
A Symposium: Morality Reconsidered

Political Morality Reconsidered: A Rejoinder

Claes G. Ryn

The Catholic University of America

When preparing my remarks for the annual meeting of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters in 2014, it did not occur to me that they might become the basis for a symposium on morality and politics. Although I took the opportunity to make philosophical points and expected them to spark discussion, I was carrying out a tricky dual assignment and did not structure my remarks solely with a view to arguing for a reform in moral philosophy. It was after the speech that others suggested a symposium on the issues that I had raised. I assented to the idea with the mentioned reservations and revised and expanded my manuscript for the new purpose. As I did not play any role in organizing the symposium, the size and philosophical range of the comments on my text took me by surprise. I am flattered that my remarks should have generated such extensive and elaborate discussion but also feel more acutely than before that what I argue in the article is but the tip of a philosophical iceberg. To respond adequately I will need to relate my argument to other writings of mine and make points that I could not go into in my original remarks.

Because the three commentaries are quite different in philosophical emphasis, I will need to deal with them separately for the most part, but whenever possible I will try to frame

CLAES G. RYN is Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America, Chairman of the National Humanities Institute, and Editor of *HUMANITAS*.

responses so that they address the concerns of more than one commentator. I should mention that the order in which I take up particular issues is not my way of ranking their importance.

Let me begin by trying to clear away what appear to me to be plain misunderstandings or misrepresentations of my article and/or general philosophical stance, most of which are found in one of the commentaries.

What I Do Not Believe

It is common for academic writers who have been criticized to complain that their views have been misunderstood or distorted. Who is not familiar with the sentiment, “He didn’t read what I wrote!” Sad to say, such complaints are all too often well-founded. Scholars are, it seems, about as prone to incomprehension, carelessness, willfulness, and irritability as human beings at large. Instead of attentively reading and trying to understand what a person wrote, scholars sometimes pass judgment on a mere caricature of work under review or even substitute for it something more serviceable to propounding ideas of their own. To a puzzling extent Professor Kenneth McIntyre’s commentary on my article falls in that category. It occurred to me to note as much in this rejoinder and to spend more time on the other comments, but I do not want to appear to be avoiding a troublesome critic, and so I will patiently respond. I will do so partly because it will afford me an opportunity to elaborate on my earlier arguments and set them in a wider philosophical context, which can be done in ways relevant also to the other commentaries.

McIntyre fundamentally misunderstands but will receive a patient response.

I am not sure how to explain McIntyre’s misrepresentations and distortions, most of which are flatly and repeatedly contradicted by my text. A part of the problem may be his being simply unprepared for a philosophical position like mine. It is as if he were wearing glasses that concealed from view all but snippets of text that he might use to bring up his own ideas. But how to explain his carelessness and his disregarding sections of my article that fly in the face of his depiction of my thinking? He attributes to me ideas that I prominently, explicitly, and emphatically reject—in the very article on which he is commenting.

Desperation a sign of moral failure.

I should have thought that it would be obvious how I respond to the question, "How desperate should we be?" I respond at considerable length and unambiguously: *We should not be desperate at all.* If we are desperate or prone to desperation, I argue, something is wrong: we are showing ourselves to be without the proper moral preparedness. Desperation is, I say, "a sign of failure." I demonstrate why the strain of moral rationalism and idealism in Western moralism that I criticize predisposes people to just this deficiency. I argue that it should be one of the purposes of moral education to reduce the risk of desperation "to a minimum" by teaching "moral versatility." I point to the danger that in increasingly troubling and frightening historical circumstances the dubious moralism will make people liable to desperation and despair in various forms. Discussing the need to counteract this state of moral debility and paralysis, I write that genuine morality is a readiness to deal with the world as it is. It has an adaptability and resourcefulness that inclines the person to be constructive even in the least encouraging circumstances. In dark, difficult situations genuine morality does not leave the person stranded, as is the case with the rationalistic or idealistic moralism that I criticize. The latter tempts individuals who feel themselves cornered to become desperate, to strike out recklessly or to retreat into a "noble" or "holy" passivity.¹

Yet Professor McIntyre tells his readers that I believe just the opposite. He asserts that in my view our historical situation is such that "it is in fact a time to be desperate." He writes of me that I am "like others who have despaired or, perhaps, more accurately, become desperate." He refers to "Professor Ryn's type of desperation." Contrasting his own view with the one that he attributes to me, he writes, "It is not immediately obvious to me that I, as a political theorist and intellectual historian, should be desperate." In the place of the author of the article "How Desperate Should We Be?" and the novel *A Desperate Man* McIntyre puts somebody wholly different.²

Modest in size and limited in objective, my article could

¹ Claes G. Ryn, "How Desperate Should We Be?," *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2015), 30, 27-28.

² Kenneth McIntyre, "Decision Procedures, Moral Philosophy, and Despair: The Response of Virtue Ethics and the Connoisseur," *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2015), 42-43, 34.

not set forth a fully argued alternative to the moralism that it criticizes, but it describes at considerable length what I call “the proper antidote to desperation.”³ It indicates the general nature of what should replace moral rationalism and idealism. McIntyre does not discuss my argument, much less specify how it might fall short. He writes nevertheless that it is not clear that I have offered “any reasonable alternative.”⁴ But without examining and assessing what I have to say he has no basis for determining whether my alternative is reasonable.

I can think of one possible but only partial explanation for McIntyre’s so distorting what I argue in the article. It involves an error in how he understands my novel that no student of fiction would make: He assumes that the chief character in the novel, Richard Bittenberg, and the author of the novel are one and the same person. Despite some similarities between Richard and the author, it should be obvious that Richard is a *fictional* character, a person in a novel, with a mind and imagination of his own and with his own strengths and weaknesses. Some of McIntyre’s comments about the novel make me think that I had better reiterate what should also be obvious, that the America of the novel is fictional. It has disturbing aspects that are not present or are less pronounced in actual America. Right at the beginning of my article I mention the difference “between the stark, fictional circumstances of the narrative and our actual predicament.”⁵

Throughout his commentary McIntyre seems oblivious of the fact that creative and philosophical writing are very different undertakings. They may be connected in that authors of both kinds draw upon a sense of what life is like and have something to say about it, but whereas the novelist appeals primarily to the imagination and is free to invent characters and events, the philosopher appeals chiefly to the conceptual, discursive mind and is trying rigorously, without distortion, to articulate what the actual, historical world is like. The philosopher builds an argument rather than “shows” something, reasons rather than creates images. I refer to this basic difference in the article, but McIntyre is inattentive, and the result is

Creative and philosophical writing very different.

³ Ryn, “How Desperate?,” 28.

⁴ McIntyre, “Decision Procedures,” 35.

⁵ Ryn, “How Desperate?,” 5.

yet more distortion. He “quotes” me as saying about the novel that I wanted “to set forth a philosophical argument . . . [about] the predicament of civilized persons who are caught in historical circumstances that seem to conspire against everything they value.”⁶ But that is not at all what I say. The words are mine, but McIntyre is improperly combining sentence fragments that are not only from different but from widely separated paragraphs, making it appear that I embarked upon a novel in order to set forth “a philosophical argument.” McIntyre’s error is two-fold in that he also betrays unfamiliarity with central issues of epistemology and aesthetics. What I say in the article is the opposite of what he asserts. I say that when writing the novel I did *not* have any obvious or conscious didactic intent. I say that I did *not* write it to argue for a philosophical position, so that, for example, the characters would become “spokesmen for ideas,” as in an Ayn Rand novel.⁷ In the “quoted” passage McIntyre has lifted the opening phrase—“to set forth a philosophical argument”—from one paragraph and has joined it to the sentence fragment after the ellipses, which refers to a different subject, the moral predicament of the central characters in the novel. The “quotation” is a fabrication, but because McIntyre is not alert to the mentioned issues of epistemology and aesthetics, he is unaware of the extent of his mistake.

*The object of
my criticism
a strain in
Western moral
speculation.*

A curious part of McIntyre’s critique is a comment on how I relate the problem of moral rationalism and idealism to Plato. He takes me to mean that “the problems of contemporary ideological morality and politics can be laid at the feet of Plato.” But then, he comments, “we went to Hell in a hand basket long before college professors started growing beards and wearing jeans to work,” the latter being a misleading reference to something Richard Bittenberg regards as symptomatic of the decline of his society.⁸ Again, McIntyre misconstrues something that I would have thought was rather straightforward. I make it clear that what I am criticizing is *a certain strain*—I call it a “tendency of thought and sensibility”—in Western moral speculation, including the mostly admirable classical Greek heritage. I discuss Plato as “a paradigmatic example” of the

⁶ McIntyre, “Decision Procedures,” 32-33.

⁷ Ryn, “How Desperate?,” 7.

⁸ McIntyre, “Decision Procedures,” 39.

tendency. I do not contend that Plato is all of a piece, which he is not.⁹ I do not claim that the dubious tendency in Plato's thought triumphed or that he is the one to blame for having created this problem. How could any philosopher, even one as great as Plato, single-handedly have created a propensity that recurs throughout Western history? Yet in trying to identify that tendency it is helpful to examine it in this towering figure, who gave it a strong push. Why, I wonder, would McIntyre fail to understand that a strain of thought and sensibility that has a particular ancient, "classic," formulation could endure and have different iterations and representatives down the centuries, sometimes under the influence of a great figure, and that this strain might be a notable force even today without ever having won a final victory? Are ideas for him inert, frozen things that are either "this" or "that" and do not evolve or transmogrify? Does McIntyre think that ideas from the past either won or lost? Is it far-fetched to imagine that philosophical questions continue to simmer and that what is in the past can have a vital, dynamic, continuing, "organic" relation to later periods? For me there is nothing far-fetched about this idea. I am an historicist in the sense that I see the past as always stirring in the present, for good or ill, and see the circumstances of time and place as giving the stirring its particular form. It seems that McIntyre's philosophical assumptions make it difficult for him to adapt to a view like mine.

Professor Donald Livingston has an impression of the main target of my criticism that is quite different from McIntyre's. Interested as he is in David Hume's critique of modern rationalism, Livingston interprets me as being on the side of Hume and as arguing against moral rationalism "in modern societies."¹⁰ I am indeed critical of modern rationalism, but in my view the dubious tendency had shown up already in classical and Christian moral speculation.

McIntyre would have liked for me to give a different sort of speech. I should have spent time on thinkers and issues that have attracted *his* interest. Although he and I might disagree

⁹ For a fuller discussion of strengths and weaknesses in Plato and of his dubious political moralism, see my "The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism," *Humanitas*, Vol. XII, No. 2 (1999).

¹⁰ Donald Livingston, "David Hume and the Origin of Modern Rationalism," *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2015), 44.

about the relative importance of particular thinkers whom he mentions, especially as compared to thinkers to whom I attach particular significance, I have no objection to the kind of study that he would have liked. But he must realize that conducting some such elaborate review of modern approaches to political ethics and epistemology would have required a little treatise and would have been hard to accomplish while handling the assigned topic. I went into various subjects only to the extent necessary to identify and criticize the problematic trend in Western moral speculation and to sketch what I regard as the proper alternative to the desperation-inducing moralism.

*My Philosophical Assumptions:
Ethics, Aesthetics, Epistemology*

In books and articles I have addressed in depth the kind of issues that Professor McIntyre would have liked for me to discuss, although I have done so in ways that he may find perplexing. Some of the issues that he deems important seem to me preliminary or secondary to addressing more demanding philosophical questions. I do not deny that thinkers in the last century whom he singles out and who are interested in subjects like "virtue," "values," "right," or "goodness" have perceptible, useful, or promising ideas. To their credit, they have in their various ways challenged the kind of traditional notion of moral deliberation and choice that I find untenable. Yet most of what these thinkers have to offer was said earlier, more penetratingly, precisely, or fully by others. The kind of philosophy that has most interested McIntyre has had difficulty overcoming the ancient propensity for abstraction and reification. It continues to struggle with philosophical problems that seem to me to have received a satisfactory solution. These problems include how to understand "reason," "practice," and the relation of universality and particularity, subjects that will be discussed further below. Defenses of tradition, for instance, have been hampered by the lingering old habit of treating universality and particularity as ultimately and by definition separate and distinct.

To exemplify, the ethics and epistemology of an Alasdair MacIntyre show but a dim and groping awareness of the possibility of synthesis of universality and particularity. His

notion of tradition has been only partially influenced by the historical consciousness at its best, as is evident from his inadequate reading of Edmund Burke. In my view, there are earlier thinkers with whom Kenneth McIntyre appears unfamiliar who in acuity, depth, subtlety, and scope surpass the ones who have attracted his attention. Among the “systematic,” “technical” philosophers, the Italian Benedetto Croce stands out. He absorbed but also revised and enhanced the most fruitful insights of German idealism. One who provides invaluable ideas regarding the prominent role of the imagination in the moral life is Croce’s American contemporary Irving Babbitt. Babbitt’s understanding of the relationship between imagination and will is crucially important not only for ethics and aesthetics but also, without Babbitt himself fully realizing it, for epistemology. Babbitt also provides a needed corrective to Croce. These two men cover much the same ground as thinkers discussed by Professor McIntyre, but they do so in particularly incisive ways, raising and addressing central issues that the thinkers whom McIntyre mentions neglect or barely consider. I hasten to add that I have reservations about Croce and Babbitt.

Croce and Babbitt address central issues neglected by more recent theorists.

My views of ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology have become known as value-centered historicism. I have spent much time bringing out the implications of this philosophical position for politics. One bee in my bonnet is the tension and potential union between life’s historicity and universality. The universal values of goodness, truth, and beauty are forever threatened by hostile historical forces, but they also become known to man only in particular, historical instantiations. To have meaning for human beings, they have to be experienced in the concrete, be “incarnated.” I summarize my view of the tension and synthesis of universality and particularity in *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (2003).

Universality and particularity in tension and potential union.

When the contemporary moral philosophy that accepts the notion of universality does not simply side-step the question of the historical consciousness, as do Straussian political theorists and other moral rationalists, it usually fumbles or truncates the relevant philosophical issues, finding it hard to understand the sense in which man’s moral-spiritual, aesthetical, and intellectual life is inescapably historical. That this should be the

case so long after Burke, Hegel, and Croce may say something about the difficulty of the subject, but also suggests a curious immobility of mind.

Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality (1986; 1997) offers a systematic account of the intimate relations among the practical, aesthetic, and intellectual aspects of human consciousness. Of the corresponding values of goodness, beauty, and truth I give primacy to goodness. The issues with which I deal may be in large part unfamiliar to Professor McIntyre but are, to my way of thinking, crucial to any adequate philosophy, including political philosophy. To exemplify how the ideas in *Will, Imagination and Reason* relate to contemporary political theory, let me mention that, when considered from the point of view of that book, the idea of “practical reason,” which McIntyre mentions and which is widely used today among political thinkers interested in moral virtue, must appear a rather imprecise, highly “compact” composite. The term lumps together elements of human consciousness, some of which are not so much reason as they are will and imagination of a special type. By simplifying and over-intellectualizing what is normative in the moral life, the term tends to conceal the crux of moral strength or weakness. “Practical reason” is but one of many widely used terms that badly need to be philosophically disentangled.

Drawing selectively from and synthesizing ideas from Babbitt and Croce, I see imagination as playing a larger and more fundamental role in human consciousness than is assumed in various current notions of “narrative” and “moral language.” A subject on which I have written at great length but that is still scandalously neglected both in political theory and philosophy generally is the morally opposed potentialities of imagination and their epistemological significance. I have tried to elucidate the meaning of the much-used, but usually poorly defined, term “moral imagination.” A crucial subject that has occupied much of my attention is the role that the imagination plays in constituting our most fundamental sense of reality. A part of my argument is that it is large, complex imaginative-intuitive wholes, not “sense impressions,” that form the basis of human consciousness and perceptions. It is the imagination, working in tandem with will, that both orients our rational

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reflection and provides its material. The problem of reality is closely intertwined with the subject of opposed potentialities of will, both of which bias imagination and affect how we apprehend the world—another area that is woefully unfamiliar to most political theorists and philosophers. An adequate understanding of these issues is necessary to a fully developed historical consciousness, a subject that continues to be a stumbling block especially in the English-speaking world.

I have tried to demonstrate that at the bottom of human consciousness is an historically evolved sense of the whole of reality that accompanies and frames all that human beings do, imagine, and think. This sense is prior to systematic reflection, intuitive rather than conceptual or abstract. But it is this intuited whole that also becomes the material for philosophical reflection. When the philosophical mind is engaged, it takes critical, conscious account of what has been intuitively apprehended. The philosophical act separates mere desire or dream from the world in which human beings act practically and encounter obstacles, which is to say that philosophy—properly understood—anchors life in historical reality. On this important epistemological point there seems to be a great deal of overlap between my position and that of David Hume as described by Livingston in his philosophically incisive and admirably written essay. I am not qualified to assess the accuracy of Livingston's interpretation of Hume, but I have every reason to trust his scholarship. Livingston's Hume has a deeper and subtler historical sense than my spotty and amateurish reading had revealed. I admit to wondering whether Livingston's Hume might in part be the result of Livingston's being able to view him from the perspective of later thought, including German idealism, which may have made Livingston more sensitive to the historicist potentialities in Hume's thought than Hume himself. Be that as it may, Livingston's Hume coincides with my outlook in important ways, and some of what looks like divergences or disagreements may be terminological rather than substantive.

I find most appealing Hume's recognition that the true philosopher is not some neutral, autonomous intellect but, in Livingston's words, a participant "in that radiant but mysterious *pre-reflective* order of common life" (emphasis in the

Hume is right to stress a pre-reflective sense of the whole . . .

original).¹¹ Livingston offers strong evidence that Hume is not the empiricist that he is often portrayed as being. Hume's acute awareness of the dependence of rational inquiry on tradition indicates a compatibility, actual and potential, of much of his thought with later British and German historical consciousness.

... but there is also reflective, conceptual apprehension of the whole.

Whether Hume has a clear sense of the difference between the intuitive/imaginative apprehension of this "order of common life" and the *philosophical* exploration of the same, is for me an important issue. Does Hume fully realize that as it reveals the distortions of "false philosophy" this pre-reflective whole is being turned into conscious, *reflective* awareness, becoming the material of philosophical reason? Is there in Hume a recognition, however faint and nascent, that a philosophical reason exists that can give faithful, non-distortive expression to the "common world"? Livingston seems to think so, but he sends mixed signals. He writes about Hume that what he sees as exposing "the disposition to false philosophy" is "a prior act of philosophical self-knowledge," which seems to indicate that the pre-reflective awareness of the whole can become philosophically articulate. But how "philosophical" is this prior act for Hume? Other statements in Livingston's article point in the direction of a deep general mistrust of reason. In Livingston's interpretation, Hume is strongly inclined to regard reason as intrinsically distortive or disrespectful of the pre-reflective whole. According to Livingston, "in Hume's account, the natural disposition of philosophy is to its false forms." It is in the very nature of philosophy to deny the "primordial authority of pre-reflective common life" and to invert the world through rational abstractions. For Hume, "The philosophical act itself in its pure form" tends to "philosophical fanaticism." Such a definition of what is distinctively philosophical suggests a rather sharp contrast between Hume's notion of philosophy and later efforts to synthesize philosophy and history, which find mature expression in Croce. In observations like these, Hume seems to be biased not just against rationalism but against reason generally and to be to that extent a forerunner of the many anti-rationalist thinkers in the last century—

¹¹ Livingston, "David Hume," 47.

including Bergson, Babbitt, Voegelin, Kirk, and Viereck—who out of awareness of the distortive, inhumane role of one kind of rationality fail to recognize the existence of another, more truly philosophical reason.¹²

Another crucial question, to be discussed later, is the extent to which, in addition to understanding the role of “false philosophy” in creating an “inverted world,” Hume might be alert to the potential for distortion of the pre-reflective “common life” itself—through flawed or perverse *imagination*. The ability of the imagination, as inspired by perverse will, to shape our pre-reflective sense of the whole and thus to color our basic apprehension of reality is a subject on which Irving Babbitt offers unique and indispensable insight.

A central question that relates to each of these considerations is whether Hume’s sensitivity to the epistemological significance of the intuited “common life” can be said to have included before Kant a budding awareness of the synthetic dimension of human consciousness. Kant developed this idea in relation to the natural sciences, which initially gave the notion of a synthetic whole a very abstract appearance. But later thinkers developed and deepened the idea of a human bond, a common self, with reference to the entire range of human experience, giving synthesis a much different, concrete, living aspect. These efforts were brought to philosophical ripeness in Croce and can be further enhanced by incorporating Babbitt’s groundbreaking ideas about distorted, willful imagination invading our sense of reality.

Knowledge is commonly regarded as a purely rational affair, so that in epistemology the central issue is taken to be the proper working of reason. I have tried to show that knowledge has a moral and aesthetical dimension. The will, working in tandem with imagination, predisposes human beings to a certain view of the world. Frequently we simply do not want to see the truth. Willfulness captures our imagination, turning it into our collaborator in self-deception. Together, will and imagination make us look past evidence and arguments that threaten our accustomed or preferred view of existence. As governed by self-indulgent will, the imagination helps explain away or evade information at odds with how we want to view

Perverse imagination can produce a distorted sense of the whole.

To what extent did Hume recognize the synthetic dimension of human consciousness?

Malformed imagination can pervert reason.

¹² Ibid., 47, 68, 66, 65.

Epistemology must consider moral and aesthetical factors in knowledge.

ourselves and our surroundings and helps portray our desires as acceptable or even noble. The imagination evolves not least under the influence of artistic works to which the self-indulgent will resonates. In time, the distortion may become chronic, permeating and orienting the entire personality. The result is sensibility of a particular kind, a certain way of perceiving reality. By coloring or biasing our basic, pre-reflective apprehension of the whole, the twisted imagination misdirects reason, for which it provides the sense of proportion and sense of what the world is like. The distortion acquires for the bearer the appearance of reality. Genuine open-mindedness, by contrast, presupposes a quality of will, of character, that does not permit such self-serving imaginative distortion and evasion of uncomfortable evidence. Strange as it may sound to those who have an overly intellectualistic epistemology, knowledge rests ultimately on will and imagination of a particular type. In the pursuit of knowledge as elsewhere, the entire personality is involved.

The personality as a whole blocks or fosters realism.

Livingston raises the question whether the moral rationalism and idealism that I criticize is best described as “immoral,” which is what he takes to be my view. He prefers to regard the problem as “ontological.” “The rationalist is not merely doing something morally wrong; he has created in thought, and is acting out, an *inverted world*.”¹³ (Emphasis in original.) I readily agree that the problem with moral rationalism and idealism is not just moral. The phrase that Livingston uses to express the effects of moral rationalism seems to me an apt characterization of its more extreme products: It creates “an inverted world.” The phrase indicates that the theorist is disregarding, even rebelling against, the basic terms of human existence, as does calling the error “ontological.” Yet in suggesting that the root of the problem is a misuse of reason, Livingston seems to me, paradoxically enough, to be overly rationalistic. What he calls “ontology” appears too slanted in an intellectualistic direction. I entirely agree that the error in question involves a misuse of reason, but, in my view, that misuse forms part of a larger and deeper distortion of the sort that I have just tried to explain. The personality as a whole,

¹³ Ibid., 46.

not just reason, resists reality and creates for itself more palatable visions and standards. The entire personality being misdirected, it is not possible to rectify the problem of the “inverted world” by changing reason alone, as if reason had no intimate connection with the other aspects of our humanity. For reason to become more receptive to reality it is necessary to reorient the personality as a whole in the depth of its being—will, imagination, and reason reconstituting their relationships. At the very root of a distorted outlook on life is a perversity of will, which means that achieving greater realism is ultimately a moral-spiritual matter. Important and influential as reason is, it is not “autonomous,” as Livingston himself, following Hume, will ordinarily recognize.

Livingston's way of explaining "inverted world" may be too rationalistic.

Livingston's formulation that “philosophy is and must be radically free inquiry” contains an important element of truth.¹⁴ Is Hume here groping for the universal dimension of philosophy? But the idea of “radically free inquiry” needs to be reconciled with the seemingly opposite idea that philosophy is not autonomous but wholly dependent on the pre-reflective, historically evolved whole. That whole, I argue, is the creature of will, imagination, and reason together, always closely interacting and influencing each other.

An important part of the epistemology set forth in *Will, Imagination and Reason* is explaining the kind of rationality that is able adequately to handle the complex mixture of universality and particularity that is man's moral-spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual life. I show that the reason capable of this task is at once historical and theoretical/contemplative. This rationality tries to express living, historical reality without distortion, that is, to articulate reality as it is in immediate experience. This type of reason is quite different from the kind of simplifying rationality that we predominantly employ when engaged in ordinary, day-to-day practical tasks. Pressed for time, we allow ourselves to think of the world as being far less complex than, in another part of ourselves, we know it to be. We are content to act on a rough “working” understanding or hypothesis of what existence is like. Only when we turn philosophical and direct our attention to what life most truly and fundamentally is do we adopt a more genuinely attentive point

Genuinely philosophical reason does not simplify or distort reality.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

of view. We try then to articulate what is actually in consciousness, which is a dauntingly intricate whole in which universality and particularity continuously interact. This articulation is the work of *philosophical* reason.

Philosophical reason not abstract and not normative but historical.

There is in human experience no universality without particularity. The ancient notion that knowledge is exclusively about the universal is therefore inadequate. Philosophical reason as I understand it abjures the abstractionist temptation to speculate about a postulated reality empty of concrete particulars. Instead it takes up the task of discerning what is actually in experience. Though philosophical reason understands human activity to be value-creating or value-destroying, the knowledge it seeks is historical, backward-looking in a special sense, not normative. Its purpose is not to formulate moral ideals or principles as assumed in much ancient and medieval thought. As Livingston points out, Hume agrees with this last observation. Note carefully that to make that observation about philosophy is not to deny the great importance to civilized life of principles, ideals, and other rules. At their best, these norms are attempts to express and promote mankind's sense of goodness, truth, and beauty, but they are abstract, simplified formulations. They are only indirectly the products of philosophical reasoning.

Philosophy pursues lasting truth but knows no ultimate clarity.

The kind of reason that seeks the truth about the universality-particularity of human existence is in itself simultaneously universal and historical. The truth that it seeks is "trans-temporal" and "inter-subjective" but is at the same time historically "perspectival." It is circumscribed by the limitation inherent in human knowing that is human experience itself. Although always aspiring to more profound, comprehensive truth, philosophy falls far short of omniscience. As it is never able to clear away all misunderstanding or confusion, its work is never done. Philosophy is a perpetual straining towards, never the achievement of, pure and unadulterated insight. That is to say that its intellectual mode, its logic, is a continual struggle to separate truth from untruth. This intellectual predicament is hard to reconcile with the ancient and still surviving Western tradition in logic according to which the law of human thought is the principle of identity or non-contradiction, "A=A and not non-A." This formula simply ignores that philosophiz-

ing is a continuing, never-ending pursuit of clarity and that all philosophical concepts must therefore be to some extent provisional. The formula nevertheless postulates the existence of ideas that have achieved complete self-identity, meaning that they are fully themselves and nothing else. The problem with this assumption is that philosophical inquiry into the human condition knows no such ultimate clarity and does not assume its possibility. Philosophical truth is always in need of further elaboration and clarification. A good philosophical idea certainly advances knowledge, has lasting truth, so that it could be said to be "A," but it is necessary to add that it is not final, so that it is also "non-A." The reason why more thought is always needed is that it is not yet wholly clear what is "A" and what is "non-A." The formal logicians look away from this kind of complexity, subtlety, and provisionality and insist on assuming the possibility of final, conceptual self-identity, Truth with a capital "T," as a precondition for intellectual coherence. Dissatisfied with imperfect human truth, they decree the law of non-contradiction, but by adopting this formula they remove thought from the human, historical sphere to a postulated sphere of pure, empty abstractions, those of mathematics or geometry being the best examples. From the point of view of formal, identitarian logic, the notion that philosophical thought is dialectical—a mixture of clarity and confusion—seems illogical. Yet it is through dialectical logic that philosophical reason achieves the kind of truth that is within the reach of humanity, which is limited, unfinished truth. Needless to say, the term "dialectical" has many meanings, and it is not possible here to explain fully how I am using it. I must refer to the analysis and definition in *Will, Imagination and Reason*.¹⁵

The old idea of identity or non-contradiction ignores the provisional element in philosophy.

The tendency to think abstractly and to reify what is not such in immediate consciousness I sometimes describe, without polemical intent, as "blockheadedness." In this mode the mind assumes the world to be made up of discrete phenomena, of "things," building blocks of some sort. In the blockhead,

"Blockheadedness" reifies what is in consciousness.

¹⁵ The dialectical logic of philosophy as distinguished from the logic of pragmatic reason (to use Croce's term) is discussed at length in *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, exp. rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), especially Chapter 7.

ideas, too, become reified. This blockheadedness is in a sense inevitable and can be positively useful. It is when its distortion of living, complex reality is allowed to invade philosophy that the effect is pernicious.

*Pragmatic
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role but is
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philosophy.*

More needs to be said about the practical utility of reification. The whole of human existence is too large and complex to be consciously contemplated in connection with each action, and so for practical purposes that whole is more or less deliberately pushed into the background. To meet pressing needs we make do with tentative, roughly constructed assumptions about reality. We employ what Croce calls “pragmatic rationality,” which is a reifying, reductive kind of thought. Pragmatic rationality turns life into something that it is not in actual life, namely, a congeries of separate “things.” Under its regime “this” becomes “this” and “that” becomes “that,” which means that the logic of “ $A=A$ and not non- A ” can be said to be at work. Note that the purpose of this reductive rationality is not to know the truth about the human whole but to simplify in order to advance a practical objective. A special, highly disciplined form of pragmatic rationality is that of natural science, which must for its own purposes skirt the complexity of the actual world of human consciousness, notably by deliberately cutting it into convenient pieces and limiting the number of variables that it considers.

*Philosophical
thought
reveals
simplifications
of pragmatic
rationality.*

While philosophy is attentive to and strives to articulate the whole without distortion, pragmatic rationality captures neither the tension nor the synthesis of universality and particularity. It is through philosophical observation of the intuitively apprehended whole that we are able to discern that pragmatic rationality puts a simplified, reified, reduced world in the place of the living, concrete whole. In immediate experience universality and particularity are forever fighting or joining forces, ebbing and flowing. Life is a constant straining to overcome obstacles to goodness, truth, or beauty and to embody them in particulars. No more than life in general does philosophical *thought* about the human condition escape from human existence as unfinished business. Hence it does not conform to the logic of conceptual identity. The principle of $A=A$ is not a principle for what is active and living; it obtains only when, as described, abstraction is allowed to replace actual experience.

Hume's distinction between "true" and "false" philosophy shows him to be moving far in the direction of a historicist understanding of human existence. It is with reference to the living, historically evolved whole that abstractions can be seen to be such. It is important to note at the same time that, according to Croce, the simplifying rationality of pragmatic reason need not be pernicious. This kind of rationality is in an important sense an inevitable and indispensable part of the economy of the human spirit. The distortion of the comprehensive human whole that it entails is frequently a practical necessity. To get things done actors cannot dwell on life's great complexity as philosophers must. Even as philosophers they cannot deal with all problems at once but must put to the side and simplify problems that do not demand immediate attention. Especially when trying to achieve practical purposes, human beings must adopt various rough working hypotheses, proceed as if life were not so complex and hard to understand. So long as they realize that they are thus taking liberties with reality, no deleterious consequences need follow. It is when thinkers lose sight of the mysterious whole and mistake elaborate reductive constructs for reality itself that their efforts turn sinister, become "false philosophy" in Hume's terminology. Though Hume may neglect the utility of simplifying thought, his recognizing "the utter mysteriousness of the pre-reflective order of common life," in Livingston's formulation, makes him an ally in unmasking the perniciousness, pretentiousness, and superficiality of rationalism and other ideology.¹⁶

It should not be difficult to see how these philosophical observations relate to the themes of my article. A great problem with moral rationalism and idealism is their limited awareness of the complexity and ultimate mysteriousness of human existence. Making their assumptions about moral normativity, they assume the possibility of a reprieve from the human condition and posit firm and unchanging norms sitting in splendid isolation from changeable, confused, blurry, fluid human existence. Moral rationalists and idealists are strangely oblivious of the historicity of human existence and assume, as if they were mere spectators from afar and not participants,

Moral rationalism and idealism do not recognize complexity and historicity of human existence.

¹⁶ Livingston, "David Hume," 55.

that in one way or another the world consists of “things,” even if they be immaterial or insubstantial rather than solid. Having vaguely glimpsed the historical consciousness, some of them double down on their ahistorical notion of universality, thinking that they are protecting it. “Historicism” becomes for both groups another word for moral relativism or nihilism. The only source of philosophical self-respect for this kind of blockhead-ness is the reassurance and support that like-minded persons can offer. The inability to conceive of non-abstract universality reveals a marked philosophical helplessness.

Issues of this kind have been my general philosophical territory for a very long time. Because of his rather different intellectual background Professor McIntyre may be unprepared for some of my approaches and conclusions, which challenge much in his notion of philosophy, but they are the result of extensive reflection.

Philosophy: Not Normative but Indispensable to Practice

*Philosophy
does not offer
practical
prescriptions.*

I take care to point out in the article what I have explained at length in other publications, that adopting my alternative to rationalistic or idealistic moralism would not produce “a particular solution to the problems of our historical situation.” Expectations of that kind are, I write, “the stuff of rationalistic, idealistic, or escapist speculation.”¹⁷ To think, as I do, that philosophy has something important to offer in our troubled circumstances is not the same as to believe that it stands ready with practical prescriptions. What McIntyre tells his readers is the opposite, that I believe that philosophy can and must offer a practical solution to our problems: “Ryn appears to believe that, given the dire moral condition of the Western world, it is imperative that some . . . answer be given.”¹⁸ That McIntyre should repeatedly read past what I clearly state and jump to unsupported conclusions is truly puzzling. Is he so strongly wedded to a particular interpretative scheme and view of philosophy that he has difficulty adapting to assumptions different from his own?

McIntyre’s general idea of the nature of philosophy and academic study comes out in what he writes about the belief

¹⁷ Ryn, “How Desperate?,” 23.

¹⁸ McIntyre, “Decision Procedures,” 32.

that America may be in deep trouble. To him, people who have such concerns and think about how to deal with the perceived problems—Donald Livingston, Bruce Frohnen, and I among them—cannot do so as philosophers but only as conceited rationalists claiming special powers of discernment. Philosophers and other academics, as McIntyre defines them, ought to be above such arrogance and excitability. Philosopher-academics know that people are always worrying about society going to the dogs.

McIntyre thinks that as “a political theorist and intellectual historian” he has no business or qualification to assess the moral and political state of America. Academics, he argues, have no “special expertise in the world of moral and political action.”¹⁹ This sweeping and revealing statement assumes a notion with which I profoundly disagree, namely, that, by definition, academic study is removed from actual life and from the kind of choices that life requires. That many academics today do in fact have little “special expertise” in morality and politics hardly needs saying. The same is true of many professional philosophers. “Technical” proficiency and formal brilliance are no guarantee of wisdom and depth, indeed, are often combined with superficiality and twisted thinking. This is one of the reasons why we distinguish between good and bad philosophy. But note that this is *my* point, not McIntyre’s. When speaking about a lack of “special expertise” he is not referring, as I might, to professors who are lost in some out of the way, trivial specialty or have warped, ideological views of the world or are otherwise failing to understand basics of the human condition. No, when denying that academics have any “special expertise” in morality and politics, McIntyre is describing what he takes to be intrinsic to *all* academic studies—to which I respond to the contrary: Academia ultimately serves a life worth living, which is to say that it has the same purpose as civilization in general. As for political philosophy, let me suggest, contra McIntyre, that “special expertise in the world of moral and political action” is its *distinguishing characteristic*—not, of course, in the sense that it is a form of political practice and not in the sense that it provides univer-

Academic philosophy that does not assist human practice is mere diversion.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

sal models or norms, but in the sense that it *understands* the terms of human practice, specifically, the practice of politics, more fully, subtly, and precisely than do people who have not reflected much on the nature of their practice and its relation to other parts of their humanity. Good philosophers *understand* better than most what makes human beings tick and what are the opportunities and limits of human existence, although, as should be clear by now, it is for me virtually self-evident that this understanding never approximates exhaustive knowledge. Political philosophy that answers to McIntyre's description of having no "special expertise" would be for me very weak or bad philosophy. If it were true that philosophy as such could offer little or no help in identifying destructive trends in society or in thinking about how to counteract them, it would be a mere diversion from what matters to human beings.

*Although not
itself practice,
philosophy
illuminates
practice.*

As my discussion of Livingston's comment has illustrated, a theme in my writing and teaching is the danger of rationalism and ideology. There is some overlap here between McIntyre and me, but, in my conception, philosophy does not withdraw from life, especially not from practice, except in the obvious and limited sense that it is *study* of practice, is contemplative-theoretical activity and not practical activity. Far from isolating itself from actual life, good philosophy tries to become as intimately familiar with its texture as possible. It wants to understand what is really there. Its special role is to scrutinize and sort out life's essentials. It seeks to improve its grasp of the previously discussed whole of common life. In my understanding, the latter is, when not warped by self-indulgent willfulness, centered in moral and religious experience. Philosophy closely and systematically studies practical and aesthetical life *and* its own theoretical-contemplative activity. Philosophy is the conceptual articulation of the experiential complexity of existence. Its mode and currency is "reflection," "theory," "ideas," "concepts," "reasoning," "definitions," but that does not mean that the truth that it expresses is abstract in the sense of empty of the concrete and historical. It is truth about lived human experience. Although philosophy is not normative in the sense of enunciating "principles" for moral practice, it is indispensable to practice in that it *illuminates* the world in which human beings have to make choices.

Unlike McIntyre, I believe, then, that philosophy as such is helpful in thinking about solutions to problems or about the state of America and the Western world. The value of philosophy for human beings lies not merely but primarily in what it has to offer to practice, the latter being the key to well-being. To act for their own good or that of their fellow human beings, persons need to understand the kind of obstacles that they must try to negotiate. They need to distinguish between real and purely imaginary possibilities. They need to see through self-serving illusion. Good philosophy sharpens their sense of what is what. In short, philosophy helps anchor human beings in the world in which they must act. Most people take no personal interest in advanced philosophy, but indirectly they benefit from the work of the philosophers down the centuries whose ideas help shape the sense of reality, direction, and proportion that defines their civilization. If philosophy had little or nothing to contribute to action, it would be marginal or irrelevant to what human beings most care about. The idea that philosophy and the academy are distant from the needs of life as actually lived suggests a thin, ethereal, highly abstract notion of their role.

Good philosophy helps guide practice.

McIntyre's notion of philosophy comes out in his comments on Machiavelli. The latter is not a philosopher, McIntyre declares, and thus his ideas do not really qualify for serious consideration. What most bothers McIntyre seems to be that I think that Machiavelli might deepen our view of political morality. Now it is I who say about Machiavelli that he does not write with the precision and nuance that one expects of a professional philosopher, but nothing could be further from my point than to suggest that for that reason Machiavelli has nothing to offer philosophy. The reason why it would not occur to me to exclude Machiavelli from philosophical consideration is what I regard as the first requirement of good philosophy: that it understand its own subject well—which is human life. To the extent that it is humanly possible, philosophy must have a strong grasp of the basic terms of human existence, its dangers, and opportunities. Philosophy must have a good sense of proportion, know which subjects and perspectives are central or marginal and where to look for explanations for disturbing or encouraging phenomena. Machiavelli had a

Machiavelli not a technical philosopher but important for moral and political philosophy.

special purpose in writing *The Prince*, true enough, and in that work he gave disproportionate attention to some aspects of politics, putting other important subjects aside, but, whatever his reasons for doing so, he shone a light on important political realities that moralists and philosophers had kept neglecting or evading.

The great artists and wise men of the human race indispensable to philosophy.

Academic philosophers who have formal brilliance and intellectual rigor sometimes display them in the defense of warped or superficial views of life. They lack what is most needed, an ability to see deeply and comprehensively. Thinkers with a native gift for philosophy who also have that ability are likely to have derived much of it from the canons of their civilization, perhaps especially from its great imaginative, artistic masterminds, men such as Sophocles, St. John, Dante, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven, Bach, and Goethe. "Poets" like these greatly affect what philosophers take to be the facts and the "feel" of the common life into which they were born, even when the philosophers are less than fully conscious of that influence. Having seen deeply into the human condition, the great artists enrich and enlarge the experience of people who, without them, would have been confined to their own powers of intuition. There is a less artistic, more cerebral group of important figures who, while writing seriously and perceptively about central questions, are not quite philosophers in the more academic, "technical" sense but who are nevertheless owed a debt by the professional philosophers. I have in mind thinkers like Machiavelli, Edmund Burke, and, again, Goethe, who was not only a poet. Many men of letters have expanded and put indelible marks on the Western mind, including the philosophical mind. The true philosopher looks for insight wherever he can find it. Since the first need of philosophy is a profound, balanced, non-illusory view of the world, no clear line can or should be drawn between men of great wisdom and philosophers in the narrow sense. If the academic philosophers did not have the discernment of mankind's men of wisdom to guide them, many or most of them would be in danger of wasting their time on misconceptions or trifles. In fact, too many of them do waste their time in precisely this manner. It seems not to have occurred to McIntyre that philosophers are importantly in the business of trying to articulate in concep-

tual, more precise, strictly philosophical terms what others have already seen more deeply and fully. The notion that as a philosopher McIntyre should consider only the thoughts of people who express themselves in the manner of academic philosophers suggests to me a truncated and artificial notion of our craft. Does Plato, for instance, measure up to McIntyre's strict definition of philosophy? Much of Plato's writing is as much artistic narrative as it is "technical" philosophy. Plato's low opinion of the poets in his official epistemology is belied by his extensive practice of the art of fiction. On the subject of what good philosophy owes to the "philosophy" of the wise, including the great artists, I have written at length, not least in *Will, Imagination and Reason*.

One of the reasons why I took up Machiavelli in my discussion of political morality was that I was expected to relate my dinner remarks to my novel, which deals with harsh, fraught political circumstances and illustrates the need for moral versatility. Another reason was to address the question of desperation. Reacting against my taking Machiavelli seriously as a commentator on politics, McIntyre writes condescendingly about Machiavelli that "it is not clear that Machiavelli should be even classified as a philosopher or historian."²⁰ I have already explained why such a comment must strike me as philosophically incriminating. Classify Machiavelli any way you want; interested as I am in moral and political reality and in whether Machiavelli has insights not otherwise available, I would take Machiavelli any day over an entire band of abstract, "rigorous," "academic" political theorists or historians.

McIntyre disparages Machiavelli as primarily "a polemicist," whose "interest in the past was solely in the service of his present" and who philosophers can thus afford to put to the side. Would McIntyre recognize Benedetto Croce as a philosopher or as an historian? It is Croce who famously declares that all history is contemporary history. At the bottom of the desire to know about the human past is the desire of human beings to learn more about mankind, hence about *themselves*, and thus about the present. All thinkers and historians have a current reason for taking up particular historical subjects. That

Philosopher or not, Machiavelli explores the dark side of politics and shows the need for moral versatility.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

What matters most to philosophy about a thinker is not what triggered his thinking but its degree of understanding.

Machiavelli was influenced by his historical circumstances and had particular objectives in writing *The Prince*, the work I cite, is evident, but, whatever got him started, it is the degree of perspicacity of his thought that matters most to the philosopher. In my view, Machiavelli made observations about an important part of reality that philosophers cannot afford to ignore. McIntyre complains that it was not “necessary” for me to use Machiavelli to make my argument. No, of course it was not. I could have approached my subject in any number of ways. But it so happens that Machiavelli deals incisively with issues relevant to my purpose, and he has for me the additional appeal that, in a most satisfying manner, he startles holier-than-thou moralists out of their complacency.²¹

McIntyre complains furthermore that my use of Machiavelli is not “academically complete.”²² He has got me there. I do not even attempt a well-rounded treatment of Machiavelli. My article has a different objective. And how could I have accomplished such a task in an article in which, besides carrying out my assignment, I should have included a survey and discussion of thinkers whom McIntyre regards as important?

McIntyre’s view of Machiavelli is inconsistent. One of his criticisms of me is, as just discussed, that Machiavelli should not be taken seriously as a thinker. He adopts a different view when criticizing me for being too concerned to refute Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli as an immoralist. Let me mention in passing that McIntyre offers no support for the latter criticism; I do not and have no reason to single out Strauss. You might think that McIntyre is unaware that Strauss is but one in a long line of commentators who have regarded Machiavelli as an immoralist. To show that there are other interpretations—as if this needed to be demonstrated—McIntyre notes that “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.”²³ To which I say: Of course. My view of Machiavelli is wholly compatible with this interpretation. Indeed, McIntyre is here *helping* me to refute the notion that Machia-

²¹ Ibid., 40.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

velli is an immoralist. He seems at the same time unaware that he is contradicting his own view that as a non-philosopher and non-historian Machiavelli cannot be taken very seriously. Here he tells us that knowledgeable and perceptive historians *can* and *do* take Machiavelli's ideas seriously.

McIntyre regards it as a sign of rationalistic arrogance to argue that America is in a precarious condition and that people need to think more about how to handle such circumstances. In their capacity as philosophers, intellectuals should, it appears, exhibit a blithe detachment from whatever might trouble their contemporaries. Presumably, McIntyre would exclude from philosophical consideration all the Cassandras of the human race. Consider Cicero's warnings of grave threats to the Roman Republic, Burke's warning of the French Revolution and its ideas, Irving Babbitt's warnings about sentimental humanitarianism undermining American constitutionalism, and so on. For these men to think that they had identified serious and dangerous problems and that they ought to warn others showed them to be conceited and rationalistic? Most of these warnings were not heeded or barely so, and disasters resulted. But, even as they failed, these warnings succeeded. They made people living later realize that, *had* these warnings been understood and heeded, great turbulence and suffering might have been averted. Events proved these observers prescient and wise, and their arguments became valued parts of the never-ending human effort to understand life better and to reduce misery. Does McIntyre actually believe that philosophy should dismiss such warnings and diagnoses as arrogant claims to omniscience? If philosophy is not qualified to warn of dangers and has little else to contribute to what human beings most care about, what would be the argument against having it close shop? I can muster no sympathy for turning the philosopher into a disinterested, abstract, faintly Stoical spectator.

McIntyre's notion of philosophy assumes a strangely fragmented human consciousness, philosophy being off to the side doing its own thing and having little relevance for the life of practice. As previously discussed, I contend that the different aspects of human life—which I sum up in the terms will, imagination, and reason—depend upon each other and interact closely. As it reflects on human existence, philosophy

Cassandras of the human race have contributed to its self-understanding.

Good philosophy not abstract exercise outside of history or without practical import.

does in a sense encompass and understand these activities, including philosophizing itself—all of this for the ultimate purpose of assisting moral-spiritual practice. McIntyre comes across as not very sensitive to the intimate interdependence of will, imagination, and reason, or to the element of continuity in man's historical existence, or to how the past moves in the present, not least in philosophy.

If philosophy did not help us live to advantage, it would have little value.

The good philosopher, then, is in my view one who understands well what threatens or assists human well-being. But to say of good philosophy that it knows what *kind* of activity is conducive to or destructive of a life truly worth living is not the same as to say that it knows what specific choices should be made or which public policies should be adopted in particular circumstances. Philosophy speaks about the general terms of human existence and about the form of and preconditions for sound choices. Not the least of its contributions is identifying obvious threats to a good life. Clearing away reductionism, conceit, and illusion, it exposes what Hume calls "false philosophy." At his best, the philosopher is of great value to practical politics, not because, like Plato's philosopher, he has a model for the good society or because he has a list of policy prescriptions, but because he knows more than others about the enduring features, problems, and higher potentialities of human existence. After all, he spends his life reflecting on the subject. McIntyre asserts that a philosopher "is certainly no more capable of answering the question [how desperate one should be] than the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus."²⁴ Why then should we pay any attention to the philosopher?

Contrary to McIntyre's arbitrary claim, there is in my notion of philosophy no implication whatever that philosophers by virtue of their understanding are also suited for politics. Although particular philosophers might be gifted politicians, the philosophical-theoretical enterprise of philosophy does not necessarily go together with the kind of practical toughness, intuition, and skill that might equip a person for politics. In criticism of the notion that philosophy has something to offer to politics, McIntyre writes that "there are no fool-proof methods of getting things right."²⁵ But of course there are no such meth-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

ods, especially not for coming up with the right public policy. Yet in another sense the central task of philosophy is precisely to try to get things right, to offer an accurate picture of human existence and of the preconditions of a meaningful life.

Good philosophy may be difficult to understand—may be “abstract” in the colloquial sense—but it is, as far as I am concerned, the opposite of distant from the world of practice and historical particulars. Although it cannot provide a blueprint for the good society or specific solutions to a crisis, it is anchored in the world of practice and helps actors understand their circumstances and orient themselves to what ultimately matters. By showing life’s complexity, including its imperfections and perversions, philosophy humbles the mind. Sound philosophy never views itself as a substitute for the historically evolved sense of what men have found over the centuries to be conducive to a good life. Philosophy is dependent on and guided by what Burke calls “the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.”²⁶ If it is true that tradition is a vital source of guidance, it is also true that tradition that is not intellectually enlivened by good philosophy and by artistic and moral creativity calcifies, rigidifies, and dies.

Anchored in the world of practice and guided by the historically evolved whole, philosophy helps actors understand their circumstances.

Morality as Synthesis of Universality and Particularity

Professor Frohnen is willing to move some distance in the direction of my suggestion for how we ought to reconstitute our thinking about morality. He is aware of the problem of defining morality as adherence to a preexisting rational or ideal standard. He is sharply critical of the new natural law theory of Germain Grisez, John Finnis, Robert George, and others, which, he writes, turns the issue of moral motive into “a matter of mere ratiocination.” Among the bad consequences are a “mechanized conception of virtue” and an “abdication of judgment.” Frohnen rightly excoriates abstract and politically partisan moral theories that are supposedly derived from Kant for being misguided and “merely formulaic.” His view of Rawls is similar to mine. That a thinker like Rawls should be greatly admired by the American academic mainstream tells

²⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 76.

us much about its intellectual condition. Rawls's abstractionism seems to me a kind of modern "liberal" and rationalistic parody of the old tendency in the Western world to disconnect moral universality from historical particularity. It should be evident, then, that there is much on which Frohnen and I agree.²⁷

Frohnen and I have similar views of the current state of America. He calls our era "decadent." He thus joins those who in bemoaning the times show themselves not to be among Professor McIntyre's academic philosophers. I note that Frohnen's impression of the practical import of the philosophical reform I advocate is very different from McIntyre's. While the latter asserts that for me philosophy must yield some definite practical solution to our current problems, Frohnen writes, "Ryn offers no pat answers."²⁸ My text may be intelligible after all.

Unlike McIntyre, Frohnen does not describe me as desperate or as prescribing desperation, but he writes at the same time that "we do truly live in desperate times."²⁹ I need to repeat that it is not I who calls our historical situation "desperate." In my article desperation comes up only in the context of answering the assigned question, "How desperate should we be?," and my answer, again, is: We should not be desperate; desperation signifies moral failure. Because Frohnen is using the word "desperation" in a loose, colloquial way and does not mention my thesis, he may be confusing the reader. To say that these are "desperate times" means in my terminology that moral rationalism and idealism, together with moral nihilism, have generated widespread moral malfunction. Because that may actually be the case, Frohnen does here in a way speak for me.

Being more traditional than I in epistemology, Frohnen places a heavier emphasis than I do on a corruption of reason as an explanation for the problems of modernity. Although Frohnen is well aware of Rousseau's harmful influence on morality, he underestimates the scope and importance of that influence. Rousseau was a thinker, to be sure, but so closely aligned with his ideas as to be inseparable from them was a new way of

*Frohnen
underestimates
Rousseau's
harmful
influence.*

²⁷ Bruce P. Frohnen, "Tradition, Principle, and the Rule of Law: A Response to Claes Ryn," *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 1 and 2 (2015), 72, 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

imagining the human condition. His greatest appeal to modern readers was that he radically *reimagined* the nature of man and society, promising a new and better world. Rousseau is a major source of what Babbitt calls “sentimental humanitarianism,” the pseudo-moral, pseudo-religious imagination that has gradually replaced or transformed classical and Christian moral and religious sensibility. The great influence of this quality of imagination is easily detected between the lines of most modern rationalist writing. Frohnen is more interested in how perverted reason in isolation has undermined traditional Western civilization. He pays particular attention to Kant and Rawls. I submit that, unless you fully understand how Rousseau and kindred figures captured the imagination and reoriented Western sensibility, you cannot get to the bottom of modern rationalism, which is usually an intellectualistic gloss upon sentimental dreaming. Here Frohnen could find the deeper origin of the political and personal partisanship that he correctly ascribes to Rawls and his admirers.

*New way of
imagining the
world usually
hides behind
modern
rationalism.*

Turning to what may be the most important area of divergence between Frohnen and me, he worries that my approach to morality would undermine the rule of law and the power of good examples and increase the danger of selfishness. Because Frohnen is committed to a particular view of Machiavelli, which is that he is an amoralist or immoralist, it also bothers him that I should use any part of Machiavelli to explain why the meaning of morality needs to be reconsidered.

I shall not attempt to argue Frohnen out of his view of Machiavelli. The Florentine has been the subject of an extraordinary diversity of interpretations, some of which are radically divergent. Who Machiavelli really is will be the subject of many studies yet to come. While Frohnen’s interpretation is supported by some Machiavelli scholars, it is contradicted by numerous others. Considering Frohnen’s other intellectual leanings, I wonder what he would make of a book like Sebastian de Grazia’s *Machiavelli in Hell*, whose interpretation of Machiavelli is so different from his as to claim that Machiavelli is a kind of Thomist.³⁰

Frohnen portrays Machiavelli as the champion of a politi-

³⁰ Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

A morality that is ill at ease in times of sharp conflict is inadequate.

cal religion, as a worshiper of the state, and as fond of ruthless violence. Offering this highly tendentious view, he also asserts that I am pointing to Machiavelli as “an exemplar of moral action,” as if I would endorse Machiavelli as understood by Frohnen.³¹ I certainly would not. I think Frohnen’s interpretation of Machiavelli is entirely too biased by the kind of moralism that I criticize in the article. Also, my purpose in taking up Machiavelli is not to offer him as “a moral exemplar.” I credit him with attending to aspects of politics that earlier moral speculation had not sufficiently considered. When moral rationalism and idealism are juxtaposed with political circumstances of the kind described in *The Prince*, their inadequacy stand out in particular relief. A morality that is confused and ill at ease in periods of open conflict and general tension is seriously deficient, partly because “ordinary,” “peaceful” life is itself often tense and threatening. Genuine morality must be understood to include a readiness to deal with high-pressure situations. Though not himself engaged in systematic philosophical reflection on this issue, Machiavelli’s portrayal of the necessities of political life in the pressure cooker brings out the need for what I call “moral versatility.” The latter is not another word for inventive expediency but for the kind of will, imagination, and reason through which morality adapts to actual situations. While having nothing to do with callous and cynical maneuvering, moral ingenuity as I understand it is able to do what is needed when the going gets tough. It is not surprised or intimidated. It is ready and takes action. It works—for moral good. Compare this readiness to the practical awkwardness and philosophical helplessness of moral rationalism and idealism, whose most rigid, wooden form is moral legalism and casuistry.

Though necessary, moral standards and examples must not be treated as moral ultimates.

Instead of debating my use of Machiavelli with Frohnen, I will address what I think is at the bottom of his discomfort with my argument. He thinks that my general approach to rethinking morality “would undermine the rule of law and the promotion of virtuous examples.”³² Let me immediately state that, like him, I find good standards and examples crucially important to the good life, whether private or public. Civilization does in a sense live or die by its standards and examples.

³¹ Frohnen, “Tradition,” 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 70.

I would stress the role of the imagination, importantly literature and the arts, in conveying the necessary sense of moral universality and in building up sound principles and patterns of conduct. What is important to understand is that these normative structures must not be reified into an abstract code and be treated as if they were morally definitive. Particular norms must not be confused with what is morally required in every particular situation. At their best and taken together, the norms indicate the general direction in which the civilized society would like to move. The standards and examples encourage a certain moral momentum in human beings, but they do not through casuistry of some sort prescribe the right choice. They do not do away with the need for morally inspired action in particular situations. There is a sense in which morality always has to be created anew by unique individuals facing unique circumstances, and sometimes they find themselves in situations radically different from those assumed by ordinarily plausible norms. The person's moral compass must work in those situations too. The essence of morality is, thus, not adherence to rules. As Frohnen knows better than most, laws and rules without moral substance can be as bad as or worse than lawlessness. The proliferation of law and legalism in America is morally a very bad sign. For substantiation of that point I refer the reader to Frohnen's own article "Lawless America" in a previous issue of *Humanitas*.³³

Moving even closer to what I think is the heart of Frohnen's criticism of my proposed reform, he is afraid that my argument is such that "the person may fall into a situational ethic prioritizing immediate and selfish interests over higher order goods." "Situational ethic"—now there is a scary thought! Let me say, first, that, given the human propensity for self-indulgence, human beings are always inclined to "prioritize" selfish interests. This is one of the reasons why I see a need for rethinking the meaning of morality. It is necessary to get at the root of this problem and to undermine the inclination to dodge moral responsibility. One of the serious defects of moral rationalism and idealism is that instead of fostering morality they tend to encourage *evasion* of morality. What I

*Moral
versatility
needed to
counteract
moral
evasion.*

³³ Bruce Frohnen, "Lawless America," *Humanitas*, Vol. XXIV, Nos. 1 & 2 (2011).

call “moral versatility” counteracts this temptation. Hence, Frohnen has more reason to direct his criticism against moral rationalism and idealism and any other notion of virtue that finds morality hard to reconcile with stressful situations. The standards that these theories treat as normative are so distant from real-life situations, especially in times of great travail, that when circumstances get rough and the standards appear difficult or impossible to apply, the person concludes that morality could not very well be expected here and now. The person either withdraws from engagement, inflicting on morality another defeat, or resorts to whatever looks expedient. A person in the habit of letting morality be defined by rationalistic or idealistic standards gets used to thinking of morality as being for “normal” circumstances, situations when the “principles” appear to fit reasonably well. In “abnormal” circumstances, especially if they are truly frightening, the same person imagines that now, surely, the actor can be excused from doing the moral thing. Frohnen himself exemplifies just that kind of thinking. He writes: “There may be times when a great bad act is necessary in order to bring an end to a corrupt and corrupting rule so that virtue may again hold sway.” Frohnen here intends to indicate partial agreement with me and to concede that “no rule book can give us all the answers,” but he is actually showing that he has misunderstood me. To think that sometimes a “great bad act” might be permissible is just the kind of unfortunate conclusion that a flawed notion of morality tends to produce. The terrible circumstances, thought to be hard to reconcile with morality, become an excuse for setting morality aside. I reject that view of morality.³⁴

*Genuine
morality
suited to all
circumstances.*

I do not believe that morality is for circumstances that match preconceived moral “principles.” If genuine, it is suited to *all* circumstances. It is as much for troubled, unforgiving situations as for supposedly “normal” situations. When is life ever “normal”? Though particular abstract moral standards may be more or less ill-adapted to a situation, morality itself is, if it be authentic, *always* relevant and applicable. It tries to make the best even of the worst circumstances. My term for the infinite adaptability of morality is “versatility.” Because we are always under the obligation to act morally, there can be no

³⁴ Ibid., 74.

such thing as a permissible “great bad act.” The explanation for why Frohnen reaches the opposite conclusion is rather straightforward. He is sufficiently a realist to recognize that sometimes really harsh action is necessary, but because he has an ultimately reified and static conception of morality, he has no choice but to place what he considers distasteful but necessary action somewhere outside of morality. His preconceptions do not allow for the possibility that *morality* might be equipped to deal efficaciously with that kind of situation. Frohnen’s notion of morality implies that in some circumstances good need not be attempted and bad is permissible.

Frohnen’s notion that evil may be necessary to achieve good reveals static view of morality.

To argue, as I do, that the moral imperative admits of no exceptions is not to deny that finding a morally satisfactory course can be exceedingly difficult. One of the reasons is that time is often short. It is because choosing rightly is so frequently difficult that, from childhood on, human beings need to learn what to expect from life and how to deal with it. They must acquire as much as possible of the versatility that will enable them to handle situations of different types, including high-pressure ones, in a morally acceptable fashion. The *sine qua non* of morality is moral character, but the versatility can develop only through moral practice and a related, increasingly nimble imagination, reason in the stricter sense playing a supportive rather than directive role. As most people will have a rather limited range of personal practical experience, literature and the other arts as well as philosophy are vital in preparing the person for dealing with unexpected, unaccustomed situations. Cultivating moral versatility means honing the ability to adapt to changing circumstance. The effect is to counter the lazy habit of evading moral challenges. However important specific moral norms may be in moral education, especially in its early stages, it is the ultimate purpose behind the norms, not specific formulations suited to “normal” circumstances, that should inspire action. Reductive, reifying moral “principles” restrict the range of moral action and discourage moral creativity.

Morality understood as adherence to fixed standards undermines moral adaptability and creativity.

How telling that even a thinker as committed to moral universality as Frohnen should be prone to a kind of partial amorism or immoralism! What better evidence that the meaning of morality needs to be reconsidered. What Frohnen and so many others have difficulty accepting because of a lingering, perhaps

Morality has an unchanging purpose, but employs means adapted to changing circumstances.

unrecognized, hankering for unchanging “principles,” is that what is substantively good and necessary may sometimes have to look very different from what conventional moral norms prescribe. That is *not* to say—note this carefully—that morality has no firm or enduring purpose. Its goal and quality are in a sense unchanging. In that sense, morality is always the same. What I am arguing about morality is the very opposite of “anything goes.” But, in another sense, morality must be changeable. To be relevant to human life it must continually adapt to the circumstances that human beings have to face. Those circumstances include the ruthlessness, treachery, greed, and cruelty of humanity. Morality must be “at home” with them, not, obviously, in the sense of approving them, but in the sense of being ready and predisposed to handle them. The means sometimes employed by morality in rough circumstances may strike moral rationalists or idealists as violations of moral norms, but that which is truly necessary to advance good in such situations is substantively moral, whether it runs afoul of moral convention or not.

Returning to earlier considerations, I had better add that, given man’s epistemological condition, the facts of situations are rarely, if ever, beyond doubt, which means that what is done in good conscience might not have the anticipated effects that were approved by conscience. Having to live with such ignorance and uncertainty is one of the permanent problems of the human condition with which morality must also contend.

A prominent feature of morality is restraining bad proclivities.

It is here relevant that it is usually easier to discern what is immoral than what is moral. Morality is forever struggling against and trying to overcome inclinations springing from egotistical motives. Far from being the enactment of a rational or ideal plan, morality must to a great extent be a censoring, restraining influence in the inner life of the person. Though morality is by definition a positive, constructive force, it must, because of man’s strong propensity for self-indulgence and conceit, very often reveal its purpose by arresting a current proclivity and affording the person an opportunity to reassess motives. Irving Babbitt uses the term “inner check” to describe the prominent negative aspect of morality. I have discussed this subject in depth elsewhere.³⁵ Only by habitually subjecting im-

³⁵ See, for example, *Will, Imagination and Reason*, Chapter 1, and *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*, 2nd exp. ed. (Wash-

pulses to moral scrutiny and exercising great selectivity can the individual help moral goodness gain a foothold in the world. The just-discussed limited transparency of circumstance only compounds the difficulty of making moral choices.

What should be done cannot, as Frohnen recognizes, be looked up in a “rule-book.” Then what is the source of such morality as humans can practice? I am suggesting that the moral person is not an expert at collecting and juggling “principles.” What makes genuine morality possible is an orientation of the whole person. What most protects a person from immorality is not keeping certain “principles” in the head but having built up a certain disposition of character. It is moral character, made supple and inventive by practice and imagination and corresponding thoughtfulness, that inspires a desire to do the right thing. Especially in stressful circumstances, no amount of good laws and good examples can make up for a lack of personal moral substance.

The best protection against immorality is a certain disposition of character.

Because he cannot quite imagine parting with the notion of morality as some kind of unchanging norm above and separate from the vicissitudes of life, Frohnen worries about the danger of “situational morality.” But life is made up of situations, none of which is identical to any other situation. That being the case, morality cannot be relevant to real life and efficacious for that life without being in one sense “situational.” As should be already evident, I do not question that life in general and morality in particular have an enduring normative aspect. My argument about morality and about beauty and truth assumes it. What I am trying to demonstrate is that the purpose of morality, as of beauty and truth, is forever changing as well as remaining the same. It shows its purpose in particular situations.

In one sense, morality must be situational.

The longer I reflect upon the strange inability of so many, including many conservatives, to free themselves of the notion of morality defined as unchanging “principles,” the more I incline to the view that the main reason is blockheadedness, as defined above. Although perhaps rejecting in theory the notion that the world is a spatially organized collection of discrete “things,” they find it hard to grasp that moral good—or

ington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), Chapter XIII.

Blockheadedness stands in the way of understanding possible synthesis of universality and particularity.

the true, or the beautiful, or God—could be at once historical and transcendent, individual and universal, both a part of the “inner” life of the particular person and universal in the sense of binding on or authoritative for all. People with a rule-bound notion of morality who consider value questions unconsciously favor abstract, reifying thought over experiential reality. If morality is a universal value, they reason, it is by definition separate from, “external” to, the individual. It cannot be universal and at the same time have its source in the here and now of a particular person. No, some sort of spatial connection has to be established between the universal and the particular, the “external” and the “internal.” The particular person must, for example, as in Plato, come to “participate” in the universal or the universal be “reflected” in the particular. Particularity, which is historical, must yield to, be replaced by, universality, which is ahistorical. There can be no integral relationship, no union, between the universal and the particular. Their relationship must be tenuous, ultimately antagonistic. It would be illogical, such reasoners assume, to think that the particular itself might manifest universality. Yet, although it seems inconceivable to the blockhead, it happens all the time. The universal enters human experience, comes alive for individual persons, as they create or recreate universal value in a particular way, at a particular time, in a particular place, in a particular *situation*. The blockhead protests that this supposed synthesis of universality and particularity is a contradiction in terms, but this view is refuted by all instances of goodness, truth, and beauty known to man. Everywhere the universal and the particular are found together, mutually dependent, implied in each other, and they are all the more magnetic and compelling because of it. The particular is not a detriment to but the embodiment of the universal value.

How paradoxical that so many who have difficulty grasping the possibility of this higher synthesis should also regard themselves as Christians! For Christianity, the Word became flesh. The universal was incarnated. This was not a case of God lowering or demeaning Himself, as most Muslims seem to regard the idea of the Incarnation, but was God making Himself known in a manner accessible to human beings. If it is possible to accept the notion that the divine can be incarnated in histo-

ry, it should be possible to understand analogously that moral universality can be instantiated in particular actions.

As I attempt to restate and summarize my main point about morality, I need to ask “traditional” moralists to brace themselves, to be prepared to be scandalized. The truth that I am trying to get across is the following: Unless morality is brought to life in specific circumstances, it does not enter human experience in the first place. Or, to sharpen the point in a way that is likely to elicit a sharp reaction: *Unless morality is situational, it is not genuine.* Otherwise put, if moral universality and particularity could not come together in the moment, genuine morality would have to remain unknown to the person, except as rumor.³⁶ If morality is conceived as having its source “outside” of the self, it tends to become distant, abstract, and easy to ignore, but as known in immediate experience the source of morality has the power and authority to sway action.

Only situational morality genuine.

The cries of righteous indignation that I can hear show the force of ingrained habit. Again, how could universality possibly express itself in particularity!? This is surely “relativism,” “solipsism,” “historicism,” “nihilism”—“situationism”! This reaction points to the need for rethinking not just morality but epistemology. Blockheadedness needs to be recognized for what it is and pushed aside so that the philosophical mind can more attentively contemplate moral reality. Synthesis of universality and particularity *is* the form of genuine morality, as well as of genuine beauty and genuine truth. Morality is not for some other time and place but for this human world, and it is infinitely adaptable to circumstance. A great weakness and danger of moral rationalism and idealism is that, assisted by blockheadedness, they disconnect morality from actual situations and let moral “standards” and “principles” take precedence over moral substance. People who cannot grasp the idea of synthesis imagine that the proposed reform

Moral rationalism and idealism should be replaced by idea of moral universality as synthesis of universality and particularity.

³⁶ For an extended discussion of the possibility of synthesis between historical particularity and universality, see my *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2003), especially chapters eight to ten. Their titles may convey the direction of the argument: “Value-Centered Historicism,” “The Concrete as Normative,” and “The Unique Expression of the Universal.”

in moral philosophy entails the *abandonment* of universality. “Situational morality” is for them by definition a rejection of universality. But their understanding of “situational” is reductive and reified. That morality is situational means in my terminology that it is not abstract but always relevant to human life. My argument is intended to help *save* moral universality from those who, through their abstractionism and/or dreaminess, distort or disarm it, usually for dubious unrecognized reasons of their own. The reform that I am proposing is to direct our attention to what the higher life of humanity actually *is*, so that its compelling experiential authority can be recognized and inspire virtuous conduct.