biblical faith” is itself a productive source of knowledge in
theology and ethics. The faith that believes in the images of divine/human contact from the
Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament produces knowledge when experience yields
difficult data that cannot be made intelligible by reason. For Niebuhr, this data concerns
profound realities of human nature in general and also in relation to the universe in which
human beings find themselves. Experience and reason can issue certain limited or readily
accessible truths about the human situation, but the more profound and obscure realities must
be apprehended by faith, according to Niebuhr. “The genius of Biblical faith,” he writes, “is that
it discerns by faith, glimpses of meaning in the ultimate mystery (‘the light that shineth in
darkness’) which furnish the keys to the understanding of directly experienced realities.”17
Although it apprehends deeper truths about the human experience that cannot be made
intelligible by reason alone, faith does not displace experience as the primary source of
theological and ethical knowledge in Niebuhr’s view. He writes that “a truth of faith is not
something which stands perpetually in contradiction to experience. On the contrary it illumines
experience and is in turn validated by experience.”18 Niebuhr’s high estimation of Biblical faith is
somewhat idiosyncratic in that Christian thought more commonly identifies the Bible, rather
than human faith, as the source for theological and ethical knowledge. And yet, his affirmation
of the authority of this particular source nonetheless demonstrates his Christian particularity


and his commitment to the authority of a kind of special revelation, even if he departs from more traditional presentations of the Bible as source in this regard.

When treating Niebuhr’s approach to a biblically-inspired faith, it is important to recognize the interpretative approach he utilizes in reading the Bible. For Niebuhr, the important truths disclosed in the Bible that inform a “biblical faith” have the status of myth. Myth, for Niebuhr, is story that reveals a deep truth about human experience that cannot be attained by reason alone. Part of the attraction of a hermeneutics of myth is that it allows a Christian to avoid the apparent conflicts between the stories in the Bible and the conclusions of the natural sciences by recognizing that many stories in the Bible are not literally true, but still contain mythic insights about the human situation. Niebuhr takes this stance by reading many Bible stories as myth. He eschews literalistic readings of central events and phenomena narrated by the biblical writers. His interpretive approach to biblical texts employs a distinction between two kinds of myth that allows him to understand difficult experiences that shed light on profound realities of the human situation which cannot be explained by reason, while avoiding the clash between scientific knowledge and biblical narrative that literalist readings yield. “Pre-scientific myths disregard what may have always been known, or have now become known, about the ordered course of events in the world. Permanent myths...are those which describe some meaning or reality, which is not subject to exact analysis but can nevertheless be verified in experience.”¹⁹ For Niebuhr, the myths of creation, fall, atonement, virgin birth, and sinless state of perfection all qualify as “permanent myths” that exceed the limits of rational analysis, yet still verify profound truths about the human condition that are discerned, if not understood, in experiences that defy reason.²⁰

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¹⁹ *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 97.

This collection of stances on the varying levels of authority possessed by several sources, and on the proper way to read the Bible has made Niebuhr a target for theological/ethical criticism of late. Stanley Hauerwas offers one of the most explicit and thorough critiques of Niebuhr’s theology and ethics, and much of what Hauerwas finds problematic in Niebuhr’s thought can be traced back to the question of sources. For Hauerwas, Niebuhr’s marginalization of special revelation and prioritization of experience, reason, and general revelation betray a theology that is only nominally Christian. Hauerwas holds that Niebuhr “assumed that Christianity must be tested by standards generally accepted by the intellectual elites of the day.”21 He finds this assumption present most clearly in Niebuhr’s contention that faith and experience must—and in fact, do—verify one another. Hauerwas holds that the negative effects of adhering to this set of positions on sources and hermeneutics, rather than, for example, making the foundation of one’s theology and ethics a confession of belief in the triune God that is bolstered by reliance on special revelation,22 are manifold. Niebuhr’s theology is one that “has given up on its ability to tell us the way the world is,”23 has “cast Christianity as a truth separable from truthful witness,”24 and has made “Christianity...a ‘truth’ for sustaining social orders in the West.”25 On the other hand, as Hauerwas notes, many critics argue against Niebuhr’s theological ethics from an opposite perspective, claiming that although his ethics and politics are laudable, all his God-talk is a useless distraction, or worse,


22 Ibid., 15.

23 Ibid., 21.

24 Ibid., 36.

25 Ibid., 39.
the confused relic of a culture proven to be intellectually disreputable long ago. Thus on the basic questions of which sources one should consider authoritative and how one should read the Bible, Niebuhr’s Christian ethics and political theory strike some as far too Christian and others as not nearly Christian enough.

Critics such as Hauerwas who argue against Niebuhr’s marginalization of special revelation often neglect the good reasons Niebuhr might have had for approaching the sources as he does. This brief examination of Niebuhr’s approach to sources and to his biblical hermeneutics suggests that one of his major priorities is fashioning a theological perspective that takes into consideration the major crises in Christian thought that have emerged in the modern period, and more particularly, in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. In this timeframe numerous challenges shook the authority of traditional sources of theological knowledge. In the early modern period, the authority of the church’s teaching had been challenged by such writers as Luther, Galileo, and Descartes. In the mid-19th century, such developments as Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the biblical interpretation of the German school known as “Higher Criticism” generated doubts about the authority of the Bible to issue reliable knowledge in the fields of theology and ethics. Niebuhr’s approach to sources takes these challenges to heart, as it holds the Bible and the traditional teachings of the western church to be secondary in authority to experience. Niebuhr’s biblical hermeneutics, which emphasize the “mythic” truth of biblical literature, are likely a reaction against the fundamentalist movement of the early-20th century, which was itself a reaction against the challenges issued by Darwinian naturalism and, less directly, German Higher Criticism. Indeed, Niebuhr makes a much greater concession to the “naturalistic empiricism” associated with Darwinian challenges to Christianity when, after admitting that any discussion of the self’s dialogue with God moves “beyond the limits of

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26 Ibid., 132–40. Hauerwas refers to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and the “atheists for Niebuhr” movement as examples of political thinkers who prefer to jettison all of Niebuhr’s religious language and commitments.
empirical verification," he abandons the lofty premise that the self actually communicates with a divine being. Instead, he restricts his introductory premise to a much more modest position: he claims "merely that the self imagines itself in an encounter with the divine." Such a concession would likely irritate Hauerwas all the more, and yet still fail to mollify Niebuhr’s atheist readers. These commitments to experience, reason, and non-literal interpretations of biblical texts are typical of liberal Protestantism, as Hauerwas and others claim. On the question of sources, then, it is fair to call Niebuhr a liberal Protestant, even if we stop short of Hauerwas’ view that this quality of Niebuhr’s thought is reason enough to reject his theology, ethics, and political thought. However, as this chapter will make clear, this label does not apply to Niebuhr’s thought on other theological and ethical categories. In any case, this overview of Niebuhr’s approach to sources and biblical hermeneutics will suffice as a means to explain why he argued for many of the positions we will consider later in this chapter.

Niebuhr’s theological anthropology holds, at the most basic level, that the human being is marked by the paradoxical qualities of finitude and freedom. Niebuhr’s political theology can be traced back to this view of human beings as possessing the qualities of finitude and freedom, which he also refers to on occasion as “nature and spirit.” The most obvious truth that Niebuhr finds written on the pages of collective experience, confirmed by reason, and further illuminated and verified in the myths of the Bible is that human beings are finite. We are bound and determined by mortality, historical and cultural location, and language. No one has access

27 The Self and the Dramas of History, 5.


29 See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1934), 230.
to the entirety of human experience and wisdom, and no one lives forever. We are always "American man, or Chinese man, or bourgeois man, or man of the twentieth century." As finite beings, we are "creatures of history," in that the historical situations that lead to our existence and into which we are born make us who we are. In addition, because we are finite beings, we possess a survival impulse that motivates us to stave off death by gathering food and protecting ourselves from predators, to band together in social units, to procreate, and so forth. Our finitude, according to Niebuhr, also determines our rational capacity: "human reason is itself embedded in the passing flux, a tool of the finite organism, the instrument of its physical necessities, and the prisoner of partial perspectives of a limited time and place." Paradoxically, humanity’s finitude coexists with its freedom. For Niebuhr, humanity’s fundamental freedom resides in the capacity for certain forms of self-extension beyond the bounds set by the human finitude I have just reviewed (mortality, historical and cultural location, and language). In Niebuhr’s corpus, there are at least four distinct forms of this kind of extension that enacts human freedom. One of these is what Niebuhr calls self-consciousness. What he means by self-consciousness is that human beings enact our freedom partly by having and exercising the capacity of self-awareness. To be completely finite would be to lack the ability to consider or be aware of one’s finitude. Even when, in an attempt to speak modestly of human beings, one holds that we ought not to pretend to be more than the other members of the animal kingdom, one “tacitly admits” that humans are “a curious kind of animal who has

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30 Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 27–9. This quotation demonstrates that, like Dewey, Niebuhr suffered from his era’s tendency to use gender-exclusive language.

31 See, for example, Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History, 16–8.

32 Ibid., 93–7.

33 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 66.
both the inclination and the capacity to make such pretensions.\textsuperscript{34} Whether it is stated explicitly or remains such a tacit admission, the awareness of human pretension is an enactment of self-consciousness, which is a marker of human freedom. In self-consciousness, the aware human being can consider any number of elements of the human situation, including, but not limited to, the capacity and inclination to pretense. One can be aware of one’s desires, impulses, history, relationality, and so on. According to Niebuhr, these “paradoxes of human nature,” which are generally accessible by experience and reason, indicate “two facts about man.” One of these facts, considered in the previous paragraph, is that “man is a child of nature...The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason, and the world.”\textsuperscript{35} Niebuhr considers this fact, derived from the phenomenon of human self-consciousness common to all experience, shows that human beings are essentially free, even while we are essentially finite.

A second form of extension beyond the bounds of finitude that exhibits our freedom is what Niebuhr calls self-transcendence. He writes that the human animal “is ‘essentially’ free, which is to say, that he has the capacity for indeterminate transcendence over the processes and limitations of nature. This freedom enables him to make history and to elaborate communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent.”\textsuperscript{36} The capacity for self-transcendence includes not only the ability to create social organizations beyond the atomized life of the solitary individual, but also the ability to influence the direction of historical development and flux. If humanity’s finitude means that human beings are, as I noted previously, “creatures of history,” humanity’s freedom in self-transcendence means that human

\textsuperscript{34} The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 1.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{36} The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 3–4.
beings are “creators of history.” The capacity for self-transcendence is not limited to these examples of large-scale social activity, though. Self-transcendence includes the ability of the human being to extend itself beyond the boundaries of its private desires, impulses toward survival, habits, and so forth. If self-consciousness makes us aware of these phenomena, self-transcendence allows us to imagine and pursue alternatives beyond these phenomena. Both are enactments of our basic freedom.

A third form of self-extension that takes the human being in freedom beyond the limits of its finitude is self-determination, according to Niebuhr. Self-determination is the human being’s capacity to choose a self-conception and/or course of action for herself or himself.\footnote{The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 16.} An act or acts of self-determination utilize both the will and conscience. Niebuhr holds that “the will is the result of the self’s transcendence over the complex of its impulses and desires. The will is in fact the self organized for the attainment of either a short-range or long-range purpose.”\footnote{The Self and the Dramas of History, 12.} The organization of the self in order to pursue these purposes involves self-transcendence to the extent that this process calls for the human being to imagine goals beyond those given to it by its condition of finitude. But the organization of self toward purposes goes beyond freedom-as-self-transcendence because it is no longer merely the imagination of broader goals; it is also the choosing of those goals that marks will, and thus self-determination. Self-determination utilizes conscience insofar as the human being reflects on the processes of self-determination to which it has committed, and judges them to be right or wrong.\footnote{Ibid., 13.} Having rendered judgment on the will, the conscience can, according to Niebuhr’s view, help determine current and future pursuits of “short-range or long-range purpose.” All of these faculties, capacities, and dynamics
fall under the heading of self-determination. The will, which exhibits human freedom in the act of choosing purposes, is a crucial element of Niebuhr’s anthropology: he calls it “the very centre of the human personality” and writes that human beings’ “essence is free self-determination.”

When we consider a fourth form of extension that exhibits human freedom in Niebuhr’s anthropology, a complicated and multi-faceted relationship between freedom and reason begins to take shape. This fourth form of freedom is what Niebuhr calls “the religious inclination.” The religious inclination is the human impulse to search in experience for “ultimate meaning.” Niebuhr holds that this is a universal human trait, and that this search for meaning involves the discernment of mystery, as well as the possibility that “the chain of causes...points beyond itself to a mystery of creativity.” When compared with the previously considered forms of free extension, the religious inclination illuminates a multivalent relationship between freedom and reason in Niebuhr’s thought. In one sense, reason—which, we recall, Niebuhr defines in minimal terms as our capacity to form concepts—is present in and utilized by each of the three movements of freedom outlined above. Reason participates in self-consciousness as it allows human beings to become aware of manifold aspects of our history, world, and nature by giving us concepts with which to order and apply these phenomena. Reason participates in self-transcendence by allowing us to imagine new possibilities as alternatives to our desires, impulses, habits, social arrangements, and so on. And reason participates in self-determination by conceptualizing purposes toward which the will can move, and by ordering judgments on these purposes in the conscience. However, in another sense, reason is itself transcended in human freedom. The religious inclination exceeds the limits of

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41 The Self and the Dramas of History, 61.

42 Ibid.
rational reflection. In the religious search for meaning, human beings move in freedom beyond the limits of reason. Reason cannot explain the ultimate causes and creative mysteries that human beings discern through experience and free searching, according to Niebuhr.\textsuperscript{43} Thus Niebuhr holds that humanity’s freedom is simultaneously a function of its reason and also an ability to transcend reason. When we recall his assertion that reason is also beholden to the limits that come with human finitude, we find that reason’s status is even more complex in Niebuhr’s anthropology; reason is subject to finitude, demonstrates freedom, and is transcended by freedom. We have seen that Niebuhr holds that we can all know through experience and reason that finitude and freedom characterize the human animal in general. But now we are in a position to understand that a Niebuhrian anthropology discerns the attributes of freedom and finitude in human reason more specifically.

With this brief sketch of humanity’s finitude and freedom, and the ways in which reason participates in both qualities, we are prepared to consider Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin. The concept of sin is central to Niebuhr’s thought, and has direct relevance for his political theology.\textsuperscript{44} What is sin, in Niebuhr’s theological vision? Summarizing the task of the social ethicist, (which he takes himself to be,) he explains that the work of ethics is to imagine and create various harmonies “under ‘conditions of sin.’ That is, a social ethic must assume the persistence of self-regard.”\textsuperscript{45} This quotation provides a concise picture of the nature of sin in Niebuhr’s theology. Sin, for Niebuhr, is always one’s self-preoccupation,\textsuperscript{46} and he characterizes

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Trading on Niebuhr’s reputation as a theologian who insisted, almost \textit{ad nauseam}, on the importance of a proper understanding of sin, Hauerwas begins a chapter on Niebuhr by writing: “Sin!” \textit{With the Grain of the Universe}, 113.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 10.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, 54.
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this pre-occupation variously as self-regard, self-interest, self-concern, and perhaps most importantly, self-love. This definition of sin is strikingly close in nature to his definition of evil: “evil is always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total community of mankind, or the total order of the world.”

Although this definition of evil adds to the concept of sin the component of “lack of regard for the whole,” this component is always at least a latent element of his definition of sin, and the basic content of sin and evil remain the same. In Niebuhr’s thought, both are essentially self-love.

Despite this failure to distinguish clearly between sin and evil, the point to note is that for Niebuhr, self-love is the basic problem facing all human beings.

Self-love has two sources according to Niebuhr’s theological framework. One of these sources of self-love (which, I would add, is neglected in much scholarship on Niebuhr) is the survival impulse born of human finitude. Our finitude generates the survival impulse, which in turn, leads human beings to enact sinful self-love in the form of will-to-power.

Niebuhr argues that no clear line can be drawn between the activities involved in survival and those that reflect sinful love of self; the former easily and often exhibits or devolves into the

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48 For a passage that demonstrates a similar lack of distinction between sin and evil, see, for example Moral Man and Immoral Society, 54.

49 Two scholarly treatments of Niebuhr that neglect his attention to the “survival impulse” as a source of sin are Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe; John Patrick Diggins, Why Niebuhr Now? (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

50 The survival impulse also leads to the pursuit of self-realization, which will be relevant later in this chapter, as we consider the concept of love. For now, though, I will focus only on the survival impulse and the will to power as sources of sin, in order to avoid needless multiplication of terms.
latter.\footnote{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 18–21.} “The very basis of self-love is the natural will to survive,” he writes. “In man the animal impulse to maintain life becomes an immediate temptation to assert the self against the neighbor.”\footnote{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 46.} For example, we might think of a person who gathers copious amounts fire wood because he or she is threatened by finitude in the form of freezing to death during a cold winter. Niebuhr would say that, on the one hand, this person is acting on a survival impulse that develops naturally from his or her finitude. However, Niebuhr would also say that as this person gathers the fire wood, he or she will also exhibit the will-to-power, given: a) that the activity is preoccupied with the self rather than the other; b) that his or her neighbor necessarily has diminished access to this source of survival, and; c) that no clear line can be drawn between how much wood is actually needed for survival and how much reflects a hoarding mentality that serves the self’s purposes to the exclusion of the neighbor’s purposes.

Niebuhr identifies the second source of self-love in human life as anxiety. This source of sin has attracted more scholarly attention from such commentators as Hauerwas and John Patrick Diggins, perhaps because it is a concept we have become accustomed to find in writers of Niebuhr’s time period.\footnote{Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe, 119–24; Diggins, Why Niebuhr Now?, 15–20, 110. As for other commentators who utilize the terminology of anxiety, I am thinking mainly of Paul Tillich, especially his The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).} For Niebuhr, anxiety is the result of the finite creature’s free consideration of its finitude. “Self-consciousness means the recognition of finiteness within infinity,” Niebuhr explains. “The mind recognizes the ego as an insignificant point amidst the immensities of the world. In all vital self-consciousness there is a note of protest against this finiteness.”\footnote{Moral Man and Immoral Society, 42.} This protest against finitude is anxiety, which generates the temptation to self-
love: “man is tempted to deny the limited character of his knowledge, the finiteness of his perspectives...Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin...Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation.” Anxiety and the will-to-power are both sources of sin, and both are also born of our finitude. The difference between these two sources of sin is that anxiety involves a fundamental encounter with or consciousness of the self’s finitude that is absent in the will-to-power. A return to the example of the person who gathers or hoards wood will illustrate how this difference plays out in Niebuhr’s view of sin. Lacking a fundamental consciousness of finitude, the wood-gatherer enacts self-love as a response to the felt threat of death. But when the wood-gatherer experiences this fundamental consciousness of finitude (realizing not only that death could come as a result of a harsh winter, but also that finitude means the self’s profound insignificance in the scheme of human history), the character of the sinful self-love changes. Perhaps the wood-gatherer will attempt to stow away enough wood to keep generations of his or her offspring warm, so that they will glorify his or her name long after death. Perhaps the wood-gatherer will erect a monument to himself or herself so that future generations will remember him or her with fond admiration. In any case, Niebuhr’s point is that anxiety produces forms of self-love that deny the self’s fundamental finitude, while the survival impulse produces forms of self-love as a byproduct of the effort to stave off death. However, for Niebuhr, both the survival impulse and anxiety are still sources of self-love; both produce sin in the human being.

Both of these sources of self-love utilize the basic finite freedom of reason and the will for their expression. Reason and the will are complicit in self-love, according to Niebuhr. The survival impulse becomes a manifestation of self-love as human beings choose to self-aggrandize by, for example, taking more than is actually needed for survival, or by glorifying the

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power that is demonstrated and achieved in the act of survival. The condition of anxiety becomes a manifestation of self-love as we choose to deny our finitude by, for example, imagining ourselves as perfect in some respect, or acting as though the world ought to attend more closely to our desires. In all these examples, human freedom is implicated in the expressions of self-love that are born of survival and anxiety. Both reason and the will participate in the processes by which survival and anxiety generate self-love. The problem of sin, then, is also a problem of corrupted reason and distorted will, both of which faculties express human beings’ basic finite freedom. “The essence of man is his freedom,” Niebuhr holds. “Sin is committed in that freedom. Sin can therefore not be attributed to a defect in his essence. It can only be understood as a self-contradiction, made possible by the fact of his freedom, but not following directly from it.”

And while both reason and the will are implicated in sinful love of self insofar as sin is chosen in freedom, reason is even further implicated in sin. According to Niebuhr, free and finite reason makes self-love possible, but it also often serves as the tool by which we justify our self-love. Human beings frequently rationalize our sinful self-love, using tortured logic to explain to ourselves and others why our choices are not ultimately sinful.

Survival-related activity and anxiety, both of which strike Niebuhr as obvious facts of universal human experience, thus lead to sin through the corrupted freedom of reason and the will. For Niebuhr, the primary way that we enact our sin is in self-love, which is manifested most evidently in pride.

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56 Ibid., 17. For more passages in which Niebuhr argues that sinful self-love, which results from survival pursuits and anxiety augmented by poor uses of free reason and will, see The Self and the Dramas of History, 128; Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 11; Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History, chapter 6; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 87.

57 Moral Man and Immoral Society, 41.

58 Another possibility for the expression of self-love that Niebuhr identifies is “isolationism.” The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence,
place. First, the proud human being denies his or her finitude.59 This movement is evident in anxiety, which has been explained already. Second, the proud human claims some manner of perfection for himself or herself. For Niebuhr, pride causes a person to claim perfection for himself or herself in the realms of power, knowledge, virtue, spirit, or some combination of these.60 It is worth noting that the model of sin as prideful self-love is not the only image of sin that Niebuhr acknowledges. He recognizes another form of sin, in which the human being seeks escape from freedom, rather than from finitude. In denying her or his freedom, the self enacts this form of sin by sinking into “worldly” pleasures such as “sexual license, gluttony, extravagance, drunkenness, and abandonment to various forms of physical desire.”61 Niebuhr identifies this form of sin, which is the opposite of self-loving pride, as sensuality. Sensuality is unmistakably a minor concern in relation to pride in Niebuhr’s theological ethics. In the twin movements of pride, in which the moral agent denies his or her finitude and claims some manner of perfection, the proud person invariably commits a double offense; both God and neighbor are offended in an individual’s prideful self-love.

For Niebuhr, pride offends God because of the perfection claimed by the self in terms of power, virtue, and spirit, with each subsequent form of pride being more offensive than those that preceded it. In self-love, the prideful sinner claims to have a perfection of power that humans simply do not have. “There is a pride of power in which the human ego assumes its self-

55. Because pride is a more consistent concern for Niebuhr, and because it is more directly related to the logic of his theory of democracy, I will examine only pride here.

59 Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 63–4; Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History, 118.


61 Ibid., 228.
sufficiency and self-mastery and imagines itself secure against all vicissitudes,” Niebuhr writes.\textsuperscript{62} In this pretense of limitless power, the proud sinner imagines himself or herself as the “centre of existence.”\textsuperscript{63} In the pride of virtue, we deny our finitude and claim perfection by imagining that our moral systems are complete and absolute, rather than incomplete and subject to evolution and change. “Moral pride is revealed in all ‘self-righteous’ judgments.”\textsuperscript{64} The self, Niebuhr writes,

has an organic unity of rational, emotional and volitional elements which make all its actions and attitudes historically more relative than is realized in any moment of thought and action. The inevitability of this confusion between the relative and the universal is exactly what is meant by original sin.\textsuperscript{65}

These two forms of pride are completed in the self’s pretension to spiritual perfection. In spiritual pride, the power and the virtue of the moral agent are not only endowed with a completeness that they clearly lack; they are given divine status. In spiritual pride, the moral agent imagines his power and virtue—or that of his society—to be identical with God’s power and goodness.\textsuperscript{66} For Niebuhr, the self-love that is evident in pride of power, virtue, and spirit all amount to an offense against God, who alone can claim to be perfect in ordering creativity, power, and goodness.\textsuperscript{67} This collection of prideful pretense that offends the divine is so primary an expression of self-love that Niebuhr often equates it with sin altogether: “Sin is rebellion

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 188.

\textsuperscript{63} Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 11; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 82.

\textsuperscript{64} The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 199.


\textsuperscript{67} An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 44.
against God,” he writes. The moral agent’s sin consists in the fact that “he tries, in short, to make himself God.”

However, proud self-love also offends against the neighbor. As with the offense against God, the prideful sinner offends her or his neighbor by pretenses to perfection of power, virtue, and spirit. Niebuhr characterizes the impulse to conceive of oneself as perfect in power as one of the more basic ways in which we harm our neighbors in acts of self-love. We attempt to perfect our power by reaching for new levels of social status, hoarding property, glorifying even our most modest achievements, and generally displaying the inclination to greed. Self-love in the form of pride of power leads us to oppress our neighbors as an expression of our “lust for power,” or “lust for domination.” In our pretenses to perfect virtue, we condemn our neighbors and attribute evil motivations to them because their systems of morality do not match our own values, which we wrongly assume to be absolute and universally-binding. And in our claims to spiritual perfection, we endow the social structures of our own highly historically-contingent time and place with divine authority. For Niebuhr, it is spiritual pride that harms our neighbor most, insofar as it claims that such degrading social structures as slavery and the caste system of India are divinely ordained. All of these forms of prideful self-love that

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68 Ibid., 81–2.


70 Ibid., 179; Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 120–2. “Pride of power” is not to be identified with “will-to-power” in Niebuhr’s moral reflection, even though the terms are so close that confusion can occur. The will-to-power is the form of self-love that results from the basic survival impulse. Pride of power, on the other hand, is a specific kind of pride, which is a form of self-love that results from anxiety.


72 Ibid., 200–3.
offend and harm our neighbors are, according to Niebuhr, the source of injustice in the world.\textsuperscript{73} Furthermore, Niebuhr holds that the trail leading from survival and anxiety, to self-love, to pride, and ultimately to rebellion against God and injustice against neighbor, is ubiquitous in human life. All human beings are involved in this basic dynamic of moral psychology. For Niebuhr, the human scene is marked by an equality of sin, meaning that no one in the history of humankind is free from the impulses to rebel against the infinite and to oppress the neighbor.\textsuperscript{74}

A few important points about Niebuhr’s conception of sin remain before we can consider his reflections on love. One of these is that, according to Niebuhr, the impulse to sin is not a “necessary” element of human life, but it is “inevitable.” He derives this stance from his claim that human sin occurs in freedom, as a corruption of the will, which I outlined above. For Niebuhr, it is not necessary that human beings succumb to self-love, pride, rebellion against God, and domination of the neighbor. Human beings are not simply fated to live this way, without any participation in the dynamics of sin on our parts. Ultimately, we are complicit in sin because we choose to live this way. Therefore, sin is not a “necessary” factor in human life. However, sin is “inevitable.” Given our finitude, survival-related activities, and our anxiety; and given our freedom, which allows us to imagine expansive possibilities to glorify ourselves, dominate others, and so on, it is inevitable that we will choose self-love, pride, rebellion, and injustice. By saying that sin is not necessary but is inevitable, Niebuhr preserves a place for responsibility in the moral life. Because we choose sin, we are responsible for our prideful feelings and actions of rebellion and injustice.\textsuperscript{75} In keeping with his approach to sources, which

\textsuperscript{73} Moral Man and Immoral Society, 23; Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 120; The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 179.


\textsuperscript{75} An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 86; The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, chap. 9.
vests the highest authority in experience, Niebuhr justifies this position on the inevitability of sin by “proving” that responsibility is, and should be a reality of all human experience. He claims to prove the reality of responsibility by noting that all human beings have experienced remorse and repentance. Of course, the permanent myths of the Christian scriptures confirm and illuminate this common experience of remorse and repentance.\textsuperscript{76}

Sin’s ubiquity means that it colors all levels of human social organization as well. Just as all individuals exhibit the inevitable tendency to choose self-love, rebellion, and injustice, so too do all realms of society exhibit this inclination.\textsuperscript{77} Niebuhr’s moral theology is well-known for its insistence on this point: for Niebuhr, self-love infects social groups of all sizes, including those at familial, local, regional and national levels. And as the size of the group increases, the power of self-love is magnified. This is because there are fewer restraints on sin as the size of a social group increases, and because the restraints that remain are diluted in their efficacy. Reason, for example, might be moderately effective in restraining self-love at the level of the individual or the family. But Niebuhr holds that reason loses its restraining power on self-love as the size of a collectivity increases (think of the irrational “mob mentality” of common parlance), and at times reason ceases to function as a restraint on sin altogether (as in situations in which large groups rationalize their self-interest, rather than use reason to critique it). \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, a book whose title conveys this point succinctly, contains many passages in which Niebuhr reflects darkly on the ways in which group size augments sinful “impulse.”

Men will never be wholly reasonable, and the proportion of reason to impulse becomes increasingly negative when we proceed from the life of individuals to that of social groups, among whom a common mind and purpose is always more


\textsuperscript{77} \textit{The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence}, 16.
or less inchoate and transitory, and who depend therefore upon a common
impulse to bind them together.\textsuperscript{78}

Or, as he put it elsewhere: “Collective pride is thus man’s last, and in some respects most
pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very
essence of human sin is in it.”\textsuperscript{79}

Another important point to notice about Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin is that he goes to
great lengths to avoid associating sin and evil directly, in a one-to-one correspondence, with the
body. Niebuhr holds that Plato and the Stoic philosophers were mistaken in associating the mind
with goodness and the body with evil. This association introduces a dualism into Western moral
theory that is quite foreign to experience and the Bible. Experience and the Bible teach,
according to Niebuhr, that both mind and body are capable of transcendence and participation
in the good. On the other hand, both mind and body are also capable of enacting anxiety and
sin. Human sexuality provides Niebuhr with an example of this ambiguity derived from
experience:

\begin{quote}
it is the very character of human life that all animal functions are touched by
freedom and released into more complex relationships. This freedom is the
basis of both creativity and sin. Freedom in relation to sex may occasion license
and it may also provide for a creative relation between the sexual impulse and
other more complex and refined spiritual impulses.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

For Niebuhr, it is inaccurate to claim—as he thinks Plato and the Stoics do—that the rational
faculty is the exclusive location of human goodness, while the body is the exclusive location of
evil. Niebuhr holds that common experience shows both mind and body to be capable of both
great goodness and also prideful self-glorification. We could imagine, in a Niebuhrian vein, the
body enacting a limited transcendence of the boundaries of the self through, for example, a

\textsuperscript{78} Moral Man and Immoral Society, 35.

\textsuperscript{79} The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 213.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 281.
gratifying sexual encounter with a loved one, or through an experience of playing or listening to beautiful music played with skill and passion. These experiences would only effect a limited transcendence of the body because the body does not cease to be subject to finitude. But the point is that, for Niebuhr, this finitude is not in and of itself the cause of sin and evil. Niebuhr’s biblical faith confirms this point, as well. “The Bible knows nothing of a good mind and an evil body.”

This examination of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin sheds more light on the question of how to classify his theology. I claimed earlier that, on the question of sources and hermeneutics, it is justifiable to call Niebuhr a “liberal” insofar as he endows experience and reason with significant authority, largely ignores traditional doctrines of the churches as an authoritative source, and reads the Bible with a mythic, “non-literal” hermeneutic. In the context of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin, we find that two different ways of classifying his thought are also justified. First, Niebuhr is, as Robin Lovin argues, a moral realist. For Lovin, the mark of a moral realist is the belief that

[m]oral ideas can be true or false. Moral statements are not only expressions of emotion or reports of the speaker’s attitudes and preferences, as non-cognitivist theories would have it. Moral statements make claims about what is the case, independently of our ideas about what is the case and of evidence we marshal to support those ideas.

Clearly, for Niebuhr, moral ideas can be true or false. People can be mistaken in their moral statements about “what is the [theological] case,” and the truth and falsity of these statements is a function of their coherence with facts derived from experience about human finitude and freedom, about self-love and pride, and about the ways in which we long for infinity and dominate our neighbors. As Lovin argues, Niebuhr makes statements that seek to explain realities apprehended through experience, reason, and (especially when the latter fails) faith.

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81 Ibid., 7.
These statements can be true or false based on the extent to which they cohere with these theological realities. Therefore, we are justified in classifying Niebuhr as a moral realist.

In addition, this examination of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin shows that it is also justifiable to classify his thought as “neo-orthodox.” This term denotes a kind of Christian theology—mainly a kind that saw a resurgence in popularity in the West in the early-20th century, especially in the years between World Wars—that revives elements of “orthodox” Christian teaching that its practitioners perceive to have been abandoned. (For Karl Barth, who is perhaps the best-known neo-orthodox theologian of the early-20th century, the major element of orthodoxy to be rediscovered is revelation.) Niebuhr’s theology attempts to revive an orthodox doctrine of sin. The orthodoxy of his doctrine of sin consists in its resonance with Augustinian, rather than Pelagian, approaches to the category. For Niebuhr, an orthodox doctrine of sin was lost in the late-19th and early-20th centuries in America, as evidenced by the Social Gospel movement’s attempts to construct by human effort the kingdom of God on earth, and by modernist beliefs (in both Christian and philosophical varieties) that faith in the progress of reason and scientific discovery could ensure human mastery over nature. Given his attempt to restore an orthodox vision of sin on the landscape of American religion, we are justified in classifying Niebuhr as “neo-orthodox.”

Although Niebuhr stresses the importance of an adequate understanding of self-interest for any political theory, sin is not the only concept in his theological ethics with relevance for democracy. Love is another concept with major significance in Niebuhr’s political thought. What is love, according to Niebuhr? His approach to defining love is rather idiosyncratic in comparison with typical Christian treatments of the concept. Niebuhr defines love most often in terms of

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83 In this paragraph I use the word “coherence” to describe Niebuhr’s theory of truth, which I will unfortunately not have space to explore in any detail. I use this word because I am persuaded by Lovin’s argument that Niebuhr shares with pragmatism the belief that “coherence” models of truth are preferable to “correspondence” theories of truth. For this argument, see Ibid., chap. 1.
“harmony.” Most simply, he defines love as “a harmonious relation of life to life.” It is likely that he uses the language of harmony to underscore the fact that all persons who exist in loving relationship with one another remain different from one another in their various interests, histories, desires, and so forth. But like different musical notes in harmony, people who exist in a relationship of love with one another complement, support, and enrich each other in the face of these differences that remain. The metaphor of harmony suggests that love achieves a unity in the face of difference, separation, and discordance. In short, particularity—including the creative and destructive possibilities inherent in human freedom—is not destroyed in the love relationship. But in love particularities complement, support, and enrich each other. The metaphor of harmony is the defining feature in all of the various forms of love that Niebuhr treats, including both agape and mutual love. I have not seen love defined primarily as “harmony” elsewhere in Christian ethics; this is why Niebuhr’s approach to love strikes me as idiosyncratic. However, Niebuhr’s approach to love is not entirely idiosyncratic. At times he defines love in more traditional terms, such as “benevolence” and “affection.” As benevolence, love means desiring and the choosing the neighbor’s good: “if love means wanting the welfare of the neighbor,” Niebuhr writes, “it can never be irrelevant to any social situation.” As affection, love is a profound fellow-feeling for another human being. Although he uses the term harmony to define love much more consistently than he uses the terms benevolence and affection, I conclude, based on a close reading of his work, that these two

84 The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, 16. For other examples of Niebuhr’s use of the language of “harmony” to define love, see for example An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 100, 192, 196.


86 Moral Man and Immoral Society, 29, 57.


88 The Self and the Dramas of History, 186.
elements are present with harmony in all forms of love he treats. He also associates this network of concepts with the good. In contrast to evil, which we will recall is “always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole,” he defines the good as “always the harmony of the whole on various levels.” By defining the good in terms of harmony, he casts love as the good, and sets it in opposition to evil.

The opposition between love and evil illuminates more important features of Niebuhr’s doctrine of love as agape, which he considers to be its pure, self-sacrificial form. While he understands evil as “self-interest without regard to the whole,” the purest love is always that in which the moral agent abandons self-interest without regard to the whole. “From the perspective of the individual the highest ideal is unselfishness.” For Niebuhr, the purity of love is a function of the lover’s inclination to disregard his or her own interests in relation to the other. In love the moral agent gives himself or herself to the other completely and freely; love is “an uncoerced giving of the self to the object of its devotion.” There is a reckless quality to Niebuhr’s love ideal. The ideal moral agent who loves purely knows that self-interest remains a corrupting temptation for all parties in the love relationship. For this reason, this ideal lover admits that he or she is tempted to self-assertion and asks for forgiveness of the beloved, while also forgiving the beloved for his or her temptation to self-assertion. In this posture, it is clear that Niebuhr’s ideal of pure, uncoerced self-giving is always a love that suffers on behalf of the

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89 The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 9.

90 Moral Man and Immoral Society, 257.

91 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 188.

92 The Irony of American History, 63; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, chap. 8.
beloved.\textsuperscript{93} Niebuhr’s identification of pure with suffering and self-sacrifice is highly problematic, as we will see in considering feminist critiques of his thought.

On what basis does Niebuhr make these assertions about the nature of the ideal of pure, \textit{agapic} love? As with his doctrine of sin as self-interest, he appeals primarily to experience to make this case, and supplements the picture of love he gathers from experience with reference to authoritative biblical myths. The nature and value of this doctrine of love is, according to Niebuhr, “organically related to the experience of love in all human life.”\textsuperscript{94} It is obvious to Niebuhr that we have all had the experiences of self-interest, in ourselves and others. He holds that it is equally obvious that we have all had the experiences of harmonious relations of life to life that often come from reckless abandonment of this self-interest, even if these experiences only provide limited glimpses, faint suggestions, or elusive implications of an actualized life of harmonious relations. In claiming that we all know the experience of uncoerced, complete, forgiving love of neighbor, Niebuhr is not saying that we have all done this—as we will soon see, he holds this kind of love to be an “impossible possibility” in the realm of human history. He does claim, however, that experience provides us all with a limited image of that love and the harmonies of life that it engenders. He also points to a universal experience of love that bolsters legal codes in cross-cultural examples.

There is a fairly universal agreement in all moral systems that it is wrong to take the life or property of the neighbor, though it must be admitted that the specific applications of these general principles vary greatly according to time and place…The obligation to affirm and protect the life of others can arise only if it is assumed that life is related to life in some unity and harmony of existence.\textsuperscript{95}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II}, 51.

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 36.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 100.
\end{flushleft}
In this quotation, Niebuhr claims that the general agreement of moral and legal structures around the world proves that all people have at least some dim awareness that lives ought to be harmoniously ordered. For Niebuhr, experience fosters in all of us the knowledge of what love requires.

The experiences that endow us with the knowledge of love’s requirements are, for Niebuhr, supplemented, illuminated, and extended by biblical myth. The “Tower of Babel” story of Genesis 11 dramatizes the “inevitable and inescapable pride involved in every human enterprise, even in the highest and most perfect or, more correctly, particularly in the highest and most perfect.” For Niebuhr, one can understand the import of this biblical myth through reference to one’s experience of self-love. But one cannot understand the meaning of God’s loving forgiveness of human pride apart from biblical faith. Niebuhr reads the death and resurrection of Jesus as a myth communicating God’s love for human kind despite humanity’s pride. This myth communicates to faithful readers the truth that God desires to restore harmony and unity to the relationship between God and human beings that is broken by sin. For Niebuhr, awareness of the reality of divine forgiveness issues in contrite, grateful love of God. However, the biblical myth inspires horizontal love in addition to vertical love, when read faithfully. “An all-embracing love is enjoined because God’s love is like that...In the thought of Jesus men are loved not because they are equally divine, but because God loves them equally: and they are to be forgiven (the highest form of love) because all (the self included) are equally far from God and in need of his grace.” For Niebuhr, these biblical myths illuminate common experiences of pride and love insofar as they recast them in narrative form to communicate the

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96 Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History, 45.


98 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 53.
depths of these realities in human life. The biblical myths also surpass common experiences of pride and love because one can neither know God’s forgiveness, nor be inspired to love God and neighbor in complete, free, self-giving agape without reading these myths in faith.\footnote{Ibid., 201–4; \textit{The Self and the Dramas of History}, 107–55.}

\textit{Agape} may be the highest ideal of the human ethical life, according to Niebuhr, but part of what it means for agape to have this status is that it is shot through with crippling difficulty and paradox. God commands agape of human beings, revealing that love is “the final norm of the self as the free spirit,”\footnote{\textit{Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History}, 179.} and that love is also the “essence of human nature.”\footnote{\textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I}, 16, 146.} Given that human beings are endowed with the freedoms of self-consciousness, self-transcendence, self-determination, and with the capacity for reflection on ultimate meaning, the possibilities of human life are limitless. Human beings have the tools to conceive of our greatest good, and we are free to do so. The “organic relation” between the love of God dramatized most clearly in Jesus and the experience of love all people know means that the realization of the “essence of human nature” is, technically speaking, a possibility.\footnote{\textit{An Interpretation of Christian Ethics}, 36, 110.} However, the fact that we remain finite creatures, and the fact that we inevitably use our freedom to choose self-love over all else indicate the massive difficulty of achieving the agape ideal. Jesus’ complete self-giving on the cross is an impossibility in the realm of human history. In addition, the picture of love Jesus endorses in his parables (love should be extended to enemies, all violence is to be met with quiet non-resistance, forgiveness should be swift and completely absent of self-regard) is so absolute and unequivocal that Niebuhr regards it as impossible to attain in human life.\footnote{Ibid., 46–50.} Thus
Niebuhr concludes that the law of love is a paradox, an “impossible possibility.”\(^{104}\) The law of love is also paradoxical because of the very fact that it is a command. “To love God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds means that every cleavage in human existence is overcome. But the fact that such an attitude is commanded proves that the cleavage is not overcome; the command comes from one side of reality to the other, from essence to existence.”\(^{105}\) For Niebuhr, experience discerns, if dimly, that complete and uncoerced self-giving is the highest human good; indeed, it is our very nature. This fact is confirmed and apprehended more deeply by faith. Experience and faith show agape to be so exacting in its demands that human finitude, freedom, and sin render it impossible. The fact that it remains a possibility is, for Niebuhr, the irrational foolishness of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Corinthians.\(^{106}\)

Niebuhr’s picture of self-giving love as the norm of human life has attracted a powerful and persuasive critique that demands our consideration. This critique comes from feminist theology and ethics, and has emerged as an insightful and influential response to much traditional Christian thought—including and especially Niebuhr’s—since roughly the 1960s and 1970s. Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Susan Nelson Dunfee have written scholarship that critiques Niebuhr explicitly on the issues I’ve reviewed, and their points must be taken into account.\(^{107}\) Each writer begins by challenging Niebuhr’s notion of experience. The experience he describes and attributes to all of humanity, they point out, is far from universally applicable. In

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 60–1.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 188.

\(^{106}\) 1 Cor. 18-31.

fact, Niebuhr is really working from the experience of men. (And by “men,” they mean men who are white, middle-class or wealthier, and obviously Christian.) Women’s experience is not like the experience described by Niebuhr, they contend. Niebuhr has neglected the experience of half of the people for whom he assumes to speak. The narrowness of his conception of experience results in major problems for his doctrines of sin and love, according to Saiving, Plaskow, and Dunfee.

First, his doctrine of sin fails to consider women’s experience, and therefore contains serious problems. The major issue identified by these scholars is that it is incorrect to assume that pride is the basic sin to which all people are subject. Women are much less likely to suffer from the sin of pride than men, because women’s experiences are different from those of men. As Plaskow notes, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, the experiences of women are formed by the social expectations and conditioning that accompany cultural conceptions of womanhood. ¹⁰⁸ “The central dilemma of women’s lives,” Plaskow writes,

is that women do not shape their own experience, but allow their life choices to be made for them by others. Pleasing their fathers, lovers, husbands, defining themselves through them and through their children become ways of achieving justification at different stages of women’s lives. Trained from childhood in the art of enchanting others, charming a man becomes the goal of woman’s existence...The adolescent girl is taught defeatism; her lot is independent of her efforts. It is not by increasing her human worth that she will make friends, become “popular,” and finally get a man, but by modeling herself on male dreams. ¹⁰⁹

The experience of women in the modern West is, by and large, an experience shaped by cultural expectations that lead women to be dependent on men, submissive, and oriented toward

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¹⁰⁸ Plaskow explicitly notes that she does not claim to speak for all women; rather, she offers “one view of modern, white, western, middle-class ‘women’s experience.’” *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 6. This is true for Saiving and Dunfee, as well. None of these writers claim to speak for all women; rather, they claim that, in general, society conditions men and women differently, and that therefore, generally speaking, men and women have different experiences.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 32.
domesticity rather than “public” engagement. Therefore, it is wrong to claim that women are guilty of the sin of pride. It is much more likely, according to Saiving, Plaskow, and Dunfee, that women’s sins will demonstrate the opposite tendency. Inclinations to self-restriction rather than self-assertion, submission rather than dominance, and self-abnegation rather than self-centeredness are more likely to be the lot of women, given the cultural conditioning in which they develop.\(^{110}\) It is rather sadistic to say to someone who has been conditioned to surrender independence and abandon self-assertion that she or he suffers from the sin of pride. Plaskow and Dunfee argue that Niebuhr comes close to identifying the predicament of women when he shifts his attention away from the sin of denying one’s finitude, and focuses instead on the sin of denying one’s freedom. However, he fails to develop his reflections on the latter problem because of his near exclusive attention to the former. For Plaskow and Dunfee, Niebuhr’s category of “sensuality,” the sin by which one denies one’s freedom, is much more relevant to women’s experience.\(^{111}\)

Second, these writers hold that Niebuhr’s doctrine of love fails to liberate women. This is not surprising, given that his idea of love, like his idea of sin, is derived from a set of experiences that do not belong to most women. The remedy Niebuhr finds in love corresponds closely to the problem he finds in sin, drawn from typically male experience. Agape love, for Niebuhr, is uncoerced, sacrificial self-giving. For Saiving, Plaskow, and Dunfee, a theological ethics that upholds self-giving as the highest moral ideal unfortunately perpetuates harmful

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\(^{110}\) I say “much more likely” because these writers do not claim that all women will necessarily fall into these inclinations to dependence and self-abnegation. Nor do they hold that all men are free from this tendency. Rather, they argue that these are the likely patterns for the moral lives of men and women, given the expectations of modern western culture. See, for example, Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” 27; Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 5–6.

\(^{111}\) Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 62–8; Dunfee, “The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Account of the Sin of Pride,” 318–20. Unfortunately, as Dunfee notes, the term “sensuality” carries its own negative connotations for women, insofar as it associates women with carnality and evil. For this reason, she prefers to name the sin from which women suffer most “hiding” or “escaping.”
social expectations and practices to which women are already subject. This is because these
c women have already given so much of themselves in so many of the relationships they are
conditioned to value. For Saiving, a prime example of this is the self-sacrifice that a woman
commonly endures in motherhood.

The moments, hours, and days of self-giving must be balanced by moments,
hours, and days of withdrawal into, and enrichment of, her individual selfhood if
she is to remain a whole person. She learns, too, that a woman can give too
much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can
become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her
fellow men, or, perhaps even to God. 112

Dunfee agrees. She laments the fact that Niebuhr failed to look more closely at the sin of
denying one’s freedom. “Had he developed the possible forms of the sin of hiding more fully,”
she writes, “Niebuhr would have realized that what he posits as humanity’s highest virtue, the
loss of self, is identical with the sin of hiding, the escape from one’s self. The virtue and the sin
are synonymous.” 113 Just as it is borderline sadistic to tell those who live lives of constant self-
abnegation that their sin is too much pride, so too is it somewhat perverse to encourage those
who give of themselves to the point of nothingness that they should aspire to an ideal of more
complete sacrifice.

These points are well taken. A project that looks to Niebuhr’s vision of democracy must
account for critiques that reveal elements of his thought that are patently anti-democratic. It is
ironic that Niebuhr fails to account for the ways in which social expectations influence women’s
experiences of sin and love, given that he made a reputation for himself as someone who
attends very closely to the ways in which socio-cultural and historical particularity form
individuals. On occasion, Niebuhr shows an awareness of the ways in which social systems


113 “The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Account of the Sin of Pride,” 321. For
similar points from Plaskow, see Sex, Sin, and Grace, 86–90.
influence women’s development and experience. However, as Saiving, Plaskow, and Dunfee contend, he does not direct as much critical attention to this point as much as he should. In a particularly telling example, he notes that one can “distinguish the historic roots and the peculiar forms which ambition and the lust for power may take.” He continues, acknowledging that

[i]t is also important to distinguish the degrees of social evil in each one of the phenomena [of different socially-formed kinds of sin]. But it would be rather “unscientific” to ignore the common element in all of these forms of ambition; or to obscure the fact that the power lusts of men of power, the vanity of beautiful women, and the envy of scholars betray common characteristics, in spite of great differences.\(^{114}\)

In this quotation, Niebuhr makes two of the moves to which the feminist critics object. He doesn’t consider any experience except that typical of powerful men, and he assumes all sin is derived from and shaped by that experience. A treatment of love is lacking here, but one could guess what the ideal kind of love prescribed to “beautiful women” would be. All in all, Niebuhr’s thought must address the concerns of the feminist writers.

It is possible to continue in a Niebuhrian vein, acknowledging the challenges made by feminist theologians and ethicists, and toward an account of democratic virtue that will speak to their concerns. One of the first points on which Niebuhr’s thought can be corrected is a simple one. Rather than attend narrowly to the sin of pride, a Niebuhrian theory of democracy could, as Plaskow and Dunfee suggest, develop more fully the sin of self-abnegation. Related to this point, a Niebuhrian theological ethics could be very clear in saying that pride is always “inordinate” or “excessive” self-love. This would make clear that there can also be both “ordinate” and “deficient” self-love. To be fair to Niebuhr, he often does make these qualifications when

discussing the sin of pride. Often he refers to the sin of pride as excessive self-love. However, he does not do this frequently enough, and when he does refer to the pride of sin as “excessive” self-love, he does not clearly explain the possibility that some people might suffer from deficient self-love. The same problem surfaces in his work on the issue of “ordered” self-love. He praises Augustine for understanding that all people should cultivate a proper and ordered love of self, and faults the 16th-century reformers for missing this point. But he fails to explain what ordered self-love means, how one can protect against letting self-love lapse into excess and deficiency, and so on. A Niebuhrian theological ethics must make clear that self-love, like other virtues, must achieve a mean.

Another similar and simple way for a Niebuhrian explication of democracy to guard against the shortcomings that feminism has identified would be to utilize a broader definition of sin. For example, Anti-Climacus defines sin as “before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not wanting to be oneself, or wanting in despair to be oneself. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the heightening of despair.” Anti-Climacus gives a definition of sin that is broad enough to account for a wide variety of manifestations of sin. When we think of sin as despair, we can see that it is possible for a moral agent to sin in many different ways, including those that Niebuhr finds pervasive in the realm of power politics, and those that feminist critics identify as the signature plight of women in the modern industrial West, and many others. Niebuhr’s fixation on sin as self-love is too narrow to be able to identify


this variety of sins, but he could alleviate this issue by following the definitional lead of Anti-
Climacus.

To recognize the constructive challenges of feminist theology and ethics, I will refer to
the sin of pride as “excessive” or “inordinate” self-love from this point forward. This is not
inconsistent with Niebuhr’s view, and we can understand this formulation as acknowledging the
possibility that deficient self-love is a reality in our world. I will not change Niebuhr’s basic
definition of sin to bring it more in line with that given by Anti-Climacus, as this would introduce
a historical inaccuracy into my treatment of Niebuhr. I suspect that the challenge to Niebuhr’s
theological ethics articulated by Saiving, Plaskow, and Dunfee will also be addressed as we deal
with Niebuhr’s doctrine of mutual love, and extend this doctrine into an interpretation of
Niebuhr’s political thought that reads through the lenses of democratic virtue. After all, the
discrepancies in power that move Saiving, Plaskow, and Dunfee to write are the problems
troubling Niebuhr’s democratic aspirations, as well. Enlightened and informed by these feminist
critiques of Niebuhr’s thought, we can continue on to consider the relevance of finitude,
freedom, sin, and love for politics in general and democracy more specifically.

In order to understand Niebuhr’s political theology, it is helpful to understand his
articulation of two social moral ideals that are related to agape, but which he concludes fall
short of the standard of pure, self-giving love. These are mutual love and justice. In Niebuhr’s
thought, each of these three moral ideals are valuable, but are ordered in hierarchical relation
to each other on a spectrum of self-giving and self-interest. According to this hierarchy, agape is
the highest and purest moral ideal insofar as it is complete self-giving and lacks any element of
self-interest; mutual love occupies a middle position insofar as the moral agent who possesses
mutual love gives freely and generously, but remains committed to a rough equality of exchange
between lovers over time; and justice holds a position below agape and mutual love, as it is a
moral ideal in which self-giving has discernible boundaries, and much self-interest remains.

Niebuhr’s explicit treatment of mutual love is very brief, but it clearly suggests both the importance of mutual love, and also mutual love’s intermediary position between agape and justice on the basis of the remnants of self-interest it contains. Although Niebuhr holds to this hierarchical ordering of agape, mutual love, and justice, I contend that feminist critiques of Niebuhr’s agape ideal will be satisfied by a Niebuhrian vision of democracy, insofar as mutual love and justice are prioritized over pure self-sacrifice in this vision.

Niebuhr’s explicit reflections on mutual love are highly concentrated; most of them occur in one particular section of The Nature and Destiny of Man. However, the concept plays a very important role in his thought in general, and in his theory of democracy in particular. To understand this role, we need to understand first what mutual love is. Niebuhr defines mutual love in relation to agape. Both agape and mutual love are, at their most basic, the moral agent’s regard for the other. This is what makes the two ideals love, and what puts them in diametric opposition with sin. The major difference between agape and mutual love is on the question of their possibility. Niebuhr reflects at length on the impossibility of agape under the conditions of human history; as we have seen before, agape’s impossibility consists in the facts that a) human beings are free and, partly because of this, b) we tend toward self-love. Therefore “the perfection of man is not attainable in history. Sacrificial love transcends history...From the standpoint of history mutual love is the highest good.” While agape remains the essence of human nature, and the requirement of human life discernible through experience and biblical faith, for Niebuhr, mutual love is the greatest good given the basic conditions of human life within history. While agape is the impossible possibility, mutual love is more like a great, yet


119 Ibid., 68–9.
difficult possibility. Another way of articulating this primary difference between _agape_ and mutual love is through reference to the limitations of historical existence. “Mutual love is the harmony of life with life within the terms of freedom; and sacrificial love is harmony of the soul with God beyond the limitations of sinful and finite history.”

Niebuhr suggests another difference between _agape_ and mutual love on the topic of the lover’s concern to receive a loving response from the beloved. He holds that in mutual love, “the concern of one person for the interests of another prompts and elicits reciprocal affection.” In terms of generating this response in kind, Niebuhr thinks that _agape_ has the same effect as mutual love: both elicit an affectionate, harmonious response from the beloved. The difference between the two, though, is _agape_’s total disavowal of concern for reciprocal response, which is inseparable from the spirit of self-sacrifice. Unlike _agape_, mutual love retains a hope that a reciprocal response will follow love’s extension. Mutual love is not offered on the condition that such a response comes, but in the interests of harmony between life and life, the moral agent guided by mutual love remains committed to the establishment and maintenance of this harmony nonetheless. A normative concern for mutual love is “harmony with other human interests and vitalities.” For Niebuhr, “this harmony is a desirable end of historical striving,” but _agape_ “transcends all particular norms of justice and mutuality in history.” In short, a major difference between _agape_ and mutual love is that the former is other-concern with no regard for reciprocal response, while the latter is other-concern that is interested in, if not conditioned upon, equality of response. The differences between _agape_ and mutual love are related to each other insofar as the limits of historical possibility generate the normative concern for a

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120 Ibid., 78.
121 Ibid., 69.
122 Ibid., 74.
reciprocal response. A love that retains a normative interest in reciprocity corresponds to the expectations of what is possible within history, while a love that disavows all interest in equal response transgresses these expectations. Niebuhr writes:

> [t]he highest good of history [mutual love] must conform to the standards of coherence and consistency in the whole realm of historical vitality. All claims within the general field of interests must be proportionately satisfied and related to each other harmoniously. The sacrifice of the self for others [agape] is therefore a violation of natural standards of morals, as limited by historical existence.  

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Mutual love may lack the purity of self-giving endemic to agape, but mutual love achieves an extraordinary degree of proportionality and harmony within the difficult conditions of human existence.

Is Niebuhr’s doctrine of mutual love really just Aristotle’s ideal of philia in different language? The texture of the ideals seems very similar, but Niebuhr is unclear about how mutual love relates to the Aristotelian standard of friendship. At times, he identifies the two terms straightforwardly, using philia and mutual love synonymously.  

124 Elsewhere, he claims that mutual love is, and must be, something more than philia: “insofar as mutual love may involve only cool calculations of reciprocal advantages of the kind that Aristotle describes in his analysis of Philia, it is always in danger of degenerating into a relation of mere calculation. If so, it will ultimately be corrupted by resentments about the lack of reciprocity in the relationship.”  

125 As we saw above, Niebuhr holds that mutual love does, in fact, imply much more than “only cool calculations of reciprocal advantages.” It involves other-concern that is interested in, but not conditioned upon, reciprocal response. In one passage he equates mutual love with eros,

123 Ibid., 69.


125 The Self and the Dramas of History, 31.
without any explanation. For these reasons it seems that Niebuhr thinks mutual love is very
different from the Aristotelian ideal of friendship. Because of his equivocation on this point,
we are better served to think of mutual love as something different from *philia* despite the
apparent similarities.

If Niebuhr holds mutual love to be an ideal that is less pure than *agape* in terms of
sacrifice and self-giving, he concludes that justice is more even more sullied by self-interest than
is mutual love. Niebuhr recognizes that justice is the possession of a virtuous moral agent,
namely the “inclination ‘to give each man his due’.” However, most of his discussion of the
ideal posits justice as a state of affairs in the polis; it is the achievement of a human collective.
And, in keeping with the dominant theme in the rest of his theological ethics, he defines justice
mainly in reference to sin. For Niebuhr, justice is the moral ideal by which human collectives
achieve a “tolerable harmony” between persons (and groups of persons) that contend against
each other on the basis of self-interest. Human beings are capable of envisioning, pursuing,
and even achieving justice because of our endowment of freedom and the capacity for
transcendence it gives us. Given the inevitability of sin, justice strives to create tolerable
harmonies between self-interested parties in which claims and counter-claims are balanced, and
social clout is diffused to protect the weak from the powerful. Much more than *agape* and
mutual love, justice is highly attentive to self-interest. Individuals and groups that value and
pursue justice are deeply committed to the meeting the claims and interests of competing

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127 Whether or not he read Aristotle on *philia* well is another question.


129 *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*, 184–5; *Reflections on the
End of an Era*, chap. XVII.
elements in society. When a tenuous balance is met, justice achieves order. For Niebuhr, equality and liberty are “essentially universal ‘principles’ of justice.”

The pursuit and establishment of justice is the task of politics. “The very essence of politics,” Niebuhr writes, “is the achievement of justice through equilibria of power.” Politics is necessary because of the harm that human beings do to each other under the influence of excessive self-love. But politics is dangerous, from a Niebuhrian perspective, because it endows a person or group with copious amounts of power, and the persons who gain power remain sinners and so will inevitably abuse it. Niebuhr explains that “politics is an effort to establish tolerable community, the sinfulness of men presupposed. The tension between competing interests makes authority, contradicting equality, necessary. The interests of the ‘rulers’ make this authority dangerous to justice.” He emphasizes two points in relation to this vision of political theology that have become part of his enduring legacy in Christian ethics. First, he regards the belief that sin can be restrained and justice can be achieved without the use of force as deeply naïve. This is why Christians ultimately cannot be pacifists. And second, he points out that it is very difficult to distinguish between physical violence and non-physical forms of coercion. Indeed, we allow political rulers to coerce recalcitrant citizens by threatening to use force. Without this power, the political rulers could not perform the service that is so necessary and also so dangerous.


131 *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 169.

132 *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 200.


The picture we have of Niebuhr’s theological ethics to this point—including his anthropology and his political theology—is strongly Augustinian. From his conception of sin as excessive self-love,\(^{135}\) to his claim that sin is derived from a corrupted will,\(^{136}\) to his justification of political use of force to constrain sin and achieve a modicum of order and justice (an image of the state as “concession to sin”), and to his fundamental suspicion of politics in the face of powerful and sinful rulers,\(^{137}\) Augustine’s influence is evident. Niebuhr’s reading of Augustine led him to certain disagreements with the ancient bishop, but these points do not change the fact that his theological ethics and political thought were informed most deeply by the latter.\(^{138}\) On Augustine Niebuhr writes, “whatever may be the defects of his approach to political reality, and whatever may be the dangers of a too slavish devotion to his insights, [he] nevertheless proves himself a more reliable guide than any known thinker.”\(^{139}\)

Niebuhr’s debt to Augustine reveals another possibility for classifying his thought. Because of his deep belief in the reality, ubiquity, and danger of sin, and because he articulates a political sensibility that admits the necessity of force, and recognizes that perfect equality and order are impossibilities, we can classify Niebuhr’s political theory as “realist.” Lovin notes that the term “political realism” can carry other meanings than the one I assign to Niebuhr here. He summarizes one such meaning, writing that the political realist “clearly believes that moral statements can be true or false, but also believes that the relevant criteria of truth or falsity are

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\(^{136}\) Ibid., XIV; Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), VII.

\(^{137}\) Both the justification and the suspicion of politics are present in *City of God*, XIX.

\(^{138}\) For examples of points of disagreement between Niebuhr and Augustine, see *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II*, 109 n. 4, 134–40; *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 127.

\(^{139}\) *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 146.
embedded in the moral beliefs and practices of the community in question.” Lovin is correct to note that this species of political realism does not belong to Niebuhr. Nor, would I say, does the political realism that denies the applicability of moral limits to warfare. However, when political realism means attention to the pervasive and damaging reality of sin and evil, willingness to use force to restrain sin and evil, and resignation to the fact that perfection in justice and order are not possible, then Niebuhr qualifies as a political realist.

Democracy is, according to Niebuhr’s political vision, the most reliable way to achieve justice through the restraint of sin. Like Dewey, Niebuhr has both thin and thick understandings of this form of polity. His thin theory of democracy holds that it is a set of political practices and institutions identifiable as “people rule.” The thin conception maintains that popular suffrage and the consent of the governed are constitutive of this set of practices and institutions. However, Niebuhr also articulates a thick conception of democracy, which claims that it is a “permanently valid form of social and political association” because it is the form of polity that makes the most legitimate claim to “equalization of political power.” Democracy achieves the equalization of political power through the customary checks and balances between branches of government, popular sovereignty and suffrage, frequent elections, and so on. The diffusion of power that these measures achieve qualifies as a “perennial justification for

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140 Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism, 12.

141 On this variety of political realism, see Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chap. 1.


143 The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 3.

democracy.” For Niebuhr, democracy restrains the sins of the strongest members of society, and delivers justice more consistently than any other political arrangements because of its ability to flatten social power. Indeed, Niebuhr holds that the Christian view of human beings as sinners is the most compelling reason to advocate democratic politics; an anthropology that attends to excessive self-love is the most solid foundation for people rule. Far from being a political form of utopia, or the means to a Kingdom of God on earth, democracy is better understood as a system of restraint. It is “a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems.” While it cannot eradicate social power and the harmful effects of excessive self-love, democracy does disperse power to the greatest number of moral agents, and therefore mitigates the destructive potential of the most powerful members of society. Niebuhr’s vision of democracy is one in which the democratic state, like any other state, is a concession to sin. Unlike any other form of government, though, democracy distributes power as evenly as possible in order to minimize sin’s destructive potential. Democracy’s superiority over all other forms of government is, according to Niebuhr’s vision, a result of its diffusion of power and mitigation of the harmful effects of sin.

What kind of people must we be for Niebuhr’s vision of democracy to succeed? What virtues must we possess in order to maintain a well-functioning democratic social and political order? One answer to this question presents itself rather quickly on this reading of Niebuhr: we must possess the virtue of humility for democracy to succeed. For democracy to succeed, it is vitally important for citizens to recognize the pervasiveness of excessive self-interest in human

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146 *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 99.

147 *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence*, 118.
beings. Even more, it is crucial that citizens understand not only that their neighbors are very likely to act in accordance with excessive self-love, but also that they themselves are likely to so act, as well. This stance by which the moral agent admits his or her proclivity to excessive self-love is part of a Niebuhrian account of humility. One might say, drawing on the distinctions Aristotle makes about excellent habits of the moral agent, that this inclination to recognize and admit one’s own claims to excessive self-love shows humility to have an intellectual dimension. In other words, democratic humility is partly an inclination to think in excellent ways regarding one’s tendency to excessive self-interest. One of the results of this excellent habit of thought is that Niebuhr’s democratic moral agent will protect against the arrogant assumption that the neighbor’s claims are irrational, or unjust, or simply not binding on himself or herself. Notice that this kind of vigilant and humble openness to the claims of the neighbor is basic to Niebuhr’s ideal of justice. “An act of justice...requires the humble recognition that the claim that another makes against us may be legitimate.”

Another important element of Niebuhr’s vision of humility and justice is that moral agents must, in humility, be honest with themselves about the amount of social power they yield, whom that power affects, and in what ways. There may be a great “equality of sin,” among moral agents according to Niebuhr’s perspective, but there is a massive inequality of guilt. The most powerful members of society are the ones whose sin hurts people the most. If these powerful members of society are to possess democratic humility, they must examine the reality of their power, and restrain themselves accordingly. As it calls on those with massive power, and therefore guilt, to recognize the ways in which their strength hurts their neighbors, a Niebuhrian doctrine of democratic humility attends to historical dynamics of oppression, such as

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the dominance of white people over black people, or the dominance of men over women.

Although he does not pursue the implications of his ethics and political theology in the latter relationship, Niebuhr often makes reference to the former. He writes,

> it is a fact that those who hold great economic and political power are more guilty of pride against God and of injustice against the weak than those who lack power and prestige. Gentiles are not naturally more sinful than Jews. But Gentiles, holding the dominant power in their several nations, sin against Semitic minority groups more than the latter sin against them. White men sin against Negroes in Africa and America more than Negroes sin against white men.¹⁴⁹

Given this inequality of guilt, the functioning of a democratic social order is highly dependent upon the most powerful members of society cultivating the virtue of humility. Returning to Aristotle’s distinct categories of virtue, we find that a Niebuhrian account of democratic humility has “moral” dimensions in addition to its “intellectual” dimensions. That is, democratic humility is a virtue that inclines its possessors to feel and to act in excellent ways relative to their social power and tendency to use it. Democratic moral agents who possess humility will feel a need to restrain their own power in order to protect the vulnerable in their midst. Their desires will be ordered so that excessive self-love is habitually restrained. Democratic moral agents who possess humility will also consistently act so as to curtail their inclinations to pursue self-interest without regard to the needs and interests of the vulnerable neighbor. Their conduct will exhibit vigilant self-regulation.

A second virtue recommends itself less obviously as a candidate to answer the question: who must we be for democracy to succeed? This is the virtue of mutuality. To understand the relevance of mutuality for democratic politics in Niebuhr’s theological framework, we need to examine the complicated and paradoxical relationship he describes between agape and justice. One of the ways that Niebuhr most frequently characterizes this relationship is by saying that

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love fulfills and negates justice. When Niebuhr claims that love fulfills justice, he indicates that justice has its source in love, and that love completes all attempts to harmonize life to life in justice, which are incomplete because of the remnants of sin in them. In addition, love fulfills justice in that all the accomplishments of justice approximate the agape ideal: “the achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood.” Another way of describing this interplay is by saying that justice is “the instrument of love.” When Niebuhr claims that love negates justice, he argues that the moral ideal of agape transcends all the relative and imperfect motivations and accomplishments of justice so completely, that love is always the “ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered.” From the perspective of perfect self-giving, all efforts at justice are found to be halting, relative, reversible, and incomplete.

Along with the dynamic of fulfillment and negation, the complicated and paradoxical relationship of love to justice also contains a number of more minor, but still significant motifs. One of these motifs, which I will call the movement of “sin’s inertia,” reveals the relevance of mutual love for democratic life. According to Niebuhr’s thought, any human conduct motivated by one of the three social ideals we have examined previously (agape, mutual love, and justice) is subject to degenerate into one of the ideals below it, because of the corrupting influence of sin. Agape, then, tends to give way to mutual love because of the impossibility of a human being acting fully, and for extended periods of time, according to self-sacrificing concern for the

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151 *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 128.


154 Ibid., 128.
neighbor. Sin’s inertia forces *agapic* conduct to become mutual love. Niebuhr points to this interaction partly to warn readers about the tendency of good motivations and good actions to shift into their corrupted counterparts. But he also wants to give a positive injunction. A corollary of this idea of sin’s inertia is that one must aspire to high levels of love if one is to attain motivation and conduct in which self-regard and other-regard are intermingled and balanced. In other words, “the self cannot achieve relations of mutual and reciprocal affection with others if its actions are dominated by the fear that they may not be reciprocated. Mutuality is not a possible achievement if it is made the intention and goal of any action.”

Thus, according to Niebuhr’s vision, in order to achieve mutual love, one must strive for the *agape* ideal. However, the most basic task of a democratic social and political order is not the achievement of mutual love; it is the achievement of justice. Therefore, democratic moral agents need not strive for *agape*.

Although democratic moral agents need not strive for *agape*, they do need to strive for mutual love in order to achieve justice, according to Niebuhr’s logic. Such is the effect of sin’s inertia on the project of pursuing and establishing “tolerable harmonies” within human collectives. Niebuhr often makes this point about the need to strive for something more than justice in order to achieve justice, but these passages in which he speaks in his “recessive voice” tend to go unnoticed in scholarship on Niebuhr’s political theology (presumably because they lack explicit reference to sin, which is his well-known trademark and “dominant voice”). These passages are vitally important to my case for mutuality as a democratic virtue in a Niebuhrian framework. In one of his clearest statements on the relationship between the inertia of sin and

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156 I borrow the wonderful and adroit metaphor of Niebuhr’s dominant and recessive voices from Eric Gregory. See, for example, his *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago, I.L.: University Of Chicago Press, 2010), 82.
the pursuit of justice, Niebuhr writes, “[m]utual love and loyalty are, in a sense, the highest possibilities of social life, rising above the rational calculations and the power-balances of its rough justice...Perhaps justice degenerates into mere order without justice if the pull of love is not upon it.”¹⁵⁷ Here he does not seem to mean the pull of agapic love; presumably the pull of mutual love would be sufficient to keep justice from degenerating into “mere order.” He voices this concern about the degeneration of justice frequently.¹⁵⁸ Without mutual love to pull justice away from mere assertion and counter-assertion, justice turns into vengeance¹⁵⁹ and resentment.¹⁶⁰ The basic point to note, though, is that one must intend the achievement of mutual love in order to produce relationships that achieve a durable justice and to avoid a grim dynamic of resentful counter-assertions of self-interest.

Given that the achievement of justice is the basic task of all political life, including democratic politics, and given that a Niebuhrian moral vision holds that citizens must be motivated by mutual love in order to establish and maintain justice, mutuality is a democratic virtue according to this thick description of democracy. To this point, I have been speaking of “mutual love;” but now my selection of “mutuality” rather than “mutual love” as the democratic virtue requires explanation. While mutual love is the exchange of benevolence and affection characterized by a rough equality over time (although not conditioned upon that equality), mutuality is such an exchange in which other goods are so given and so received. Mutuality resembles mutual love in the manner in which goods are exchanged, but can depart from mutual love in that it need not exchange benevolence and affection. The democratic moral


¹⁵⁸ Moral Man and Immoral Society, 258, 266. See also Love and Justice, 28.

¹⁵⁹ Love and Justice, 229.

¹⁶⁰ Christian Realism and Political Problems, 160–1.
agent who strives for or intends mutual love can therefore be said to possess the virtue of mutuality, as can the moral agent who values and seeks exchanges of other goods that are characterized by a rough equivalence over time. This movement from mutual love to the virtue of mutuality will be helpful as we consider economic exchanges later, in Chapter 5. This movement is justified by Niebuhr’s frequent association of the terms “mutual love” and “mutuality,” as in the quotation used above: “the self cannot achieve relations of mutual and reciprocal affection with others if its actions are dominated by the fear that they may not be reciprocated. Mutuality is not a possible achievement if it is made the intention and goal of any action.”¹⁶¹ Like humility, mutuality has both intellectual and moral components. Mutuality is a virtue pertaining to excellent habits of thought insofar as moral agents come to a rational understanding of the value of relationships in which there is a rough equality of exchange over time. Mutuality is a virtue pertaining to excellent habits of feeling insofar as moral agents genuinely come to desire these kinds of relationships in order to mitigate the collection of destructive power in the hands of too few sinful people. Mutuality is a virtue pertaining to excellent habits of conduct insofar as moral agents consistently act in ways that seek to equalize exchanges between parties for whom such exchanges have historically been imbalanced.

Returning to the quotation that serves as the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, we can see that Niebuhr packs his famous statement on the possibility and necessity of democracy with much implicit ethical substance. In his recessive voice, he notes that “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible.” This statement assumes, of course, a theological anthropology in which human beings are endowed with freedom to imagine and pursue goals beyond our own self-interest. However, concealed in this statement is the belief that justice requires the motivation of mutuality; without this element, justice cannot last as such, given

sin’s inertia. And in his dominant voice, Niebuhr reminds us that “man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” This admonishment is founded on a theological anthropology in which finite and free human beings inevitably and excessively pursue our own interests to the detriment of our neighbors. This clause carries the implicit belief that humility is required of all citizens in a democracy, particularly those with the most power, and therefore, the most guilt.

In conclusion, I suggest that the democratic virtues of humility and mutuality meet many of the valid concerns that feminist theologians and ethicists voice in response to Niebuhr’s thought. Although on their face, calls for humility may strike many readers as more examples in a long historical line of ethical injunctions to self-abasement, in fact a Niebuhrian vision of democratic humility carries liberating potential for oppressed and marginalized social groups. Guided by humility, a democratic citizen will recognize the tendency of all people to inordinate self-interest, including his or her own tendency in that regard. However, insofar as it strives for justice, democratic humility also identifies power and guilt in the human collective. As justice flattens out the damage done by disproportionate power, humility restrains the potential for the most powerful members of society to inflict injustice through self-interest. Far from counseling the oppressed to further self-abnegation, democratic humility recognizes the inclination of all people to injustice, and adds the important addendum that the most powerful among us are the most capable and likely to act in unjust, excessively self-interested ways.

Like humility, mutuality may strike feminist critics of Niebuhr as problematic, given that Niebuhr’s vision of agape as pure self-sacrificial love remains normative in his theological ethics. Doesn’t that leave us precisely where we started? Wasn’t the injunction to self-sacrifice exactly the problem with Niebuhr’s ethics, according to the feminist critique? While the feminist authors are justified in critiquing Niebuhr on agape, the dynamics between mutuality and justice will offer ethical ideals that are less objectionable than the norm of pure self-sacrificial love. This
is for two reasons. First, calls for *agapic* self-sacrifice are out of place in the political realm. A proper Niebuhrian political framework does not call for *agape*, as this ideal exceeds the limits of political morality. Rather, a Niebuhrian political framework pursues justice in the light of sin. This pursuit requires something more than justice (namely, mutuality), but does not require *agape*. A Niebuhrian vision of democracy does not demand pure self-sacrifice of anyone.

Second, mutuality will identify and target historical social relationships in which exchanges are out of balance. Citizens guided by mutuality will retain an interest in achieving a rough equality over time between various social groups. Where inequality is most obvious, mutuality will go to work, calling for increased giving on the part of those who have taken disproportionately. Thus, Niebuhr’s idea of mutuality contains significant resources for the liberation of oppressed social groups, even if he did not always attend to that potential. Motivated by mutuality, humble in the recognition that excessive self-interest is ubiquitous and especially dangerous in the hands of the most powerful, and secure in the belief that justice requires a dispersal of that power, citizens can rest assured that self-abasement and self-abnegation are not required for the functioning of a democratic polis. Although the feminist writers are correct in pointing out the problems with Niebuhr’s male-centered accounts of experience, sin, and love, his political thought will always be worth revisiting and revising as long as the excessive self-interest of the powerful members of society threaten the most vulnerable among us. And despite the fact that America no longer possesses the cultural-moral unity founded on Judeo-Christian norms that marked earlier periods, Niebuhr’s political thought will remain relevant as long as American Christians continue to share the premises on which his ethics is based, and continue to bring these premises to bear on their political decisions.
CHAPTER IV

THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN DEWEY AND NIEBUHR

The preceding detailed examinations and interpretations of the comprehensive doctrines of Dewey and Niebuhr have highlighted their agreement on the questions of the habits of thought, feeling, and action necessary to sustain democratic political societies. However, the interpretive examinations of Dewey’s philosophy and Niebuhr’s theology are also necessary if we are to understand the critiques that they made of each other. The tasks of this chapter are to revisit the public argument in which Dewey and Niebuhr engaged each other’s work, to evaluate the validity of their critiques, and to argue that they failed to consider an important area of common ground that they shared, despite their deep divergence on questions of moral psychology, the nature and status of the use of force in socio-political struggles, and the ease and inevitability of social progress. Understanding their divergence on these questions will foster an awareness that these elements of their comprehensive doctrines cannot be reduced into agreement, and will draw out the irony inherent in their unexplored consensus on democratic virtue. In addition, an examination of how they engaged each other’s work will serve the argument I make in the conclusion of this dissertation, on the contrast between democratic and libertarian tolerance.

Their explicit engagement of each other’s work spanned many years. The first time one of the two writers explicitly mentioned the other was in a book review Niebuhr wrote of a collection of Dewey’s “occasional papers.” The review ran in the November 1929 issue of The World Tomorrow,¹ and was an unremarkable, copacetic affair. Niebuhr praised Dewey for his role in American public life, writing that, unlike many other philosophers, Dewey had been willing to “descend from the Olympian heights,” and that he had “helped to form political

thought and guide political conduct.” It was only later, in the 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that Niebuhr initiated the conflict with Dewey. According to Langdon Gilkey, the book had “a profound and disturbing impact” on the academic theologians, philosophers, and ethicists who read it. Much of the reason for the disturbance caused by *Moral Man* was the critical attention that Niebuhr directed toward Dewey. Indeed, Dewey served as a convenient example of a philosopher who exhibited many of the misguided tendencies against which Niebuhr argued. The critique of modern liberal thought, for which Dewey stood as a prime example, was much of the reason for the “profound and disturbing impact” that Gilkey attributes to the book. Surveying the treatment that Dewey received, Richard Wightman Fox writes that Niebuhr’s “rhetoric was icy, his argument aggressive.” Following this 1932 shot across Dewey’s bow, the actual debate between the two writers burned bright and hot, but not long. After a few years of explicit, public responses to each other, Dewey let his participation in the quarrel trail off. However, even though “Dewey more or less ignored Niebuhr after 1935,” Niebuhr continued to make critical reference to Dewey until well beyond the latter’s death in 1952. Because Niebuhr initiated the debate, and prolonged it after Dewey’s death, and because many scholars write that Niebuhr’s views were vindicated in the exchange, I will examine Niebuhr’s critique first, and then move to Dewey’s response.

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2 Ibid., 472–3.


For Niebuhr, Dewey’s naturalism entails two major problems that poison modern philosophy and theology more generally. Although the problems that Niebuhr identified in Dewey’s naturalism were not part of his original critique in *Moral Man*, they do comprise the deepest objection Niebuhr made to Dewey’s comprehensive doctrine. In addition, understanding the two-pronged critique that Niebuhr articulates about the naturalism in Dewey’s philosophy allows us to understand other elements of Niebuhr’s argument. For these two reasons, I will begin by treating Niebuhr’s twin arguments against what he called Dewey’s “modern, naturalistic empiricism.” The first problem with the naturalistic empiricism common to many modern thinkers and evident especially in Dewey’s work is, according to Niebuhr, that it denies the basic freedom of human life. In particular, Niebuhr maintains that the abandonment of all supernatural reference points in human experience disavows the fundamental human freedom at work in self-transcendence and the religious inclination. According to Niebuhr, the naturalistic philosophy represented so clearly by Dewey makes the basic mistake of assuming that experience is only in and of the natural world; this mistake severs the connection that all human beings have in experience of deeper encounters with the mysterious source of life that lies beyond all causation, of higher possibilities of personal fulfillment, and of greater levels of loving interaction with the neighbor. Niebuhr writes that “modern naturalism,” of which Dewey is the most obvious example in the context of 20th-century American thought, “disavows the transcendent and unconditioned ground and fulfillment of the temporal flux.”

Such a denial of these basic elements of human freedom would be troubling enough for Niebuhr, but on top of this problem, he finds that naturalistic empiricism adds a second offense. Naturalistic empiricists such as Dewey deny humanity’s freedom and then make the mistake of

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glorifying humanity’s finitude. More specifically, naturalistic empiricism revels in finite human reason. For Niebuhr, no one expresses greater faith in finite human reason than John Dewey. “According to the naturalistic rationalism of John Dewey,” he explains, “reason cuts the channels into which life will inevitably flow because life itself is dynamic. Reason supplies the direction and the natural power of life-as-impulse insures the movement in the direction of the naturally projected goal.”

This faith in reason was one of the elements of Dewey’s thought that first attracted Niebuhr’s attention in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*; after levying this initial point, Niebuhr broadened his charges to include an indictment of the naturalistic denial of humanity’s freedom. These two points—the denial of human freedom and the glorification of reason—are for Niebuhr the root of all the problematic elements of Dewey’s philosophy in general and of his moral theory in particular. In order to understand this critique more fully, we can first examine the problems that Niebuhr identifies with faith in reason and second consider the ways in which a denial of freedom augments this problematic faith.

Before moving to Niebuhr’s critique of Dewey’s faith in reason, though, we should recall from the preceding analysis of Dewey’s thought (in Chapter 2) the philosopher’s high regard for scientific method. For Dewey, scientific method embodies most clearly the experimental union of thought and action that intelligence must enact in order to transform a doubtful situation into a determinate one. He holds that the scientific method is exemplary in its commitment to naturalistic empiricism, and in its willingness to revise any proposition whose assertibility has recently been found to be unwarranted. Dewey often uses the term “inquiry” as a synonym of scientific method. I recall these points because Niebuhr’s critique of Dewey frequently focuses

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8 *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 186–7.

9 The earliest passage in which Niebuhr calls attention to Dewey’s faith in reason is Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 35.
on the latter’s high regard for the reason exemplified by science. Although he finds that Dewey’s faith in reason is communicated most clearly in his high praise for scientific method, on occasion his critique of Dewey’s “rationalism” takes aim at the pragmatist’s theory of education rather than his endorsement of scientific method.\(^\text{10}\) For our purposes, the critique of faith in reason as embodied in Dewey’s high regard for scientific inquiry will be most important.

Why does Niebuhr regard Dewey’s faith in reason as such a troubling element of his thought? In brief, because he thinks Dewey fails to understand all the limitations to which reason is subject. In Niebuhr’s writing on the boundaries to which reason is subject, one can identify at least three limitations on reason that Niebuhr thinks Dewey fails to comprehend: reason is not capable of achieving universality, objectivity, or disinterestedness in the knowledge and moral norms it delivers. On the mistaken belief that reason can achieve a universal perspective, Niebuhr writes that Dewey is no different from the classical Greek philosophical perspective that he claims to overturn: “it is indicative of the similarities underneath the differences between classical rationalism and modern pragmatism...that John Dewey in his ‘Common Faith’ expects the scientific method to achieve a universally valid viewpoint, closely akin to the services which Aristotle’s nous accomplished.”\(^\text{11}\) Human reason is always finite, according to Niebuhr, and so although it can participate in the free activities of self-consciousness, self-transcendence, self-determination, and the religious inclination, it always does so in a limited way. Reason’s movements are always the motions of a particular being, bound in fundamental ways by culture, language, and history. Therefore he charges


Dewey—whom he understands to endow reason with the capacity to achieve a universal perspective, free from the particular circumstances that bind finite human beings—with a fatal overstatement on the topic of reason’s capacities. “The most pathetic aspect of the bourgeois faith,” Niebuhr intones, with Dewey clearly in his sights as the primary spokesperson of the faith in question, “is that it regards its characteristic perspectives as universally valid and applicable, at the precise moment in history when they are being unmasked as the peculiar convictions of a special class which flourished in a special situation in western society.”

Similarly, reason’s limitations preclude it from achieving pure objectivity. Niebuhr faults Dewey for believing that human beings can fully transcend our particular subjectivity in the process of reasoning. After naming Dewey explicitly in an article entitled “A Faith to Live by: The Dilemma of Modern Man,” Niebuhr rejects the pretentious illusion of Dewey’s beloved scientific method, which claims to achieve a stance of pure objectivity. “It is the illusion that the so-called ‘methods of science’ or ‘impartial scientific inquiry’ or ‘scientific objectivity’ are actually the instruments by which mankind rises to higher and higher perfection.”

For Niebuhr, the case against science’s claim that reason can achieve pure objectivity is the same as the case against the claim of universality. Reason remains the capacity of profoundly limited creatures who can never fully transcend the boundaries set by our subjectivity. Human subjectivity does not allow reason to step completely outside of the particular perceptions, emotions, desires, and histories that partially determine our knowledge. The pure objectivity that science arrogates to itself is impossible for human beings to attain, according to Niebuhr.


Niebuhr also critiques Dewey’s faith in reason on the issue of disinterestedness. While the case against the ability of reason to attain a state of disinterestedness shares common features with the case against reason’s capacity for universality and objectivity, the abiding “interest” that Niebuhr attributes to reason must also be set apart for special consideration. On the one hand, Niebuhr’s contention that reason can never achieve pure disinterestedness closely resembles his argument that reason can never deliver purely universal or purely objective knowledge or moral norms. This is because it is always the capacity of a finite human being. However, the contention that reason cannot achieve a state of pure “disinterestedness” is different, as well. When Niebuhr claims—against the position that he attributes to Dewey—that reason can never be disinterested, his point is partly about the ubiquity of excessive self-interest. This, of course, is Niebuhr’s basic point about sin: at the level of individual moral psychology, he holds that reason cannot achieve a state of disinterestedness because it is always much more beholden to self-interest, which he also calls “impulse,” than it is in control of self-interest. The relationship between reason and interest/impulse in the moral life of a human being is that reason serves impulse more easily than it controls impulse. For Niebuhr, Dewey’s faith in reason “presupposes a nonexistent unity of man’s impulsive life, a greater degree of rational transcendence over impulse than actually exists and a natural obedience of impulse to the ideal which all history refutes.”14 And in keeping with his theory of sin, Niebuhr argues against Dewey that whatever chances reason might have of applying restrictive reins to impulse within the moral life of an individual become even more attenuated when considered at the social level. In a 1935 review of Dewey’s Liberalism and Social Action, Niebuhr writes that Dewey’s conception of reason, or “freed intelligence,”

14 An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 187.
does not recognize the relation of social and economic interest to the play of intelligence upon social problems. It does not perceive the perennial and inevitable character of the subordination of reason to interest in the social struggle. Its ideal of “freed intelligence” expects a degree of rational freedom from the particular interests and perspectives of those who think about social problems which is incompatible with the very constitution of human nature.  

It is crucial to note that Niebuhr does not stop with a simple argument that Dewey exhibits a naïve lack of awareness about the influence socio-economic interests have on reason. Niebuhr extends this point by claiming that Dewey himself is subject to the very dynamic he overlooks. He is, according to Niebuhr, blissfully unaware of the fact that his philosophy reflects the particular interests of bourgeois liberal academics. When Niebuhr calls Dewey a bourgeois liberal, he departs from the typically Marxist valence of the term “bourgeois;” he is not identifying Dewey primarily as one of the “people in the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor.” Rather he is associating him with the privileged, educated Western middle-class that is painfully out of touch with the struggles of the true working class.

For Niebuhr, Dewey’s faith in reason exaggerates the possibilities of reason and overlooks the limitations to which it is subject. Not least of these limitations is excessive self-interest. However, this problem is augmented in that Dewey’s naturalism fails to acknowledge human freedom. From Niebuhr’s perspective, the neglect of freedom means that Dewey is even less capable of understanding the depth and difficulty of human sinfulness. This is because the limited freedom that human beings enjoy allows us to pursue our excessive and inordinate self-interest.

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16 Moral Man and Immoral Society, 212; The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 129. For other passages in which Niebuhr maintains that reason is always the servant of impulse (or self-interest) before its master, see Moral Man and Immoral Society, 41; Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1934), 17; “A Faith to Live By: The Dilemma of Modern Man.”

interest with even greater awareness, imagination, foresight, and conviction. Niebuhr’s anthropology holds that reason is too finite to control excessive self-love effectively; but reason is free enough to allow us to act on our inevitable and disproportionate self-love with greater power and cunning. This is the full meaning of Niebuhr’s contention that reason serves impulse before it is impulse’s master, and he holds that Dewey misses both of the crucial elements of this vision of human beings (the finitude of reason as well as the ability of partially-free reason to augment inordinate self-love). Technically speaking, Niebuhr holds that in neglecting humanity’s freedom, Dewey (like so many other modern thinkers) fails to understand both the heights of transcendence and goodness to which human beings can soar and also the depths of depravity to which we can sink. Niebuhr identifies this as a “single and common source” of the errors that plague modern naturalistic thought: “man is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or sufficiently deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can understand, express, and find itself.”\(^{18}\) However, Niebuhr rarely dwells on the extent to which Dewey fails to account for the possibilities of goodness and fulfillment inherent in human life. The major point for Niebuhr is that Dewey’s naturalistic faith in reason, coupled with and augmented by his denial of human freedom, grossly underestimates the inevitability and the destructive power of excessive self-interest. Dewey’s real problem, which he shares with all other modern thinkers whether they are “rationalists” or “romantics,” is that they all possess an “essentially easy conscience; and nothing gives the diverse and discordant notes of modern culture so much harmony as the unanimous opposition of modern man to Christian conceptions of the sinfulness

of man.” The twin critiques that Niebuhr put forward in response to Dewey’s moral vision—that he underestimates evil, tragedy, and sin and that he overestimates reason—were not unique to Niebuhr. Randolph Bourne and Walter Lippmann also advanced these two points against a Deweyan anthropology well before Niebuhr did so.

This two-pronged rebuttal of Dewey’s philosophy extends into a rejection of Dewey’s preferred method to address social problems. Niebuhr argues that Dewey’s desire to apply scientific inquiry to the social sphere in an effort to identify and alleviate basic problems of collective life is naïve on a number of levels. First, Dewey’s faith in reason might be valid when directed to the natural world, insofar as reason may be able to approximate universality, objectivity, and disinterestedness when utilized in service of understanding the physical (rather than the social) world. But insofar as the inevitability and ubiquity of excessive self-interest makes the realm of human history categorically distinct from the realm of nature, Dewey’s vision of social improvement cannot deliver the change he seeks. Niebuhr writes that

it never occurred to [Dewey] that his insistence that the ‘methods of science’ could be transferred from the field of nature to that of history, and that only the intrusion of irrelevant religious and political authority prevented this consummation, rested upon an erroneous and, unexamined presupposition. That was the universally held belief of modern culture that the realm of history was essentially identical with the realm of nature.

This conflation of the physical world with the world of human history naively discounts the immense difficulty of applying scientific inquiry to human collectives.

19 Ibid., 23.


In addition, Niebuhr faults Dewey for the simplistic belief that humanity moves inevitably toward a complete knowledge and enactment of the social good as authoritarian structures give way to the processes of intelligent inquiry. This belief Niebuhr finds most clearly in Dewey’s distinction between “religion” and “the religious,” articulated in *A Common Faith*. While the former stands for the authoritarian and supernatural traditions of history, the latter “denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal,” and “that lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living.” Dewey hoped to awaken and inspire this religious attitude toward the end and ideal of intelligent inquiry into social problems. For Dewey, a religious commitment to intelligent inquiry would both weaken the grips that traditional, authoritarian religion holds on society and also move society toward a realization of democratic ideals. This is because such liberation is itself in keeping with democratic ideals, and because it allows intelligent inquiry to imagine, value, and pursue new democratic ends. Niebuhr derides this vision as an utterly simplistic and naïve faith in progress. “According to Dewey the divisive elements in human culture are vestigial remnants of outmoded religious prejudices which will yield to the universal perspectives which modern education will inculcate. This education will create practical unanimity among men of goodwill.” To demonstrate the inadequacy of this perspective, Niebuhr adds, “[m]odern culture was generating new and fierce ideological conflicts, not remotely connected with traditional religious concepts, while Professor Dewey was writing this book [*A Common Faith*].” Niebuhr characterizes this simple faith in the inevitability of progress through reason as the belief that

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23 Ibid., 26, 39.

history is redemptive. “The one unifying element in all strands of modern culture was the idea of progress,” he writes. “We had faith in a redemptive history.” He means, of course, that “modern culture” is united in the belief that history can and will be redeemed by human efforts.

A third and final naivety to which Dewey’s naturalistic social philosophy is subject, according to Niebuhr, follows from the previous points. Dewey’s faith in reason, his vision of extending the rational scientific method of inquiry into the realm of human history as a means to alleviate problems of injustice reflects his desire and belief that social change can and should occur without violence or the use of force. In a review of *Liberalism and Social Action*, Niebuhr relates Dewey’s belief in the possibility of reason to transcend humanity’s particularity to the hope that social change can occur without violence.

The same inability to recognize the perennial enslavement of even ‘freed intelligence’ to partial and particular interests is revealed in Professor Dewey’s discussion of violence and social change...the discussion of the possibility of avoiding violence lacks realism because Professor Dewey again sees violence as a consequence of a social ignorance which a more perfect intelligence will be able to eliminate...One might as well expect to beguile the gentlemen of the Liberty League to modify their touching devotion to the Constitution by proving to them logically, rationally, and intellectually that the flexibility of the Constitution is a necessary prerequisite of orderly social change.

This faith in the promise of non-violent action to alleviate problematic social situations is, for Niebuhr, a predictable corollary of those systems of modern thought that fail to understand the depth and power of excessive self-interest. Powerful, self-interested people will not submit to change through moral suasion alone. In addition, calls for non-violent social change like those that Dewey articulates demonstrate the naïve belief that the political order does not already traffic in violence through the coercive threat of force. These two points about the naivety of

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non-violent liberalism were central arguments of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and spanned Niebuhr’s scholarly career from its beginning until its conclusion.\(^{27}\)

These are the major points on which Niebuhr challenged Dewey from 1932 until well after Dewey’s death. Dewey’s period of explicit response to Niebuhr was short-lived and very selective in terms of the contested points that Dewey chose to defend. Unlike Niebuhr’s critique, which was sustained over a long period of time, and touched on a broad range of conceptual elements in Dewey’s philosophy, Dewey’s engagement of Niebuhr was contained in a narrow window of time, and contested only a modest portion of his adversary’s thought. This makes it possible—and desirable—to examine Dewey’s critique of Niebuhr in its chronological sequence, in order to watch the argument develop, crest, and then recede.

Dewey’s first explicit public engagement of Niebuhr came in the March 8, 1933 edition of *The World Tomorrow*. This article came a week after Niebuhr’s piece in the same series sponsored by the magazine, which instructed its contributors to “write an assessment of the American scene.”\(^{28}\) Dewey took it upon himself to respond directly to Niebuhr’s piece. The essay, entitled “Unity and Progress,” offers no evidence that Dewey had read Niebuhr’s “icy and aggressive” opening salvo in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which had been published in 1932. In “Unity and Progress,” Dewey makes three basic points about the article that Niebuhr published, entitled “After Capitalism—What?” in *The World Tomorrow* the previous week. First, Dewey claims that Niebuhr lacks a philosophy of history. By this he means that Niebuhr fails to offer readers substantive guidance on the development of the social and political climate, and


about the appropriate way to respond to that climate. Rather, Niebuhr prefers to issue
foreboding political predictions.

He seems to me to predicate political policies for the present upon a conception
of what the future is practically sure to be. Amid the confused welter of social
phenomena he has no doubt as to what the dominant forces are and what is to
be their certain outcome...I should begin, if I could, with finding out what are
the urgent needs of the present and then try to shape policies to meet those
needs.²⁹

Second, Dewey writes that, even on the occasion that Niebuhr makes specific recommendations
for political action, these are vague and contradictory. Not only does he omit the important
elements of a “working program,” Niebuhr also exhibits vagueness in the “oscillation regarding
the method by which changes are to come about.” Pointing to his apparent endorsement of
both violent revolution and “deprecation of struggle,” Dewey sighs, “I can understand
thoroughgoing pacifism, and I can understand the Communisitic version of a violent struggle
ending in the victory of the proletariat. But Dr. Niebuhr’s position escapes me.”³⁰ Third, Dewey
claims that the present socio-political scene demands both consensus among political radicals
and unity of thought and action, and that “this unity is hindered by the type of view represented
in Dr. Niebuhr’s article.”³¹

Although they were explicit, public engagements of Niebuhr’s work, these three points
missed the bulk of the debate that Niebuhr had initiated the previous year. For this reason, I
believe Dewey had not read *Moral Man and Immoral Society* prior to the publication of “Unity
and Progress.” It is clear, though, that he was well aware of Niebuhr’s critical appraisal of
liberalism in general, and of his own work in particular, by the time Dewey penned his second

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³⁰ Ibid., 73.

³¹ Ibid., 74.
direct response to Niebuhr, which was published in 1934. This essay, entitled “Intelligence and Power,” addresses two of Niebuhr’s major critiques of Dewey, and also offers rebuttals in response to these critiques.

In this essay Dewey tackles Niebuhr’s skepticism about the efficacy of reason—which is also referred to as intelligence and scientific method—as a means to social and political change. Dewey charges that Niebuhr makes the mistake of interpreting too literally the call for application of scientific method to social issues. Dewey does not mean that “the particular techniques of the physical sciences are to be literally copied...nor that experimentation in the laboratory sense can be carried out on any large scale in social affairs.” He corrects Niebuhr on this point, explaining that “the attitude of mind exemplified in the conquest of nature by the experimental sciences, and the method involved in it, may and should be carried into social affairs.”

Furthermore, Dewey asks Niebuhr about the difference that would obtain if his critique of intelligence were true: “[w]hat are the alternatives?” If Niebuhr is so certain that reason is not a helpful resource in the social struggle, what tools does he recommend? Dewey guesses that the tools available to Niebuhr resemble those used previously, and with dubious effect: “[d]ogmatism, reinforced by the weight of unquestioned custom and tradition, the disguised or open play of class interests, dependence on brute force and violence.”

Dewey is even willing to admit Niebuhr’s point about liberalism’s deluded belief in reason in the service of social change, if only for the sake of argument, and for comparison with these other weary tools: “even if it be an illusion, exaltation of intelligence and experimental method is worth a trial. Illusion for illusion, this particular one may be better than those upon which humanity has

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33 Ibid.
usually depended.”\textsuperscript{34} This sentence concludes with a footnote to a passage in \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, in which Niebuhr argues, in the fashion of William James, that religion is an illusion whose truth is a consequence of its being believed.

“Intelligence and Power” also contains Dewey’s response to Niebuhr’s insistence on the pervasiveness of excessive self-interest, even (and especially) for those who claim to be guided purely by rationality. Dewey admits that intelligence has been corrupted by the inordinate self-interest of the powerful and the dispossessed alike. He maintains, however, that intelligence is no different from any other method or source of social conduct in this regard.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, Dewey turns the charge of naivety against Niebuhr: when Niebuhr holds that the application of scientific method to social problems will be unable to overcome vested economic and political interests, Dewey points out that these kinds of interests also resisted the extension of scientific intelligence into the natural world. According to this line of argument, Niebuhr is naïve to think that scientific rationality has not already fought the kinds of battles that Niebuhr thinks will prevent reason from operating effectively on social issues. Indeed, Dewey holds that the protagonists of the scientific revolution fought these battles well, and achieved a great degree of success against such vested interests as ecclesiastical and political powers.\textsuperscript{36} In addition, Dewey takes umbrage at the more personal point that Niebuhr makes about Dewey’s inability to account for the ubiquity of excessive self-interest. In response to Niebuhr’s claim that Dewey’s theory of intelligence betrays the bourgeois liberal detachment from actual human situations so typical among academics, Dewey cries foul.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 107.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 108.
Thus on the basis of a passage in which I denied that any amount of fact-finding apart from action aiming at control of social processes—in other words, a planned economy—could ever build up social knowledge and understanding, Mr. Niebuhr imputes to me middle class prejudices in ignoring the role of class interest and conflict in social affairs! He imputes to me a great exaggeration of the potentialities of education in spite of the fact that I have spent a good deal of energy urging that no genuine education is possible without active participation in actual conditions, and have pointed out that economic interests are the chief cause why this change in education is retarded and deflected.\(^{37}\)

He concludes the essay with a note of skepticism about the effectiveness of Niebuhr’s program that echoes the conclusion of “Unity and Progress.” It is not clear to Dewey that Niebuhr’s moral vision can galvanize political action among those who are concerned about justice. This time, though, Dewey focuses much more on Niebuhr’s critique of scientific intelligence and on his reminders about sin’s ubiquity. “Just because dominant economic interests are the chief cause for non-use of the method of intelligence to control social change, opponents of the method play into the hands of those interests when they discourage the potentialities of this method.”\(^{38}\)

After “Intelligence and Power,” Dewey did not make explicit reference to Niebuhr again in his published works. Niebuhr’s critiques lurk in the background of many of Dewey’s works, though. One can discern responses to Niebuhr’s thought in the pragmatist’s later work, as if much of Dewey’s philosophy from the mid-1930s and beyond was written as the author looked warily over his shoulder for a Niebuhrian objection. His later remarks that bear implicit responses to Niebuhr deploy many of the same arguments that Dewey uses in “Intelligence and Power.” In *A Common Faith*, for example, which saw print in the same year as “Intelligence and Power,” Dewey takes a pass at what is surely Niebuhr’s theological understanding of rationality. “Those contemporary theologians who are interested in social change and who at the same time depreciate human intelligence and effort in behalf of the supernatural, are riding two horses

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 110.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
that are going in opposite directions.”

Again, in *Freedom and Culture*, published in 1939, Dewey calls for a revival of democratic humanism, which he claims is essentially “faith in the potentialities of human nature.” For Dewey, the moral outlook opposed to this kind of humanism is the root of all intolerance. “[T]he underlying attitude [of intolerance] is one of fundamental distrust of human nature...An anti-humanist attitude is the essence of every form of intolerance.” It is not difficult to see in quotations such as these that Niebuhr’s critiques of Dewey’s faith in reason and his belief in the ability of scientific intelligence to ameliorate social problems continued to attract Dewey’s attention, even if he did not make explicit reference to Niebuhr in his published works after April, 1934.

Despite Daniel F. Rice’s claim that neither contestant in the dispute took the critiques personally, Dewey’s explicit and implicit responses suggest to me that he was hurt by what he took to be unfair and, at times, *ad hominem* attacks from Niebuhr. No university professor who tries to advocate social justice on behalf of society’s vulnerable takes kindly to being called a “bourgeois liberal.” The fact that Dewey refers to his interlocutor as “Dr. Niebuhr” in his first public response, and “Mr. Niebuhr” in his second reflects that Dewey took the attacks to be personal and responded in kind; he may be needling Niebuhr about the fact that the latter never earned a doctoral degree. The tone of the later essay, in which Dewey responds to *Moral Man*

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41 One explicit reference to Niebuhr from Dewey’s papers bears mention. In a 1947 letter to Robert V. Daniels, Dewey’s reflections on existentialism bring him to this assessment of Niebuhr and Kierkegaard: “Well I have the impression that both he and Kiekaagard--excuse spelling--have both completely lost faith in traditional statements of Christianity, haven’t got any modern substitute and so are making up, off the bat, something which supplies to them the gist of Christianity--what they find significant in it and what they approve of in modern thought--as when two newspapers are joined, the new organ always says ‘retaining the best features of both.’” John Dewey, “1947.11.17 (14803): John Dewey to Robert V. Daniels”, September 17, 1947, Center for Dewey Studies, Carbondale I.L.

42 See “Foreward,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey*. 
and Immoral Society, is defensive. Dewey’s protestations depart from his usual prosaic style by using an exclamation point. Although Rice disagrees, I conclude on the basis of these factors that Dewey felt Niebuhr’s critiques were unjustified, took them to be personal in nature, and was hurt by them.

Whether or not Dewey actually took offense at Niebuhr’s critiques, we can evaluate the accuracy of their readings of each other’s work that supply the foundation of these critiques. Were Niebuhr and Dewey justified in making the arguments that they did? Were their critical interpretations of each other based on fair and full readings? In response to these questions, one must answer both yes and no. I find that many of Niebuhr’s arguments were not justified because they were based on either incomplete or uncharitable assessments of Dewey’s positions, while other critical points were valid. The valid points in Niebuhr’s critique of Dewey reveal indissoluble disagreements between the two writers on questions of moral psychology, the nature and status of the use of force, and the inevitability of social progress. The same, of course, can be said for Dewey. Some of his responses to Niebuhr reflect a poor understanding of Niebuhr, while others are based on an accurate assessment of the latter’s thought, and reveal fundamental conflicts in the intellectual frameworks of the two authors.

Niebuhr indulges in major distortions of Dewey’s work, which are identifiable most clearly in his discussions of reason and sin. Among the topics on which Niebuhr misrepresents Dewey, the debate about reason provides perhaps the most egregious example of an uncharitable or incomplete reading. He frequently claims that Dewey’s reverence for scientific method advocates faith in a rationality that can achieve universality, objectivity, and disinterestedness. Of course, Dewey does call for faith in the kind of reason exemplified by the scientific method, but he never holds that this reason is capable of achieving a pure universality, objectivity, or disinterestedness, whether applied in the natural world or the sphere of social
relations. The reason in which Dewey invests his faith and hope is a deeply human reason, and is subject to the contingency that marks all of human life. This thoroughgoing contingency precludes reason from supplying human beings with a perspective that can be described as fully universal: if the capacity of human reason and the product of its active relation to its environment (knowledge) are always marked by the basic contingency of human life, then neither the capacity nor the product can be said to be universal. In addition, the experimental nature of the scientific method and the instrumental nature of knowledge reveal pure objectivity and pure disinterestedness to be impossible ideals. The experimental processes of reasoning and the instrumental nature of knowledge necessarily involve a subjective, interested human reasoner and knower. The fact that Dewey consistently points to the revisability of all human knowledge underscores these points about his doctrine of reason. The revisability of knowledge indicates that the rational processes by which it is attained are never fully universal, objective, or disinterested. Indeed, Dewey makes a crucial distinction between “intelligence” and “reason” which emphasizes all these points. He prefers the former term to the latter precisely because of the Kantian connotations that come with “reason” (although, to be sure, he does not consistently choose intelligence over reason in accordance with this stated preference). These connotations, according to Dewey, mistakenly relegate reason to a realm beyond human activity and invite the erroneous ideas that reason can be universal, objective, or disinterested.43 Dewey self-consciously chooses the term “intelligence” over “reason” because of his dissatisfaction with the Kantian connotations of the latter, only to have Niebuhr read the Kantian trappings of reason back into Dewey’s doctrine, and castigate him for it. As we have seen above, Dewey protested that Niebuhr read into his idea of scientific method a too literal

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sense of laboratory controls, quantification, and so forth. But this was the closest that Dewey came to defending himself from the distorted picture of reason that Niebuhr attributed to him.

In addition, Niebuhr’s rejection of Dewey’s call for the application of scientific intelligence to the problems of human society is misleading. Niebuhr critiques Dewey on this point by arguing that the natural world is categorically distinct from the socio-historical world because of the ubiquity and depth of excessive self-love that pervade the latter. Therefore, Niebuhr argues, one cannot simply apply scientific intelligence to the world of social conflict. However, this argument overstates Niebuhr’s skepticism about the possibilities of reason in the service of social change. When he articulates this critique of Dewey, Niebuhr expresses such a thoroughgoing skepticism about reason’s efficacy in the pursuit of social change that he implies that the only means to alleviate social ills are such tools as law, force, and coercion. This is an overstated suggestion, because in fact, Niebuhr does reserve a place for reason in the service of social change. The closing passage from *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is enough to show that Niebuhr’s social ethic envisions a circumscribed, but important and multivalent role for reason to play. There Niebuhr calls for “new illusions” such as the dream that “the collective life of mankind can achieve a perfect justice,” in the project of redeeming “the total human enterprise...of its excesses and corruptions.” He writes that the “illusion [of perfect justice] is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason does not destroy it before its work is done.”

Thus it is clear that Niebuhr reserves an important place for reason in the task of social change. However, when he critiques Dewey’s doctrine of reason, he obscures this important role in his own work, and therefore overstates his skepticism about the efficacy of rationality in the realm of social relations, creating a misleading inflation of his conflict with Dewey on this topic.

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44 *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 277.
Niebuhr’s distortions of Dewey’s philosophy are also evident in his claim that Dewey cannot and does not account for human sin. When Niebuhr makes this point, it comes in two varieties: first, he argues that Dewey’s thought does not adequately account for the ubiquity and depth of excessive self-interest at the level of the individual moral agent (both because Dewey glorifies finite reason and because he neglects the freedom that augments sin); second, he argues that Dewey fails to understand the pervasive and insidious influence that excessive self-interest has on human collectives. While the first objection illuminates an important difference between the two writers, the second objection is based on a reading of Dewey that is either incomplete or uncharitable (or both). More specifically, it is Niebuhr’s contention that Dewey fails to understand the influence that socio-economic status has on the moral life of a group that is problematic. To the contrary, Dewey’s work exhibits a robust understanding of the ways in which socio-economic position determines the moral life of a human collective. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, written in 1922 (and therefore accessible to Niebuhr as he wrote in the late 1920s and early 1930s), Dewey attributes to Jeremy Bentham “the imperishable renown of forcing home to the popular consciousness that ‘conscience,’ intelligence applied to moral matters, is too often not intelligence but is veiled caprice, dogmatic *ipse dixit*ism, vested class interest.” In a similar vein he admits later in the work that “[i]ntellect is too often made a tool for a systematized apology for ‘the way things are,’ that is for customs that benefit the class in power.” In *The Public and its Problems*, published five years after *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey repeats this theme with greater specificity. To predict material that will come in a later chapter of this dissertation, Dewey laments the great influence that economic power has on

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46 Ibid., 171.
moral formation and on political processes. It is precisely this kind of influence that Dewey’s doctrines of social inquiry and communication are designed to combat. Suffice it to say that Dewey was highly aware of the unfortunate influence that socio-economic position can exert on moral and political processes. In this instance, Niebuhr’s critique of Dewey is off the mark.

Dewey’s responses to Niebuhr were different from Niebuhr’s critiques in that most of them either were rebuttals of Niebuhr’s arguments, or were points about the likely effects of Niebuhr’s positions. Therefore it is much more difficult to say whether or not Dewey’s responses reflect accurate readings of Niebuhr’s theological ethics. Of the points Dewey made in response to Niebuhr that we examined above, only two qualify as candidates for evaluation: the argument about “philosophy of history” and the argument about vague and contradictory recommendations for social and political activity. Both occur in Dewey’s March, 1933 essay “Unity and Progress,” and so it is highly unlikely that they were informed by a reading of any of Niebuhr’s work except for the article “After Capitalism—What?” (which was published the prior week). Therefore the two points cannot be understood as responses to Niebuhr’s total body of work; rather, they must be seen as responses to the position articulated in a single article.

Even in that restricted context, Dewey’s point about Niebuhr’s lack of a “philosophy of history” seems only partly valid. With this point, Dewey means that Niebuhr’s analysis fails to offer any kind of historical explanation of the social and political situation, and that Niebuhr focuses too little on concrete measures to address that situation, preferring instead to speculate broadly about future developments. In “After Capitalism—What?” Niebuhr does not offer much historical reflection, either on the level of a grand theological theory of human history, or on the level of specific historical causes for the social crises of the early 1930s. In this regard, a “philosophy of history” does seem to be missing from the piece. However, if Dewey had read

Moral Man and Immoral Society, he might have understood that Niebuhr was developing at that time an Augustinian theological understanding of history, according to which human beings occupy a “time between times” and therefore remain subject to sin until history’s conclusion. Although this picture of history is lacking in the 1933 article, it appears in nascent form in Moral Man. It seems plausible that Dewey’s critical point about Niebuhr’s lack of attention to a philosophy of history struck a chord with Niebuhr. Many of the titles of his works in the aftermath of this exchange, such as Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History (1937), Faith and History (1949), The Irony of American History (1952), and The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), suggest that Niebuhr took up Dewey’s challenge and endowed history with a new importance in his theological ethics.

The second meaning of Dewey’s point about Niebuhr’s missing philosophy of history seems less valid, though. Even in the restricted context of an essay that responds only to “After Capitalism—What?” Dewey’s claim that Niebuhr offers no concrete moral and political responses to the social crises of the 1930s is misguided. Niebuhr does offer such concrete recommendations for moral and political response. He admits the value of a chastened, and not overly sentimental “intellectual and moral idealism.”\(^\text{48}\) Given his conviction that the most powerful classes of American society will not cede their power in response to moral suasion, he embraces legal measures to restrain these classes, although he warns that such a “parliamentary socialism” should not be fetishized, and should remain open to experimentation with radical measures short of violent revolution.\(^\text{49}\) Perhaps most importantly, Niebuhr offers a concrete moral and political option for dealing with the social crises of the early 1930s in his call

\(^{48}\) Niebuhr, “After Capitalism--What?,” 401.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 402–3.
for a “strong political labor movement, expressing itself in socialist terms.”\(^{50}\) All these examples from the 1933 article reveal that Dewey’s argument that Niebuhr fails to give explicit guidance on social issues is unjustified. Had Dewey read *Moral Man* by then, this quarrel would have been even less valid, as *Moral Man* offers even more reflection on appropriate and effective methods for dealing with social crises.

These points also reveal that the other critique that Dewey offers of Niebuhr—that his suggestions for alleviating social crises are vague and contradictory—is unjustified. It is clear that Dewey’s basic points against Niebuhr are themselves contradictory: he claims both that Niebuhr fails to give concrete moral and political guidance for dealing with social crises, and also that Niebuhr’s concrete guidance is vague and contradictory. As I have shown in the preceding paragraph, Niebuhr does offer some explicit political positions to address social issues. And these positions are neither vague nor contradictory. They are intricate responses to complicated social problems that acknowledge the difficulties inherent in all political positions, which result from the basic tendency of all human striving for justice to be corrupted by excessive self-love. Given this ubiquitous tendency, Niebuhr’s concrete positions always admit that there is no political activity that will deliver pure justice. Therefore, when Niebuhr endorses, for example, a “strong political labor movement,” he does so with the resigned understanding that, even if such a movement is successful in limiting the destructive power of capital, labor will also exhibit corruptions of excessive self-interest such as vengeance and resentment. Though this perspective grows from and responds to a nuanced theological anthropology, it is neither vague nor contradictory. Again, if Dewey had read *Moral Man and Immoral Society* by March 1933, he might have understood the consistency of Niebuhr’s perspective.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 402.
Does it matter how Dewey and Niebuhr read each other’s work? Do these interpretive inadequacies have any bearing on the importance of their lives and work for the success of American democracy? Yes. Dewey and Niebuhr both articulated comprehensive intellectual visions that included thick descriptions of democracy and implied certain positions on the question of the kinds of people we must be for “people rule” to thrive. We can, and should, learn from these visions. However, as I will argue in the conclusion to this dissertation, their discursive failure is just as instructive as their intellectual successes are. Their inability, or unwillingness, or simple failure to understand each other well carries a valuable lesson from which we can learn. This failure is as significant for the success of American democracy as are their respective visions of democratic life. Attention to their poor readings of each other, I will suggest, can illuminate the nature and value of a kind of tolerance, a third democratic virtue which will take its position alongside humility and mutuality.

However, a discussion of democratic tolerance contextualized by the unjustified critiques Dewey and Niebuhr made of each other will have to wait until the conclusion of this dissertation. For now, we should also note that their interpretations of each other’s work were not wholly misguided. Despite the interpretive errors I have outlined above, their debate also accurately illuminates three important and indissoluble differences between the two writers. First, Niebuhr and Dewey isolate a very basic and very important difference between their respective intellectual frameworks on a specific question of moral psychology. While Dewey holds that intelligence can and should guide impulse, Niebuhr holds out little hope for reason to perform this function. For Dewey, “thought is not the slave of impulse to do its bidding. Impulse does not know what it is after; it cannot give orders, not even if it wants to...What intelligence has to do in the service of impulse is act not as its obedient servant but as its clarifier and
liberator.” Thus, in both descriptive and prescriptive senses, Dewey holds that intelligence commands impulse. Niebuhr regards this contention as descriptively false: “reason is always, to some degree, the servant of interest in a social situation.” He grants that in certain instances reason may be able to impose very modest checks on the egoistic impulse of the moral agent, but Niebuhr is so convinced of the power of inordinate self-interest that the overwhelming picture of reason’s relation to “impulse” is one in which impulse rules. “Reason may not only justify egoism prematurely,” he writes, “but actually give it a force which it does not possess in non-rational nature.” This difference on the relationship between reason and impulse or disproportionate self-interest carries enormous consequences for other points of comparison between Dewey’s philosophy and Niebuhr’s theology. It is the foundational difference out of which Niebuhr’s critiques of Dewey’s undue glorification of reason and neglect of sin grow (overstated and misrepresentative though these points may be). Their difference on reason’s relation to self-interested impulse is an indissoluble conflict between the comprehensive doctrines of the two writers.

In addition, Dewey and Niebuhr were correct in identifying an ineradicable conflict between their respective intellectual frameworks on the question of the use of force. Dewey was never a zealous proponent of the use of physical coercion either in international conflict or in domestic affairs, but over the course of his intellectual career, he did undergo a shift from a perspective that admitted the necessity of the use of force to a deep reluctance against admitting force’s value as a method of social change. The turning point in his career was World War I. He eventually embraced Woodrow Wilson’s call for intervention in the Great War, seeing


52 Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, xxvii.

53 Ibid., 41.
the war as a potential vehicle for the establishment of democratic relationships between
nations. After the disappointment of the Great War and its conclusion, though, Dewey came to
see force as another example of an authoritarian, anti-democratic means to social ends. He
eschewed the use of force in both international and domestic affairs, and preferred intelligence,
communication, and political activity as means to new social realities. A prime example of this
deep reluctance to embrace the use of force comes with Dewey’s explanation of his “radical liberalism:”

radicalism also means, in the minds of many, both supporters and opponents, dependence on the use of violence as the main method of effecting drastic changes. Here the liberal parts company. For he is committed to the organization of intelligent action as the chief method... It is not pleasant to face the extent to which, as matter of fact, coercive and violent force is relied upon in the present social system as a means of social control. But unless the fact is acknowledged as a fact in its full depth and breadth, the meaning of dependence upon intelligence as the alternative method of social direction will not be grasped.

It is this preference for intelligence over force that Niebuhr finds doubly simplistic. First, Niebuhr argues that force is already at play in all the structures of state and society that the “radical liberal” uses and would harness in the project of “non-coercive” social change, including measures that appear to fall short of the use of force, such as economic sanctions and diplomacy. Second, he holds that it is naïve to think that economically powerful people guided by inordinate self-love will accept limitations on their power in the face of anything less than force. This difference on the nature and efficacy of force clearly grows from the difference between Dewey and Niebuhr on the relationship between reason and impulse. Like their conflict


55 On Dewey’s reluctance to endorse interventionism in the years leading up to World War II, see Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy, 510–23. Westbrook explains that Dewey was never a pacifist, and that his reasons for opposing American intervention were complicated and shifting.

on the latter issue, their difference on the former is an indissoluble conflict between opposing comprehensive doctrines.

Third, and finally, Dewey and Niebuhr correctly identify a major difference between their opposing intellectual frameworks on the question of the inevitability of social progress. In Dewey’s thought there is a sense that human processes of inquiry have undergone major improvement over the centuries, and that scientific method comprises the most effective practice of inquiry yet known to humanity. Furthermore, Dewey’s persistent calls for the application of this style of inquiry to social issues suggest that social life can continue to improve just as much as methods of inquiry have. When Dewey writes about problematic social situations yielding new ones that offer more fulfilling experience through the application of the most effective form of inquiry yet established by human beings, readers encounter a philosophical perspective that posits social progress as basically inevitable, assuming that inquiry is allowed to do its work. Indeed, the political philosophy that Dewey articulates in *The Public and Its Problems* suggests that there are major obstacles blocking the formation of the Great Community, but that these obstacles will crumble in the face of intelligent inquiry, communication, and political policy informed by this inquiry and communication. For Dewey, the Great Community will follow the activity of intelligent inquiry and the communication of its results.\(^57\) For Niebuhr, social progress is a much more difficult and complicated prospect. Niebuhr’s understanding of the human animal reminds readers that whatever changes occur in the social sphere, the new groups that attain power will exhibit just as much corruption as the previous groups. The social and political progress that human beings achieve will always be relative, halting, and marred by corruption according to the Niebuhrian vision. Niebuhr holds that as long as human beings are guided by excessive self-interest, there can be no real changes

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\(^57\) *The Public and Its Problems*, 153–84.
in the brutality and viciousness of social life; social change is largely a matter of new powers
taking the place of old ones. The only political progress for which a Niebuhrian can hope is a
progress in which the power allocated to social elites is flattened so as to minimize its harmful
potential. On the question of the inevitability of progress, then, Niebuhr and Dewey assess each
other’s comprehensive doctrines well, and identify a third area of indissoluble conflict between
their respective visions.

In sum, much of the public debate between Niebuhr and Dewey was marked by
incomplete and uncharitable readings, but other portions of their conflict illuminated stubborn
conflicts between the two writers that derive from their opposing comprehensive doctrines and
cannot be explained away. But while they misrepresented each other on some questions, and
read each other well on others, there is also a third category that should be used in analyzing
their public quarrel: on certain questions, they simply neglected to engage each other at all. For
my interests, of course, each writer’s neglect of the democratic virtue implications of the other’s
work is the most stunning omission in the entire debate. As I explained in Chapters 2 and 3, both
Dewey and Niebuhr articulated political theories in which the success of democracy depends
directly on the extent to which moral agents possess the virtues of humility and mutuality. Had
they thought to engage each other on the question of democratic virtue, they might have
noticed this agreement.

This may strike some readers as an anachronistic request to make of Dewey and
Niebuhr; after all, the renaissance of virtue ethics had not reached even its most nascent form
when Dewey died in 1952. (Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” was published six years
later.) I reject this argument, given the fact that Dewey focuses so much attention on the
development and reformation of habits and repeatedly asserts that the most important
question of the moral life is: “what kind of self is in the making?” Similarly, Niebuhr’s talk of
egoistic inclinations, the human capacity for justice, and the universal experience of love lead me to believe that he could have pursued the question of democratic virtue—both on his own and also in conversation with Dewey—very easily.

Other readers might argue that their opposing political theories are too distinct to justify comparison on the question of democratic virtue. Channeling MacIntyre’s critique of the modern presumption of “translatability,” they might say that Niebuhr and Dewey had theories of the nature and function of the state that were too foreign to each other to justify comparison.⁵⁸ I reject this contention, too. There can be no doubt that the two writers had vastly different conceptions of the nature and function of the state: Dewey’s theory of the democratic Great Community is very far from Niebuhr’s vision of democracy as least dangerous concession to sin. But despite their conflicting thick descriptions of the state, Niebuhr and Dewey operated from an identical thin description of democracy. Both held that, whatever else it might be, democracy is the social and political structure characterized as “people rule.” This agreement confirms that their political theories are comparable enough that we can pose the question of democratic virtue to them both.

After all the accurate and inaccurate critiques they made of each other, Dewey and Niebuhr failed to recognize that both of their visions of democracy require moral agents who possess the virtues of humility and mutuality. In the next chapter, I will argue that the democratic moral agent that Dewey and Niebuhr imagined is deeply out of place in the economic system of capitalism. For both Niebuhr and Dewey, democracy is incompatible with the moral texture of laissez faire economics, in large part because capitalism requires and rewards moral agents who are severely deficient in humility and mutuality.

CHAPTER V

CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE

John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr espoused comprehensive doctrines that conflicted deeply with each other, but that both implied, despite their conflict, the necessity for moral agents to possess the virtues of humility and mutuality in order for democracy to flourish. The ironic element of their public interaction with each other resides in the fact that they advocated these common conceptions of democratic virtue from opposing comprehensive doctrines, and that they missed this ironic agreement because each writer was too focused on arguing that the other could not provide an adequate intellectual grounding for a theory of democracy. But this ironic agreement was not the only part of their exchange that was lost on them; they also missed the rich critique of capitalism that they shared, which was informed by their shared conception of democratic virtue. Dewey and Niebuhr put forward strikingly similar moral evaluations of capitalism throughout their careers. Their critiques were levied both at the natural law reasoning from which theorists derived the moral norms of capitalism, and at practices sanctioned by capitalism. Niebuhr and Dewey objected both to the qualities of character required and rewarded by capitalism, and also to the social consequences of capitalist practices. These critiques were not merely intellectual points: Niebuhr and Dewey enacted them in similar political stances, such as solidarity with the struggles of the working class and support of labor unions. My argument about the democratic virtue critique of capitalism Dewey and Niebuhr offered leads to a subsidiary contention, as well: I hold that Niebuhr continued to critique capitalism throughout his career, even during his so-called “Cold War liberal” phase. This corollary argument contests dominant understandings of Niebuhr which portray him an apologist for all “Western” and American ways of life, including capitalism. I argue that these critiques and stances that they shared vis-à-vis capitalism follow directly from their ironic and
unnoticed agreement on democratic virtue. Examining their critiques of capitalism and their political perspectives in this way reveals that, for both Dewey and Niebuhr, democracy and capitalism are irreconcilable social ideals.

Before exploring their shared democratic critique of capitalism, I should be clear about the terms of this discussion. What is capitalism? I will define it here with reference to the realities of economic life in post-feudal Europe, to certain moral ideals that theorists of capitalism uphold as normative for economic exchange, and to social conditions that scholars identify as definitive of capitalism. However, we must recognize even before exploring these three dimensions of my definition of capitalism that this economic system is not internally unified; disagreement exists among advocates of capitalism on important theoretical questions. In addition, capitalism is practiced differently in many different countries, and it almost never exists in its purest, *laissez faire* form. Therefore, it is best to understand the moral norms espoused by the theorists of capitalism as “ideal types” that are never quite practiced in reality as they are imagined in theory. Despite these caveats, we must explore the historical reality, moral norms, and social conditions in order to understand this ideal type. The historical contrast between feudalism and capitalism is instructive in highlighting certain theoretical and practical elements of modern economics. The moral concepts I will treat here are, generally speaking, considered to be normative by schools of capitalist thought whose constituents disagree on other issues. And the social conditions I will emphasize are present in very many countries in the modern West, even though these countries do not practice free market exchange in exactly the same ways, and despite the fact that a pure capitalist economy exists almost nowhere. When Dewey and Niebuhr critique capitalism, they focus on abstract theory (including the moral ideals espoused by advocates of capitalism) as well as concrete social practices (including laws and customs that surround free markets) to construct what I take to be a democratic virtue critique.
They focus mainly on capitalism as imagined and practiced in the United States, although often they shift their attention to other Northern Atlantic countries such as Germany and England.

With this caveat in mind, we can attend to the problem of defining capitalism. To begin, capitalism is the system of economic exchange that displaced feudalism as Western European nations and their colonies transitioned into modernity. Scholars debate exactly when the transition from feudalism to capitalism took place. For example, Ellen Meiksins Wood argues for an early date for the transition. Wood contends that capitalism had its beginnings in English social practices of land usage known as “improvement” (the process of “enhancement of the land’s productivity for profit”) and “enclosure” (which, although it is “often thought of as simply the fencing in of common land, or of the ‘open fields’ that characterized certain parts of the English countryside” in fact means “the extinction with or without a physical fencing of land, of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood”).¹ She dates these practices, and thus the origins of capitalism, to the 16th century, and claims that the transition was consolidated in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Early capitalism was agrarian capitalism, according to Wood. In contrast, Michel Beaud locates the transition later. He emphasizes the development of the mill in late 18th century industrial England as the historical moment at which capitalism is consolidated and the transition away from feudalism is complete.² The difference in dating is partly a function of a difference on the nature of capitalism itself: while Wood allows for an agrarian capitalism, Beaud is interested mainly in industrial capitalism. Just as scholars debate the date of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, so too do they debate the catalyst for the change. As Wood summarizes this debate, some hold that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was a result of tensions internal to

feudalism, and others claim that the spark was an external event or phenomenon, such as the explosion of overseas trade and the subsequent development of the town. These debates are interesting, but ultimately inconsequential for our purposes. What is important to note is not when and how capitalism was born, but rather that capitalism in its various historical manifestations had become the dominant economic system in the West by the time Niebuhr and Dewey wrote.

More must be said about capitalism, though, than simply that it displaced feudalism and that it is now dominant in the West. What is the nature of this system of economic exchange? I find that it is helpful to describe the nature of capitalism through reference to a set of moral ideals defended by the theorists of capitalism and to a set of social conditions that capitalism establishes, maintains, and requires. The moral ideals of capitalism tend to be explained and defended most consistently by proponents of capitalism, such as figures in the Scottish Enlightenment, the Austrian school of economics associated with Ludwig Von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, and the Chicago school of the late-20th century identified most closely with Milton Friedman. It is worth noting that these writers often avoid referring to their preferred system of economics as “capitalism;” Adam Smith used the term “commercial society,” and Friedrich Hayek employed the phrase “market economy.” In contrast, the social conditions of capitalism are typically explored by critics of capitalism, such as philosophers, historians, and cultural critics who have Marxist and/or socialist proclivities. These critics identify social conditions that they claim are exclusive to and definitive of capitalism. For these critics, the

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3 The Origin of Capitalism, chap. 2.


5 Beaud, A History of Capitalism, 1500-2000, 4.
social conditions may vary based on historical location, but will be present in differing degrees in any social milieu that practices a form of free market economics. Unlike the philosophers and economists who attend to the moral ideals of “market economies,” they employ the term “capitalism” often and with ease.⁶

The moral ideals endemic to capitalism were articulated first by figures in the Scottish Enlightenment, and were developed later in Austrian and “Chicago school” economics. One of the most fundamental moral commitments of modern economics is that moral agents are guided by self-interest. This is true in both descriptive and prescriptive senses. The utilitarian thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill offer perhaps the clearest descriptive account of self-interest as moral motivation in their principle of utility. According to this principle, it is descriptively true that human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain.⁷ However, both Bentham and Mill proceed from this descriptive premise to outline a prescriptive moral theory in which pure self-interest is balanced against the pleasure of all other members of the community: this is the utilitarian quest for “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”⁸ In the hands of other free-market theorists, such as Adam Smith, the norm of self-interest acquires a prescriptive valence along with its descriptive meaning. In the prescriptive mode, pure self-interest is a moral norm according to which human beings should act. For Smith, the pursuit of self-interest allows individuals to meet their needs for basic survival, but also naturally leads to

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⁶ This difference in habits of language usage may suggest that one’s basic moral and political commitments are evident in the language one uses to discuss modern economics. That is, use of the word “capitalism” may tip one’s ideological hand even before a debate about economics, ethics, and politics begins.


the achievement of the common good. “Every individual,” he writes, “is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command...But the study of his own advantage naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society.”

Smith’s often-cited invocation of the “invisible hand” is the most vivid metaphor for this moral dynamic in which individual agents naturally achieve the common good through activity motivated by self-interest. This metaphor holds that, if all moral agents act according to their own self-interest, an “invisible hand” will guide society to its greatest good.

Along with this descriptive and prescriptive moral ideal of self-interest, theorists of capitalism prescribe a particular ideal of property ownership. Most simply, persons can, do, and should acquire property through labor. John Locke offers a classic statement of the process by which human beings acquire property.

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.  

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9 Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Great Books of the Western World v. 39 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), 193. Here we see a basic difference between the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, on the one hand, and the laissez-faire philosophy of Adam Smith, on the other. Bentham and Mill call for moral agents to pay specific attention to the “greatest good for the greatest number,” and even to make sacrifices in order to attain it. Smith, on the other hand, holds that the social good will naturally follow from self-interested activity, even if moral agents do not intend it. Mill’s career departed from the purest ideals of capitalism in other ways, too. For example, Mill advocated such measures to reform capitalism as severe taxation on inheritances and strict limitation of land ownership rights. On these economic reforms, see Dale Miller, John Stuart Mill: Moral, Social and Political Thought, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 158–68.


For Locke, the mingling of labor with the natural world is the process by which human beings come to own property. But it is important to note that the property which an individual acquires by this process thereby becomes private, rather than common property. Locke continues:

> It being by him removed from the common state nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.\(^\text{12}\)

Through mixing our work with the material world, we acquire property, meaning that objects belong exclusively to us. A corollary, for Locke, is that these things cannot become the property of anyone else against our will. One ought not to take the property of another against the other’s will; this violates a natural relationship between the owner and the object owned, which are linked through the act of labor exerted by the owner in the material world. These elements of the idea of property ownership have become basic moral norms of capitalism, generally speaking. They can be articulated in both a descriptive sense (“people own materials with which their labor has become mixed”), and a prescriptive sense (“it is right/good for people to acquire property through labor” and “it is wrong/evil for one to seize the property of another person against the latter’s will”).

The ideal of competition is a third moral norm native to capitalism. Competition occurs when people trade their private property, acquired via self-interested labor, in accordance with their natural inclination to “truck, barter, and exchange,”\(^\text{13}\) toward the end of improving material property holdings. If one person possesses property—a dairy cow, say—that two other people keenly desire, those two people will compete with each other to win the opportunity to trade with the former person. Their competition will mean a greater gain for the person who

\(^{12}\) Ibid. In this quotation, and in the quotation preceding, italics are in the original text.

possesses the highly desired object: if one person offers a bushel of apples for the dairy cow, the other person will levy a greater offer, such as a bushel of apples plus a keg of beer, so as to win the dairy cow. As the network of exchange grows more complicated and abstract (through the customary use of money and the development of private corporations), the benefits of competition become clear: competition keeps prices low as rival vendors strive to win the money of consumers, and competition also spurs more innovation, as rival corporations attempt to create new things that the consuming public will desire.

Defenders of capitalism identify natural patterns that accompany economic competition. In commercial society, economic competition occurs between moral agents in the same category. That is, as Paul Cwik explains, “buyers compete with buyers...sellers compete with sellers...notice that buyers do not compete with sellers.”\(^{14}\) Moral agents compete against other moral agents in their own category of exchange, rather than competing against members of the category on the other side of the exchange. This dynamic extends to another relationship within the economic sphere, as well; competition is not limited to buyers competing with buyers and sellers competing with sellers. As Cwik notes, employers compete with other employers to purchase labor, and workers compete with other workers to sell labor.\(^ {15}\) This particular dynamic of workers competing with other workers to sell labor will be an important element of the critique that Dewey and Niebuhr make of capitalism. Like the concepts of self-interest and private property, competition has both descriptive and normative status in the moral theory of capitalism.


\(^{15}\) Ibid.
These three moral concepts (together with others that are not relevant to our discussion) all inform the capitalist conception of the proper function of the state. According to the intellectual framework of capitalism, the state is a political entity that protects the lives of citizens and the property of private individuals and private groups (including corporations). The state does this in international and domestic spheres. In the international sphere, the state’s primary function is to defend the territorial integrity of the nation, and thereby protect citizens from invasive harm to body and property perpetrated by foreign agents. In the domestic sphere, the state’s function is to protect life, defend the property of individuals and groups, and enforce the contracts that are formed in the natural process of truck, barter, and exchange. It is important to note that, according to the capitalist moral vision whose pure ideas I have begun to sketch above, the state ought not to exceed these functions. If the state does exceed these functions, this excess should be minimized. When the state exceeds its functions by interfering with economic life (through such practices as imposing tariffs, legislating wages, enforcing environmental regulations, and so forth), the natural dynamics of exchange are upset. Nor is the state to offer goods and services beyond those listed above. Milton Friedman once referred to proponents of public school as people with an “irrational attachment to a socialist system.” His point is that, because public education is a good provided to the populace by the state and not by the private market, it is a good provided by “socialist” and not “capitalist” means. Capitalism opposes these practices on the grounds of justice, in that such state intrusion into private dynamics of exchange constitutes a violation of freedom, which is understood primarily as “non-interference,” and on the grounds of efficiency, in that state interference in the world of private exchange places a burden on economic agents who would otherwise direct their unfettered 

energies toward production, trade, and the creation of wealth. The capitalist vision of the state is one that calls for a maximization of a concept of freedom that connotes non-interference above all else. The French term laissez-faire, which translates into the English “let do” (in the sense of “allowing one to do or make something”), captures this sense of freedom as non-interference well. Given this robust commitment to a moral ideal of freedom, it is appropriate to define capitalism as “economic liberalism.”

These elements of the moral ideals of capitalism should suffice for our discussion of Dewey, Niebuhr, and democratic virtue. Many other moral norms and theoretical concepts could be articulated. These include, but are not limited to, the idea of division of labor, the value of the comparative advantage, and Say’s law, to name a few basic concepts in the intellectual framework of capitalism. However, discussion of these concepts would take us too far afield, and would be unnecessary for an understanding of the arguments offered by Dewey and Niebuhr. I do not intend to represent capitalist thought as internally unified on all questions. Far from being a discussion marked by monolithic agreement, the historical trajectory of capitalist thought demonstrates a number of internal divisions. For example, the Austrian school dissents from the classical school’s labor theory of value. This internal diversity is also evident in conflicting ideals within capitalist thought. For instance, the ideal of limited state intervention discourages civil law from legislating against monopolies, which may arise naturally as a dominant producer/seller gains total control of a market for a certain good. This total control of the market is a monopoly, which stifles competition. But given capitalism’s robust commitment to freedom as non-interference, moral agents in the market have little means to dismantle a

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17 For a good example of this capitalist vision of the proper function of the state, see Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, bk. 5.

monopoly and revive an atmosphere of productive competition. In addition, the moral concepts treated here comprise a sketch of capitalism that should be understood as an “ideal type.” Like Muller’s definition of capitalism, this brief sketch of the moral ideals of capitalism intends to highlight certain features that exist in reality only in imperfect form. Almost nowhere, for example, have production and distribution been determined purely by free exchange in the market; capitalism has existed with some degree of unfree labor (as in the antebellum American South); and a market dominated economy has often existed alongside a government-owned sector. However, the fact that these moral norms are ideal types that do not exist in pure, perfect form anywhere on earth does not detract from their political power. The capitalism against which Dewey and Niebuhr wrote in the mid-20th century had advocates who longed to enact the ideal type through political means. This is no less true in the early 21st century than it was when Dewey and Niebuhr lived. Adherents to libertarian political theory—such as Texas Congressman Ron Paul and his son, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul—are the primary and most vocal proponents of the purest capitalism. They seek to align actual political policy with the ideal types of moral norms examined here.

One more point should be noted about the moral ideals listed here before moving to the social conditions of capitalism. These moral concepts are frequently derived from a “natural law” ethical rubric that was common to Enlightenment philosophers and political economists. The structure of natural law ethics entails some basic premises that are present in the modern accounts of capitalist moral ideals. Natural law approaches maintain that the created world is orderly, and that all things in the created world participate in that orderly cosmos of which they are a part. According to natural law logic, human beings are unique among participants in the created world, insofar as our freedom allows us to behave in ways that depart from the natural order that characterizes creation. However, humanity’s uniqueness includes its endowment

19 The Mind and the Market, xvii.
with reason. Reason, according to natural law approaches, allows us to discern the order of the created world and act in continuity with that order. When reason apprehends this order, and the human place in it, it issues dictates to govern behavior. The dictates of the natural law are those dictates for human behavior that command our compliance with an orderly world. For many natural law thinkers, these dictates include injunctions to reproduce, socialize, educate the youngest members of society, and so forth. We are free to disobey these precepts, but to do so is to deny our place in the order of creation, and therefore to upset that order. To disobey the natural law is to act in ways that are neither right nor good for human beings. Natural law thinkers often take the central task of human government to be the creation of positive law (meaning human dictates for conduct, enforceable by civil authority) that codifies the precepts of the natural law.20

Natural law ethics have a long historical trajectory, and have been used in a wide variety of traditions and contexts. Natural law reasoning has its sources in Greek and Roman philosophy, especially the Stoics, and reached the zenith of its influence in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, the natural law is a set of principles and precepts, habitually possessed by practical reason, that order human conduct toward the good.21 This understanding of the natural law has been highly influential throughout the history of Western moral reflection (from the 13th century forward), and it bears the distinctive marks of Aquinas’s basic project, in that it draws from authoritative Christian sources such as scripture, traditional church teaching, philosophy, and natural science, and in that it is informed by an Aristotelian anthropology. However, natural law approaches have enjoyed prominence outside of medieval Catholic moral

20 See, for example, Robert P. George, Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion, & Morality in Crisis, 1st ed. (Wilmington, D.E.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2002), chap. 7.

theology, including among theologians and philosophers in the modern era who were shaped by the processes of Reformation and secularization but continued to employ this form of reasoning.

This is not the time to explore the major differences between the medieval and modern forms of natural law reasoning.\(^{22}\) It is, however, appropriate to note that capitalist moral thought in general, and John Locke’s theory of property in particular, rely on a version of natural law theory. To demonstrate this reliance, let us briefly revisit Locke’s theory of property. Recall that Locke discerns in the created cosmos a distinct order that includes the material world, human beings (who are a unique part of that material world), and the relation between human beings and our environment. His case for property prescribes certain kinds of conduct that will bring human beings into good participation with this orderly world. For example, Locke holds that it is wrong to upset the natural, orderly relationship between a human being and the product of her labor by taking that product against her will. To be sure, his thought is not part of the tradition of Catholic moral theology to which Aquinas belongs. But it is a form of natural law reasoning nonetheless. The broader point to note is that many of the moral ideals common to capitalism derive their justification from a natural law approach to ethics. The moral ideals I have surveyed above (the descriptive and prescriptive cases for self-interest, the relation of labor to property, the nature and value of competition, and the case for a maximization of

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\(^{22}\) This kind of exploration is done extremely well in Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005). Porter argues that the scholastic/medieval view of the natural law is “fundamentally a capacity or power to distinguish between good and evil; it is intrinsic to the character of the human soul as made in the Image of God, and therefore it cannot be altogether obliterated; and it is expressed or developed through moral precepts which are confirmed, as well as being completed and transcended, through the operation of grace” (13-4). In the shift from medieval to modern natural law ethics, Porter argues, reason came to be the primary source for natural law, with revelation supplementing and clarifying reason (as opposed to the scholastic paradigm, in which reason was conceived of in an explicitly theological framework), and natural law thinkers became primarily concerned with developing concrete precepts or “secondary principles” of the moral life (as opposed to the scholastic paradigm, in which the primary concern was on “first principles,” and the concrete precepts were understood to change with time and culture). See 24-33 for a discussion of these shifts.
freedom as non-interference under the positive law) all derive their justification from natural law reasoning in its Enlightenment/Lockean, rather than its Thomist form. As we will see, Dewey and Niebuhr had much to say about the natural law cases for the moral ideals of capitalism.

While the “market economy” is often defined by reference to moral ideals such as those surveyed above, many scholars take a different approach, and define it by reference to the social conditions that capitalism in its various forms establishes, maintains, and requires. One such social condition is that of all humans’ near-complete dependence upon the market for goods necessary for subsistence. Some scholars, such as Wood, note that in feudalism, human beings were not dependent upon markets for subsistence. The means of life—including land, food, housing, clothing, and other goods—were available to people through other, non-market avenues. These avenues might include familial relationships, political or military relationships, and so on. However, capitalism creates and perpetuates a social condition in which almost all goods, including but not limited to those necessary for survival, are mediated by markets. Under this social condition, participation in market exchange becomes mandatory for all people, as all things are sold there. “Virtually everything in capitalist society is a commodity produced for the market,” Wood writes. “[T]he market became capitalist when it became compulsory.”

Another social condition that scholars identify as definitive of capitalism is the division between the two basic categories of society: owners and workers. This dualistic distinction was one of Marx’s signature insights. For Marx, the two classes of capitalist society are the bourgeois “modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor,” and the proletarians, those “in the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of

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production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live.”

The owners are those who possess the basic property necessary to create goods, including land, machines, raw materials, and so forth. Importantly, these “means of production” include the property necessary to create the conditions of human subsistence. The workers are those who do not possess this basic property. The division of all of society into the two basic classes of owners and workers is one of the key features that scholars identify as definitive of capitalism.

Many scholars add to this basic distinction that capitalism augments the antagonistic relationship between these two classes. Indeed, Marx holds that the two classes of “oppressed” and “oppressor” have existed throughout history, but that the emergence of capitalist social conditions “simplified” the basic antagonism that has always existed between classes. A number of factors contribute to the simplification of this antagonism. Wood cites the aforementioned customs of improvement and enclosure, which led to a “dispossession” of the working class. “Only in capitalism is the dominant mode of appropriation based on the dispossession of legally free direct producers,” she writes.

Marx identifies another reason for the simplification of class antagonisms in the dynamic of alienation. The members of the working class alienate themselves through the processes of production, in part because they create an object whose full value they do not receive in return, and in part because the more they produce, the less they are worth. Therefore, the antagonism between workers and owners is simplified because the disparity between the two groups grows steadily more acute.


25 Ibid., 58–9.

26 Wood, The Origin of Capitalism, 70.

over time. The longer the social conditions perpetuate a basic distinction between owners and workers, the deeper the rifts of wealth and animosity between the two become.

Scholars identify a third social condition that is basic to capitalism, which follows from the previous two (and was alluded to in the previous paragraph, on the condition of dualistic class distinction). Under capitalism, the members of the working class sell their labor for a wage through the market. The previous conditions align to create a world in which workers are forced to sell their labor at the market for basic subsistence. Nearly all goods are mediated through the market, and the workers do not possess the means of production. What they possess, which can be exchanged indirectly for the goods necessary to survive, is their labor power. Owners purchase this labor power through a wage, which is set by market forces according to such factors as the difficulty of the labor, the skill of the worker, the supply of the workforce, and so on. The wage, most commonly in the form of money, is a signifier of the value of labor performed by the worker. Thus, referring back to Locke’s discussion of labor and property, a wage is abstracted labor, which represents potential property, or potential goods and services, once exchanged again on the market. According to Wood, Beaud, and Muller, the social condition under which workers can—and indeed, must—sell their labor at the market for a wage is one of the defining features of capitalism, and one that distinguishes it most strongly from feudalism.28

The moral ideals and social conditions examined here give us a picture of capitalism that is sufficient to understand the democratic critiques of the market economy that Dewey and Niebuhr shared. In sum, capitalism is a system of economic exchange that values self-interested activity, labor for property (and the natural linkage between the two), competition, and a maximization of freedom as non-interference under the positive law. This economic system

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entails such social conditions as the total dependence of all human beings on the market for the goods necessary to live, the division of society into classes of owners and workers, and the necessity for workers to sell their labor on the market in exchange for a wage. Dewey and Niebuhr would evaluate this constellation of moral ideals and social conditions both in the abstract and as it played out in the United States, and to a lesser extent, other European nations. They would evaluate these ideals and conditions in light of the consequences that they created, but also, and more importantly for my purposes, in light of their visions of democratic virtue.

One striking element of the critique of capitalism that Dewey and Niebuhr shared is that neither writer engaged in wholesale, knee-jerk reactions against capitalism. Both Dewey and Niebuhr offered balanced, moderate ethical assessments of capitalism that exemplified the moral mean by avoiding excess and deficiency in the assessments they conducted of market economies. One example of this moderate, balanced assessment is evident in their shared approach to capitalism as a product of distinctive social forces and historical circumstances. Key among these circumstances, for both Dewey and Niebuhr, is the fact that capitalism displaced feudalism. As such, both noted that modern liberal economics offer obvious advantages over the feudal system of exchange. In his *Ethics*, Dewey reflects on the historical development of political authority in Western Europe, and notes that the attenuation of monarchical power was accomplished through halting processes of struggle and concession. “Upon its face,” he writes, “the struggle for individual liberty was a struggle against the overbearing menace of despotic rulers.” But this struggle included economic liberation no less than political liberation. “There can be no doubt that the movement to restrict the functions of government, the *laissez-faire*
movement, was in its time an important step in human freedom, because so much of governmental action was despotic in intention and stupid in execution.”

Niebuhr agrees that the struggle for economic freedom accomplished important gains in the modern project of social and political liberation, more broadly speaking. For Niebuhr, an ideology of bourgeois individualism carried this project of liberation forward. He considers this ideology naïve for all the same reasons that lead him to conclude (whether rightly or wrongly) that Dewey’s philosophy is naïve. However, the ideology of bourgeois individualism brought important reform to feudal Europe, according to Niebuhr.

From the very beginning libertarianism was a tool of the middle classes in their struggle to remove the restraints upon business which a feudal society had maintained in the interest of the landed gentry. The virtue of laissez-faire economics was that it destroyed the mercantilism by which the feudal nobility derived special privileges from the government. Niebuhr repeated this word of praise for bourgeois individualism, published in 1934, ten years later. “The individualism of bourgeois democracy,” he wrote, “was partly derived from illusions which seemed plausible enough in the early stages of the bourgeois revolution against feudalism. The new commercial civilization offered individuals a wider variety of vocational choices than the old agrarian community.”

Another example of their moderate, balanced approach to moral assessment of capitalism is evident in their cool reception of Marx. While both writers articulated critiques of market society that resonate with Marxist analysis (as I will argue later), neither Dewey nor Niebuhr embraced Marx uncritically. Dewey’s objections to Marx are presented mainly in


*Freedom and Culture.* As James Farr writes, they are “disorganized” and “repetitive,” and his arguments are “portmanteau, overlap, and recall earlier charges.” Nonetheless, Farr summarizes five basic arguments that Dewey makes against Marx, all of which suggest that Marxism “has violated most systematically every principle of scientific method.” Dewey’s objections to Marx are that his philosophy is “uniformitarian, absolutistic, positivistic, monistic, and monolithic.” All of these charges focus at some level on the abstract elements of Marx’s dialectical materialism, and therefore, they do not require explanation here. But some of them—especially the claims that Marx is uniformitarian, absolutistic, and monistic—also take issue with Marx’s vision of the proletarian revolution. More specifically, Dewey rejects the idea that material production is the sole determinant of social life and progress. He sees this idea as denying both human agency and the nature and value of inquiry. Thus it is clear that his critique of capitalism parts ways with Marx on the question of the coalescence, uprising, and victory of the working class. Indeed, scholars such as Boyer and Stromquist find in Dewey an even deeper departure from Marx, evident in his reluctance to employ the language of “class conflict.” Like Farr, these scholars identify in Dewey an unwillingness to adopt a Marxist understanding of the means of social progress; but while Farr focuses on Dewey’s critique of

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 278–81.


Marx’s philosophical materialism, Boyer and Stromquist attend to Dewey’s social and political method.

Niebuhr’s reception of Marx is similarly cool. Perhaps the most basic charge that Niebuhr levels against Marx is that the picture he paints of human life is simplistic. For Niebuhr, Marx’s naïve anthropology is on obvious display in those passages in which Marx describes the post-revolution dictatorship of the proletariat.

Marxism insisted that the increasingly overt social conflict in democratic society would have to become even more overt, and would finally be fought to a bitter conclusion. But Marxism was also convinced that after the triumph of the lower classes of society, a new society would emerge in which exactly that kind of harmony between all social forces would be established which Adam Smith had regarded as a possibility for any kind of society.37

Marx’s basic naivety, according to Niebuhr, resides in his inability or unwillingness to recognize that excessive self-interest will mark the post-revolution social order as much as it marks collective life prior to the workers’ uprising.38 Marx’s post-revolution society is just another incident in a long line of humanity’s presumptuous towers aspiring to the heavens;39 in this presumption, Marx is no different from the bourgeois liberals against whom Niebuhr rails. Harrison identifies other features of Marx’s thought that Niebuhr finds objectionable, including Marx’s “unqualified scientific positivism,” his inadequate “philosophy of history,” and his tendency toward a “crass materialist causation in social science” that results from Marx’s “polemic against idealism.”40 For Harrison, however, all these critiques of Marx exhibit Niebuhr’s

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38 Ibid., 60.


misunderstanding of Marx. If Harrison is correct in regarding Niebuhr’s reading of Marx as incomplete and/or incorrect, this may be another area of overlap between Niebuhr and Dewey. Many scholars, including Farr, Cork, and Sydney Hook argue that Dewey’s reading of Marx was ill-informed.\textsuperscript{41}

If their rejections of Marx amounted to a lukewarm dismissal, both Dewey and Niebuhr were much more clear and forceful in their rejection of the Soviet Communism Marx inspired. Although they both were deeply critical of capitalism, as we shall soon see, this criticism did not lead them to embrace Soviet Communism. Indeed, quite the opposite: Dewey spells out very clearly his reasons for rejecting communism in his short essay, “Why I Am Not a Communist.” His reasons are mainly reiterations of his critique of Marx. He is opposed to the neglect of historical contexts he finds in Soviet Communism, to “its monistic and one-way philosophy of history,” to its absolutist faith in class struggle as the only way to achieve social change, and also to “the emotional tone and methods of discussion and dispute which seem to accompany Communism.”\textsuperscript{42} It is true that Dewey visited Soviet Russia in 1928, and wrote a glowing report about his experience. However, as Westbrook notes,

what Dewey liked about the Soviet Union were those features of society which indicated to him that it was moving toward the democracy he had envisioned in \textit{The Public and Its Problems}. He applauded the cooperatives, the art museums for the proletariat, and, most especially, the educational experimentation that tied cultural and vocational education to “a single and comprehensive purpose”...Dewey said nothing about Russian politics, and his comments about Marxist ideology were uniformly critical.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{41} Farr, “Engels, Dewey, and the Reception of Marxism in America,” 262; Cork, “John Dewey and Karl Marx,” 338–41. Farr argues that “it was Engels or an Engelsified Marxism that Dewey read and rejected.” Cork argues for nine points of profound philosophical agreement between Dewey and Marx that Dewey might have noticed through a better reading. Both writers note that Sydney Hook attempted to convince Dewey of this latter point.


In addition, he retracted the bulk of his praise after learning of the atrocities of the Soviet political powers, including, most notably, Stalin’s purges. Therefore it is clear that Dewey’s critique of capitalism did not interfere with his thorough rejection of Communism. Nor can one claim that his interaction with Trotsky at the latter’s trial in Mexico betrays a Communist impulse. Though Dewey’s commission ultimately found Trotsky innocent of Stalin’s charges of treason and conspiracy to murder, Dewey maintained his own personal objections to Communism throughout the trial. In Niebuhr’s case, there is even less room for debate. He called Soviet Communism “pure evil,” and referred to it as “a fierce and unscrupulous Don Quixote on a fiery horse,” with “a satanic dimension.”

If Niebuhr and Dewey resisted Marxist philosophy and thoroughly rejected Soviet Communism, what was the nature of their critique of capitalism? Their shared critique of capitalism: 1) challenged the philosophical reasoning underlying free-market moral norms; 2) focused on the problem of economic inequality—a problem that exists, I argue, on a “virtue” level as well as on a “consequences” level—inherent in capitalist moral ideals and practices, and; 3) offered both long-term and short-term goals to address capitalism’s problems. Although they cared deeply about the consequences that follow from a capitalist system of social relationships and exchanges, they also called attention to the deficiencies in virtue that capitalism assumes and rewards. The virtues that they find lacking in the capitalist moral agent are precisely the virtues that they took to be necessary in the democratic moral agent; therefore I take their engagement of capitalism to be a “democratic virtue critique.”

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44 Ibid., 478.
In considering Dewey and Niebuhr’s critique of capitalism, let us first note that they found the philosophical reasoning that underlies the moral ideals of capitalism to be deeply problematic. More specifically, they were dissatisfied with the natural law justifications of several of capitalism’s central moral ideals. Dewey suspected that modern philosophers of market economies appealed to natural law because processes of secularization had rendered invocations of the law of God’s will untenable.

When mythology is dying in its open forms, and when social life is so disturbed that custom and tradition fail to supply their wonted control, men resort to Nature as a norm...In our time this notion had been perpetuated in connection with a laissez-faire social philosophy and the theory of evolution. Human intelligence is thought to mark an artificial interference if it does more than register fixed natural laws as rules of human action.47

Of course, Dewey would take umbrage at any social philosophy that he perceived to restrict the workings of “human intelligence.” As we saw in Chapter 2, Dewey was suspicious of any philosophical or theological approach to human problems that made appeals to authorities outside of human experience and intelligence, whether these were to God, or nature, or any other source beyond the human. One of the results of this appeal to the external authority of nature for moral norms was particularly galling for Dewey: when “laissez-faire liberalism” finds laws for human conduct—especially economic conduct—in the authority of nature, the edicts that nature furnishes attain an untouchable status. “They put forward their ideas as immutable truths good at all times and places,” he wrote of the liberal economic philosophers. “[T]hey had no idea of historical relativity, either in general or in relation to themselves.”48 In Dewey’s mind, the first problem flows directly into the second: an appeal to non-human moral authority


interprets that authority as issuing absolute and eternal rules for conduct. Moral norms must be able to change, according to Dewey, with changing human experience and knowledge.

Dewey singled out two edicts from the natural law ethics of laissez-faire liberalism for special attention. One of these was the capitalist ideal of freedom as non-interference, which colors the liberal economic vision of the proper function of the state. On the issue of a state limited so severely from intervention in the market, Dewey saw the “vested interest” of the philosophers of the free market influencing the creation of law. While legislators attempted to craft positive law that would regulate economic affairs, appointed judges stripped that legislation away, leaving a set of laws (and indeed a state) that strongly reflected the capitalist ideal of freedom as non-interference. “The earlier doctrine of ‘natural rights,’ superior to legislative action, has been given a definitely economic meaning by the courts, and used by judges to destroy social legislation passed in the interest of a real, instead of a purely formal, liberty of contract.”\(^{49}\) The second natural law edict espoused by capitalist philosophers that attracted Dewey’s attention was the law of private property ownership. The laws of nature, as read by the theorists of commercial society, set private property apart as a social institution of special significance. According to Dewey, liberal political economists from the earliest days of free market philosophy through the mid-20\(^{th}\) century found natural law sanction for “the way of private economic enterprise, socially undirected, based upon and resulting in the sanctity of private property—that is to say, freedom from social control.”\(^{50}\) Together, these two tenets of capitalist moral philosophy struck Dewey as in need of intelligent inquiry, for reasons that will soon become clear. Unfortunately, Dewey lamented, the absolute authority that the laws of nature lent to these edicts made such inquiry impossible.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 34.
Niebuhr’s critique of the natural law reasoning from which modern economic thought derived its moral norms was aligned with Dewey’s. Like Dewey, Niebuhr pointed out that capitalist uses of natural law granted undue authority to the moral norms they derived. Historical contingencies and the perspectives of the people attempting to discern moral precepts from the natural law would, according to Niebuhr, always infect those precepts with strong measures of relativity and excessive self-love. Capitalist natural law thinkers “fail to appreciate the perennial corruptions of interest and passion which are introduced into any historical definition of even the most ideal and abstract moral principles.”  

Like Dewey, Niebuhr faulted capitalist thinkers—whether Catholic, Protestant, or of a secular philosophical stripe—for endowing the moral precepts they defended with absolute authority. “There are, in short, fewer specific principles of justice with ‘eternal’ validity than is assumed in almost all theories of natural law.”

Unlike Dewey, though, Niebuhr included in his critique of capitalist thinkers’ use of natural law a familiar charge of intellectual and moral naivety. Natural law cases to support the

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52 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 193. See also Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*, 34–5. Niebuhr says “almost all” in the passage quoted because in preceding passages he explains that Thomas Aquinas did not endow the concrete moral and legal norms he derived from the natural law with this kind of absolute authority. For Aquinas, the first principles of the natural law are immutable, but the secondary principles human beings develop from these first principles are “subject to change.” He quotes Aquinas as saying that “the more we descend toward the particular the more we encounter defects” because “in matters of action truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all.” Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*, 190–1. (Quoting from ST 1a 94.) Jean Porter notes that Aquinas put limits on property law, and that “private ownership...is considered by Aquinas to be conventional and not natural.” Porter, *Nature as Reason*, 23. My understanding of the relation between first principles and secondary and tertiary principles of the natural law in Aquinas’s thought has benefitted from Henle’s explanation of the topic in Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on Law: Summa Theologiae I-II; Qq. 90-97*, ed. Robert J. Henle (Notre Dame, I.N.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), especially 269–70. It is not clear that Dewey acknowledged the difference between Thomas Aquinas’ position and that of the modern political economists on the question of whether or not specific precepts derived from the natural law have absolute and eternal authority.
moral norms of capitalism fail to take into consideration the common tendency of human beings to be guided by excessive self-interest: “the justification of classical laissez-faire theories was the mistaken belief that human passions were naturally ordinate and limited.” For Niebuhr, the proponents of market economies overlooked the all-important reality of human sinfulness as they made their blithe appeals to the laws of nature. The descriptive and prescriptive accounts that the modern economists give of self-interest neglect the fact that excessive love of self is the basic problem confronting human beings, from Niebuhr’s perspective. Far from achieving a natural state of common good, self-interest produces destructive results, according to Niebuhr.

However, Niebuhr returned to follow Dewey in identifying two especially problematic moral ideals that capitalist writers make absolute through natural law reasoning: the ideal of freedom as non-interference, and the institution of private property ownership. The modern ideal of the limited state that is prohibited from interference in the economic realm betrayed, according to Niebuhr, a basic inability to hold the two poles of human-as-creature and human-as-creator in adequate tension.

The tendency to equate history with nature and to confuse the “laws of nature” with those of history has given rise, since the French Enlightenment, to a determinism which minimizes the creative role of man. The most consistent application of this determinism is the economics of laissez faire, drawn from physiocratic theory, and warning men from interference with the “natural” processes and “natural” balances of history.54

The “interference” against which physiocratic and later free market natural law theory warn, of course, is interference from the state into the market. Niebuhr held, like Dewey, that this prohibition of state involvement in economic affairs took on absolute authority in the hands of

53 Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 64.

the natural law theorists of the modern era. Like Dewey, Niebuhr considered this to be a flagrant lack of understanding about the contingency and historicity of all human moral utterances. (Of course, Niebuhr would add that these utterances also included the particular interests and desires of people guided by excessive self-love.) In addition, Niebuhr agreed with Dewey’s assessment of natural law accounts of property: “both Catholic and Protestant social theory tended to make the right of property much too absolute.”\(^{55}\) This estimation comes in a broad discussion of natural law theories in the modern era, and includes an indictment of the uncompromising defense of private property in Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum.* Niebuhr extends this charge to parties beyond Catholic and Protestant writers, as well; “bourgeois liberal” accounts of private property make the same mistakes.\(^{56}\)

We should pause for a moment and consider the significance of this critique of natural law defenses of general and specific norms of market economies. First, it is worth noting that two theorists who came from deeply divergent intellectual traditions—and who quarreled bitterly with each other because of this divergence—levied the same critique of the form of reasoning from which capitalism derives its moral norms. This is one of the most basic points of this dissertation, and will hold true for the other discussions of Niebuhr and Dewey on capitalism in the remainder of this chapter. Second, and more importantly, we must recognize that this shared evaluation was a “democratic virtue” critique of capitalism. Recall that both Niebuhr and Dewey imply that humility is a democratic virtue, albeit for different reasons that correspond to their different thick descriptions of democracy. In their critiques of natural law approaches to liberal economics, the major offense that Dewey and Niebuhr highlighted was the hubris involved in claiming that particular policies and specific moral precepts are absolute,


unlimited, and binding on humanity for all times and in all places. Put in these terms, the intellectual justification for capitalism is severely deficient in the democratic virtue of humility, where, in this case, humility is an intellectual virtue that inclines its possessor to recognize the limitations and contingencies that mark the endeavor to secure moral knowledge. For Niebuhr and Dewey, the willingness of capitalism’s defenders to claim absolute and eternal authority for highly specific moral norms proves their dearth of intellectual humility. Good participants in (either a Deweyan or a Niebuhrian) democratic society possess this humility which is lacking in capitalist natural law ethics, and therefore democratic moral agents would not make the sorts of claims that capitalist moral agents make.

The need for intellectual humility is one that applies to all moral agents in a capitalist society. To return to Marx’s dualistic formulation, workers and owners alike must possess intellectual humility in order to understand the moral norms and laws are not endowed with eternal and absolute authority by nature, and that these can change as times demand. Obviously, one can imagine members of the ownership class resisting this proposition more strongly than members of the working class. After all, endowing moral norms of property ownership and freedom as non-interference with an absolute and eternal authority would benefit the ownership class much more than it would benefit the working class. Nevertheless, intellectual humility in the context of moral and legal norms is also a virtue that the working class must cultivate. Members of the working class may—even against their own self-interest—consider moral and legal norms about property ownership and freedom as non-interference beyond the reach of human modification. But Dewey and Niebuhr would encourage these members of the working class to understand the contingency of these norms, and welcome the opportunity to modify them, especially given the fact that they would be the primary beneficiaries of such modification.
In addition, the intellectual hubris involved in modern natural law accounts of property ownership and government non-interference can produce vicious habits of feeling and conduct. This problem is more specific to the theorists of capitalism and to the ownership class than the working class. When theorists of capitalism and the ownership class benefit greatly from the norms that they take to be absolute and eternally-binding laws of nature, they may take their wealth as a justification of the authority of these laws. That is, they may come to feel that their economic success is proof that the natural laws of property ownership and government non-interference really do possess absolute and eternal authority. Moreover, they may come to feel that this wealth demonstrates that they, the theorists of capitalism and the members of the ownership class, understand and observe these natural laws better than anyone else. Thus a lack of intellectual humility can, in this case, engender a lack of humility in feeling and conduct, as well.

Indeed, Dewey and Niebuhr both protested the free market social conditions that might yield such a lack of humble feeling and conduct in the ownership class. More specifically, both writers lamented the deep disparities in wealth between owners and workers that capitalism created and perpetuated. When combined with the moral ideals of private property and freedom as non-interference, the practice of wage-labor resulted, according to these two thinkers, in vast economic inequalities between workers and owners. The mild forms of economic redistribution enacted in such countries as the United States through taxation and the provision of social programs did not speak to the enormity of economic disparity created by capitalism. Dewey argued that this dynamic demonstrated modernity’s stalled transition between two kinds of “individualism.” He took it as a matter of fact that, by the time the 1930s rolled around, America (and the West more broadly) had entered a new “collective age.”\textsuperscript{57} In an

earlier era, according to Dewey, material production and morality both prioritized and responded to a kind of atomistic individualism, in which people produced the means of existence in solitary conditions or in very small groups. The moral norms of this era corresponded to this atomistic structure of production: responsibilities, rewards, rights, and other moral concepts all took as their basic referent the isolated individual or the isolated small familial or local group. However, Dewey claimed that with the industrial revolution a new form of material production had been introduced to Western society. This new form no longer featured isolated and atomistic individuals. “Mass production and mass distribution inevitably follow in the wake of an epoch of steam and electricity. These have created a common market, the parts of which are held together by intercommunication and interdependence; distance is eliminated and the tempo of action enormously accelerated.”\(^58\) The new reality of industrial life binds individuals together in much more intimate ways and with many more people than had been the case in previous stages of life in the West. Dewey saw “the tendency to combination in all phases of life.”\(^59\) Developments since Dewey’s death have proved his observation of commercial society in the 1930s prescient; his comments on extensive networks of interdependence and intercommunication are even more justified now, in an age of globalized production, distribution, and consumption.

The major problem that Dewey saw with this turn from atomistic individualism to “a condition of dominant corporateness”\(^60\) was that moral norms failed to follow the new realities of economics and industry. While the world of material production moved swiftly into an era of

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 37.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.
“[a]ssociations tightly or loosely organized,” the world of moral norms lagged stubbornly behind. “The problem of constructing a new individuality consonant with the objective conditions under which we live is the deepest problem of our times,” Dewey wrote. This new moral reality would, of course, be responsive to the collective nature of production. Just as production had become collective and interdependent, so too would the rewards that followed from the processes of collective production be allocated to all participants. “Concentration and corporate organization are the rule,” Dewey observed. “But the concentration and corporate organization are still controlled in their operation by ideals that were institutionalized in eons of separate individual effort. The attempts at cooperation for mutual benefit that are put forth are precious as experimental moves.” Although production was unmistakably a collective affair, profit remained private.

Where Dewey explains his vision of the incongruity between the new reality of corporate production and the older system of private profit, his explanations often neglect the basic economic factors at play in the disjunctive relation between collective production and private gain. Perhaps this is because, as Boyer and Stromquist argue (see above, note 36), Dewey was reluctant to use language of class division and conflict. Nevertheless, the basic situation that Dewey wanted to challenge can be made intelligible only through reference to certain social conditions and economic practices. Regardless of whether or not Dewey wants to incite class warfare, or to channel Marx, his argument assumes that there are two categories of moral agent in the capitalist marketplace. (There may be more, but for his point about corporate production and private profit, only two need be noted.) There are owners, and there are

\[61\] Ibid.

\[62\] Ibid., 32.

workers. The owners possess as private property all the elements necessary for the production of whatever good they create. Because of this fact of private possession, the owners can claim (in a capitalist society) all the profits that accumulate from the sale of the product, minus whatever wages that they concede to pay to the workers. Crucial to the dynamic is that the workers do not own any of the elements required for material production. Therefore, they work for a wage. Moreover, because there are many workers relative to the opportunities available to earn a wage, wages offered by owners/employers stay low. Workers compete against each other for the opportunity to earn a wage, and this competition drives wages downward. In such a system, owners maximize profits, which remain their private possession, while workers struggle to earn substantial incomes, especially if they are unskilled. This is the very basic dynamic in place that spurs Dewey to write what he does about the need for a new morality of “corporate individualism,” in which profits are distributed in like manner as work is done. Notice that this basic dynamic that produces surplus labor and subsistence-level wages is augmented in an age of free global trade. In a globalized free-market economy, the ownership class can purchase labor from anywhere in the world, which creates a meteoric rise in the amount of labor available to work for a wage. This labor surplus was already high in the early 20th century, but the era of globalization has made it even higher. This means that wages can descend even lower than they could have when Dewey and Niebuhr wrote. The age of globalization makes their critique of capitalism even more relevant now than it was when Dewey and Niebuhr first wrote, given that the working class is more vulnerable to wage exploitation now than it was in the early and mid 20th century.

Although Dewey very often fails to put his finger on the basic economic factors—the combination of private property, two socio-economic classes, wage labor, and a non-interventionist government—that send him to his typewriter, he does make clear the inevitable
results of this arrangement: “disparity, not equality, was the actual consequence of laissez faire liberalism.” And I contend that Dewey omits reference to these factors “very often,” rather than “always,” because he does discuss these dynamics explicitly on occasion, as in the following passage. “Industrial entrepreneurs have reaped out of all proportion to what they sowed. By obtaining private ownership of the means of production and exchange they deflected a considerable share of the results of increased productivity to their private pockets.” In these instances, as on his more common occasions of dismay over the lag between private morality and collective production, the concern is the same: capitalism produces severe inequality between those who own and those who do not.

Dewey’s discussion of the inevitable disparities of wealth that result from free market economies included a measure of irony, too. Despite being known for their abiding commitment to freedom, theorists of capitalism defend a social, economic, and political system that actually denies freedom, according to Dewey. He makes this argument most clearly during a discussion of the fragmentation of modern labor. The labor available to workers hoping to earn sufficient wages to live tends to be fragmented along the lines of what he called theoretical tasks and practical ones. Furthermore, this fragmentation engenders resentment between people who perform one type of task or the other, and none of the workers take an active interest in their work because of this division. “This state of affairs must exist so far as society is organized on a basis of division between laboring classes and leisure classes,” Dewey writes. “Moreover, the majority of human beings still lack economic freedom. Their pursuits are fixed by accident and necessity of circumstance; they are not the normal expression of their own powers interacting with the needs and resources of the environment. Our economic conditions still relegate many

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64 Ibid., 37.
65 Ibid., 75.
men to a servile status." Here Dewey argues that the inequality that results from capitalist practices sinks workers so deep in poverty that they effectively lack freedom. The most prized moral ideal of capitalist thought is undermined through capitalist practice. By Dewey’s lights, free market apologists couldn’t rightly claim to promote the cause of freedom if their moral norms had the effect of elevating one class into unthinkable wealth and making another class bound to scrape for subsistence.

As with his critique of natural law defenses of free market norms, Niebuhr’s challenge to free market practice resonated with Dewey’s. In language that follows Dewey’s to an uncanny degree, Niebuhr called attention to the discrepancy between group production and private gain in modern industrial society.

The modern factory is a great collective process. Technical advance has made it impossible for the worker to own either his own tools or the place of his work. Both the wealth represented by the machine and the wealth which the machine produces are generated by complex mutual services. The “private” ownership of such a process is anachronistic and incongruous; and the individual control of such centralized power is an invitation to injustice.

Niebuhr’s argument parallels that of Dewey almost to the word. Modern industrial society has become, through advances in technology and industrial manufacturing (and also through specialized work and the distribution of labor), a deeply interconnected and interdependent process, in which no individual can create a product for sale on the market alone. And yet, the profits garnered from the sale of such a product are the private property of an individual owner. Like Dewey, Niebuhr considered this incongruity problematic.

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However, Niebuhr named economic inequality as an injustice more clearly and directly than Dewey did. He was unequivocal about the injustice essential to a capitalist system of ownership and production: “the disproportion of economic power, inherent in the private ownership of social processes, is the main cause of modern injustice.” In the first statement of his mature social ethics, he argued that “[e]ven if history is viewed from other than equalitarian perspectives, and it is granted that differentials in economic rewards are morally justified and socially useful, it is impossible to justify the degree of economic inequality which complex societies inevitably create by the increased centralisation of power which develops with more elaborate civilisations.” In this quotation, when he speaks of “centralisation of power,” he is not talking about political power; rather, he refers to “the economic overlords, who are the real centres of power in an industrial society.” His critique extends both to the moral norms articulated by the theorists and defenders of capitalism, and also to the practices of capitalism that produce vast economic inequality in such countries as the United States.

One may counter my presentation of Niebuhr’s account of the inherent injustices of capitalist inequality by pointing out that these quotations are taken from works written in the early 1930s, a period in which Niebuhr was primarily a “zealous antagonist of business hegemony, [and an] angry critic of consumer culture.” This objection would likely point out that Niebuhr grew out of this phase, and later separated himself even more decisively from

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70 Ibid. See also 114.

Marxism. I contend, however, that this objection misses an important point: Niebuhr continued to critique pure capitalism as an engine of economic inequality throughout his career, even into his so-called “Cold War liberal” phase. In 1952, for example, Niebuhr castigated the mid-20th century defenders of capitalism, who, in contrast with earlier liberal political economists, advocated a non-interventionist government in order to maintain their relatively high levels of wealth and privilege.

The earlier bourgeois man wanted to eliminate political power because it represented the special advantages which the old aristocracy had over him. The present bourgeois man wants to reduce it to a minimum because it represents the effort of a democratic society to bring disproportions of economic power under control. In the shift of motive from earlier to later bourgeois man lies the inevitable degradation of the liberal dogma.\(^{72}\)

And in 1969, two years before his death, Niebuhr published reflections on *The Democratic Experience* which demonstrated continuity with, rather than a departure from, his earlier thoughts on capitalism and inequality. Here Niebuhr maintained that capitalism created social conditions in which laborers could overcome “their individual impotence vis-à-vis the owner of industry and...achieve a more equitable share of political and economic power” only through the right to collective bargaining. (I will examine Niebuhr’s position on labor unions and collective bargaining more fully later in this chapter.) The point to note here is that Niebuhr continued to argue that inequality is endemic to the purest capitalism throughout his career, even into his so-called Cold War liberal phase.

Just as Niebuhr was more willing to label capitalism as unjust on the basis of the economic inequalities it inevitably creates, so too was he clearer and more direct than Dewey about the basic economic factors that generate such a climate of disparity. For Niebuhr, the inequalities that capitalism engenders are a direct result of the system of private property ownership. He allowed that rights to the possession of private property provided vulnerable,

powerless citizens with a much-needed protection against the aggression of sinful neighbors. But Niebuhr argued that property, which is always a form of power, can transition from a protection against sin to a tool of sin when it accumulates and grows excessive. Modern liberal economists were mistaken in the belief that “property represents primarily an ordinate and defensive power to be used against the inclination of others to take advantage of the self. The fact is that property, as every other form of power, cannot be limited to the defensive purpose. If it grows strong enough it becomes an instrument of aggression and usurpation.” Therefore, in Niebuhr’s vision, as an individual’s property holdings grow—as they invariably do for the ownership class—so too do that individual’s tendency and ability to act on excessive self-interest. This critique has deep and obvious roots in Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin as excessive self-love, and leads him to the position that private ownership of the means of production in a capitalist society is responsible for the yawning gulf of inequality that divides workers from owners. This point about property as power and as instrument of aggression also allows him to undercut claims made by theorists of market economies that all moral agents come to the market on equal footing, with the ability to compete with any other agent they might meet. Niebuhr argued that “every economic process begins with a disproportion of economic power. Some men have land and some have not. Some gain a foothold in the commercial and industrial


process and others do not. Modern technical civilization accentuates, rather than diminishes, these disproportions of economic power.\textsuperscript{75}

Thus it is clear that both Dewey and Niebuhr argued against the capitalist practices of property ownership and wage labor as modes of conduct that necessarily betray collective forms of production and create objectionable disparities of wealth between ownership and working classes. This is perhaps the most major argument they make against capitalism. Given the centrality of this argument to their respective visions of democracy, I would like to make three points about this critique that they shared. First, as with their challenges to natural law argumentation for free market moral norms, their objection to the wealth disparities created and perpetuated by capitalism was a “democratic virtue” objection. It may seem that their critique of social inequality and class stratification was strictly a consequentialist critique. After all, they were disturbed by the unequal effects, results, or consequences of the constellation of moral norms and social conditions. In other words, the moral norms and social conditions of capitalism are objectionable because they cause much human suffering. Understanding Dewey and Niebuhr as levying consequentialist objections to capitalism would certainly fit with the common conception that they were both consequentialists generally speaking, meaning that, like utilitarians, they evaluate moral conduct on the basis of the effects produced. Such a view would not be wrong: their critique was, in part, a consequentialist objection to the economic inequality that comes as a necessary consequence of capitalism. They considered this inequality incongruous with the collective nature of production, and unjust on the basis of the suffering it means for the working class. Indeed, their consequentialist case against capitalism posits such inequality as anti-democratic. When such a significant portion of the population is condemned to struggle for subsistence (i.e. the working class), the ideal of people-rule is unattainable. The

people cannot effectively participate in their own governance if their immediate goals are as basic and urgent as the gathering of food, the procurement of heat and clothing, and so forth. Furthermore, such economic inequality limits the participation of the working class in political processes because of the limited access its members have to high quality education, especially relative to the educational options available to the ownership class. Here we see that economic inequality produces social and political inequality. These challenges to working class participation in democratic life have been augmented recently by the 2010 Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which prohibits government limitation on corporate spending in political campaigns. Through this ruling, the members of the ownership class gain greater political influence, as they remain in control of the corporations whose political “speech” (meaning ability to spend) has been unfettered. This effectively diminishes the political influence of the working class even further, as its members must try to compete with even more powerful entities. Dewey and Niebuhr would both be chagrined by this development, as it amplifies the anti-democratic consequences of capitalist society, which had presented serious challenges to the working class even prior to the *Citizens United* ruling.

However, to say that their argument against capitalism was strictly consequentialist would be incomplete, because it was also a “democratic virtue” challenge. If we look closely at their arguments, we will see that they were concerned first and foremost with the habits of feeling, thought, and action of moral agents in the economic sphere, including owners and workers alike. Let us first consider the habits of the ownership class. Both Dewey and Niebuhr called attention to the inclinations of the members of the ownership class a) to arrogate to themselves as much profit as possible and b) to pay their laborers as little as the market would allow. Put in these terms, we can see that the moral evaluations Dewey and Niebuhr made of the ownership class were primarily concerned with dispositions and habits which influence
conduct and consequences. In other words, they were concerned about the levels of virtue among those who own the means of production. More specifically, they concluded that the habits of thought, feeling, and action of these moral agents demonstrated both a lack of mutuality and a lack of humility. The members of the ownership class lack mutuality, according to a Deweyan and Niebuhrian analysis, because they take much more from the working class than they give back in return. Dewey and Niebuhr both imply this in their argument about the incongruity between collective production and private profit. The virtue of mutuality that the ownership class must cultivate in response to this problem has dimensions of thought, feeling, and action. Owners must develop habits of thought which understand the reality of collective production, and which value profit distribution that is commensurate with a world of collective production. Owners must develop habits of feeling that identify with the plight and vulnerability of those who do not own the means of production and must work for a wage. Owners must also develop habits of conduct that accord with these thoughts and feelings by sharing the profits garnered by collective production more evenly. Mutuality, which Dewey and Niebuhr believe the ownership class lacks and must cultivate, is a virtue with intellectual and moral dimensions.

Furthermore, the members of the ownership class lack humility, according to Deweyan and Niebuhrian analyses, because the owners of the means of production possess habits of thought, feeling, and action that wrongly assume they deserve all the profits that the market will allow. The argument that Dewey and Niebuhr make about the new era of collective production implies this virtue-ethical point. No individual moral agent, they claim, can produce goods for sale at the market on his or her own; all moral agents require extensive networks of labor and cooperation. To believe that one individual—whether or not he or she owns the means of production—deserves such a disproportionate measure of profit exhibits a stunning lack of humility. As a habit of thought, humility would lead members of the ownership class to
an intellectual understanding that they do not, in fact, create anything on their own, and that therefore they do not deserve such a disproportionate amount of profit. As a habit of feeling, humility would lead members of the ownership class to gratitude in the face of the workers’ efforts, and would inculcate in owners a desire to share profits accordingly. As a habit of conduct, humility would lead members of the ownership class to act in ways that do not assume all possible profits belong to them; this might include offering profit-sharing or stock options to members of the workforce.

However, the basic reality of vast economic inequality does not have virtue implications only for the ownership class; members of the working class must also cultivate virtue in response to capitalist inequality. More specifically, the members of the working class must cultivate the virtue of mutuality in response to the economic inequality from which they suffer. Mutuality is the virtue that inclines its possessors to seek and to value relationships characterized by rough equality over time. As a habit possessed by members of the working class, mutuality will empower workers to rectify capitalist inequality. Workers’ mutuality, like owners’ mutuality, is a virtue with both intellectual and moral dimensions. Those workers who possess the virtue of mutuality would habitually think in ways that apprehend the basic reality of collective production, and would understand that capitalism secures them disproportionately low rewards for their role in the productive process. Those workers guided by mutuality would also possess habits of feeling that would incline them to be frustrated by their disproportionately low rewards. Those workers guided by mutuality would also be inclined to act so as to secure for themselves profits that are more commensurate with their role in production. They could do so by joining unions, participating in strikes and boycotts, and so forth. Mutuality is a virtue that will incline the workers to stand up for themselves, and to
demand fair treatment in economic exchange. As such, both Deweyan and Niebuhrian social analyses would prescribe mutuality for workers in a capitalist economy.

Prescribing humility for workers is a different and more problematic issue. It is not clear that members of the working class, who already suffer disproportionately from capitalist inequality, must cultivate humility in order to address this inequality. (Although we have already seen that workers, no less than owners, must cultivate humility on the question of the absolute and eternal authority of natural law edicts on property and government non-interference.) On the question of pursuing and establishing equal exchanges between owners and workers, humility might even be counter-productive when possessed by the workforce. That is, economic inequality requires workers to stand up for themselves, and claim more for themselves, and these requirements do not suggest that more humility is needed. We can tentatively conclude, then, that humility is not required for the workers on the question of capitalist inequality. However, I find a major difference between Niebuhr and Dewey on this question. While nothing in Dewey’s work indicates a need for workers to cultivate humility in response to the problem of economic inequality, Niebuhr’s thought is different. For Niebuhr, workers must cultivate humility because, in the event that they secure a greater share of economic power for the workforce, they will inevitably be tempted by excessive love of self on the other side of this victory. Any increases in power that the working class wins for itself, according to Niebuhr, will be accompanied by the inclination to use that power in destructively self-serving ways. Indeed, Niebuhr would say that labor unions have already demonstrated this inclination, insofar as they have been guilty of corruption, intimidation, and the use of excessive force. Unlike Dewey, Niebuhr would likely say that the working class must cultivate humility on the question of capitalist inequality, given that any increase in power for the laborers will include a greater inclination to abuse power.
Note that, although Dewey and Niebuhr would agree that capitalist inequality reveals a lack of virtue, they would interpret this lack of virtue in different ways. Dewey might say that this lack of virtue among the owners of the means of production suggests their failure to share in the experience of the working class, and that rectification of this problem awaits the renewing of democratic habits among the class of owners, and also the coalescence of a working-class public. Such a renewal and coalescence would, according to Dewey, be goals justified by the promise they carry of better experiences for all involved. Niebuhr would likely cast this moral vision in different terms. He might say that the ownership class is acting on the universal inclination to excessive self-love, and that the effects of such inclination are magnified by the power that these moral agents possess. For Niebuhr, cultivating humility and mutuality in these individuals would likely require that they encounter the reality of their sin. Despite these different interpretations, the virtues they prescribe are generally the same, except for the asymmetry on the question of whether or not the working class should cultivate humility in response to the problem of inequality. Given that democratic moral agents possess the virtues of mutuality and humility (in both Deweyan and Niebuhrian visions of democracy), we can safely say that the capitalist moral agent is deficient in democratic virtue, according to Niebuhr and Dewey.

This reading of Dewey and Niebuhr on capitalism, in which we take them to critique both the virtues and the consequences at play in the economic realm, is fuller and more complete than a simple consequentialist reading. Not only is it justified by the texts, but it is also justified by the interplay between virtues and consequences, as explained in the overview of Aristotelian virtue theory in Chapter 1: consequences of actions follow more or less reliably from the dispositions of thought, feeling, and conduct that guide them. If one possesses the virtue of humility, the consequences of one’s actions will, generally speaking, not tend to be
self-aggrandizing. If one possesses the virtue of mutuality, the consequences of one’s actions will, generally speaking, attend to the establishment of a rough equality of exchange over time. If one lacks these virtues, the consequences of one’s actions may run the risk of self-aggrandizement and inequality, to the detriment of democratic society. I submit that this way of reading Dewey and Niebuhr on free market morality is the most complete way to understand their reflections on the conflict between capitalism and democracy. They both address this fundamental conflict between democracy and capitalism in ways that suggest primarily a “virtue” approach, but also attention to “consequences,” which issue from virtues. Consider Niebuhr’s reflections on capitalism from his *magnum opus*.

The idea is that if only government will not interfere with the operation of natural laws in the economic sphere justice will be established through a harmony pre-established in nature. It is instructive that while modern political life can boast of genuine advances in justice, through the equalization of political power advocated by the democrats, modern economic life was allowed to develop cruel and iniquitous disproportions of power through the *laissez-faire* theories advocated by the physiocrats.76

Thus the concentration of economic power in modern technical society has made for injustice, while the diffusion of political power has made for justice. The history of modern democratic-capitalistic societies is on the whole determined by the tension between these two forms of power. In this history the economic oligarchy has sought to bend political power to its purposes, but has never done so with complete success. On the other hand the political power of the common man has been an instrument of political and economic justice; but it has also not succeeded completely in eliminating flagrant forms of economic injustice.77

In these passages, justice is both a personal virtue relevant to moral agency in the economic realm, and also a social-moral consequence to be achieved. He repeated this basic point about the conflict between capitalism and democracy later, at the height of his Cold-War liberal phase,

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in the 1955 book *The Self and the Dramas of History*.\(^7\) Dewey’s take on the conflict was more concise, and (for once) more impassioned and pointed than Niebuhr’s. “The idea,” Dewey wrote, “of a pre-established harmony between the existing so-called capitalistic regime and democracy is as absurd a piece of metaphysical speculation as human history has ever evolved.”\(^7\) As with Niebuhr’s comments on the conflict between capitalism and democracy, it is obvious that Dewey’s words call attention to the anti-democratic consequences of capitalism. But I maintain that this passage also challenges the anti-democratic habits of capitalism. When we recall Dewey’s broader comprehensive doctrine, it is clear that his desired approach to address the “absurd...metaphysical speculation” is to adjust the habits and dispositions of the parties involved (especially the ownership class) in as intelligent a manner as possible.

These passages, which underscore the incompatibility of democracy and capitalism on levels of both moral agency and social consequences, put Dewey and Niebuhr in direct conflict with contemporary scholars who hold that these two social systems are inseparably joined. Joan Lockwood O’Donovan makes this argument, for example. O’Donovan claims that capitalism and democracy are united insofar as both prioritize a moral agent for whom freedom is the greatest good. “The principles peculiar to modern liberal democracy are two, one teleological and one formal: *the maximalization of individual and collective freedom, and the equality of individuals in regard to freedom.*”\(^8\) These are the principles she finds operative in the ethics of capitalism as well. For O’Donovan, the equality that democratic citizens prize and pursue is a basic equality of

\(\text{\footnotesize\(^7\)}\) Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 136.


freedom, according to which self-governance is secondary to self-ownership. For such democratic theorists as Dewey and Niebuhr, though, this is not an adequate description of democratic ideals. Both of these writers would hold, against O’Donovan’s argument, that a) democratic moral agents and societies accept the possibility and necessity of limiting a certain kind of freedom (that by which the wealthiest in society own and use property) in order to achieve equality, and that b) this equality valued by democrats is not one in which freedom and self-ownership are the primary goods to be enjoyed by all persons evenly, but it is rather an equality of social power and of sharing in the wealth produced by the market.

A second point I would make about their shared critique of capitalist inequality is that it resonates with the Marxist insight about alienation in the process of wage labor. Although Dewey and Niebuhr held Marx at arms’ length, their objections to the disparities of wealth inherent in private property and wage labor echo this particular element of Marx’s theory of alienation. For Marx, a product receives its value from the labor a worker expends in creating the product. Therefore, when an owner takes the product, sells it, and keeps the majority of the sale price for himself or herself, and gives only a fraction of the sale price to the worker who created the product, the worker has been alienated from the full value of the product of his or her labor. The point of contact between Marx’s theory of alienation in wage labor and Dewey and Niebuhr’s critique of inequality is that in both arguments, the worker is understood to receive much less than he or she deserves, and the owner is understood to receive much more than he or she deserves, given their respective roles in the process of production. Therefore, I

81 Ibid., 140.

82 I should reiterate two points that I made previously in this chapter. First, Austrian economists disagree with Marx’s labor theory of value, and argue instead for a “use” theory of value (see note 18). Second, Marx’s theory of alienation is complicated and contains a number of different meanings. I only suggest here that Dewey and Niebuhr’s critique of inequality bears a similarity to Marx’s theory of alienation in wage labor, rather than alienation in species being, for example.
agree with the argument of Cork and Hook that there is great potential for reconciliation between the social moral vision of Dewey and that of Marx.\(^83\) I concur with Boyer, who seeks to develop a constructive social ethic that draws on Dewey’s concept of growth and Marx’s quest for workers’ emancipation, that such a rapprochement is possible.\(^84\) In addition, I contend that it is time for Niebuhr scholars to recognize that Niebuhr’s critique of capitalism was one that struck to the roots of modern ideals of property ownership and exchanges patterns, even into his years as a Cold War liberal, when his rhetoric denounced all things Communist. For all his rejections of Marxist thought, his abiding critique of capitalism maintained a high degree of respect for Marx’s insights about wage labor failing to provide workers with commensurate value for their role in production.

The third point that I would make here is that these democratic objections to capitalism reveal the fullness of the conflict between the various liberalisms involved in the interplay between Dewey, Niebuhr, and modern economic thought. Recalling the various ways in which each voice in this conversation qualifies as “liberal” in its own way, we can track this conflict with a high degree of precision. Dewey’s philosophical and social liberalism consists in his empiricism, in the emphasis he places on the development of the individual (although we must remember that in Dewey’s thought, the individual is always embedded in a natural and social environment), and in the high priority he gives to intelligence and education. Niebuhr’s liberalism resides in his approach to theological sources and hermeneutics; he regards experience as the most reliable source for knowledge, and he reads biblical texts through a “mythic” hermeneutic. The liberalism of capitalist theory is found in the strong emphasis it puts on freedom as the absence of government interference in economic exchanges. In sum, then,

\(^83\) See Cork, “John Dewey and Karl Marx.”

\(^84\) Boyer, “John Dewey and Growth as ‘End-in-Itself,’” 38.
this three-way conversation involves a Christian who is in many ways a theological liberal
attacking a liberal philosopher, both of whom in turn critique liberal economic theory. These
distinctions are important to make if we are to understand the content of this conversation, and
also if we are to try to take our own positions in the debate.

When they turned their attention to remedies that would address the problems they
identified in free market economics, Dewey and Niebuhr suggested both long-term and short-
term measures. The long-term remedy they prescribed to address the inevitable disparities of
wealth created by capitalism followed directly from their analysis of the most fundamental
challenge democracy faces when coupled with a free market society. Both sought to modify the
institution of private property that had achieved, due to its foundations in modern natural law
reasoning, a position of untouchable authority, placing it beyond revision, limitation, or
regulation. Dewey appealed to Thomas Jefferson, “the first modern to state in human terms the
principles of democracy,”⁸⁵ in his case for the modification of moral norms surrounding property
ownership. Dewey’s invocation of Jefferson on the issue of property rights encapsulates the
former’s dissatisfaction with modern natural law reasoning and also empowers mid-20th century
readers (and, indeed, readers beyond Dewey’s time) to modify the moral and legal customs of
property ownership. On Jefferson’s language in the “Declaration of Independence,” Dewey
writes,

it is sometimes suggested that his phrase “pursuit of happiness” stood for
economic activity, so that life, liberty, and property were the rights he thought
organized society should maintain. But just here is where he broke most
completely with Locke. In connection with property, especially property in land,
he makes his most positive statements about the inability of any generation to
bind its successors. Jefferson held that property rights are created by the “social
pact” instead of representing inherent individual moral claims which
government is morally bound to maintain.⁸⁶


⁸⁶ Ibid., 161.
Jefferson’s important departure from Locke (and also, I would add, from Edmund Burke) was his willingness to let each generation modify the moral and legal customs of the preceding eras. In this departure, Dewey finds justification for modifying the authority that the natural law endows to property norms. In the Jeffersonian vision, these norms are not to be understood as eternal, absolute, and binding on individuals and groups (including the state) without limit.

And for Dewey, a Jeffersonian approach to the economic challenges of the mid-20th century (and beyond) wouldn’t stop at granting permission to revise moral and legal norms by drawing back on the authority that their modern natural law theorists gave them. Such a revision would address the massive accumulation of property in the ownership class and the severe paucity of property that afflicts the working class, both of which inevitably flow from an economic system of collective production and privatized profit. He notes that Jefferson sought to defend “the claim of every human being to choose his own career and to act upon his own choice and judgment free from the restraints and constraints imposed by the arbitrary will of other human beings,” and includes in a list of these enemies to Jeffersonian freedom “persons whose command of capital and control of the opportunities for engaging in useful work limits the ability of others to ‘pursue happiness.’”

Reading Dewey’s appeal to Jefferson, on the question of property and economics, one senses that Dewey would expect Jefferson to revise his own position about the immediate dangers of coercion and constraint to reflect the realities of the mid-20th century. Dewey’s Jefferson would no longer be concerned primarily with, for example, a state that constrains the natural freedom of the human conscience. Rather, Dewey’s Jefferson would be concerned with an ownership class that constrains the ability of working people to achieve positive freedom due to the imbalance in property. In the face of these

87 Ibid., 161–2.
coercive capitalist entities, Dewey enlarges the possibilities for moral and legal revision of “property rights” in Jefferson's name: “it is sheer perversion to hold that there is anything in Jeffersonian democracy that forbids political action to bring about equalization of economic conditions in order that the equal right of all to free choice and free action be maintained.”

These words came in 1939, but four years earlier, Dewey made more explicit the substantive direction of such a Jeffersonian revision of property rights.

The only form of enduring social organization that is now possible is one in which the new forces of productivity are cooperatively controlled and used in the interest of effective liberty and the cultural development of individuals that constitute society. Such a social order cannot be established by an unplanned and external convergence of the actions of separate individuals, each of whom is bent on personal private advantage.

Here we see that Dewey's long-term goal of the modification of property rights, which had previously been endowed with an untouchable authority though natural law reasoning, addresses capitalist inequality toward a more democratic social order. One might expect, if Dewey were to relate this goal to his pragmatist comprehensive doctrine, that he would justify this goal through reference to the improvement of experience it would bring to all involved, based on the attenuation of authoritarian social structures and the development of new forms of communication between previously isolated demographics. Such social renewal would be, for Dewey, an expression of and impetus toward democratic dispositions and conduct.

Niebuhr's long-range goal for dealing with the inevitable inequalities in a system of private profit followed Dewey's lead, especially from his Augustinian turn in the early 1930s through the mid-1940s. Like Dewey, Niebuhr called for significant revisions to the capitalist moral ideal of private ownership of productive property. The dangers that Niebuhr saw facing the working class were, as we have already seen, the basic fact of crushing poverty due to the

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88 Ibid., 162.

incongruity between collective production and private profit; but other challenges included large-scale unemployment and a bureaucratic state that over-extends itself and stifles efficiency. Here we see a rhetorical technique that Niebuhr utilized often, which adds merit to a “virtue-ethical” interpretation of his thought. He argued for a “moral mean” on many of the social questions that drew his attention, calling for avoidance of both Scylla on the one hand, and Charybdis on the other. In the realm of economics, the two extremes were the laissez-faire approach and the centralized, bureaucratic state, which he typically envisioned as the model displayed by Soviet Communism. His approach to property rights, especially in the 1930s and early 1940s, sought to sail between these extremes. The issue of inequality was, in Niebuhr’s mind, complicated and amplified by the need to avoid these political extremes, and by the excessive nature of production in free market economies. “Markets for the ever-increasing flood of goods are not adequate,” he wrote,

because the buying power of the multitudes is too restricted. Consequently, a periodic glut of goods leads to employment crises and general depressions. Efforts to solve this problem, short of the socialization of productive property, lead to a dangerous increase in the power of the state without giving the state final authority over the dominant economic power.\(^90\)

In this passage, published in 1935, Niebuhr holds that “socialization of productive property” is the best long-term measure to address inequality without falling prey either to the extreme of an overly-powerful, centralized state, or to the opposite extreme of a state that is impotent in the face of economic inequality. During this same period, he argued that the most basic cause of social injustice is economic inequality, and that “this particular cause will therefore be eliminated or mitigated by social ownership.”\(^91\) Niebuhr continued to make this argument into the 1940s. “The property issue must,” he wrote in 1944, “be continually solved within the

\(^{90}\) Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 165.

\(^{91}\) Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*, 238.
framework of the democratic process.” He allowed that although not every different example of property could be, or ought to be collectivized, many should. While private persons must maintain their rights to home ownership, landlordism (“the most ancient form of oppression”), and industrial, mechanized forms of agriculture would need to give way to new forms of collective ownership.93

I grant to those who argue that Niebuhr cooled to socialism after the 1930s and early-1940s that it is difficult to find passages such as these in his writing after the publication of The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. His calls for collectivization of productive property do, in fact, drop off after 1944, lending credence to interpretations that suggest his sympathies with socialism were cultivated throughout the 1920s and 1930s, peaked in the late-1930s, and waned in the early- and mid-1940s. This basic pattern coincides with his historical record of membership in the Socialist Party; he joined the Party in 1929, and left it in 1940. However, I think this standard interpretation of the trajectory of Niebuhr’s economic ethics is too simple, because it suggests—contrary to a close reading of his later moral reflections on economics—that from the late 1940s until his death he came to peace with capitalism. I suspect that his abandonment of the cause of collectivization of productive property may have been caused more by factors of historical context and political culture, rather than by any significant change in his ethical evaluation of capitalism. During the Cold War, Niebuhr was at times both caught up in, and also a target of the Communist hysteria most evident in the McCarthy hearings and the House Un-American Activities Committee.94

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93 Ibid., 116–7.

94 On the F.B.I.’s suspicion of Niebuhr as a Communist sympathizer, see Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, 205–18. On Niebuhr’s participation in the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, see Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, 252–6.
Investigation amassed a significant file on Niebuhr, and its inquiries into his loyalties were spurred by his political commentary. Being a vocal critic of Soviet Communism and being a target suspected of Communist sympathies would likely motivate anyone to abandon advocacy of the collectivization of productive property. In addition, his departure from the Socialist Party in 1940 was precipitated not by any economic disagreement he had with party leadership, but by the Socialists’ unwillingness to support American intervention in World War II. And although it may be difficult to find passages in Niebuhr’s late work that demonstrate a keen desire to reform the basic moral norms of property ownership found in capitalism, such a discovery is not impossible. In The Irony of American History, published in 1952, Niebuhr warned America against settling too deeply into an anti-Marxist complacency. “In so far as the absence of a Marxist challenge to our culture has left the institution of property completely unchallenged we may have become the prisoners of a dogmatism which will cost us dearly in some future crisis.”

In any case, as I’ll argue below, his critique of pure capitalism and his support for the working class remained deep and spirited until his last days.

Leaving aside the question of Niebuhr’s shifting economic allegiances, the calls that he made with Dewey for the collectivization of productive property once more reveal the irony at the heart of their opposing comprehensive doctrines, which generate their common vision of the democratic moral agent. If their conclusions were the same, their reasoning was ironically dissonant. As one might expect, Niebuhr’s rationale for the socialization of productive property struck an Augustinian chord: “the granting of peculiar rights of ownership in these instruments of production to a special class of owners is to invite those injustices which always result from centralization of power.” Unlike Dewey, who would have argued for the socialization of

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96 Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, 239.
productive property as a reflection of greater sharing of experience, as a means to more
democratic experiences, and as an outgrowth of renewed habits of thought and action,
Niebuhr’s case for collective property highlighted the need to restrain the sins of the most
powerful people in society. His Augustinian political theology made him balk at claims made by
people such as Dewey about the political establishment of the Great Community. But the moral
and legal norms they defended on the question of productive property were remarkably
consonant. Also similar were their visions of the democratic moral agent underlying these
norms. While Dewey sought a renewal of democratic mutuality that would weaken the
authoritarian relationships in capitalist society and address wealth inequalities, Niebuhr called
for democratic moral agents to support the restriction of the sins of the most powerful
members of society through participation in the creation of positive law. This Niebuhrian call
demands a populace that is inclined to seek and to value exchanges characterized by a rough
equality achieved over time. From contrasting world views, they develop consistent visions of
the democratic person, and advocate similar modifications of property law in the face of
inequality created by free market society. I must conclude, given this long-term goal of revision
to the moral and legal norms surrounding the private ownership of productive property, that
Dewey and Niebuhr exhibited socialist impulses as a result of their democratic critique of
capitalism.

To this long-range goal of revising capitalism’s moral norms regarding property
ownership Dewey and Niebuhr added what I would call short-term political goals and stances to
address the problems of a free market society. For both writers, these goals and stances
included strong solidarity with labor unions, support of legislation protecting collective
bargaining, and the establishment of government programs that either met or went beyond
Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation in terms of redistributing wealth through
taxation and providing social programs to protect the working class. For both Niebuhr and Dewey, these political positions grew out of experiences—appropriately enough—that they underwent at formative moments in their careers.

The experience that inculcated in Dewey enduring support for the working class, labor unions, and progressive legislation was the Pullman Strike of 1894. In the economic depression that followed the stock market crash of 1893, George Pullman ran into some trouble running his company. The owner of Pullman sleeping cars, he had built a massively successful company with headquarters in Chicago, and had also established the town of Pullman, Illinois, where many of his workers lived. All the town’s services generated profit for the Pullman company. When the depression struck, Pullman slashed his employees’ wages by 25% and “laid off a fifth of the workforce at the shops in Pullman, Illinois. He did not, however, reduce the rents.” This development led to one of the most influential labor actions in United States history. Pullman workers went on strike, and enlisted the help of a young Eugene V. Debs, the head of the American Railway Union who was fresh off a successful labor action against the Great Northern Railroad. The Pullman strike lasted from May 11, 1894 until July 18, and cannot be counted as a victory for the workers. Debs was jailed and rallies turned violent and even deadly. Labor’s situation was worse than before. “One thousand of the original striking workers in Pullman were left destitute, and everyone who went back to work for the company was required to sign a pledge never to join a union.”

Dewey’s career intersected with the Pullman strike in a most fateful way. In the summer of 1894, he traveled by train from Michigan to Chicago to settle into his new life and teaching

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98 Ibid., 297.
post at the University of Chicago. He passed directly through the eye of the labor storm, and his letters home to his wife Alice demonstrate that his support for the working class bloomed as a result. He told her of a conversation he had with a striking worker while riding a Wagner Company sleeping car.

I only talked with him 10 or 15 minutes but when I got through my nerves were more thrilled than they had been for years; I felt as if I had better resign my teaching job and follow him around till I got into life. One lost all sense of the right or wrong of things in admiration of his absolute, almost fanatic, sincerity and earnestness, and in admiration of the magnificent combination that was going on. Simply as an aesthetic matter, I don’t believe the world has seen but few times such a spectacle of magnificent, widespread union of men about a common interest as this strike business. The only point is the Pullman strike; they simply boycott the roads that carry Pullmans and go on a strike if the roads won’t stop carrying Pullmans; they say all the labor organizations of all kinds will go into it if Pullman doesn’t yield or at least arbitrate...The gov’t is evidently going to take a hand in and the men will be beaten almost to a certainty—but it’s a great thing and the beginning of a greater.99

This consummatory experience prompted further reflections on the nature of industry, capital, class, and even university politics in Dewey. Other letters to Alice on the conflict between capital and labor dramatized in the Pullman strike lamented anti-union sentiment in such media outlets as Harper’s Weekly. Dewey found it “hard to keep one’s balance; the only wonder is that when the ‘higher classes’—damn them—take such views there aren’t more downright socialists.”100

When the strike ended with the Pullman workers, the ARU, and Debs all suffering defeat, Dewey still remained positive about the long-term prospects of labor activism in the wake of this social and economic milestone. “The strike is lost and ‘labor’ is rather depressed. But if I am a prophet, it really won. The business made a tremendous impression...the exhibition of what the unions


100 Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy, 87; Menand, The Metaphysical Club, 298.
might accomplish if working together, has...given the public mind an object lesson that it won’t soon forget."\textsuperscript{101}

His experience with the Pullman strike permanently marked Dewey’s moral reflections on capital and labor. While his initial conversation with the strike organizer on the Wagner Company sleeping car led him to lose “all sense of the right or wrong of things in admiration of his absolute, almost fanatic, sincerity and earnestness,” this moral sensibility did not stay lost for long. In his later writings, Dewey explored, justified, and supported labor’s moral case in the economic sphere. In a 1916 piece entitled “Force and Coercion,” Dewey argued that the use of force in labor actions such as strikes can be morally permissible. He built his case by making a distinction between three types of “energy:” power, force, and violence. Power, for Dewey, is simply the “ability or capacity to execute, to realize ends.”\textsuperscript{102} Force is power in action. “It is force by which we excavate subways and build bridges and travel and manufacture.” Violence, meanwhile, is the wasteful use of force, which fails to achieve intended ends efficiently and produces needless destruction. On the power of this distinction, Dewey argued that labor is often justified in using force in such actions as strikes in order to achieve desired ends. He even allowed that “existing and legal machinery” are often less effective than the force that labor commands.\textsuperscript{103} In these reflections Dewey comes to terms with, and makes an ethical case in support of, striking labor unions such as the ARU, whose work he admired in 1894. His distinction allows him to maintain his abhorrence for “violence” in the quest for social progress, which colored such later works as \textit{Liberalism and Social Action} and his response to the prospects of American intervention in World War II, while simultaneously supporting the force used by

\textsuperscript{101} Westbrook, \textit{John Dewey and American Democracy}, 88.


\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., vols. 10, 247.
labor unions in the struggle against capital. Presumably his defense of the use of force includes physical resistance in the event that police attack striking workers. Dewey was not a pacifist at the time when he wrote this piece, and two years after the publication of this essay, he would write in defense of American intervention in World War I. 104

The impact of the Pullman strike on Dewey’s reflections on the ethics of capital and labor is also evident in his work on the value of collective bargaining. His ethical writings are unequivocal about the importance of collective bargaining. The Ethics textbook that he co-authored with James Hayden Tufts bears testimony to the lasting impression that labor struggles made on Dewey. The 1932 edition of Ethics added substantially to the original 1908 version, and one of the additions was a completely new chapter on “Collective Bargaining and the Labor Union.” In this chapter, Dewey and Tufts pull no punches about the disparity in power between owners and workers in the modern economic world. “The gap between employer and workman is financial, educational, and social…The bargaining power of an individual workman when set over against that of a million dollar company is practically zero.” 105 In response to this reality, they recommend a clear-cut moral principle to their readers. “The firmest protection against injustice under a capitalistic system is to be sought first of all in keeping the conditions of bargaining such that the two parties shall be as nearly equal as possible in bargaining power.” 106 Absent such a principle, which the authors understand labor unions to have advanced, working people can have no part of deciding answers to four questions that affect them directly. Collective bargaining levels the playing field between workers and owners as these parties consider how to distribute income between wages and profits, rate of work, working conditions,

104 For example, see his essay, “America in the World,” in Ibid., vols. 11, 70–2.


106 Ibid., 392.
and how to spread risks associated with accident, old age, and disease. The major benefit that labor unions offer to the economic realm is their ability to achieve at least a relative degree of equality between moral agents who enter their relation to each other on vastly unequal terms.

Dewey maintained with consistency this high regard for the work of labor unions in other writings, as well, and offered other reasons for supporting collective bargaining. One such reason was the positive effect of softening a rigid dualism between divided social groups. The political rights for which the “class of more or less organized factory laborers” fought have, according to Dewey, helped to dismantle divisive and authoritarian social structures. Through the work of these organized laborers, including most fundamentally the act of collective bargaining, “the well-to-do...have been brought into closer connections with the less fortunate classes through the breaking down of class barriers.” Another benefit that Dewey identified in the labor unions’ efforts to equalize economic power was the potential for workers to gain greater control, and thus increased interest, in their daily tasks. Dewey saw collective bargaining as a means for laborers to take part in the management of the companies for which they worked. Such involvement would address the lamentable plight of the day laborer whose life is bifurcated into uninteresting hours of work and (ostensibly) enjoyable hours of leisure. For Dewey, this adjustment reaches the roots of workers’ essential lack of freedom. A deep and “permanent solution” to the “labor and employment problem” would address workers’ lack of involvement in the day to day affairs of the workplace. This solution would require a “radical social alteration, which effects [sic] the degree and kind of participation a worker has in the production and social disposition of the wares he produces. Only such a change will seriously...
modify the content of experience into which creation of objects made for use enters.”¹⁰⁹ Labor unions carry the promise of achieving this goal, by the means of collective bargaining toward the end of greater worker involvement in issues of management. For these reasons (the need for equality between workers and owners, the disruption of rigid and authoritarian social divisions, and the promise of greater worker involvement in managerial decision-making), Dewey exhibited committed support for labor unions and saw their work as contributing to short-term gains in the face of capitalism’s most challenging problems.

Dewey’s support for labor was also evident in his associations with The League for Independent Political Action (LIPA), and in his voting record. The LIPA was formed in 1928, immediately following the election of Herbert Hoover to the presidency. At its core, it was comprised of various New York City leftists and intellectuals. These members were bound by the common interest of creating a third political party that would champion the cause of workers, and address America’s economic issues. Dewey was the primary spokesman for the League’s brief life; the LIPA lasted only eight years, as the original energy that galvanized leftists in opposition to Hoover was fractured and scattered to the winds by Roosevelt’s popularity.

When Dewey wrote under the LIPA’s banner, he always called for the creation of a new party that would serve the working class. In 1932, he predicted that the time was ripe for a new political vision to meet the needs of collective production and a deeply vulnerable labor force. “The present crisis,” he wrote, “has emphasized the fact that in millions of cases individual industry and ability are no guaranty against tragic loss.”¹¹⁰ The task of the LIPA, as Dewey saw it, was to address this issue and by bringing democratic norms to fruition in the economic realm.


The League sought to “make the connection between political democracy and industrial democracy as clear as the noon-day sun.” Dewey’s preferred way of doing this was to enlist a broad coalition of farmers and laborers, but he noted sadly in 1932 that “the important leaders in the Farmer-Labor party are about to come out in support of Roosevelt for President.” If the LIPA could not secure the support of this crucial coalition for a new nominee from a new party, the Socialist Party’s Norman Thomas would be an acceptable alternative. In 1928 Thomas took the baton from Eugene Debs as the Socialist Party’s presidential nominee, and ran in six straight elections. Dewey’s writing for the LIPA supported Thomas as a worthwhile option, given the League’s inability to drum up support for a new party and candidate. Dewey reported that in the LIPA, “the opinion prevailed...that in the coming presidential election [of 1932] the Socialist platform and the Socialist candidates, Thomas and Maurer...came sufficiently near to representing the aims of the League to justify urging its members to work and vote in this campaign for the Socialist ticket.” After all, Dewey’s desired party would operate from a platform of “socialistic ideals in a form adapted to American conditions.” His major quarrel with the Socialist Party, and the reason why his support for Thomas was not more energetic, was that the “Socialists...spoke until recently too much of a foreign language to make themselves understood.” Still in all, Thomas and the Socialist Party promised more meaningful economic reforms than did Roosevelt’s New Deal, which Dewey considered a half-way measure

111 “Democracy Joins the Unemployed,” Ibid., vols. 6, 245.
112 “Prospects for a Third Party,” Ibid., vols. 6, 251.
113 Ibid., vols. 6, 250.
114 “The Place of Minor Parties in the American Scene and Their Relation to the Present Situation,” Ibid., vols. 6, 236.
115 Ibid., vols. 6, 237.
to prop up a dying capitalist system.\textsuperscript{116} Westbrook reports that Dewey supported Thomas as a presidential candidate until the election of 1948, the last in which Dewey voted and the last in which Thomas ran, when Dewey cast his ballot for Harry S. Truman.\textsuperscript{117} In his political activities and associations, as in his ethical evaluations of labor unions and collective bargaining, Dewey pursued targets short of major reform of capitalism’s moral ideal of private property in order to address the disparity of power between workers and owners. Given these short-term pursuits, I conclude that it is fair to characterize Dewey’s politics as progressive.

Niebuhr’s formative experience with labor and capital came early in his career, immediately following his graduation from Yale Divinity School in 1915. The first job that Niebuhr landed after earning his MA from Yale was at Bethel Evangelical Church, in Detroit, Michigan. He remained at this post until 1928, when he was hired to the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. It was at Bethel that Niebuhr found the prophetic voice that earned him his appointment at Union, and that served him so well in engaging a range of social issues throughout his career. For 13 years in Detroit, Niebuhr developed this prophetic voice primarily through observation and critique of Henry Ford’s automobile factories, which offered a clear picture of the power imbalances between labor and ownership. Niebuhr set his sights directly on Ford himself, and wrote extensively during his Detroit years on the disjuncture between the claims Ford made about his treatment of factory workers and the actual reality. Wages, hours, and conditions were all topics on which Niebuhr took Ford to task. The wages Ford paid his workers were so low that they had to rely on charity to survive. “Years ago, when the $5 a day minimum was established, which meant $30 per week,” Niebuhr wrote in 1926, “the Ford boast that an adequate wage obviated the necessity for charity was not an idle one.

\textsuperscript{116} On Dewey’s critique of FDR’s New Deal, see Westbrook, \textit{John Dewey and American Democracy}, 440–1.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 461.
Today it is an idle boast, for living prices have well-nigh doubled and the weekly wage still hovers around $30.”¹¹⁸ While the reduced hours that Ford assigned to his employees were publicized as an improvement for labor’s lot, in reality this reduction meant that fewer and fewer people earned a subsistence-level income from week to week.¹¹⁹ On top of inadequate wages and hours, Ford’s factories maintained conditions that would break a normal working man, and then abandon him to hire a younger one. The use of heavy machinery aged men prematurely and also kept them without marketable skills. “A man may put fifteen years into a plant, acquire no more skill than can be duplicated in a youth of eighteen by two months’ training, and find himself losing in competition with the superior stamina of the stripling.”¹²⁰ And of course the worker endured this situation without the security of a pension or even a contract. “Perhaps,” Niebuhr concluded, “the automobile industry is too young to have acquired a conscience upon this problem.”¹²¹

This fundamental solidarity with the wage-laborer that Niebuhr developed during his years in Detroit marked his social ethics for the remainder of his career. It colored his evaluation of capitalism, and led him to develop short-term political goals and stances to address the basic situation of economic inequality. There is a special irony in the trajectory of Niebuhr’s moral reflection on capital and labor, when examined from its origins in Detroit through his mature work. In his early years in Detroit, Niebuhr’s solidarity with labor was primarily motivated by the effort to apply Christian ideals of neighbor love to complex, large-scale social issues. Later, in his written reflections following the publication of Moral Man and Immoral Society, his solidarity


¹¹⁹ Ibid., 103.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 101.

¹²¹ Ibid.
with labor was couched in terms of the restraint of the excessive self-love of society’s most powerful moral agents, such as Henry Ford. In this period, Niebuhr would not weary of pointing out that the earlier position, in which Christians attempt to make a simple application of neighbor love to such complex, large-scale, and ultimately ineradicable problems as those dramatized by labor and capital, is the very height of naivety. Ironically, the political substance of his approach to labor survived his Augustinian turn. Support for labor became for Niebuhr less a matter of neighbor love, and more a matter of restraining evil and pursuing whatever balance of power society could muster. Despite this shift, his political stances from 1932 forward exhibited continuity with the labor solidarity that he learned in Detroit.

One of the clearest ways in which Niebuhr expressed this solidarity throughout his career was in his high esteem for the work of labor unions. Reflecting his deeply Augustinian sensibilities, Niebuhr held consistently to the position that labor unions are an invaluable element of modern industrial economies, in that they provide a crucial check on the power of the ownership classes, which would otherwise run wild. Assessing the democratic elements of American society in 1952, Niebuhr was cautiously optimistic about the role of labor:

> we have managed to achieve a tolerable justice in the collective relations of industry by balancing power against power and equilibrating the various competing social forces of society. The rise of the labor movement has been particularly important in achieving this result; for its organization of the power of the workers was necessary to produce the counter-weight to the great concentrations of economic power which justice requires.\(^\text{122}\)

This position communicates an Augustinian rationale for the value of labor unions that he cultivated in Detroit, prior to his Augustinian turn. In 1932, with his Ford experience not far behind him and his attention turning to the social implications of excessive self-love, he explained that the security of America’s vulnerable workers would not be given over by owners

such as Ford. Workers had to take it. “Whatever place the industrial worker has won in society has been won by the assertion of his rights through his trade-union organizations.”\(^{123}\)

His solidarity with labor and his high estimation of the work of justice that unions accomplish led Niebuhr to advocate strongly and consistently for the protection of collective bargaining. Looking back at the struggles of labor throughout American history, Niebuhr was saddened to report that it had taken so long for workers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively to be recognized. The “bourgeois and individualistic” American ethos had been “reluctant to come to terms with the collective realities and necessities of modern industrialism,” meaning that labor’s efforts to organize had been systematically denied.\(^{124}\) He denounced the jurisprudence of earlier American generations in which “our Supreme Court persistently enjoined industrial strikes as ‘conspiracies in restraint of trade,’” as “reading the dogma of laissez faire into the Constitution.”\(^{125}\) In light of these comments, his high praise for the Wagner Act of 1935, which granted to unions the legal right to bargain collectively, is not surprising. Niebuhr contended that the Wagner Act was “an instrument of justice, second only to the right of suffrage. It was in fact a very essential instrument of justice in an industrial society and a final tool for correcting the injustices of early industrialism, consequent upon the disproportion of power in the industrial enterprise itself.”\(^{126}\)

The Wagner Act was one part, but not the only part of Roosevelt’s New Deal that Niebuhr welcomed as offering needed social and political protection to the working class.

\(^{123}\) Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 34.


\(^{125}\) Ibid., 41.

Reflecting on the tendency of democratic societies to equalize power through the ballot, Niebuhr argued that Roosevelt’s social programs comprised a significant step in the pursuit of justice. “Culminating in the ‘New Deal,’ national governments, based upon an alliance of farmers, workers and middle classes, have used the power of the state to establish minimal standards of ‘welfare’ in housing, social security, health services, etc.”\textsuperscript{127} Although he admitted that “the higher income groups benefitted less from these minimal standards of justice,” this struck Niebuhr as a justifiable price to pay for the security and protection that the working class would enjoy as a result. His texts indicate that he would have supported broader reforms along the lines of Roosevelt’s New Deal, as well. He praised the “extension of socialized services” in other modern states such as England, as “a greater moral achievement” than America had been able to realize, given the United States’ attachment to privatized institutions of higher education. For Niebuhr, a system of free, public higher education “implements a Christian understanding of the limitless character of a man’s responsibility for his neighbor. In so far socialism has understood this responsibility better than conventional Christianity, it has been more Christian than conventional Christianity.”\textsuperscript{128} One of the appropriate means that Niebuhr identified to achieve these political ends was a progressive or graduated system of income taxation, which he regarded as a much more “American” approach to economic realities than the “notion of the survival of the fittest.”\textsuperscript{129} These positions were reflected in Niebuhr’s voting habits in the middle decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In the elections of 1928 and 1932 he supported Thomas for president, and almost did so again in 1936, before casting his ballot for FDR as a

\textsuperscript{127} Niebuhr, \textit{The Irony of American History}, 32.

\textsuperscript{128} Niebuhr, \textit{Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr}, 86.

\textsuperscript{129} Niebuhr and Heimert, \textit{A Nation so Conceived: Reflections on the History of America from Its Early Visions to Its Present Power}, 85.
“lesser evil” candidate. He participated in the LIPA briefly, before concluding that the group was too naïve to make any real contribution to politics, but his record of presidential voting suggests that his basic commitment to progressive economic policy remained consistent to the end of his life.

Niebuhr’s early experience with Ford manufacturing plants came full circle late in his life, when he was invited to work as a consultant for the Ford Foundation. He attended meetings with the Foundation in 1961 and 1962, accepting the institution’s invitation to “chew the rag on the general state of the world and the U.S.A.” His written reflections on these meetings reveal that his criticism of laissez-faire capitalism remained strong, and that he continued to prescribe a strong role for labor unions and an interventionist government in the quest for equality and the protection of the working class. Gazing retrospectively at his Detroit experience in the light of his work with the Ford Foundation, he coupled this position with praise for the Foundation’s work. “Henry Ford ruled Detroit, and no voice was raised against his pretensions. I, like many of my contemporaries, did not foresee that the auto union and the Ford Foundation, the latter the fruit of Federal tax laws, would change the distribution of power and privilege.” Fox is misguided in interpreting this comment as indicative of any embrace of capitalism on the part of the “mature” Niebuhr. In this selection, Niebuhr plainly reiterates elements of his very first reaction to the practices and conditions that obtained in Ford factories. Only strong labor unions and an interventionist government could create a situation in which power is dispersed more

130 Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, 177.

131 Ibid., 288.

132 Ibid., 279.


134 Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, 279.
evenly between owners and workers. The market would not bequeath an equal share of power
to workers on its own; an institution like the Ford Foundation required active measures from
outside forces in order to be born and deliver whatever power it might to the working class.

In sum, Dewey and Niebuhr identified what they considered to be serious shortcomings
in modern liberal economics. The major quarrel that they brought against capitalism was framed
in terms of the economic inequality that capitalism assumes, replicates, and requires, but this
issue was founded on their common and unexplored visions of democratic virtue. They found a
lack of humility in capitalist accounts of property ownership and in the system of private
ownership of the means of production. In the inclination of members of the ownership class to
arrogate to themselves more profit than they merited, and to give to the working class too little
of a share of the material wealth that they helped to create, and in the disinclination of workers
to demand their proper share of the profits of collective production, Dewey and Niebuhr found
a lack of mutuality. They advocated reform to moral norms surrounding property ownership and
also engaged in immediate political measures to achieve equality and security for the working
class. They imagined these tasks differently; for Dewey this work was done in the service of the
Great Community, but for Niebuhr, it amounted mainly to restrictions placed on the excessive
self-love of the most powerful members of society. But in both cases, the politics look
remarkably similar. And for both Dewey and Niebuhr, the motivation to adopt such political
positions will follow directly from a moral agent’s democratic virtues.
CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, I have offered democratic virtue interpretations of John
Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr, and have argued that despite their profound disagreement on
questions of anthropology, moral psychology, and the possibilities of social progress, they both
imagined the democratic moral agent as one who possesses the virtues of humility and
mutuality. I have also argued that this conception of democratic virtue informed their shared
critique of capitalism, insofar as they both maintained that the natural law reasoning, moral
norms, practices of exchange, and social conditions of capitalism betray deficiencies in
democratic virtue. With these interpretations and arguments in mind, I would like to offer some
concluding reflections on what I take to be the successes and failures that mark the public
conversation between Dewey and Niebuhr. Borrowing a term from literary criticism, I will close
by suggesting, in light of their failures, that the democratic moral agent must understand the
different comprehensive doctrines held by her neighbors not as adiaphora (something
inconsequential), but rather, as MacGuffin (something that holds both extreme importance and
also secondary importance).

First, let me count a pair of their successes. I conclude that both Dewey and Niebuhr
were highly successful in articulating their own separate visions of democratic ethics. Given the
premises from which Dewey’s reflections on democracy unfold, I find his arguments compelling,
persuasive, and worthy of the consideration of readers in the early 21st century. That is to say, if
one accepts Dewey’s premises about the nature of experience, about the development and
function of human habits, intelligence, communication, and so on, his descriptive and normative
accounts of democracy are coherent, consistent, and morally persuasive. His reasoning is sound,
and his conclusions about the nature and value of democracy follow from the premises from
which his reflections begin. This success means that naturalistic empiricists today must consider
Dewey’s calls for democratic renewal. Similarly, I find that if one accepts Reinhold Niebuhr’s premises about human nature as finite and free, about the nature and value of experience (especially experiences that point to referents beyond the natural, human realm), and about the urgent problem of excessive self-love in the sphere of history, his understanding of and case for democracy are both quite compelling. His reasoning is sound, and the conclusions he derives about the nature and value of democracy follow well from his premises. Therefore, Niebuhr’s work must remain relevant to the many Christians who share his comprehensive vision of the nature of reality. Contemporary Christians in a modern Western nation such as the United States may not have the opportunity to explore theology and ethics as much as Niebuhr did, but I suspect that there are very many of these people who share with Niebuhr a basic concern that sin is a real and urgent problem for human social and political life. These Christians who share Niebuhr’s concerns about sin must continue to reckon with his democratic ethics, given the coherence, consistency, and compelling nature of his thought.

In addition, I conclude that the democratic critiques of capitalism Dewey and Niebuhr made were cogent and plausible. Dewey’s arguments against the absolute authority granted to property law through natural law reasoning, the incongruity between private profit and a world of collective production, and the authoritarian consequences that follow from such a moral landscape are all effective and well-formulated. They can be traced to his conception of the moral agent interacting with natural and social environments. These arguments also serve his broad goals of the renewal of democratic life, insofar as they carry the promise of experiences that are better because more communicative and less authoritarian. Thus, again, if one accepts the basic premises of Dewey’s philosophical ethics, one must consider his democratic objections to capitalism. The same is true for Niebuhr. Niebuhr’s arguments against the arrogance exhibited by modern natural law cases for property ownership and against the qualities of
character that move moral agents to approve of a social system so saturated with inequality are persuasive. They follow from the premises on which his theological ethics is built. These arguments also serve his major democratic goal of restraining the sin of the most powerful members of society through the tentative compromises and balances of power that political action achieves. In short, Niebuhr and Dewey were successful in developing their theological and philosophical objections to capitalism that follow soundly from their accounts of democratic life.

Despite these successes, though, I conclude that the conversation between Dewey and Niebuhr reveals their basic failure to possess and be guided by the democratic species of the virtue of tolerance in their interaction with each other. This failure is remarkable because of the extraordinary value that both assigned to democracy, but it is especially noteworthy, as I will explain shortly, because Dewey and Niebuhr both explicitly commented on the need for a deeper tolerance than that which marked the 20th century West, and because their intellectual traditions (American pragmatism and neo-orthodox Protestantism, respectively) possess ample resources to instill in moral agents the democratic variant of tolerance. Before explaining these points, though, I should comment briefly on what I mean by tolerance, and on what I take to be the difference between the libertarian and the democratic versions of this virtue.

Tolerance is the virtue that orients a moral agent toward the good in her or his interactions with others who are in some sense different from her or him. More specifically, tolerance inclines its possessor toward the good of hospitality toward the different other. The tolerant person or group accepts difference and allows difference to exist; this dual movement of acceptance and permission are the most basic gestures that follow from stable possession of the virtue of tolerance. Tolerance is a virtue with both intellectual and moral components; it is an intellectual movement by which the moral agent reconciles himself or herself mentally to the
presence of difference, and a moral movement (meaning one of emotion and conduct) whereby the moral agent feels and acts in accordance with that reconciliation. The differences tolerant moral agents accept and permit are manifold. Tolerant people accept others of different religion, ethnicity, race, sexual preference, class, age, mental and physical ability, and so forth. Crucially, tolerance relies on strong distinctions between “thought” and “act” and between “private” and “public” actions. These distinctions allow moral agents to identify the limits of tolerance, with harmful public acts being less amenable to tolerance than are thoughts and private acts. With this limit in view, the tolerant moral agent can still reject many forms of difference, especially those that lead to conduct that harms other people. These differences of conduct that are not tolerated, even by “tolerant” people, are typically regulated by positive law. That is, when difference becomes harmful, we regulate it through the creation and enforcement of civil law.

Notice that, on the basis of these distinctions, a tolerant person can disagree vigorously with someone who holds different ideas. Suppose, for example, that my friend Kurt is tolerant and is also committed to racial equality. If Kurt encounters a person who holds patently racist ideas about the inherent inferiority of African-Americans, Kurt will argue vigorously with the racist person in order to convince him of his errors. The racist person has thoughts that are repugnant to Kurt. When the racist person argues in public for the acceptance of his ideas that African-Americans are inferior, he engages in public acts that Kurt finds repugnant. Kurt will try to change this person’s repugnant thoughts and actions through argument, and will still be tolerant as he does so. At the end of the conversation, the racist person may not be convinced by Kurt’s arguments. In that case, Kurt would walk away, disgusted by the racism he has encountered, but would accept this difference of thought, and permit it to exist. This acceptance and permission of another’s difference shows Kurt to be tolerant. Kurt would be intolerant if he
sought to silence, disenfranchise, or kill the racist person on the basis of the latter’s repugnant thoughts and public speech. In addition, Kurt would still be a tolerant person if he sought to regulate the harmful public acts of the racist person; this is the obvious situation in which difference is not tolerated. The difficulty comes in determining when certain public acts become harmful, and therefore require regulation. For example, the racist person’s public speech can become harmful and require regulation when it incites dangerous behavior in others, or calls for harm to specific people. When speech takes on this kind of tenor, it moves from a repugnant, but non-harmful public act to a harmful public act that requires regulation through civil law. The thought/act and public/private distinctions may not be foolproof, but they are helpful guides that allow tolerant people to function well in a difficult moral world. In any case, this example shows that tolerance does not preclude vigorous argument, and that one does not cease to be tolerant simply because one labels certain differences as objectionable, or because one calls for regulation of harmful public acts.

There are different forms of the virtue of tolerance; not all varieties of tolerance are the same. In my comments on Dewey and Niebuhr, and their relative abilities to possess and be guided by tolerance, I would like to distinguish between “libertarian” and “democratic” versions of this virtue. Libertarian tolerance meets the basic standard of tolerance that I outlined in the previous paragraphs. It is the virtue by which moral agents encounter differences in thought, private act, or public non-harmful act, and allow these differences to exist. The moral agent who possesses libertarian tolerance accepts that his or her society is one marked by diversity, and does not seek to change this reality through coercive measures that utilize either political power or the use of private force or intimidation. (Although, as I have explained, tolerant people need not accept differences that involve harmful public acts.) Historically, the 17th and 18th centuries were periods of great advancement for libertarian tolerance. The European Reformations...
introduced (or perhaps made more apparent) massive pluralism into Western society, and wars, compulsion, and systematic repression followed. In this new pluralistic European landscape, moral agents and political powers failed for long periods of time to tolerate difference well. The history of Western political thought from 1517 forward tells the story of slow and halting movement toward a climate of libertarian tolerance. Such events, developments, and doctrines as the ideal of *cuius regio, eius religio*, the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the Edict of Nantes (1598), the Glorious Revolution (1688), Locke’s “Letter Concerning Toleration” (1689), the disestablishment of religion in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (ratified 1791), and Jefferson’s “Letter to the Danbury Baptists” (1802) are all examples of the normalization of this libertarian tolerance. These steps in the normalization of libertarian tolerance have been off-set by coincident historical examples of conduct and policy by which differences of thought, private act, and non-harmful public act are neither accepted nor permitted to exist, such as the persecution of Protestants in Marian England (1553-58), the martyrdom of Michael Servetus in Calvin’s Geneva (1553), the denial of suffrage to African-Americans and women in the United States, and so forth. Although the story of the normalization of libertarian tolerance is a slow and halting one, Western societies have moved toward a more complete embrace of the ideal of libertarian tolerance whereby people and groups do not seek to eradicate difference merely because it exists.

Democratic tolerance adds a significant demand of moral agents to the basic norms of libertarian tolerance. Like libertarian tolerance, the democratic version of this virtue entails acceptance of the differences of thought, private act, and non-harmful public act that accompany major differences of race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, physical capacity, and so on. Like libertarian tolerance, democratic tolerance does not seek to eradicate these differences. But when the virtue of tolerance serves the broad goals of a democratic social and political
order, a new and very significant challenge emerges. This challenge arises from the discrepancy between the reality of a pluralistic society and the ideal of the unified legislating subject in democracy. For democratic societies, the ideal legislating subject is “the people.” This means that, ideally, the people create the law that governs our conduct. The difficulty inherent in this goal of people rule is evident in the fact that the subject responsible for the law’s creation is a collective singular noun. Although “the people” is a singular noun, the collective nature of the noun means that this singularity is derived from an unavoidable plurality. Theorists of democracy have grappled with this problem for centuries. The effort to fashion “the people” as a capable subject of political action is memorialized in the phrase *e pluribus unum*. This timeless democratic task is directly related to tolerance; we cannot become a coherent subject of political action if we do not accept and allow the various differences that mark the aggregate population of “the people.” If difference is not tolerated, something less than “the people” is the subject of the law that governs all. In addition, though, to become “the people,” we must cultivate a deeper kind of tolerance that moves beyond acceptance of difference and seeks to attain some measure of political unity in the task of self-legislation. The unity that the people must achieve is one that pertains to the act of creating law. It is not a unity in which we all agree to speak the same language, worship the same gods, and hold the same beliefs about the nature of reality. At those levels, pluralism will remain even in the democratic people. However, on the level of agreeing to the kinds of laws that we desire to regulate our conduct, the people must be one in order to fulfill the democratic ideal. Thus a kind of tolerance beyond the libertarian version is required if the people is to become one out of many, in order to take its rightful place as the author of the law governing the collective singular.

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1 I say “ideally” because, in reality, the people do not create the law in such countries that aspire to democracy as the United States. In the United States, the people elect representatives to create the law for them.
This claim that democracy requires more than simple libertarian tolerance must be explored in greater detail. What, specifically, does democratic tolerance demand of people who differ from one another and yet must become one as co-participants in the people? Democratic tolerance requires three specific moral stances between persons who would comprise the people. Each of these stances entails a default assumption that the moral agent must make regarding his or her co-participant in democratic governance. These three assumptions involve hospitable relations to the different neighbor on questions of the neighbor’s virtue, reasoning, and concrete political policy.

First, persons must assume that their co-participants in democratic life with differing comprehensive doctrines are capable of possessing the virtues required by the tasks of democratic life. This assumption requires us to cultivate a default belief that different comprehensive doctrines are capable of instilling democratic virtue in the people who adhere to them. We cannot become one people if we assume that our co-participants are incapable of possessing the qualities of character necessary for democratic governance. Such an assumption would prevent any substantive conversation about the conditions that require political attention. If I assume, for instance, that my Catholic neighbor is incapable of participating in the creation of democratic law because of my deep suspicion that Catholicism cannot supply the virtues required by democratic society, I will never be motivated to form a coherent subject of political action with my Catholic neighbor. We will remain in the political state of *pluribus*, and will not approach the *unum*. At various stages in American history, popular sentiment has voiced this very suspicion about a number of social groups whose differences relegated them to the margins of the dominant Anglo-American social order. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants from Germany, Italy, and elsewhere were thought to be incapable of cultivating and possessing democratic virtue. In the presidential election of 1960, many people suspected that
John F. Kennedy would be incapable of leading a democratic nation because his Catholicism would force him to accept the political authority of the papacy as normative for his tasks as political leader of America. Today many Americans suspect Muslims in their midst to be incapable of democratic citizenship because of their presumed allegiance to sharia law. In every case, this assumption betrays a level of tolerance short of the democratic ideal on the part of the assumer, which therefore prevents the formation of the people as democratic sovereign.

Now it may be true that, in certain cases, a person’s comprehensive doctrine does, in fact, instill in him or her habits that are decidedly anti-democratic. For instance, my Catholic neighbor may have habits that of thought, feeling, or action that encourage political submission and that stifle open dialogue with fellow participants in political discourse. Perhaps that person would like for American political policy to be dictated by the pope. In that case, democratic tolerance does not require us to be dishonest, and pretend that this person possesses democratic virtue. Such habits and desires are clearly at odds with the ideals of democracy; whoever possesses them cannot participate well in a democratic political order. However, we can recognize that this neighbor lacks democratic virtue while also maintaining that Catholicism is nonetheless still capable of instilling such virtue in him or her. This assumption is one of the basic works of democratic tolerance; we must believe that all people can find in their respective comprehensive doctrines the resources to develop democratic tolerance. In order to bring my hypothetical Catholic neighbor into the political unum, I would need to try to convince him or her about the compatibility of Catholicism and democracy, and I would also need to appeal to particular doctrines, people, or events in Catholicism that demonstrate democratic virtue. This would show my neighbor that he or she can remain a Catholic and still be a good participant in democracy. This would be an extremely difficult task. And even if I could convince my neighbor of these things, we would still be far from governing ourselves together; an actual conversation
about the content of the law is still far, far away at this point. But no one ever said that forming a coherent subject of political action was easy.

A second moral stance builds on this requirement that we assume the possibilities of democratic virtue in our different neighbors. This second stance is that we must engage in rational conversation with our different co-participants as part of the task of creating democratic law. To do so, we must both assume our different neighbor’s capacity for rational political conversation and also engage in the act of political discourse. Once we assume the capacity for democratic virtue in our different neighbors, the task of law creation requires that we reason together about fairness, priorities, common problems, methods to address social challenges, and so on. This collective reasoning is one of the central tasks of the people whose sovereignty democracy establishes and maintains. The people cannot create the law that will govern them if they cannot reason together about the law’s substance. We should note that the first moral stance required by democratic politics, the assumption of the capacity for democratic virtue in our different neighbor, is a prerequisite of this second stance. That is, I cannot engage in political reasoning with someone whom I presume to be incapable of good participation in the basic tasks of democracy. My presumption that my Catholic neighbor is necessarily incapable of the cultivating the qualities of character required for participation in the people will prevent me from reasoning with him or her about the substance of our common task in creating the law that governs us.

This second moral stance, in which constituents of the people converse with their different neighbors on the substance of the law, carries a subsidiary requirement with implications for the question of religious arguments in political debate. The subsidiary requirement is that the task of reasoning with one’s different co-participant demands that the people understand the comprehensive doctrines of their different neighbors. All the people who
participate in democratic life together will bring different premises, languages, logics, and conclusions to the democratic conversation, and these will be traceable to the different comprehensive doctrines that the people espouse. If I am to reason well with my different neighbor, I will need to be able to speak in the language of his or her comprehensive doctrine in order to persuade him or her about the value of a particular political conclusion. For example, in order to make a persuasive case to my Catholic neighbor about ideas of fairness or political priorities, I may have to utilize concepts, language, and forms of logic from his or her comprehensive doctrine. This tactic in democratic reasoning has been called “immanent critique” by writers in ethics and political theory such as Jeffrey Stout. To this idea of immanent critique I would like to add another metaphor to help clarify the demand that democratic tolerance makes of co-participants in the people. This requirement of the democratic process of reasoning together is what I will call the demand that we be “morally multilingual.” A person who is morally multilingual will possess the ability to make a case for political policy in language and logic that is familiar to a different neighbor, even if it is foreign to the comprehensive doctrine of the person making the case. This call for morally multilingual participants does not assume that we all agree on political issues, and that these agreements only need to be accessed by rephrasing political conclusions in the moral language of our interlocutors. It assumes that we disagree radically about the nature of reality, about the good life for humans, and about the political policy that is derived from these premises. The call to be morally multilingual is a strategy for dealing with those radical disagreements; we are more likely to come to agreement if, in reasoning with each other, we adopt the vocabulary, concepts, and logic of our conversation partner.

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Notice that democratic tolerance, immanent critique, and the ability to be morally multilingual imply a position on the permissibility of private citizens’ use of religious reasons in public policy debate. Against arguments that John Rawls and Richard Rorty made in a previous generation (and subsequently modified, in light of criticism from Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff), I take it that such reference to religion or another kind of comprehensive doctrine must be allowed in democratic conversation for the private citizen, i.e., for one who serves in no official public capacity.³ Jürgen Habermas argues for similar capacities and dispositions in democratic moral agents in his article “Religion in the Public Sphere,”⁴ and his argument also assumes the permissibility of reference to religion in political discourse. When Habermas speaks of the need for secular citizens to be open to religious intuition, and of the need for religious citizens to be willing to translate these intuitions into other moral languages, he echoes both the immanent critique that Stout describes and also the demands of democratic tolerance to which I point.⁵ For Habermas, the use of religious reasons must be allowed for private citizens in public, political discourse.

This second moral stance required by the task of *e pluribus unum* will likely also require a capacity to live with irony, especially as it calls on people to be morally multilingual. Our democratic reasoning together toward political policy may have the ironic result of joining two people in support of a common political measure on the basis of radically different premises,

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⁵ Ibid., 8–10.
and for radically different reasons. The militant atheist may find herself marching in political protest arm-in-arm with a Southern Baptist motivated by a literalistic reading of the Bible. The democratic moral agent will be able to live with this incongruity, and will not seek to eradicate it by converting his or her co-participant from one comprehensive doctrine to another in an effort to homogenize the premises and the reasoning along with the virtues and the policy upon which different people come to an ironic agreement.

A third moral stance required by democratic governance follows from these two, which require hospitable assumptions about the different neighbor’s virtue and reasoning. Democracy requires that we assume that our co-participants in the law’s creation will be motivated by their virtues and by the (sometimes ironic) process of reasoning together to identify needed political reforms and to support good policy. That is, one must assume that one’s different neighbor has the capacity to identify and endorse good law, meaning law that is reasonable and effectively addresses actual social problems. At this stage, the concrete democratic task of policy-making is at hand. The people must fashion the law that will govern them. To do so together, we must assume that our neighbors are capable of possessing reasons and virtues that will move them to endorse particular policies. The first two moral stances enumerated above are prerequisites of this third posture. If I am to assume that my different neighbor is capable of identifying and endorsing good law, I must first assume that he or she is capable of possessing the virtues that would incline him or her to such identification and endorsement. In addition, if I am to assume that my different neighbor is capable of identifying and endorsing good law made by the people, I must assume that he or she is capable of reasoning with the other people who participate in the law’s creation. Failure to make any of these three assumptions about moral possibilities of the different neighbor—regarding her virtue, reasoning, and policy positions—will prevent me from becoming one with my neighbor in the sense required by democratic politics.
These three stances are distinctive of democratic tolerance, and they are postures toward the different neighbor that libertarian tolerance neither requires nor encourages. These three moral postures toward the different neighbor are *democratic* because they are necessary for the establishment of one coherent subject of political action out of a society comprising vastly different individuals and groups. That is, these moral stances facilitate the creation of “the people,” the collective singular noun that democracy elevates as its sovereign. These three moral stances are elements of *tolerance* insofar as each is a feature of the inclination to think, act, and feel in hospitable ways toward the different neighbor. But notice that they go beyond the minimal requirements of libertarian tolerance. To possess libertarian tolerance is simply to accept and permit the existence of the different neighbor. Individuals who possess libertarian tolerance will refrain from burning crosses on their neighbors’ land. States that codify libertarian tolerance in positive law will prohibit the drowning of people suspected to be witches. These minimal measures may reflect an inclination toward tolerance, but they do nothing to foster the sovereign people imagined by the normative ideal of people rule. People who possess libertarian tolerance as opposed to democratic tolerance will fail to become a coherent subject of political action; their moral posture toward the different neighbor will be one that perpetuates an atmosphere of division, even if it grudgingly admits that the neighbor should not be killed or oppressed because of her or his difference. Such tolerance is better suited to the workings of a libertarian republic than it is to a democracy, insofar as constituents in a libertarian republic can take their disagreements to a voting booth, and avoid the difficult business of creating a political consensus from a pluralistic people.

It is clear to me that Dewey and Niebuhr may have extended a libertarian tolerance to each other, but they failed miserably in terms of possessing and being guided by democratic tolerance in their public quarrel. They met the minimal standards of libertarian tolerance in that
they did not seek to silence, harass, or kill each other because of their difference in comprehensive doctrines. But their tolerance of each other did nothing more than meet this standard. More specifically, each failed to assume that the comprehensive doctrine of the other was capable of instilling in the other the virtues necessary for participation in democratic life. Dewey regarded religious supernaturalism as a basic obstacle to be overcome in the quest for democratic renewal. Following David Hume and other Enlightenment philosophers, Dewey suspected that supernatural religion encourages habits of passivity, deference, and submission to external authority. Dewey’s position was that if Niebuhr was to be a good participant in democratic life, his references to God must be jettisoned in favor of paeans to the social potential resident in human intelligence. Recall a quotation to which I made reference in Chapter 4, originally written in the heat of the Dewey/Niebuhr exchange of the mid-1930s.

“Those contemporary theologians who are interested in social change and who at the same time depreciate human intelligence and effort in behalf of the supernatural, are riding two horses that are going in opposite directions.” Niebuhr’s default assumption about Dewey was the same. His book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* is an extended reflection on the inadequacy of “modern bourgeois liberalism” as a foundation for democracy. It was, according to Niebuhr, an ironic mistake of history that democratic forms of government developed out of such a naïve worldview as the one Dewey represented. This irony would be corrected, of course, when these bourgeois liberals saw the light and embraced an Augustinian vision of the sinful self and the political theology to which it logically leads. The only adequate and durable foundation for a democratic society, according to Niebuhr’s perspective, is this hardened Augustinian realism. In a word, Dewey and Niebuhr failed the crucial test of democratic tolerance. They failed to assume that the co-participant in democratic life could

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cultivate the requisite virtues. This attention to the perceived shortcomings of each other’s comprehensive doctrines also prevented them from reasoning together toward concrete policy. The two most important 20th century American theorists of democracy weren’t even able to pursue the goal of *e pluribus unum* in their engagement with each other; they were so fixated on their contrasting comprehensive doctrines that they never had a chance to reason together, or to consider their common ground on political policy.

This failure is even more unsettling given that these two writers reflected explicitly on the need for tolerance in the modern West to move beyond what I’ve called its libertarian version. Dewey’s reflections on tolerance are a case in point. In *The Public and Its Problems*, he gives readers a typically naturalistic account of the development of tolerance in the modern West. He notes that freedom of “a purely private area of consciousness” was born of modifications to the social environment, particularly “institutional change, political and ecclesiastic.” Although he welcomes the institutional change, and the new freedom and political policy that it initiates, he seeks something more. “Even yet, however, toleration in matters of judgment and belief is largely a negative matter. We agree to leave one another alone (within limits) more from recognition of evil consequences which have resulted from the opposite course rather than from any profound belief in its positive social beneficence.” A better approach, according to Dewey, would be to value difference in matters of judgment and belief, and to trust that these differences can yield new and better habits. His comments on the “superficial” nature of modern tolerance dovetail with his concept of inquiry; he goes on to make a case for the value of seeking out new experiences and communication, so as to revise

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8 Ibid., 50–1.

9 Ibid., 51.
human knowledge and habit toward a more democratic society. On paper, then, he calls for a
deeper tolerance than that which he identified in early 20th century Western culture. He seeks a
kind of tolerance that will be vigilantly open to the possibility that all kinds of different
worldviews can produce democratic habits. In his interactions with Niebuhr, though, he fell
short of this goal, insofar as he presumed that Niebuhr’s supernaturalism would be incapable of
producing a good democratic moral agent, and insofar as he failed to move his conversation
with Niebuhr toward political topics.

Of course, Niebuhr follows Dewey in this respect as well. Like Dewey, Niebuhr failed to
embody the democratic tolerance that his written reflections on the topic recommend. In The
Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, he castigates the modern Western attitude of
tolerance, invoking Gilbert Chesterton’s dismissive adage: “[t]olerance is the virtue of people
who do not believe anything.”10 To be sure, he admits that this mistaken and naïve tolerance
carries beneficial consequences. But in these reflections, he seeks a deeper form of the virtue,
based on something more than liberal indifference. For Niebuhr, “modern democratic tolerance
was made possible partly because a bourgeois culture had created a spirit of indifference
toward the most characteristic affirmations of historic forms of religious faith. It is a question,
however, whether the health of a culture can be maintained upon the basis of such a shallow
unity.”11 Niebuhr urges a form of tolerance that would achieve a deeper unity, and one that
would meet the needs of truly democratic society despite the challenges of pluralism.

“Democratic life,” he writes, “requires a spirit of tolerant cooperation between individuals and

10 Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a
Critique of Its Traditional Defence (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1944), 130.

11 Ibid.
groups.”¹² And yet, when it came time to imagine how this cooperation was to be forged, Niebuhr insisted that the most adequate basis for this cooperative tolerance was religious humility.¹³ He was convinced that a liberal, secular perspective such as the one he attributed to Dewey was incapable of producing durable humility, and this conviction undercut his abilities to pursue and establish any kind of political unity with Dewey. In his public interactions with Dewey, Niebuhr fell short of his own call for a deeper form of tolerance, because he assumed that Dewey’s comprehensive doctrine could not lead one to develop the virtues necessary to sustain democratic life, and because he never moved his conversation with Dewey to political questions.

If Dewey and Niebuhr failed to live up to the deeper forms of tolerance endorsed in their own work, they also overlooked resources for democratic tolerance in the intellectual traditions to which they belonged. In Dewey’s case, the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism contains an analogue to the spirit of democratic tolerance in its epistemology. William James, whose work molded Dewey decisively in the latter’s early career, articulates a theory of knowledge that he called “radical empiricism.” For James, this phrase indicates a method and a source for the gathering of human knowledge. “To be radical,” he writes, “an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced.”¹⁴ This pithy statement on the nature of radical empiricism conceals a concept of enormous importance in James’ theory of knowledge. His discussion of radical empiricism would lead him to the position that selves and ideas are all in states of process, rather than fixed, isolable entities. It would also

¹² Ibid., 151–2.

¹³ Ibid., 131–8.

¹⁴ William James, Essays in Radical Empiricism (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 42.
lead him to dismantle hard distinctions between subject and object in the dynamics of experience that are productive of evolving knowledge. But for my purposes, a less monumental feature of James’ definition of radical empiricism is most relevant. That is the fact that James’ pragmatist theory of knowledge held that all experience must be assumed to possess the capacity to produce or revise existing knowledge. For James, one must consider all experiences as potentially valid sources for new knowledge. No experience can be ruled out of court, simply because it does not fit with standard ideas of authoritative epistemological sources. Experiences are innocent until proven guilty, according to the radical empiricist. This is the epistemological spirit that led James to explore mescal, séances, and hypnotism as avenues of experience that had the potential to produce new, more effective knowledge. If one transplants this “innocent until proven guilty” spirit from epistemology to the ethics of democracy, one arrives at the assumption that I argue is at the heart of democratic tolerance: one assumes that all comprehensive doctrines are capable of producing democratic moral agents. Of course, one could still say of my hypothetical Catholic neighbor that he or she obviously lacks democratic virtue; but one would still hold that Catholicism itself is capable of instilling in that person democratic virtue. Although this basic presumption was present in the pragmatist epistemology that informed his philosophical framework, Dewey failed to transfer its spirit to his democratic ethics, and also failed to be guided by it in his exchange with Reinhold Niebuhr.

Similarly, Niebuhr’s intellectual tradition of modern Augustinian Protestantism provides robust resources to develop a spirit of deeper tolerance that assumes the possibilities of democratic virtue in the different neighbor. Niebuhr was highly influenced by the work of Søren

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Kierkegaard, a 19th century existentialist Christian with unmistakable Augustinian tendencies. His references to Kierkegaard in both volumes of The Nature and Destiny of Man are almost entirely favorable and praiseworthy. And yet, I think Niebuhr missed an important feature of Kierkegaard’s reflections on the dual love command in his seminal writing on Christian ethics, Works of Love. For Kierkegaard, the dual love command calls on human beings to love God and neighbor in distinctive ways. These include, but are not limited to, understanding love as duty, loving God first and above all else, extending love to all neighbors in radical, uncompromising equality, and in love to remain in debt to the beloved. However, the feature of Kierkegaard’s reflections on love that is most pertinent to my discussion of Niebuhr and democratic tolerance comes under the heading of the “up-building” work that love accomplishes. For Kierkegaard, love recognizes the divine presence in the neighbor, and therefore identifies love in the neighbor. This love is present in all, and not because of any work done by human agents. This identification of love perpetuates and nurtures the presence of love in the neighbor. “The one who loves,” Kierkegaard writes, “presupposes that love is in the other person’s heart and by this very presupposition builds up love in him—from the ground up, provided, of course, that in love he presupposes its presence in the ground.” What is worth noticing here is the presupposition that love makes about the neighbor. Kierkegaard’s Christian ethics holds that love presumes the presence and possibility of love in every other neighbor. As I have argued above, democratic

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16 I find Kierkegaard’s Augustinian tendencies in his desire to ground all love in love of God, in the attention that he pays to the problem of self-love in the moral life, and in his simultaneous attraction and repulsion to erotic love.


19 Ibid., 216–7. Italics in the original.
tolerance makes a parallel assumption, in a different context. Democratic tolerance presumes the capacity for democratic virtue in the different neighbor. This feature of democratic tolerance has a clear analogue in Kierkegaard’s reflections on the work of love in the context of the Christian love command. Despite his debts to Kierkegaard, Niebuhr failed to take this insight on love’s up-building work and apply it to the realm of democratic politics.

With these reflections on the nature of democratic tolerance (and on the failure of Dewey and Niebuhr to possess and be guided by such tolerance) in mind, I would like to conclude with a word on the proper status of comprehensive doctrines in the political discourse of a pluralistic society. It may seem that the foregoing comments imagine comprehensive doctrines as *adiaphora* in political discourse. *Adiaphora* is a term taken from the history of Reformation thought, meaning “matters of indifference.” In Reformation history, such matters including “the provisional continuation in Protestant lands of married clergy, communion in both kinds,” and “elements of the Catholic cultus and theology,” including priestly vestments, have been considered *adiaphora* in various periods.20 On each occasion, participants in the conversation argued that these social, theological, and liturgical policies were indifferent in that they had no bearing on salvation. Therefore, they could be permitted to exist without rendering serious harm to individual Christians. To be *adiaphora* is to be of inconsequential or negligible importance for the ultimate goals of the community.

Now it may seem that my discussion of democratic tolerance casts comprehensive doctrines as *adiaphora* in the context of political deliberation. That is, it may appear that the religious and philosophical frameworks that contain our intellectual premises about the nature of human beings and the world in which they live are inconsequential to the task of forging the people, deliberating together, and creating the law that governs us. One may get the sense from

my reflections on democratic tolerance that moral agents must hasten to move the
conversation beyond the level of comprehensive doctrines, in order to get down to the
important business of cooperative self-legislation. However, this is not the case. Comprehensive
doctrines are not “matters indifferent” in political conversation, and moral agents who possess
democratic tolerance ought not to see them as adiaphora. The religious and philosophical
worldviews that democratic interlocutors bring to political discussion matter deeply. They are
the sources of the intellectual premises, reasoning processes, and civic virtues that guide all
participants in the conversation. Moral agents who aspire to democratic ideals must not
relegate these worldviews to the margins of political conversation, as they bear enormous
capacity to influence and persuade the people who hold them. In addition, comprehensive
doctrines matter deeply to their possessors because they provide insights on ultimate questions
of human existence. This is especially true in the case of religious comprehensive doctrines.
Religious worldviews inform their possessors on questions relating to salvation, the existence of
an after-life, the possibility of reunion and reconciliation with deceased loved ones, and so forth.
These are not matters that can be pushed to the fringes of any conversation, for the people who
hold them. It would be condescending to claim that the religious worldview of one’s
conversation partner is a matter of indifference in any context. Such condescension ill befits
democratic moral agents.

Therefore, I submit that the democratic moral agent must not regard his different
neighbor’s comprehensive doctrine as adiaphora, but rather as MacGuffin. I borrow the term
MacGuffin from literary criticism, the field in which it is most commonly used. Alfred Hitchcock’s
understanding of the term, which he conveyed in the form of a brief story, is both widely cited
and informative. Christopher D. Morris explains that Hitchcock’s narrative description of the
MacGuffin involved “a man traveling on an English train,” who “notices a package on the shelf above another man.”

“What’s that package?” asked the first man.
“Oh, that’s a MacGuffin,” replied his companion.
“What’s a MacGuffin?”
“It’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish highlands.”
“But there are no lions in the Scottish highlands.”
“Then that’s no MacGuffin.”

Film critics find various MacGuffins throughout Hitchcock’s works—including wedding rings, aircraft formulas, government secrets, and so on—and often consider them “plot pretexts.” Morris departs from the standard interpretation of Hitchcock’s various MacGuffins as plot pretexts, and argues instead for a deconstructionist take, which sees the MacGuffin as a sign:

“[I]ke all signs, the wedding ring is not what it is.”

While literary criticism attends to the function of the MacGuffin in a text’s plot, I am interested in the role of comprehensive doctrines in democratic conversation. The gloss that Hitchcock offers on his own explanatory narrative of the MacGuffin is crucial for my purposes. The MacGuffin, he explains, is “something that the characters in the film care a lot about, but the audience doesn’t worry about it too much.” To me, this description of the attitudes and concerns of the parties involved in the MacGuffin story encapsulates well the proper stance democratic moral agents must assume toward the comprehensive doctrines of their co-participants in political discourse. Like the characters in Hitchcock’s story, democratic moral agents “care a lot about” the comprehensive doctrines that produce the premises, processes of reasoning, virtues, and political positions they hold. Each democratic moral agent who engages

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21 Christopher D. Morris, The Hanging Figure: On Suspense and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock (Westport, C.T.: Praeger, 2002), 40.

22 Ibid., 42.

23 Ibid., 40.
in political discourse cares deeply about all the comprehensive doctrines involved in the discourse, including her own, and those of all of her conversation partners. This care allows the democratic moral agent to assume the possibilities of democratic virtue in the different neighbor, and it also produces interlocutors who can engage in immanent critique and be “morally multilingual.” So in one sense, democratic moral agents must assume the position of the characters in Hitchcock’s story in relation to the comprehensive doctrine of their conversation partners. And yet, like the audience members in Hitchcock’s story, democratic moral agents will locate their primary interest in a different drama. They will attend mainly to the plot of forming “the people,” that coherent subject of political action responsible for its own legislation. They will always bear in mind that democracy requires a conversation about social problems, priorities, and policy. So in another sense, democratic moral agents must assume the position of the audience members in Hitchcock’s story. Understanding comprehensive doctrines as MacGuffins, democratic moral agents will recognize the importance of their neighbors’ worldviews, but will not allow differences in worldviews to stall or prevent political discourse. Adopting the dual perspectives of both the characters and the audience members in Hitchcock’s story, the democratic moral agent will be able to live with the ironic incongruities that mark political agreements born of divergent premises and processes of reasoning.

If John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr had regarded each other’s comprehensive doctrines as MacGuffins, perhaps they would have moved their public conversation beyond the metaphysical quarrel it failed to transcend. Perhaps they would have noticed the ironic similarities of democratic virtue implied by their contrasting worldviews. Perhaps they would have engaged in the novel task of political deliberation, and turned their attention to the peoples’ work of policy creation. Perhaps, eventually, they would have joined together in
support of labor unions, collective bargaining, and revision to moral ideals of property ownership that have been endowed for too long with unquestionable authority.
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