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A Symposium: Morality Reconsidered

*Decision Procedures, Moral  
Philosophy, and Despair:  
The Response of Virtue Ethics  
and the Connoisseur*

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In 2014, Claes Ryn wrote an intriguing novel titled *A Desperate Man* which dealt with the protagonist's reaction to what he understood to be the moral decadence of the West in general and the United States of America in particular.<sup>1</sup> Ryn followed this novel with an essay titled "How Desperate Should We Be?" in which he offers an explanation of the intentions behind his writing and the purpose of the novel.<sup>2</sup> Both the novel and the accompanying essay are quite provocative and suggest a series of questions that are central to the academic study of moral and political philosophy but are also relevant to considerations concerning moral and political action in circumstances of moral upheaval. These questions include concerns about the relation between moral philosophy and moral action, between the works of moral philosophers and the moral choices of a political community, between moral philosophy and political philosophy, and between moral philosophy and the political actions of a political community. Ryn is also interested in the

*Ryn's questions  
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of desperation  
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definitive  
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<sup>1</sup> Claes Ryn, *A Desperate Man* (Washington, D.C.: Athena Books, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Claes Ryn, "How Desperate Should We Be?" *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2015), 5-30.

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*Virtue ethicists have provided clear accounts of the relationship between moral philosophy and moral action.*

perennial question of ‘what is to be done?’ Though this question is more often associated with radical and/or neo-Marxist theorists of praxis, Ryn appears to believe that, given the dire moral conditions of the Western world, it is imperative that some other kind of answer be given.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I will address several of Ryn’s questions concerning the relationship between theory and practice and between moral and political philosophy, while also examining some of the more specific claims that he makes in his descriptive and prescriptive essay concerning the state of moral and political philosophy and the state of moral decadence in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> I will suggest that some of the questions that he asks, such as ‘what is to be done?’ are not susceptible of definitive answers, especially answers provided by academic moral and political philosophers. However, I do believe that the relationship between theory and practice and between moral and political philosophy can be and has been adequately addressed in some manner by scholars, specifically in the last century by philosophers like Michael Oakeshott, Gilbert Ryle, Michael Polanyi, and the variety of thinkers associated with what has come to be called virtue ethics.<sup>5</sup> Like Ryn, these writers have all rejected the relevance and, in most cases, possibility of a moral philosophy which is composed of a single decision procedure productive of definitive and probative rules of conduct, instead insisting upon a morality of practical reason, contextual judgment, and character.

Before examining the various questions that Ryn’s novel and essay raise, it would be useful to place both the novel and the essay in an appropriate historical context. In terms of the novel, Ryn writes that he wanted “to set forth a philosophi-

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<sup>3</sup> For the most well-known examples, see Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael Katz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Joe Fineburg (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> In dealing with these questions, I will hew more closely to Ryn’s explanatory essay than to his novel, but will refer to the novel when relevant.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949); and Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991). Their respective discussions of tacit knowledge, ‘knowing how,’ and practical knowledge all specifically address the relation between theory/philosophy and practice in insightful and compelling ways.

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cal argument . . . [about] the predicament of civilized persons who are caught in historical circumstances that seem to conspire against everything that they value."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the crux of the novel is the moral and political question that confronts the main character, Richard Bittenberg, concerning what, if anything, he is to do about what he has adjudged to be the moral and political decay of his own country. The genre of the man out of his time, especially the man whose moral commitments seem to have become out of date in circumstances of rapid moral, social, and political change, is actually central to the American literary tradition and has been so since the beginning of the American Republic. Though not merely concerned with civilizational decadence, the Leatherstocking tales of James Fenimore Cooper exhibit an explicit nostalgia for a dying native civilization. Nathaniel Hawthorne's works focus on the decadence and hypocrisy of late Puritanism. Henry Adams, in a novel which is a pessimist's version of Ryn's, offers an account of American social and political life in *Democracy* which suggests that the question, 'what is to be done?', is moot because American life has already decayed beyond repair. William Faulkner, in almost all of his novels, presents characters whose moral sensibilities have been formed by an older age which no longer exists. And, finally, even contemporary postmodernist writers like Thomas Pynchon portray their paranoid protagonists as being opposed to some mysterious malignant moral force that is destroying an older American ideal. The previous list is not meant to suggest that Ryn's novel is not original, but to suggest that, from the earliest days of the Republic, there has been an aspect of the American political, social, and aesthetic consciousness which is well aware of and disturbed by the rapid and often radical changes which have occurred in the American polity and in American mores. This history then also undermines the novelty of the character Bittenberg's moral perceptions, though perhaps not of his particular circumstances.

*Ryn's literary concerns shared by other figures such as Cooper, Hawthorne, and Faulkner.*

Like the novel, the essay also is a representation of a particular genre in American academic culture. The genre, like the history of the novel of moral alienation, stretches back to the origins of the American polity, but I will focus on more recent manifestations of it. Since World War II, a political movement

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<sup>6</sup> Ryn, "How Desperate?," 5, 7.

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Ryn's  
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conservatism.

which has described itself as conservative has emerged as a significant force in American political life.<sup>7</sup> Alongside of this political movement, there has developed a group of explicitly conservative professors, usually associated with political theory, intellectual history, or literature, which has existed in an uneasy alliance with the political movement, while also being marked by internal fissures concerning the nature of conservatism and the character of the American political tradition. Since the end of the war, there has been a long and variously compelling series of books, essays, and shorter commentaries about the decadence of American political culture. The works compose a long conversation concerning the question, 'when did the world go to Hell in a hand basket?'<sup>8</sup> The primary presupposition here is that the barbarians are already at the gate, and something needs to be done immediately about it (though some argue that the damage has already been done and their work reads more like a eulogy than a call to arms). In some ways, then, this type of approach is not really very conservative at all because, by the time the point of desperation has been reached, it is often believed that there is nothing left to conserve, or perhaps that it is impossible to conserve whatever is valuable.<sup>9</sup> This is one example of despair, but it is not exactly Professor Ryn's type of desperation because Ryn seems to believe that something can still be done. But what was and is broken?

According to Ryn, one of the primary difficulties facing Western civilization generally and America specifically is a mistaken conception of both the character and content of moral philosophy. He writes that "what is questionable is the habit

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<sup>7</sup> For the definitive history of both the political and academic sides of this movement, see George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute), 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). But also see the works of Robert Nisbet, M. E. Bradford, George Carey, Willmoore Kendall, Paul Gottfried, Sam Francis, and many others.

<sup>9</sup> M. E. Bradford insisted upon calling himself a reactionary and not a conservative precisely because he felt that there was little worth conserving. Here, where nostalgia for a golden age replaces the idea of conservation of what is valued, we come closer to the point at which reactionary impulse and radical impulse tend to merge into the longing for total revolution. See M. E. Bradford, *The Reactionary Imperative* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1990), Preface.

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of defining morality as adherence to a preexisting rational or ideal standard."<sup>10</sup> Or, in another iteration, "the problem is the assumption that moral universality is static, unhistorical, and ethereal."<sup>11</sup> Ryn is certainly correct in asserting that one of the most compelling strands of the Western moral tradition takes the task of moral philosophy to be the construction of a rational, single, and universal decision procedure from which other moral rules can and should be derived and which would provide the answers to all questions concerning moral actions. The most influential versions of this conception of moral philosophy are currently, on the one hand, Kantian deontology which relies on some sort of universalizable expression of duty, and, on the other, consequentialism which is often dependent upon some version of act or rule utility. Ryn's analysis of this tradition is accurate as far as it goes. Adherents of both deontology and consequentialism understand moral philosophy to be concerned with making normative or prescriptive claims which ought not only to inform, but govern moral choices. These claims take the form of rule-like statements which are supposed to then guide all individual and collective moral choices. Ryn rejects this rigid conception of moral philosophy because of the particularity of the circumstances which condition any specific moral choice or action. As he suggests, "the present situation is never a replica of any previous situation, . . . improvisation and innovation are always required."<sup>12</sup> In this context of continuous practical novelty, there are no rules for following rules, and there are no rules for ultimately determining what to do when rules conflict. Thus, it is not at all apparent that the generation of rules should be expected to produce uniform moral or political actions.

However, though I share Ryn's misgivings about the possibility or desirability of a rule-based universal moral and, by implication, political philosophy, it is unclear to me that he has offered any reasonable alternative, nor has he recognized that there have been, in fact, plenty of moral and political philosophers in the past century or two who have rejected the notion that a single decision procedure (e.g., the categorical impera-

*Ryn rightly rejects as inadequate deontological and consequentialist moral theorizing.*

*Ryn overlooks developments in modern moral philosophy that address concerns similar to his.*

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<sup>10</sup> Ryn, "How Desperate?," 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

tive, utility calculation, etc.) could be discovered which would solve the problems of moral and political action. In fact, three of the major movements in Twentieth Century Anglophone moral philosophy rejected the traditionally normative character of the field altogether, insisting instead on a meta-ethics which examines the meaning of moral language, while a fourth, virtue ethics, sought and still seeks to appropriate and reinvigorate a neo-Aristotelian concentration on the contextual character of moral action (which seems like exactly what Ryn is seeking).<sup>13</sup>

Those moral philosophers concerned with what came to be called meta-ethics were interested in examining what our moral languages are doing, and, for the most part, rejected the prescriptivism of the deontologists and consequentialists. Their answers to questions about language and usage were quite diverse, but their answer to the question, 'what do moral philosophers do?' was that moral philosophers clarify confusions concerning our use of moral language. They do not tell us how to be better human beings, but instead answer the question, 'What are we doing when we say, e.g., 'x' is right or wrong?' Different answers were given to these sorts of questions. G. E. Moore thought that moral sensibility was a result of some sort of intuition of goodness, which was much like an intuition of the color yellow. His was a fairly conventional answer, but it did not issue in moral prescriptions, though some, like the Bloomsbury Group, mistakenly believed it did.<sup>14</sup> Another answer was given by C. L. Stevenson who insisted that moral approval or disapproval was merely an expression of a more general emotional state of approval or disapproval,

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<sup>13</sup> For an examination of meta-ethics in the twentieth century, see G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1967). For an elaboration of virtue ethics, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1984). Further, the whole Hegelian tradition, including British Idealists like Bradley, Collingwood, and Oakeshott, has also rejected abstract ideological and normative moral and political philosophy, but I will leave that aside because Professor Ryn's own writing on these questions is indebted in part to the tradition of Hegelian Idealism. For the British Idealists, see F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (especially "My Station and Its Duties"), 2nd Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 160-213; R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 169-176; 221-231; 304-306; Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 5-42; 465-487.

<sup>14</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

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but once again there was no specifically prescriptive version of emotivism that was offered.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Richard Hare argued that what makes moral language moral was precisely that it is prescriptive. Interestingly enough, however, Hare initially offered no actual specific version of a prescriptive moral system but merely stated that moral judgments are inherently prescriptive.<sup>16</sup> All of these meta-ethical theories suffer from serious shortcomings, not the least of which is that none of them actually offers a theory of what distinguishes moral language from other sorts of intuitional, emotive, or prescriptive language. However, none suffers from Ryn's critique of being abstract and universal in a normative way. It is likely that Ryn might suggest, following one of the most common subjects of his critiques, that they fiddle while Rome burns, but at least they are not commanding us to fiddle along with them.

What is more puzzling than Ryn's neglect of meta-ethics is his inattention to the emergence first in Britain and later in America of virtue ethics. Beginning with G. E. M. Anscombe's essay "Modern Moral Philosophy" which was published in 1958, those associated with virtue ethics have maintained a constant critique of the ideological style of ethics which Ryn rejects. Anscombe even expresses doubt that moral philosophy is a meaningful subject under circumstances in which it is understood to be an abstract, universalizing activity.<sup>17</sup> Instead of asking the question, 'What ought I to do?', moral philosophers should be asking the question, 'Who ought I to be?'.<sup>18</sup> There are three central concepts to virtue ethics (virtue, prudence, and happiness/flourishing), none of which entails the development of a rule-based morality, and all of which combine some sense of universality with the recognition that moral action always takes place within specific circumstances and, thus,

*Ryn neglects potential allies in contemporary virtue ethicists.*

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<sup>15</sup> C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

<sup>16</sup> R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

<sup>17</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers Volume III* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 26. For other examples of virtue ethics, see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> In this brief section, I will offer an account of virtue ethics which is indebted primarily to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, but also refers to other accounts of practical reason. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, especially chs. 11-15.

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*The centrality  
of prudence in  
virtue ethics.*

moral judgment is necessarily circumscribed by those conditions. These three concepts are related to a teleological concept of humanness. That is to say, human beings, like knives, watches, houses, and other things, have a specific purpose, or specific purposes, and, when they are acting toward the fulfillment of those purposes, they are good, just like a knife is a good knife when it is cutting things effectively. The virtues are those things internal to human action, because they have been made habitual, that allow human beings to act reliably in a morally good way. Being honest, therefore, is not merely the best policy, it is something that is learned and becomes part of an individual's character. Telling the truth once does not make one honest, and, if one is known for one's honesty, it is likely that telling a lie once will call for an explanation, not a condemnation. The virtues lead to happiness, not in the sense that one satisfies one's desires by being virtuous but in the sense that happiness or human flourishing consists of doing well what human beings are supposed to be doing. How can one tell in any circumstance what one situated in that circumstance ought to do? Prudence, or practical reason is needed to determine, not merely what one ought to do, but what *I*, being the kind of person that I am with the kind of character that I have developed, ought to do. Practical reason, then, is concerned with the distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that.'<sup>19</sup> 'Knowing that' is connected largely to factual and theoretical matters, while 'knowing how' is not necessarily a capacity to answer a question correctly but to engage in a practice intelligently or skillfully. One knows how to play chess, or to ride a bike, or to participate in politics, or to speak a language, while one knows that Stockholm is the capital of Sweden or that the Cowboys won the Super Bowl in 1972.

*Virtue ethics  
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and consequential-  
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Virtue ethics posits an epistemological traditionalism that is connected to a more general claim about human nature and the connection between virtue and happiness. There are important theoretical difficulties associated with virtue ethics, with one of the central problems related to the question of the ultimate

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<sup>19</sup> As Gilbert Ryle writes, "We learn *how* by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by any lessons in . . . theory, [indeed] intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary, theorizing is one practice amongst others." See Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, 41, 26.

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telos of human being, especially given the diversity of modern political communities. Nonetheless, virtue ethics offers a compelling non-rule based account of ethical life, while also suggesting that the connection between moral philosophy and moral action is most likely not going to be explicitly directive or prescriptive. Thus, it is not clear at all that a change in the direction of academic moral philosophy will produce a change in the direction of practical moral and political judgments.

However, Ryn is quite suggestive that there is a strong link between the moral philosophy of the day and the desperate situation in which we find ourselves. His attribution of the genesis of the problem is quite surprising and seemingly undermines his claim about the intimate link between moral philosophy and moral action. When he claims that the failure of moral philosophy that we see currently can be dated to Plato and infects almost all Western moral and political philosophy, he sounds somewhat like Heidegger.<sup>20</sup> If the problems of contemporary ideological morality and politics can be laid at the feet of Plato, then we went to Hell in a hand basket long before college professors started growing beards and wearing jeans to work (which, in the novel was one of Bittenberg's prime pieces of evidence of moral decadence).<sup>21</sup> However, his claims about Platonic and early Christian moral philosophy raise significant questions concerning the actual relations between the practice of moral or political philosophy and the practice of moral or political action. It is not at all evident that there is an obvious connection, but, in any case, this would be a question for intellectual historians and would be a question that would

*Ryn's criticism of Plato has a surprising affinity with the philosophy of Heidegger.*

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<sup>20</sup> Ryn, "How Desperate?," 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> It is not clear whether the protagonist Bittenberg's priggish obsession with other people's clothing was meant to be a positive quality or merely a characteristic which signaled his alienation, but kvetching about professors who wear jeans, have long hair and a beard brings to mind Allan Bloom's risible notion that all contemporary problems in the West can be laid at the feet of Mick Jagger. It is like someone from early in the twentieth century blaming moral problems on the lack of stiff collars and top hats. After all, how precipitous was that fall from the elegance of Lord Salisbury (who did have a beard, though) to John F. Kennedy and his Rat Pack look. In any case, the most important problems facing universities these days have been caused both by politicization on the part of the academic left, who think of academia as a re-education camp, and commercialization on the part of the academic right, who think of academia as a grand exercise in vocational training.

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Ryn's  
interpretation  
of Machiavelli  
too influenced  
by Straussian  
reading of  
Machiavelli.

be answered in very different ways in different ages.

Ryn contrasts the moral rigidity of Plato with the flexibility and suppleness of Machiavelli, or at least a Machiavelli in troubled times. However, his use of Machiavelli is neither necessary nor academically complete. First, Ryn is much too concerned with the Straussian interpretation of Machiavelli as a radical teacher of evil. Outside the conservative movement, the Straussians are widely dismissed as being almost completely unhistorical and, therefore, wholly unreliable in their characterization of Machiavelli. Most academic historians of Renaissance political thought now consider Machiavelli to be a central figure in the revival of civic humanist republicanism, not an amoral defender of proto-realpolitik.<sup>22</sup>

Second, it is not clear that Machiavelli should be even classified as a philosopher or historian. In fact, Ryn admits that "Machiavelli is not a philosopher concerned to write with precision and to include every relevant nuance and qualification."<sup>23</sup> For many, the lack of precision and nuance would be, in itself, evidence that Machiavelli is not really a philosopher but more of a polemicist. Further, Machiavelli's interest in the past was solely in the service of his present. Whiggism in historiography, as Butterfield pointed out, is not merely progressivism but presentism in any form, including Machiavelli's neo-classical cyclical view of the past and Heidegger's decadent view.<sup>24</sup> These observations raise further questions about the connection of history as an authentically autonomous field of understanding and explanation, and the exploration of the past in terms of what lessons it can teach to the present. These two ways of thinking about the past are logically independent of each other, and the latter necessarily perverts the former to its own purposes because it asks a logically different kind of question. Instead of, 'how do I make this event and subsequent changes related to it intelligible?', it

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<sup>22</sup> For the most well-known critiques of Strauss and elaborations of Machiavelli as republican, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and the essays on Machiavelli by Skinner in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume II: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118-212.

<sup>23</sup> Ryn, "How Desperate?," 17.

<sup>24</sup> Butterfield makes the point that Guicciardini was the more insightful historian because, compared with Machiavelli, Guicciardini was actually interested in the past for its own sake. Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 15-22, 94-96.

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asks, 'what can I find in the storehouse of past examples which will be useful to me in my current situation?'<sup>25</sup>

Ryn is actually interested in Machiavelli, not for philosophical or historical reasons, but for practical ones. According to Ryn, Machiavelli is important because he was capable of thinking about political action in times of moral crisis. Machiavelli, unlike other thinkers in the Western tradition, wrote about "the darker side of life" and concluded (along with Ryn, it seems) that "political good must be served very differently in times of great travail and danger than in peaceful circumstances."<sup>26</sup> It is certainly important for Ryn to suggest that things that might be deemed immoral and politically tyrannical during times of relative peace and harmony might also be necessary during times of disorder, political chaos, and moral decadence. However, he obviously does not have to go to Machiavelli, as St. Augustine or Hobbes would have been both sufficient and more philosophically systematic about such subjects.<sup>27</sup> In any case, the relevance of Machiavelli's apology for the uses of ruthlessness is questionable regarding the actions of Western governments over the past century or so. No one questions that the political leadership of the U.S. and Britain in World War II and the Cold War, and even in the current Global War on Terror, has been more than willing and able to do morally repugnant things. It is likely that Ryn does not agree with the purposes of many of these actions, and, of course, he rejects the language of abstract political and moral ideology in which such actions are defended, but that is the way that the Anglophone world speaks these days, and has spoken for a long time.<sup>28</sup>

*Ryn's interest  
in Machiavelli  
is merely  
practical.*

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of these distinctions, see Michael Oakeshott, *On History* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 1-48.

<sup>26</sup> Ryn, "How Desperate?," 18.

<sup>27</sup> One area in which Ryn and Machiavelli come together, and which might explain Ryn's preference for Machiavelli over St. Augustine or Hobbes, is in the notion that some sort of commitment to political action is inherently a part of what makes a person morally good, a commitment which plays no part in Augustine's or Hobbes' work.

<sup>28</sup> One of the most intriguing and ironic aspects of the American political tradition is that it has been, at least in part, anti-traditional from the time of the American War of Independence. It has been noted by many that the rhetoric of American politics has been ideological, while the actions have often been more traditional. See, among others, Kenneth B. McIntyre, "One Hand Clapping: The Reception of Oakeshott's Work by American Conservatives," in Corey

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This leads to a final observation, which is that, in asking ‘how desperate should one be?’, Ryn is asking a practical question and not an academic one. In this case, a university professor is certainly no more capable of answering the question than the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus. The novel presents a situation which is not necessarily as urgent as it is presented for several reasons. First, it is not obvious, and in fact it is quite unlikely that academic historians, philosophers, literature professors, et al. qua academic historians, philosophers, literature professors, et al. have any special expertise in the world of moral or political action. Of course, professors are not merely professors and many of them (us?) follow politics closely enough that we might have developed some expertise along the way, but it is not because of our academic studies. Therefore, the question, ‘How desperate should one be?’, like the related question ‘What is to be done?’, must be qualified by a great deal more circumstantial detail. ‘How desperate should *who* be?’ and ‘What is to be done by *whom*?’ are reasonable conditional adjustments. It is not immediately obvious to me that I, as a political theorist and intellectual historian, should be desperate, and it is less obvious what I, as a political theorist and intellectual historian, should do, even if I were to decide that the situation were desperate. As stated earlier, moral and political judgments have more of the character of connoisseurship than measurement, and there are no foolproof methods of getting things right. Those who are not connoisseurs (and there is no licensing for this type of thing) are not likely to get things right, and should most likely either leave things alone or start learning ‘how to.’

*Ryn's sense of desperation misinterprets the present and leaves little room for rational debate and assessment of circumstances.*

Second, Ryn’s conclusion that it is in fact a time to be desperate evokes an old conceptual problem that has plagued certain ways of thinking generally associated with the political left in the Western world. The problem is that of false consciousness and the implications for rational debate which such a concept entails. Ryn, like others who have despaired or, perhaps, more accurately, become desperate, must assume that those who do not read the situation in the same pessimistic light are blinded by some intellectual or moral flaw. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the desperate to maintain a seri-

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Abel, ed., *The Meanings of Oakeshott's Conservatism* (Exeter, U.K.: Imprint Academic, 2010), 264-267.

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ous commitment to political life because political life involves the necessity of taking others seriously. This becomes acutely problematic when one actually looks at American society from a longer perspective. For whatever reason, there is a general lack of desperation amongst the general population which might suggest several different things: actual satisfaction, apathy, true despair, or perhaps false consciousness.

However, the claim that the lack of despair involves false consciousness involves some rather dogmatic claims about the 'actual' situation. In the novel, it involves claims about a cabal called 'The System', which exists to perpetuate and strengthen itself through deliberate deception. This scenario is quite far-fetched, but is likely related to the equally dubious notion central to the novel concerning the ubiquity of the 'spontaneous conspiracy' in human history. Both notions manifest a confidence in the human capacity to act in extraordinarily complex situations in a concerted and highly rationalistic way, but, whether the American moral and political community is in a state of advanced decay<sup>29</sup> or whether Americans, like moral versions of fashion models, are merely in the process of exchanging old moral and political clothing for new raiment, incompetence, ignorance, and indifference are just as likely explanations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The question of decadence is dependent upon some notion either of progress (teleological or otherwise) or of an unchanging ideal. If one is merely ringing the changes, then the question of decadence is not necessarily relevant. For example, consider the breakdown of traditional marriage in the western world. From one perspective, i.e., from the perspective of those who tend to think of the nuclear family or even extended version of it as natural, it is obviously a breakdown and a dangerous one. However, it can certainly also be viewed as merely the substitution of a different way of thinking about what constitutes a family. Though sympathetic with the former, I am well aware that what is currently described as a 'traditional' family or marriage does not describe some immovable and unchanging institution, and does not really describe very well at all the character of family relations during the classical period in Greece and Rome. This problem of change and what counts as complete alteration is at the heart of what makes historical explanation such a difficult task.

<sup>30</sup> The novel presents the classic conundrum of destroying the Constitution in order to save it. In the novel, as in the American experiences in Vietnam and the Civil War, among others, the cure was most certainly worse than the disease. And, there was nothing authentically conservative about the coup plotters. Instead, they appeared to be classic idealists who created an idyllic pre-lapsarian America in their minds which had disappeared at some uncertain but recent time in the past and then appointed themselves to re-create it.