
A Symposium: Morality Reconsidered

How Desperate Should We Be?

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This article is based on an after-dinner speech given at the annual meeting of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters in June of 2014. The invitation had come from the president of the Academy, who had also proposed the above title, an allusion to my then-recent novel *A Desperate Man*. The structure and tone of the text is due to the setting for my remarks and my somewhat awkward assignment, which was to discuss the novel as a work of fiction and relate it to our historical situation. As the novel is relevant to the state of America and the Western world in many ways, I might have explored possible parallels between the stark, fictional circumstances of the narrative and our actual predicament, but I used the occasion primarily to set forth a philosophical argument. I concentrated on a philosophical problem that has long occupied me and that the novel raises in acute form. The topic is relevant to any historical circumstances, but trends in today's American society seem to me to give it urgency.

The subject is as large as it is difficult: the meaning or form of morality, particularly as it relates to politics. My concern is with what I consider a dubious tendency in Western moral philosophy since the ancient Greeks. That tendency seems to me detrimental to morality's ability to find its way in actual circumstances, especially in highly charged and hard-to-understand situations. What is questionable is the habit of defining

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The problem is an abstract notion of moral authority.

morality as adherence to a preexisting rational or ideal standard. The problem is not with the assumption that human beings must respect a moral imperative over which, in a crucial sense, they have no control. Morality does have a universal dimension and its own morally binding authority. The problem is with a particular, abstract, reifying conception of that authority. Under this conception, moral actors are to apply supposedly universal “principles” or standards to specific moral choices. But so removed and different from the specific and changeable and often confusing and stressful situations of real life are these supposedly unchanging, dispassionate moral norms that they are hard to apply. In practice, they are usually ignored or become an obstacle to good conduct. Politics as ordinarily understood is but one area of life in which situations are often so complex, unstable, and tense that they threaten simply to overwhelm abstract or ideal moral notions and trigger rash, desperate action. I contend that what makes a decision moral or immoral is different from what is assumed in moral theories of the mentioned type. Morality demands respect for a universal moral authority, but morality is misconceived as conformity to ready-made norms or models.

Why a Novel?

The argument to follow will not assume familiarity with *A Desperate Man*, but in order to explain the argument’s connection to the novel I will briefly discuss the impetus behind the novel and give a description of its contents without depriving potential new readers of suspense by giving away too much of the plot.

In the novel, nerve-racking circumstances show inadequacy of pre-existing norms.

A prominent aspect of the story is the moral perturbations and anguish of the central character and the morally challenging circumstances of several others. These people face nerve-racking, highly complex choices for which their experience and moral inclinations have not prepared them and that are ill-served by allegedly fixed preexisting rational or ideal norms. The desperation that the novel describes is attributable to the fictional perilous state of America, but also to a wrenching disorientation. The situation of the main protagonist illustrates concretely the kind of problem that a dubious notion of morality will accentuate.

Why would a person like me who has spent his career on issues of philosophy want to write a novel in the first place? Other than that the novel badly wanted to be written, my reasons for starting and finishing it are not entirely clear, not even in hindsight. For long periods I could not work on it at all, but it kept pulling me back. Whatever other need it satisfied, I think it helped me articulate what is happening in America and Western society and what kind of developments might ensue. Specifically, working on the novel let me explore in experiential terms an issue of deep and growing concern to me, the predicament of civilized persons who are caught in historical circumstances that seem to conspire against everything they value. What I wanted to say seems to have required the form of fiction.

*Novel a way
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Those who know something of my scholarly writing are familiar with the epistemological theme that the imagination and the arts are ultimately more influential and more fundamental in human consciousness than the conceptual, reasoning mind. But I did not start writing a novel because of impatience with the limits of philosophy and political theory. I was not moved by the thought that appealing primarily to the imagination, as in a novel, would improve my chances of persuading others. I certainly did not intend to produce a manifesto in the form of a novel, following the path of an Ayn Rand. I did not envision the characters of my novel as spokesmen for ideas. Besides, I can confirm what other novelists have reported: that the characters in a work of fiction tend to acquire a life of their own. Nevertheless, I undoubtedly wrote this story about decent human beings in a declining, increasingly perverse society in order to say something about life. It must have been a desire to express that something in the most tangible, concrete way that made me choose fiction.

I knew from the start that the narrative would feature an essentially admirable but flawed male protagonist, a person of some prominence and privilege who lives with his family in Washington, D.C. As I wrote, I discovered that this man, Richard Bittenberg, had deep family roots in Charleston, South Carolina. He is a professor of history at National University. He is profoundly troubled by what he thinks is his country's precipitous decline. Richard loves America and feels morally

obligated to help change its course. But how? He is pained by his inability to make a difference. Beginning to despair because of his powerlessness, he seizes an opportunity to act that he could never have foreseen. He is thrown into events for which his earlier life has not prepared him. A man of conscience, he has difficulty finding his way in new, intensely stressful, and increasingly harrowing circumstances. He conceals from his wife, Helen, that his life has taken a sharp turn. She can tell that he is under great pressure, but she is used to his making too many professional commitments and attributes his pre-occupied demeanor to a particularly bad case of overwork. Helen is highly intelligent, strong-willed, and a good wife and mother. She does not really disagree with her husband about the state of America, but she will not let worries about her country weigh her down. She tries to shield their two children from Richard's sadness and often acerbic comments about the signs of American decline. At the same time, she tries to make her husband relax his hectic pace.

The novel starts in Paris where the family is on a brief vacation to which Richard, the supposed workaholic, has miraculously agreed, though at the last moment. The milieus of the novel are Washington, D.C., first of all, but also Paris and environs, and Charleston. Among the other notable characters are a group of alienated Washington insiders, a South Carolina congressman who is also Richard's best friend, two Paris detectives, a senior American diplomat at the American embassy in Paris, and a French nobleman. Before telling the story of Richard's new life, protracted ordeal, and crisis, the novel describes his early life and family background, which help explain his love for America and his willingness to endure great pressure and danger to defend it. Helen has to face a nightmare of her own.

The novel might be classified as a political thriller and a "mystery," but is, at bottom, a moral and psychological drama in which the chief protagonist is driven to desperation. In the novel, destructive trends familiar to today's Americans have intensified and done more damage to the country's fabric. America seems to Richard to be in a precarious state. He is initially despondent, at his wit's end trying to figure out what he should be doing to help save the situation. The novel shows

*At bottom,
the novel is a
moral drama.*

how his personality and frame of mind influence his conduct. He and other key characters see themselves as acting in catastrophic circumstances.

I believe that I wanted to give vivid experiential expression to certain central problems of our time and to disconcerting potentialities inhering in them. I was drawn to the moral challenge that this hypothetical historical situation would present. Despite its dystopian aspects, the America of the novel is sufficiently close to current conditions that readers should have little difficulty relating to it. As if by design, but without obvious premeditation on my part, the events of the novel bring the previously mentioned issue of morality to the fore.

A Dubious Moralism

It is time to turn to philosophical analysis of the questionable tendency in traditional Western thought and sensibility. Whether predominantly classical or Christian, the rationalistic or idealistic strain of moral speculation seems to me to be philosophically defective and to stand in the way of dealing at once morally and effectively with concrete situations, notably with the darker potentialities of life, including those of politics. One of the reasons why I have been so concerned to demonstrate this weakness is probably an intuition that current trends in the Western world may be unleashing such darker potentialities on a large scale. There are reasons to fear that morality, if it will have anything at all to do with handling the burgeoning crisis, will be, because of the mentioned philosophical and practical weakness, ill-prepared for the task.

The problem can be traced back to a dubious form of Greek intellectualism, often tinged with a type of romantic idealism, that mars a largely very admirable classical heritage. It is a form of ahistoricism that has tended to divorce moral norms from the world of concrete experience. It has placed these norms somewhere outside of history, where their supposed purity and nobility are not threatened by the indignities and messiness of ordinary life. This overly abstract, "idealistic" conception of moral universality has made it difficult for morality to find its way in the actual, specific circumstances of a much different human existence.

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The paradigmatic example of this tendency of thought

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and sensibility is the notion of political virtue and justice set forth in Plato's *Republic*. It is a blend of rationalism and quasi-romantic spirituality. Plato attaches his notion of morality to a transcendent sphere of "fixed and immutable realities," to a realm where "all is reason and order."¹ The higher realm is thus defined as radically different from man's historical existence, in which change, movement, and disorder are ubiquitous. Plato's brand of universalism saddled moral philosophy with the difficulty of applying a putatively rational, unchanging, and universal standard to a life of particularity, diversity, and change. The problem does not lie with the idea that morality has an enduring, transcendent dimension. On the contrary, I believe that it is being closely attentive to the nature of the latter that inspires resistance to the dubious strain of moralism. The problem is the assumption that moral universality is static, unhistorical, and ethereal, which must give it but the most tenuous connection to the life that human beings have to live. Universality is made diffuse and distant, not clearly relevant to the here and the now. Already Aristotle sensed the inadequacy and ultimate artificiality of a wholly transcendent moral good and reacted rather strongly against it, but he had in him too much of a similar intellectualism to be able fully to extricate himself from it.

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Christianity brought the promise of a revised understanding of goodness. The idea of the Word becoming flesh brought universality and particularity more closely together. The notion of the Incarnation increased sensitivity to the higher potentialities and meaning of man's historical existence. Christianity intuited the possibility of union between universality and historical particularity, but it was, partly because of the influence of Greek intellectualism, slow to discern the philosophical and other implications of this insight. Christianity also saw more clearly than the Greeks that the crux of the moral life is not to *think* rightly but to *change*—to *will* rightly. "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6) is not a call to adopt the right doctrine but to change the will, to embody, to incarnate, the Holy Spirit in practical action. Nevertheless, Christianity continued in its theology and philosophy to be affected by the

¹ Plato, *The Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 297 (500c).

Greek tendency to distance what is morally normative from the particulars of man's historical existence. The philosophy of natural law might be said to have resisted that tendency in that, partly under Aristotle's influence, it affirmed the value of concrete worldly life, but it also exhibited an opposite propensity for moral rationalism and legalism, less so perhaps in Thomas Aquinas than in various Thomists and neo-Thomists. The tendency for the ahistorical, abstractionist strain in the natural law tradition to break free of more historically, experientially rooted elements became particularly evident as it started blending with the natural rights theorizing of modern liberalism. The rationalist trend of neo-Thomism was prominent in the mid-twentieth century and forward. In recent times, it gave rise to the tortuous legalism and abstractionism of the so-called new natural law theory propounded by such thinkers as Germain Grisez and John Finnis.

Christianity torn between a rationalistic and more historical view of morality.

Over the centuries, making allegedly universal norms—"principles"—relevant to concrete situations proved difficult, leading to often convoluted, intricate, sometimes absurd exercises in casuistry. One who challenged the rationalistic fondness for abstract "principles" was Edmund Burke. He reacted most strongly against French Enlightenment and Jacobin thinking, which had taken the preference for ahistorical universality in a radical direction, but he was generally averse to a mind-set favoring the simplicity of rational constructs over complex, historical reality. He opposed the rationalistic fondness for "the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction."² There were echoes of natural law thinking in Edmund Burke, but he also argued strenuously and incisively against the ahistorical, rationalistic temperament. What was original and groundbreaking in his thought was his perceiving the potentially intimate *connection* between universality and history. To be sure, most of history was to Burke unedifying or worse, but such nobility, wisdom, and beauty as humanity had achieved had acquired concrete, historical form. The good, the true, and the beautiful revealed themselves in experiential particulars.

Burke opposes unhistorical notion of higher values and intuits intimate connection between universality and particularity.

Contrary to superficial interpretations of Burke as a "value

² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 7.

Abstract theories of universality distract actors from real world.

relativist”—an “historicist,” in the terminology of Leo Strauss and his followers—he never doubted the validity of a distinction between good and evil, true and false, and beautiful and ugly. For Burke, this distinction is no mere creature of convention. He stressed the importance of history and experience not in order to put tradition in the place of moral universality but because he recognized their intimate association: that universality becomes present to human beings only in the historical concrete. In their attempts to *understand* and *appreciate* universal values, morally weak and intellectually limited human beings are greatly dependent on what previous generations have been able to discover, articulate, and transmit through tradition. A soundly traditional society evolves an intricate pattern of norms that warns people away from destructive ways and helps orient them towards the higher life, but these norms are not turned into fixed, rigid abstractions but are understood in context. Not even tradition at its best contains any final word, and life keeps changing. Tradition needs continuous self-examination and adaptation to new circumstances. That this process should be guided by fresh intuition of how to advance universal good does not lessen man’s dependence on the past. Burke’s revulsion for “abstract” reason, as distinguished from historically grounded rationality, showed his awareness of the historical nature of human existence and of man’s apprehension of universality. It is not surprising that the Straussians with their anti-historicism and abstract notion of natural right should be severe critics of Burke. They represent a particularly thoroughgoing type of moral rationalism—this despite the fact that, ultimately, many of them reject the notion of moral universality.

What abstract, anti-historical theories of universal right have in common is the assumption that universality and history are, by definition, separate, or connected by the thinnest possible thread. To this mind-set, what is universal cannot at the same time have particular, historical form. Although the notion of synthesis between universality and particularity would seem to be grounded in actual human experience—universal values showing their reality and worth in concrete manifestations of goodness, truth, and beauty—synthesis is to moral rationalists a contradiction in terms, a violation of what

they take to be the fundamental rule of logic, the principle of identity: A must be A and cannot also be non-A. Particularity and individuality as such must be meaningless. But to think of what is normative as empty of concrete particulars—to turn it into a set of abstract rules or ideas—is to look away from the needs of specific situations. The first requirement of morality, think the moral rationalists, is knowing the right “principles” or models and keeping them in your head. The abstractionist mind thus distracts the moral actor from what is actually there, in the here and now at the frontline of life.

Starting with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the trend of looking away from the concrete, actual texture of life turned in a more radical, dreamy, and sentimental direction. Rousseauistic and romantic imagination produced a flighty, revolutionary mentality, which goes much further than the older ahistorical mind-set in neglecting or disdaining the potentialities of the ordinary world. What exists is now assumed to be vile and oppressive. This romantic form of anti-historicism, this modern “idealism,” takes its bearings by an imaginative vision of the world wholly transformed. Plato’s *Republic*, too, contemplates a radical remaking of society, but, unlike Rousseau, Plato never comes close to assuming that there are no evil potentialities in man with which to contend. On the contrary, he believes that the flaws of human nature will make it difficult, perhaps impossible, to turn the ideal *polis* into reality.

The rationalistic or idealistic notion of moral choice has made it hard to reconcile moral universality with the demands of practical life. The idea that moral actors should compare present possibilities to preexisting prescriptions does not well describe how people of conscience actually try to do the right thing. That images of what ought to happen—intuitions of possible outcomes—play a central role in moral deliberation is not in dispute. In fact, moral rationalism greatly underestimates the importance and prominence of imagination in determining what ought to be done. Yet the intuition that assists moral choice must not be likened to a road map on which the actor consults the applicable part and with reference to which he then executes the appropriate turn. Partly because the situation is not yet clear, the intuition is a work in progress. The intuition interacts with reason in a process in which the

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conscientious person is trying as best he can to understand the situation and make the best of it. Rarely, if ever, are the facts clear. Even more important, the intuition must interact with a will that is often torn. The conscientious person must scrutinize his desires and struggle to purify his motives. He must, to use an old phrase, “examine his conscience.” Because of the complexity of situations and the risk that a subtle egotism will masquerade as moral conscience, the moral course is rarely obvious. As the present situation is never a replica of any previous situation, some improvisation and innovation are always required. Guessing and taking risks are often necessary. Despite the best of intentions people sometimes fail because they misunderstand the circumstances or bring about unintended consequences.

Morality must adapt to the needs of the moment.

Whatever one might think in theory, in practice acting morally is not something like following a blueprint. Supposedly preexisting universal rational or ideal standards are general and univocal, but actual situations are particular, complex, and only partially transparent. People of conscience do as well as they can. One effect of rule- or model-bound moralism is to draw attention away from the special characteristics of the present and to underestimate the need for creative intuition and adaptation to dynamic historical reality. Moral rationalism does not understand that, in order to become efficacious in the unique present moment, the universal must assume specific form, become *embodied* in action adapted to the needs of the moment, which involves subtle interactions and adjustments among will, imagination, and reason—i.e., involves the whole person. Genuine moral universality does not preexist in abstract directives, only as an obligation to try to find and perform the action that will contribute most to good. The specific form that moral universality will need to assume has to await the person’s finding his way in the particular situation. The actor must achieve union, *synthesis*, between the universal imperative and the moral potentiality inhering in the specific case—a possibility that moral abstractionism dogmatically denies.

The allegedly universal abstract or ideal principles of moral rationalism need not be irrelevant; at best, in the most suitable circumstances, they can assist in guiding will, imagination, and reason and help the person intuit what should be done here

and now. But at worst, ahistorically conceived standards do, precisely because of their abstractness and poor fit, become a distraction. In some circumstances they may, because they assume very different circumstances, positively stand in the way of finding the right course. The reason why rationalistic and idealistic moralism does not have a worse reputation than it does is that in actual moral deliberation intuition and general creativity provide the connection to the actual world that is missing from the theory.

That reasoning plays an important role in morality is, as far as I am concerned, not at issue. But moral rationalism misunderstands and exaggerates that role and greatly underestimates the importance of character and imagination. Christianity sharpened the awareness that the main obstacle to good conduct is a perversity of the will. It traced that perversity back to original sin. For morality to be possible and for a common good to be advanced in politics, human beings must learn to rein in their self-indulgence. Moral good is a creature first and foremost not of intellect but of a special kind of will. Christianity associates that higher will with divine grace. Without character, there can be no morality or common good. But Greek moral rationalism and idealism, reinforced by other schools of thought, kept distracting Western man from the centrality of moral character and from the need for synthesis of moral universality and concrete, varied, ordinary life. Specifically, Platonic moral rationalism and idealism, though theoretically strongly committed to moral virtue, left very vague how moral universality might become integrated with actual politics. Plato conceived of political virtue as being so distant from ordinary politics that, barring the cleansing of society of all such politics, this virtue should not even be expected to make an appearance. Except in that it indicated the necessity of disciplining desire, the Platonic notion of political morality and justice left actual politics stranded.

Moral rationalism neglects primacy of moral character.

The Machiavellian Challenge

Machiavelli protests the Platonic idea of political good and the general genre of models of virtuous politics as having little to offer to statesmen. The typical representative of moral rationalism and idealism assumes that Machiavelli is adopting an

Machiavelli's challenge to moral idealism and rationalism may be justified.

amoral or immoral view of politics and advocating practical efficiency for its own sake. Because Machiavelli rejects their kind of moralism and is chiefly interested in action that might work in the real world, he must be trying to drive morality from politics. *The Prince* seems to these critics to offer proof of his cynicism, callousness, and general moral perversity. Machiavelli is to them the one who derails the old Western tradition of insisting that politics must respect a moral standard. He is “a teacher of evil,” et cetera. To suggest to such commentators that Machiavelli’s challenge to associating good with “imagined states and principedoms” might be largely justified and that one might draw upon him to strengthen moral philosophy is to invite incredulity.³ Yet it can certainly be argued that the ethereal, rationalistic, and romantic elements of Plato’s political theory did limit the latter’s utility for actual politics. Plato’s notions of virtue and justice are, after all, indistinguishable from a dream of society transformed. His hope is not to make the best of politics but to *abolish* it. His moralism is, in other words, attached to the hope of achieving something inherently impossible, politics being an inescapable part of human existence, not just in matters relating to government. Moral thought prone toward merely ideal possibilities is ill adapted to politics in general, but especially to situations far removed from the presumed ideal, for example, ones involving intense conflict and general disorder. Such conditions are not rare and somehow negligible. They occur frequently, not just in politics narrowly understood but in life generally. Having little to say about how good might be advanced in circumstances of that kind represents evasion, one-sidedness, and imbalance and must be regarded as a major deficiency in any moral philosophy, especially any political philosophy.

Both critics and defenders of Machiavelli distort his ideas.

Both among Machiavelli’s critics and defenders, a simplifying and even simplistic interpretation of his thought is common. On both sides he is viewed by many as setting aside moral considerations and caring only about the efficient pursuit of power, the latter having its essence in physical coercion. According to this interpretation, Machiavelli not only stresses but revels in the need for deceit and harsh methods. What his critics dislike—his supposed disdain for morality—his admirers

³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 42.

regard as refreshing “realism.” But both camps demonstrate a lack of philosophical agility and subtlety. The critics betray a reluctance to acknowledge or face life’s darker dimension and exhibit a correspondingly truncated conception of morality, while the defenders betray a reductionistic view of power and an equally regrettable neglect of moral considerations.

Machiavelli may be prone to an overly dark view of politics, due in part to his historical circumstances. He may open himself up to moralistic scolding by employing sweeping, categorical statements and hyperbole. Some of his specific recommendations that would have looked harsh but not extraordinary to a sixteenth-century Italian, must also appear extreme to a modern observer used to thinking of politics in terms of humane, peaceful relations and the rule of law. In addition, Machiavelli is not a philosopher concerned to write with precision and to include every relevant nuance and qualification. He formulates his alternative to moral idealism and rationalism in a partly unfortunate manner, making it appear that, in his view, political good often requires performing actions that are substantively evil. I would suggest that he is really trying to say something different, but is failing to express himself well, partly because he is entangled in the same dubious moralism that he is challenging. I see him as struggling in *The Prince* to reconcile political good, even morality, with the necessities of politics as they arise in particularly disordered, turbulent circumstances.

What makes Machiavelli appear insensitive to the demands of morality is that, paradoxical as it might seem, he is still associating morality with traditional Western moral norms and that he is, in a part of himself, conceiving of them in a rather legalistic manner. But he also recognizes that sometimes circumstances leave statesmen no choice but to break these norms. Because he remains to some extent the captive of a rule-bound conception of morality, he can see no alternative to approving “evil means” in politics, provided that they serve the greater good of society, what he calls “glory.” Machiavelli may not fully recognize that he is, in effect, not so much exempting politics from morality in tough situations as attempting to *redefine* political morality. The reason Machiavelli seems so cynical and immoral to many is that the context in which

Machiavelli, too, affected by rule-bound morality.

he is trying to articulate his groping insight regarding political good is the radically unsettled, formidable circumstances described in *The Prince*. In that context, physical violence and treachery are ubiquitous and must be handled by corresponding means by anyone trying to create order. Although it is in this particular setting that he discusses what is necessary to realize political good, Machiavelli is trying to make room for a more generally applicable idea: that political good must be served very differently in times of great travail and danger than in peaceful circumstances. He muddies the water by not making a clean break with the notion of morality as adherence to pre-existing rules.

*Machiavelli's
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It is revealing that while heaping disdain on Machiavelli his moralistic critics do not spell out how their allegedly superior approach to politics would deal effectively with the kind of circumstances that he addresses in *The Prince*. A display of moral indignation is deemed sufficient to refute him. For Machiavelli to pay such close attention to the special problems of harsh and anarchic situations is to his moralistic critics in itself proof of a low view of politics and of disinterest in the moral purpose of politics. Does then morality not need to concern itself with highly unsettled, fractious circumstances? I suggest that one of the reasons why Machiavelli reacted against idealistic moralism was precisely its reluctance to deal with that prominent part of human existence. The indiscriminate moralistic condemnation of Machiavelli is an example of the seemingly chronic reluctance in Western moral speculation to take the darker side of life, including dirty politics, fully into account.

The historical and political context of Machiavelli's observations in *The Prince* has made it easy to caricature him as predisposed to cruelty and general ruthlessness. But what was on his mind in that work was the troubled situation of Italy at the time and how peace and order might be created out of these unpropitious circumstances. There was no choice, it seemed to him, but to employ methods scorned by conventional morality. Of the classical thinkers, the temperament of Aristotle is not fundamentally different from Machiavelli's. Aristotle made rather Machiavellian-sounding points about order as the most basic need of politics. But Aristotle's main emphasis was on how to make already existing order, however flawed and

precarious, more stable and conducive to the common good. When Machiavelli contemplated the state of Italy there was no already existing moral philosophy that covered systematically and in depth what morality might mean when disorder reigns and citizens and statesmen are even in danger of their lives. The political philosophers had concerned themselves with what political arrangements are ideally the best or the best practicable in societies that are already holding together and functioning. Machiavelli did what earlier thinkers had failed to do, write about what might overcome appalling historical conditions. He realized that a good tied to ideal models or inflexible rules was inadequate. The habit of applying ill-fitting or clearly irrelevant moral standards had to be broken. That he brought into the open the moral evasiveness and wishful thinking of so much earlier political thought was to his credit. Although he initiated rather than completed a much-needed reconsideration of political morality, he provided an important ingredient for that project.

My main point in bringing up Machiavelli is not that rule-bound moral philosophy needs to supplement its list of “principles” with ones that define in advance just when deceit and harsh methods are permissible—that moral philosophy needs some counterpart of “just war” criteria for domestic use. The point is rather that morality may not be defined by rules in the first place—which is not the same as saying that the moral life can do without rules. Morality is often, perhaps always, *aided* by existing rules to some considerable extent. The civilized society is defined in part by the network of prohibitions, encouragements, and nudges through which it helps convey the quality of a meaningful existence. For practical reasons government punishes violation of many of these rules, punishes severely in some cases. Taken together, the norms of society sketch a picture of the general characteristics of a civilized society, of the general direction in which to find a life worth living. But this intuitive vision of a desirable whole is nothing like a blueprint of Justice. Only in a formalistic, routinized, traditionalistic rather than traditional, social milieu do moral and other prejudices rigidify, so that particular norms are mistaken for absolutes that permit of no exceptions regardless of circumstances.

Machiavelli shows inadequacy of rule-bound moralism.

Machiavelli shows need for adaptability.

To sum up, moral norms are in the moment of moral choice transcended by what is morally required in the specific situation. Morality is always *qualitatively* the same—it demands trying to do what is most conducive to a good outcome—but its concrete specifics must vary greatly as it handles very different circumstances. The picture of Machiavelli as one with a special fondness for coercive methods and for dealing ruthlessly with opponents is a vulgar misrepresentation whether it shows up among his critics or his defenders. He is well aware that in peaceful circumstances what will be most conducive to political good is vastly different from what might work in turbulent times.

There is no reason to confine Machiavelli's desire for realism and adaptability to circumstances of disorder and conflict. His willingness to take life as it is applies as much to ordered circumstances. There peaceable and subtle methods more in accord with conventional mores will be not only morally appropriate but more efficacious. Deceit and ruthlessness may there be shameful.

What is important to moral philosophy in Machiavelli, then, is certainly not some general preference for dealing harshly and deceitfully with opponents; he has no such preference. What is needed is some of his readiness to confront situations actually at hand even when they seem discouraging and daunting. Although Machiavelli does not make the point himself, we can learn from him some of the kind of flexibility and adaptability that can make morality efficacious in *all* circumstances.

Morality too needs power.

Conventional moralists are suspicious of Machiavelli's strong interest in questions of acquiring and holding on to power. But why do they assume, as Plato does, that being interested in power is always a sign of having amoral or immoral motives? Without power no change can be achieved in the real world, the world of human action. Without power—without resources to effect change—political *morality* would be an empty abstraction. To make a difference in the world of human beings morality must be able to assert itself, exercise some modicum of power. No blame should attach to studying how available resources can be best deployed to achieve desirable results. The question of supreme interest to moral philosophy is, power *for what purpose*? For as long as the world remains

the kind of place it has been, morality will often have to find its way in difficult territory. It must hone its skills, employ resources creatively in the world as it is. It is simply wrong to assert that Machiavelli does not care about the *quality* of political action as long as it brings success for the individual political actor. His condemnation of the skilled, brutal, audacious climb to power of Agathocles the Sicilian is but one refutation of the picture of Machiavelli as an amoral worshipper of ruthless efficiency.⁴ True, Machiavelli offers no more than a tentative, partly confused redefinition of political morality. His word “glory” as the proper end of statesmanship is insufficient to convey the more-than-personal higher goal of politics. But others who are not caught in abstract, reality-averse moralism can work out the implications for moral philosophy of Machiavelli’s willingness to make the best of any given circumstances, including those least to the taste of traditional moralists.

It is in large measure because of the strong influence of moral rationalism and idealism that Western moral philosophers have had such difficulty establishing a more than tenuous connection between moral universality and actual politics. Plato even *admits* that justice and virtue, as he understands them, have a way of pulling people away from the world of politics. He conceives of political virtue as an expression of high spirituality. Its nobility abhors comingling with anything as mundane and contemptible as ordinary politics. As already mentioned, Plato wants to *abolish* ordinary politics. So what form of morality is to handle politics in the world as it is? Platonic idealistic morality exhibits with respect to actual politics a pretentious passivity. With its vagueness and hankering for an abstract perfection it positively discourages exploring what morality might mean in unreformed, ordinary politics. We have no business looking for it there. The *practical* effect of this Platonic longing for an ideal moral purity is to *undermine* morality in politics. Creating a vast distance between the moral standard and the sphere for which it is supposed to be normative, this idealism generates a strong tendency simply to ignore morality, namely, in proportion as actual situations

*Abstract ideals
undermine
morality in
practice.*

⁴ Ibid., Ch. VIII.

deviate from the preconceived model of moral good. Because it *disarms, confuses, and discourages* attempts to make the best of real situations, there is even warrant for calling this idealism immoral.

Unhistorical, ideal standards do not enhance a capacity for creative adjustment.

The assumption that the standard of morality sits outside of history and shows its high nobility only in ideal circumstances induces a kind of disinterested spectator view of politics. It lets the moralist display his moral superiority by sitting on the sidelines and bemoaning “dirty politics.” Moral rationalism and idealism do, then, *weaken* what genuine morality would appear to require most: a disposition of will, imagination, and reason to make the best of situations at hand. A sound moral education would foster not the memorization of “moral principles” but the kind of character, imaginative acuity, and intellectual incisiveness that would help the person find his moral way in any circumstances, including the most unsettled and disturbing. A central purpose of moral education is to enhance a capacity for creative adjustment to actual situations.

Immoralism takes advantage of dubious moralism.

Abstract and idealistic moralism, by contrast, tends to put the person in a one-track mode. Because ill-suited to moving with changing circumstances, this moralism generates discomfort with anything that is distant from the best, particularly the unexpected and unfamiliar. In the face of radical and disturbing threats to normality, inflexibility and lack of imagination produce confusion, ambivalence, and demoralization—weaknesses of which the morally unscrupulous are quick to take advantage. A putative moral scrupulousness that abhors dealing with harsh opposition even encourages ruthlessness.

Some traditionalist readers will be muttering to themselves. Criticizing Plato? Defending *Machiavelli*? Questioning firm moral principles? This author is surely going much too far. If it had been my task fully to argue the case for a reform in moral philosophy, I would now go on to address the predictable objections to what I have said. But my main reason for explaining and criticizing a dubious strain in Western moral speculation has been to answer the question of what measure of desperation might be appropriate to our historical situation.

Morality for Real Life

When I started to write *A Desperate Man* I did not have a plan to illustrate a problem in moral philosophy, yet the story moved inexorably into the general territory that I have here sketched in philosophical terms. The main protagonist, Richard, finds himself in the kind of circumstances for which moral rationalism and idealism could not have prepared him. The America of the novel has begun to fracture. Traditional moral standards are yielding to every kind of irresponsibility and self-indulgence. Constitutionalism and the rule of law are frail or a mere front for political arbitrariness and ruthlessness. Greed is out of control. Chaos threatens at the same time that the federal government is becoming dictatorial and quasi-totalitarian.

In the America of the novel traditional norms are crumbling.

In such circumstances, what does morality demand? How should decent people behave? For a long time a hankering for a no longer possible normality has made people in America and Europe simply discount or look away from the ubiquitous signs that their society is falling apart and that the future may be grim. Rather than getting ready in mind and spirit for possibly turbulent, scary times, many commentators tout the same old same old, escaping into a world of ideology and fetishes. Many supposed conservatives, for example, assume that our problems will be corrected by persuading others of the correct interpretation of the U.S. Constitution or by reviving and expanding the free market. Some extreme ideologues have been dreaming of global democracy through armed American world hegemony. Academic moral and political philosophy that has not abandoned the idea of universality or transcendence is strongly prone to ahistoricism. Straussian natural right thinking is explicitly and emphatically anti-historical. Needless to say, Goody Two-Shoes is as upset about Machiavelli as ever.

But where is the moral philosophy that is amenable to creative adaptation to unfamiliar, perhaps disturbing circumstances? My question does not hide an assumption that rejecting moral rationalism and idealism and other forms of escape from reality would produce a particular solution to the problems of our historical situation. Expectations of that kind are the stuff of rationalistic, idealistic, or escapist speculation.

Greater realism will not produce a particular solution to our problems.

Although there is a clear need for greater willingness to face historical facts and to hone a corresponding moral intuition, what men and women of greater realism and more supple mind and imagination will see as the best way forward cannot be determined in advance. Disagreement is inevitable—but now less so, one hopes, because of wishful thinking.

Novel may have been written partly to puncture bubble of escapism.

I did not start writing *A Desperate Man* to advocate some practical solution to the problems of our deteriorating society. It is not obvious to me why I told the kind of story that I did tell, but I think one of the reasons was a desire to puncture the bubble of escapism within which so many people seem to live today. What happens in the novel is but one possible outcome of America's decline, but it is one that makes it difficult for morality to take its bearings. I have to think that many readers of the novel asked themselves the question that the author has long asked himself: Would we be ready to handle anything like the fictional circumstances of the story? I am told that readers have found the novel engaging. It would surprise me if they also perceived it as pushing a particular political agenda.

Characters in novel placed in unaccustomed, morally challenging circumstances.

Richard Bittenberg is too insightful, down-to-earth, and honest to give in to escapism. But although he decides to break out of ingrained habits and does something radical and daring, he is too much the product of the declining society not to have great difficulty adjusting to the life he must now live. Just what his travail is about I will not reveal. Suffice it to say that Richard must act in dark, sometimes oppressive circumstances of which he has had no earlier experience. He finds himself deeply torn between moral sensibilities formed in his previous life and the requirements of a new, grueling present. Richard's mentor in the dangerous endeavor that he has joined is a senior, very experienced statesman. At a time when Richard is utterly distressed and exhausted, his mentor analyzes why Richard is so troubled. He says: "You have a conscience, and it's been operating in the circumstances of a normal life. You've lived an essentially ordered, predictable, even sheltered life. You've been one of the pillars of a deteriorating society, helping to enforce its highest standards and setting a good example for others. What's important in the present context is that you've never had to ask yourself what conscience might demand in very different, previously unknown circumstances.

You've had no practice handling situations in which the world is being turned upside down."⁵

Richard's closest friend, the congressman from South Carolina who agrees with him on the need for radical change, comments in a conversation on the situation of people like them whose world has shifted under their feet and who must endure the relentless pressure of a perilous, very chancy undertaking. Richard keeps fretting over the need to deceive family members, friends and others, and his friend thinks the resulting anxiety illustrates a problem endemic to the civilization from which they both stem: "Our deepest reflexes are conditioned by fairly tranquil circumstances. So the question, Dick, is whether people like us are cut out for the job. Damn it, the long and short of it is that we're probably too civilized—no, that's not quite what I mean. I mean, we, too, are infected by our progressively corrupt culture . . . We lack imagination, lack adaptability. We think we're realistic and canny. We see better than others that our country's in danger and that radical action is necessary, but we have a very hard time breaking out of a mode of being that's inappropriate to the new circumstances. We're morally myopic, inflexible, caught in patterns that don't apply. That's *decadence*, Dick. Even the better people—people like you and me, brother, who think they're better than others—have their own version of that avoidance of tough problems that's become chronic in our society."⁶

The issue here is not whether in the novel the two men have chosen the right or wrong path, but whether they have the moral wherewithal to handle their historical situation.

It is when we are ill-prepared for dealing with urgent problems, when we are under great pressure to act but do not know what to do, that we become desperate. The desperado acts recklessly because events are overwhelming him and he cannot see any way out. He lashes out blindly, partly in frustration over his own confusion and powerlessness. Compare such conduct to that of a well-trained soldier who finds himself pushed into a corner on a battlefield. He is in acute danger and realizes that his chances of survival may be small.

*Desperation
results from
lack of
preparation.*

⁵ Claes G. Ryn, *A Desperate Man* (Washington, D.C.: Athena Books, 2014), 572.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 472.

But because of his training he knows what he should do. He must assess the situation realistically and take prudent, if very dangerous, action. He does not throw caution to the wind and give in to some wild abandon. In fact, the good soldier knows that in some circumstances the only acceptable course is to surrender. What I am arguing here is not that desperation is necessarily the consequence of being ill-equipped to handle force and physical danger. That side of life has come into the foreground only because of the earlier discussion of Machiavelli's *Prince* and the context of my novel. Desperation may result from being woefully unprepared in *any* sphere of life. Even in peaceful circumstances, desperation may result from ill-fitting preconceptions or predispositions standing in the way of understanding and dealing effectively with urgent and important matters.

Not even in stable historical circumstances should moral education neglect the darker side of life.

Knowing how to choose in unexpected or unfamiliar circumstances requires preparation. Morally conscientious persons are by definition sensitive to the moral imperative of human existence, but, if my argument is correct, this should mean that they are morally dexterous, ingenious, and resourceful in meeting the contingencies of life. Anchored in moral character, they are also imaginative and intellectually supple. Not even in the most stable historical circumstances should moral education neglect the darker side of life and the need to prepare for it. Given the nature of human beings, that side is *never* far away, though for most people it will rarely, if ever, involve circumstances as drastic as those discussed in *The Prince*. But moral rationalism and idealism do in their preoccupation with abstract formulas put themselves to the side, issuing directives in the manner of a broken record.

One of the dangers of moral rationalism and idealism is that they set human beings up for desperation. Especially in unanticipated and highly charged situations, moral ideas and expectations that are too detached from concrete life leave people disoriented. Finding it hard to relate accustomed moral principles to disturbing events, they are in danger of becoming despondent and acting rashly.

The same kind of confusion is induced by any frame of mind that permits neglecting uncomfortable facts and that stands in the way of engaging the world as it is. A prime ex-

ample that runs parallel to moral rationalism and idealism is political ideology, the habit of viewing politics through a more or less rigidly held interpretative scheme and dealing with problems according to preconceived formulas. To the extent that they succumb to ideology, liberalism, socialism, conservatism, and libertarianism do not admit the existence of problems that might defy their ready-made classifications and be resistant to their standard remedies. As the current formulaic approaches to political problems show more and more of their inadequacy in our historical situation, ideologues will be at a loss. Especially if America continues to fracture, they will become confused, afraid, and prone to desperation.

Like moral rationalism and idealism, ideology stands in the way of engaging the world as it is.

Conservatives have often claimed to be non-ideological, more rooted in the real, historical world than others and therefore less prone to escapism and utopianism, but many of those who are called conservatives today seem to be no more immune than others to ideological pipe dreams and wishful thinking. Trusting in free markets and deregulation to set society right is a particularly striking example. But the tendency to evade reality takes many forms. For my entire academic career I have defended a decentralized, community-oriented society—love of neighbor, de Tocqueville, et cetera. The image of the front porch has great appeal to many. So does Norman Rockwell’s picture of America. Trying to save what might be saved of traditional American community life is a worthy task, but conservatives as much as others have to resist a propensity for idyllic, escapist dreaming. The present situation has to be assessed with ruthless honesty. The possibility of frightening, transformative developments has to be anticipated in the imagination so as to make possible an attunement of moral sensibility to changed circumstances.

A temptation to which some American conservative intellectuals seem prone is to assume a supposedly devout religious posture of a kind that is not unrelated to the strain in Western moral speculation that I have criticized. The posture is one of withdrawal from a world of troubles, into the catacombs, as it were. The adoption of this putatively noble passivity with regard to the ordinary world has had great appeal to many since Plato. He offers supposedly noble souls the classical excuse for not even trying to improve a mundane, discouraging society.

A putatively noble passivity may be form of escapism.

Claiming to be a form of high spirituality, a type of holiness, this passivity simply *yields* to the dark forces but nevertheless claims moral credit for retreating. Ethereal and distant from real life as it is, this spirituality may be charged with escapism and a kind of moral incompetence or perversity. My criticism is not directed against all individual acts of withdrawal or turning the other cheek but against a generalized moral passivity dressed up as moral nobility.

Dogmatism reveals spiritual insecurity and reluctance to act.

Exhibiting a similar form of evasion of reality, some adopt ostentatious and dogmatic religious belief as the only answer to our civilizational crisis. They assume that they belong to just the right church and have just the right creed. The problem with this self-important religiosity is twofold. First, the churches are today a major source of moral and spiritual pollution. The religious sensibility of every person is susceptible to infestation from a spiritually, intellectually, and artistically corrupt culture. It behooves all supposedly religious people to scrutinize their beliefs and to make sure that the God about whom they are speaking and to whom they are praying is not a projection of some self-serving, shoddy, escapist imagination. But the pretentious believer thinks himself exempt from corrupting influences. He does not need greater theological and philosophical depth or rigor or to guard against premature certainty. Second, truebelieverism is not intent on trying to reverse present trends. This spirituality may speak loudly and confidently, but it is not a predisposition to act. It is mostly self-applause and an attempt to suppress doubt. Instead of looking for ways to address actual and acute problems, it merely plants a flag. This spirituality has much the same practical effect as catacomb religiosity, to abandon the field, which serves well the objectives of those who would like to have a monopoly on effective action.

A readiness to deal with historical reality is the antidote to desperation.

The proper antidote to desperation, then, is for our moral sensibilities to be as attuned as possible to historical reality, not in the sense of *approving* or *condoning* whatever that reality may be, but in the sense of being predisposed to look for and to act on its moral potentialities. The proper frame of mind for envisioning the way forward should be a calm and deliberate, if passionate, desire to know the facts and to find ways for morality and the spirit of civilization to outmaneuver hostile forces.

In case speaking of outmaneuvering hostile forces calls to mind the vulgar caricature of Machiavelli, it should perhaps be underlined that there is no necessary relationship between being morally realistic and inventive in politics and resorting to treachery or other draconian measures. Not even in distressed situations or intense conflict are such methods inevitable. What I have sought to demonstrate is the need for moral versatility. Even at a time of severe discord, moral realism and creativity might in some circumstances call for the opposite of harshness or deceit, perhaps for a disarming gentleness, frankness, or honesty. Sometimes in a tense confrontation, the best way forward may be to avoid battle and try the unexpected. Not even a soldier is expected always to take the violent course. Also, much or most of the time circumstances do not even minimally resemble battlefield conditions. On occasion, genuine morality may even meet with the approval of Goody Two-Shoes. My argument is that although morality will always have the same *quality*—the quality of advancing good—it must look substantively different depending on what opportunities are available to it.

Moral versatility needed to adapt to diverse circumstances.

Richard Bittenberg is no desperado. He is well-informed, realistic, and cautious. He acts only upon reflection, perhaps too much so. When I picked the title for the novel I did not start out from the definition of desperation that I have set forth here. I used the term more loosely, as we ordinarily do, to label the emotional state of a person who is despondent and moved by deep frustration. Observing the decline and fracturing of his society, Richard sees no alternative to what he decides to do. He knows that he is acting against high odds. Although Richard does not exemplify the kind of desperation that throws all caution to the wind, is he nevertheless desperate in the special sense of being morally unprepared in the way that I have here discussed? That will depend on how you assess his historical situation and how you regard him as a person. Some might say that what he ultimately does shows him to be not quite desperate in the sense of being morally unfit. Another possible interpretation is that his moral tribulations exemplify the effects of an overly static and abstract notion of morality. If he is morally ill-prepared for what he attempts to do, he, and the society from which he comes, may be culpable in a sense

that needs to be better understood. How to judge Richard Bit-
tenberg and the nature and extent of his culpability, I must
leave to the reader.

*Being better
prepared
staves off
desperation.*

The question I was asked to address was, how desper-
ate should we be? The assignment assumed that desperation
might be an understandable reaction to developments in
America. So it is. Feelings of desperation are likely to spread
in America and other Western societies. But I have argued
that this reaction to tough circumstances is a consequence of
being ill-prepared. Desperation is a sign of failure, born of a
reluctance or inability to face real life. Because human beings
cannot possibly be ready for all situations, desperation is to
some extent unavoidable, but one of the purposes of moral
education is to reduce the risk of it to a minimum by promot-
ing moral versatility—the general readiness for life that comes
from moral character, creative imagination, and historically
grounded reason supporting each other. *A Desperate Man* is, I
think, among other things a commentary on the kind of mor-
alism that is bound to give people bad surprises, confound
them, and cause desperation. We who live now may, because
of the state of our culture, be in particular danger of events
morally paralyzing us. However late it may be, we should get
better prepared. I am far from suggesting that approaching the
problems of our time with the appropriate moral and other
realism will produce an action plan. How our historical situa-
tion might best be addressed is a daunting topic. But reflection
in the spirit of moral realism and versatility will counteract the
influence of abstract formulas and wishful thinking and offer
some protection against confusion, surprise, discouragement,
and fear—all sources of desperation.