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INTRODUCTION

The Vices of Virtue

LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEM
OF RUTHLESSNESS

Virtue itself has need of limits.¹

In that “how” lies all the difference.²

HOW DO HUMANITARIAN IDEALISTS become butchers of human beings? How do they convince themselves that they are virtuous in their butchery? This is a question that should trouble those of us who cherish hopes of bettering the world through politics. It is the question of Robespierre, the champion of the rights of man and opponent of the death penalty who presided over the Reign of Terror; the question of György Lukács, the sensitive idealist turned commissar, panegyrist of Lenin, and abettor of Stalin. It is a question raised by countless others who have traveled from humanism to inhumanity, who have embraced murderous causes because they came to believe it morally imperative and politically urgent to do so.

It is easy (at least for some of us) to condemn the French Revolutionary Terrorists, Stalinist secret police, or Maoist Red Guards. But a careful study of the personal roots of these horrors should be an antidote to complacency—as, perhaps, should a moment of self-examination. Few of these political murderers started out as monsters. And readiness to sacrifice individuals in the pursuit of moral causes often takes less dramatic and bloody forms, which many of us could find in ourselves, if we looked. Anyone who feels the force of revulsion against the injustice, cruelty, and oppression of this world should be alert to this temptation; so should those who believe that they have discovered the

truth about how to improve human life (whether this truth is secular or religious, and identified with the political right or left). Ruthlessness—understood as both a feature of action and a quality of thought and feeling that rejects all scruples, doubts, hesitation, and remorse in pursuing some ultimate purpose or serving some paramount principle—possesses an attractive simplicity and strength. It grants a sense of direction and meaning, garrisoning the mind against the terror of uncertainty. It lends a feeling of strength, a patina of psychological power, a glamor of toughness: hence politicians seem never to tire of declaring metaphorical wars—or (for example) announcing the goal of achieving “total domination” through the use of force by “very tough, strong, powerful people.”³ Ruthlessness possesses a self-enforcing psychology: once one has set one’s heart on ruthlessness, it can be hard to escape. And the pragmatic arguments for ruthlessness are potent. Within politics—a realm of passionate, often unprincipled, struggle—how can one be effective in urgently pursuing a just cause, especially when faced with the ruthlessness of others, without hardening one’s heart, stopping one’s ears, getting one’s hands dirty?⁴

Many political evils, of course, stem from garden variety villainy—ambition, venality, the appetite for domination or longing for submission. But righteous ruthlessness is particularly troubling, insofar as it can transform apparent virtues into terrible vices. As a disillusioned Communist in Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* reflects, the terrible paradox of Communism was that it “freed people from morality in the name of morality”; for the sake of a “fine and noble” cause, it justified killing, crippling, uprooting and terrorizing, and licensed “pharisees, hypocrites, and writers of denunciations.” This showed how “the very concept of good” can become “a scourge, a greater evil than evil itself.”⁵ The combination of idealism and cynicism in the pursuit of noble goals through brutal means is particularly potent in its appeal, and horrific in its consequences.

Liberalism and the Politics of Limits

The tendency to pass from humanitarian idealism to ruthlessness can occur among adherents of diverse political visions and programs. No ideology or party is immune; governments and movements have called for the brutal infliction of death, imprisonment, and material misery in the name of freedom or justice, capitalism or socialism, “growth” or “greatness,” and numerous other inspiring slogans. Yet there is a strong affinity between this tendency and *anti-liberal* politics—politics that forcefully rejects liberal principles and seeks to demolish liberal institutions. And while individuals from across the political

spectrum have diagnosed, and proposed prophylactics against, political ruthlessness, there is a strong affinity between liberalism and a propensity to feel horror at political ruthlessness, and to regard combating it as a vital political task. Those who have been repulsed by political ruthlessness have often been driven toward liberalism, whatever their ideological starting point. Indeed, liberalism itself emerged out of reaction against the ruthlessness of the French Revolutionary Terror, and fear of answering reactionary ruthlessness.⁶ Not all forms of liberalism are equally concerned with ruthlessness—or able to resist impulses toward ruthlessness on behalf of liberal objectives. While recent liberal theory may not license ruthlessness, it also has little to say about it, having focused largely on questions of justification and institutional principles. Yet not long ago, the practical challenge of ruthlessness inspired a distinctive strand of liberal thinking. I reconstruct, retrieve, and develop that liberalism here.

“Liberalism” covers broad, well-trodden, and contested terrain; any definition is liable to be controversial.⁷ It variously denotes support for a mildly redistributionist welfare state combined with significant personal liberty and commitment to the free market, or a political theory defined by the framework of the social contract, or “methodological individualism,” or affirmation of the “priority of the right over the good.” I do not use liberalism in any of these ways here. Likewise, by “anti-liberalism” I do not mean libertarian, communitarian, civic-republican, conservative, socialist, or perfectionist critics of the foregoing positions, but rather those who reject liberal principles and practices, and seek to overturn them, root-and-branch.⁸

Liberal politics is limited politics—institutionally, normatively, ethically.⁹ Institutionally, liberals embrace limits such as the rule of law (enforced through an independent judiciary); charters of guaranteed individual rights; the selection and removal of political officials by popular vote; an internally diverse civil society, endowed with protections against the dictates of the state, and with the power to criticize or resist the state. Beyond this, liberalism inculcates norms of recognizing such limits as legitimate and desirable. It may also encourage internalizing acceptance of limits in undertaking political action, even in the silence of the law. This insistence on limits reflects a commitment to promoting individual liberty, understood as the ability of “[e]very adult . . . to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult”;¹⁰ and promoting a society marked by the diversity (and disagreement) that the practice of liberty produces. Liberalism seeks to reduce, as

much as possible, the fear, the frustrating sense of immobility or entrapment, the cramping of character and narrowing of horizons through deprivation or coercion, and the arbitrariness and arrogance of authority, within a society.

Liberalism's "negativity"—its tendency to define itself in terms of what it opposes and seeks to protect against—should not be overstated (as it often is¹¹). Liberalism reflects not only fears, but ideals: aspirations to rich individual self-development, and a society marked by greater justice and mutual respect. It does not merely accept diversity (and even discord), but "rejoice[s]" in it, because "it is in diversity alone that freedom can be realized"—for a "free society is not one in which people are merely allowed to make effective social choices among a variety of alternatives, but one in which they are encouraged to do so."¹² Liberal politics is not only a limited, but (as the word's origins suggest) a generous or "magnanimous politics."¹³ But this generosity typically takes the form of forbearance and tolerance, which is one reason why it is not always recognized (another is liberals' own failures to live up to their ideals). Liberals do not, like conservatives, stand athwart history shouting "stop." At their best, they stand between vulnerable individuals and the predations of power, and insist on limits—"so far, but no further," as Camus had it. There is more to liberalism than this. But this is liberalism's spine.

Political ruthlessness is naturally opposed to liberalism thus understood. It is defined by an insistence that certain goals or principles override individual rights or liberties and justify the use of unbridled power, the infliction of untold suffering, the obliteration or blighting of countless individual lives. Such ruthlessness poses a serious problem: how can liberals respond effectively to it without emulating it? It also challenges the seriousness and sincerity of liberalism. Is the liberal who refrains from pursuing her goals when doing so seems to require ruthless action really that committed to those goals in the first place?

This liberal vulnerability is evoked whenever people quote (whether wryly, regretfully, or maliciously) Robert Frost's definition of a liberal as one "too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel." Here Frost identifies liberalism with a feature of character, outlook, and approach—and a consequent deficiency in action. This deficiency may seem fairly harmless, as political vices go—even endearing. But what happens when liberals find themselves in a quarrel with those who oppose liberalism root and branch—and particularly those who oppose it in a way that threatens the basic values and interests that liberals hold dear? What happens, in other words, when liberals come up against political ruthlessness? This question is at the heart of what I call

(adopting a phrase from Isaiah Berlin) “the liberal predicament.” The main crux of this predicament can be articulated as: how to combat anti-liberal movements, which are not constrained in the way that liberal movements and regimes are, without either sacrificing political efficacy or betraying basic liberal principles in the name of defending them? Faced with ruthless anti-liberal attacks, to remain a good liberal (in the sense of adhering to liberal principles) threatens to make one a failed liberal. Yet to become ruthless in the fight against ruthlessness threatens to leave one no longer a liberal at all.¹⁴

It is telling that Frost and Berlin characterized liberalism as they did at roughly the same time.¹⁵ In the twentieth century, political ruthlessness achieved particular salience as a defining challenge for liberalism. As I show in the next chapter, the embrace of ruthlessness was generated and justified by a reaction against liberalism’s perceived failings. Liberalism, in turn, was redefined by its encounter with political ruthlessness. This reflects an important, but often neglected, feature of twentieth-century politics: the conflict between liberals and their fiercest opponents in the early- to mid-twentieth century was fundamentally “ethical” in two distinct senses.

First, the terms of this conflict centered, to a significant extent, on questions of *political ethics*. As distinct from moral philosophy, political ethics (as I understand the term) assumes that politics involves its own characteristic means, challenges, burdens, and opportunities; thinking about “political ethics” means beginning from these political phenomena, rather than beginning with a more universal theory of morality and seeking to draw out applications to politics from this “pre-political” moral theory. At the same time, recognizing the porousness, complexity, and inextricability of politics and other facets of life, political ethics approaches questions about how to act politically within a larger context of thinking about how a life should be lived, and what sort of character we should try to cultivate (or what qualities we want to characterize our conduct toward and relationships with others). As distinct from more “architectonic” forms of political theory, political ethics is concerned, not with general moral duties or purposes, or the institutional architecture of politics, but with the conduct, character, and cultivated convictions of individual actors, as these arise in their pursuit of political projects. If political theory on the whole identifies what sort of political order we should seek, political ethics asks what we should and should not do and be(come) in pursuing that order.

Many accounts of twentieth-century political thought focus on questions of ends, institutions, and policy (the relationship between politics and economics and the proper goals of economic policy; the basis, functions, and

boundaries of the state and political membership; the meaning of concepts such as liberty, equality, justice, authority, or legitimacy).¹⁶ These issues were obviously crucial. But the clash between liberals and anti-liberals also centered on political-ethical questions: how the demands of politics relate to the dictates of personal morality; the relationship between means and ends; the significance of personal character in defining political action. Faced with grotesque horrors—massacre, torture, cynical manipulation, blatant lies, pervasive terror—those I term “tempered liberals” reaffirmed the moral value of scruples—of “inner doubts and hesitations as to the propriety of this or that . . . practice.”¹⁷ They also grappled with the ethical challenges that commitment to scruple imposed.

The conflict between liberals and anti-liberals was “ethical,” second, insofar as both sides were defined by a *political ethos*: a “stance” or “bearing,” formed by patterns of disposition, perception, commitment, and response, which shapes how individuals or groups go about acting politically.¹⁸ The liberals I discuss here, in particular, came to be preoccupied with what the American literary critic Lionel Trilling termed “the morality of morality”: reflection not on what course of action should be chosen, but on the *quality* of the moral life lived in pursuit of that course. This quality of moral life, Trilling added, is shaped by the “sensibility” and “manner” through which “political views” are related to the “character of our personal being.”¹⁹ These liberals articulated, defended, and exemplified a liberalism shaped by a combination of sensibility, manner, and personal being, with reflection on the “morality of morality.”

Retrieving this ethically centered liberalism has two implications for how we think about political theory, and liberal theory in particular. First, it nudges us away from the focus on institutions, and the tendency to think in terms of general principles, which have shaped much recent liberal theory, and toward greater attention to individual character, temperament, and sensibility. In this regard, my account converges with the recent turn of a diverse range of political theorists to the idea of *ethos*—a term I have adopted, and which I clarify in the next chapter.²⁰ This turn reflects a sense that there is something else, besides “the *formal features* of government” (that is, “institutions, laws, and procedures”²¹), the *general principles* of political morality, or the proper *ends* of politics, to which political theory should pay more attention. Yet the nature of this “something else” often remains obscure. An *ethos* may be conceived, as William Connolly suggests, as the sensibility or manner through which a “creed” or belief system is applied.²² I will suggest a more complicated picture: an *ethos*, as I use the term, encompasses both such a sensibility or temper, and

the larger framework of perception and thought through which it is brought to bear on determining how to hold and act on the creed. To embrace one or another “creed” will influence one toward and away from one or another ethos (or several *ethes*); at the same time, one’s ethos will dispose one toward particular creeds. To take ethos seriously is not to neglect the power or importance of theories, doctrines, or arguments. It is, rather, to recognize the important role ethos plays in how these come to be applied—or lived—in political practice. A major claim of this book is that there is something not only paradoxical, but (potentially) self-defeating, and even pathological, about seeking to live a *liberal* “creed” through an illiberal ethos.

Through my analysis of political ruthlessness, and of a line of liberal response to it, I develop an account of ethos that allows us to better grasp what distinguishes liberal and anti-liberal politics, and that may aid us in evaluating different ways of applying and defending liberal ideals. In doing so, I suggest a larger claim: that attending to ethos is vital to understanding what moves and guides individuals, appreciating the quality of their actions, and comprehending what attracts them to, and divides them into, different political camps. In order to understand what was (and is) at stake in the conflict between liberalism and its fiercest enemies, we must, as Amanda Anderson has argued, move beyond blunt ideological labels, defined in terms of doctrines and programs, and attend to contrasting “style[s] and disposition[s].”²³ Politics should be approached, not solely through the question of “who does what to whom for whose benefit,”²⁴ but also through the additional question of “*how* do they (the actors) do it (the action) to them?” And this “*how*” should be approached in terms not only of processes of action, but also of the attitudes sustained and the temper and dispositions displayed in actions—qualities that determine the full significance of the action itself. As Andrew Sabl has noted, in politics “Decency”—and much else, both good and bad—“lives in the adverbs: how one intends to exercise power, within what constraints, with what underlying attitudes.”²⁵ The description and analysis of political action should be conducted in a more adjectival and adverbial style than we are often accustomed to practice it.

In addition to suggesting how political (especially liberal) theory may benefit from attending to ethos, my historical account retrieves “another liberalism,”²⁶ different from those most often encountered in histories of liberalism or discussions of contemporary liberal theory.²⁷ This liberalism was conceived by those who articulated it as an ethical disposition, irreducible to logically entailed principles or programs. I call this *tempered liberalism*. It is a liberalism tempered—that is, at once chastened, and ultimately reaffirmed and strengthened—by the

crucible of criticism, struggle, and tribulation; a liberalism that is informed by and seeks to maintain a poise of balance between (and maintain its balance *against*) extremes; and a liberalism that centers on personal temperament, seeking not to advance a general theory or program of institutional design or a set of general principles, but to cultivate a particular way of thinking about and engaging in political life. “Tempered” also indicates opposition to ruthlessness—insofar as to be tempered is to be restrained, balanced, circumspect.²⁸ The ethos of tempered liberalism was not *only* the antithesis of ruthlessness. But rejection of ruthlessness, extremism, and fanaticism was among its central features.

Concerns with both political ruthlessness and liberalism’s ability to respond to it—to both counter it effectively and avoid incubating it within liberalism itself—are all too relevant; and I will return to the contemporary resonance of tempered liberalism in the conclusion. But my concerns here are not only contemporary or normative. This is a work of history, which enriches existing accounts of liberalism’s past and challenges perceptions of “Cold War liberalism.” There has been, among many political theorists and historians, what Jan-Werner Müller calls a “systematic forgetting” of what Cold War liberals “actually said and meant.”²⁹ Narratives of postwar liberalism typically identify one, or some combination, of several tendencies. One is a change of *mood* from a more ambitious and hopeful to a “conservative,” gloomy, anxious liberalism, which discouraged political experimentation and effervescence.³⁰ Closely connected to this is a shift in *political program* from the more “progressive” liberalism embodied in the New Deal (especially in its earlier years) to a combination of “managerial” rule, cultural “consensus,” and defense of the status quo.³¹ Another story depicts liberalism becoming abstract, individualistic, and privatized; this shift was both substantive (emphasizing personal rights, private interests, and fair procedures rather than civic duties, virtuous character formation, and the common good) and methodological (relying on abstract theorizing rather than “thick” political and social analysis).³² Postwar liberalism, on this account, was *de-moralizing*, in the double sense of sapping enthusiasm by failing to offer an inspiring ethical ideal and undercutting concern with civic virtue; and *de-politicizing*, encouraging a retreat from civic responsibilities. Finally, critics attribute to postwar liberalism a growing rigidity, as it defined itself against a Communist “other,” dug in its heels, and closed its mind.³³ These shifts are seen as fostering “quietism,” “defeatism,”³⁴ “disillusionment,” a “celebration of apathy,” and “the sickness of complacency,”³⁵ thereby stifling political imagination and experimentation, and obstructing progress.³⁶

These stories, accurate concerning *some* postwar liberalisms, do not capture the full story; they are misleading when applied to tempered liberals, who remained morally robust and politically engaged—and, indeed, stressed the need to cultivate an ethically strenuous set of dispositions, if liberal politics were to be sustained. Nor did tempered liberalism represent a turn to a cramping liberal fundamentalism. This, indeed, is one reason for its neglect. Always too complex, unsystematic, and personal to serve as the basis of a movement or ideology, tempered liberalism was eclipsed both by alternative responses to totalitarianism which offered more robust defenses of the superiority of constitutionalist and capitalist institutions, and the more systematic “high liberalism” of Rawls and others. Subsequent “communitarian” and “realist” critiques of Rawlsian, “individualist,” or libertarian variants of liberalism, for all their theoretical and practical importance, have tended to lack tempered liberalism’s sense of the existential fragility of liberalism as a political achievement, and the ethical demandingness of liberalism as a political disposition. Recent expositions of liberalism have also neglected tempered liberals’ practice of *exemplarity*—their efforts to engage in a noncoercive and nonperfectionist political-ethical pedagogy through the evocation of a liberal ethos, both in their accounts of others and their own conduct and authorial personae.

For Lionel Trilling, the “great vice of academicism” is “that it is concerned with ideas rather than with thinking”—fostering the belief that “some ideas can betray us, others save us,” so that we are inclined to “blame ideas for our troubles, rather than blaming what is a very different thing—our own bad thinking.”³⁷ Liberal theory, in our day as in Trilling’s, sometimes falls prey to academicism; tempered liberalism provides a corrective. It is certainly no political panacea. But its proponents are too often neglected—or dismissed for what they are confidently, but wrongly, assumed to have said and done. The recovery of what tempered liberals faced and proposed is important both to setting the historical record straight, and setting liberalism on a more fruitful path of political engagement, which grapples with questions of character and the challenges of ruthlessness, and provides a perspective from which to confront the challenges and dangers that continue to face liberalism.

The Shape of Things to Come

In this book I examine four thinkers who contributed to the articulation of tempered liberalism: Reinhold Niebuhr, Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, and Isaiah Berlin. These thinkers shared a sometimes ambivalent but enduring

commitment to democracy, a combination of connection to and departures from classical liberalism, an eschewal of systematic theory—and, above all, a central preoccupation with political ethics and “the liberal predicament,” and recognition of ethos as a crucial dimension of politics.³⁸ They also occupied similar ideological space. All viewed themselves, at least initially, as men of the left; and their liberalism was definitively left of center, affirming both liberal personal freedoms and some version of a “mixed economy” and redistributionist welfare state—and implacably opposed to both Fascism and Communism. Roughly contemporaries (born between 1892 and 1914, and prominent following World War II), they were intellectual and political fellow-travelers (Berlin and Niebuhr were friendly and shared a mutual admiration; Berlin and Aron, and Aron and Camus, knew each other but were cooler in their mutual regard). Each articulated distinctive variations on a tempered liberal vision—and exemplified different versions of how a tempered liberal ethos could be lived.³⁹ Each recognized ruthlessness as a temptation, to which they were drawn to varying degrees and for various reasons. Each developed (similar) diagnoses of ruthlessness, its attractions, psychological-ethical grip, and dangers; each saw ruthlessness, and the anti-liberal politics and ethos to which it was connected, as an ethical problem that was deep, and not simple. They all faced up to “the liberal predicament”: how to respond to anti-liberal ruthlessness without coming to imitate it, thereby betraying liberalism itself—but also without betraying one’s responsibility to fight for liberalism effectively. And they all responded to this problem by turning their attention to matters of ethos.

Reflecting my concerns with questions of personal character, temperament, style, bearing, and conduct—and echoing their own approaches—my treatment of these figures is “exemplary”: I not only reconstruct their arguments, but evoke their personal visions and dispositions, analyze their intellectual style and sensibility, and explore what we can learn from both their practice of political reflection and reflections on political practice. To thus treat them as exemplary is not to claim for them perfection; it is to suggest that we can learn not only from their arguments, but their examples—or, that their efforts to set examples of intellectual engagement and liberal political commitment themselves embody political-ethical arguments, and, taken up critically, can serve as a form of political pedagogy.

Before turning to these individuals, the first chapter clarifies the concept of ethos, explicates the phenomenon of *morally inspired ideological ruthlessness*, and seeks to substantiate my claim that such ruthlessness constituted a central element in twentieth-century political thought and practice, one that

presented a particular challenge for liberalism. In the process, I show how considerations of political efficacy and personal purity intertwined in inspiring ruthlessness; and how the vindication of ruthlessness formed a central part of an ethical critique of liberalism. Chapter 2 then provides a more in-depth exploration of the way in which the imperatives and attractions of realism and moral purism intersected, and how these connected to struggles with and over liberalism, through the stories of two representative figures of the early twentieth century. Max Weber's political ethics anticipated, and in some cases directly informed, tempered liberalism—though Weber remains a politically and ethically ambiguous figure. These ambiguities are reflected in the intellectual and political vicissitudes of Weber's friend György Lukács, who illustrates how impulses toward moral purity and hard-headed realism—and an ethos of intellectual extremism and total commitment—came together to inspire ruthless, anti-liberal politics.

The next four chapters examine four thinkers who, formed by the crisis of liberal democracy between the wars, became leading liberal voices in the post-war period. Despite significant differences of intellectual framework, personal sensibility, and political approach, Camus, Aron, Niebuhr, and Berlin shared a preoccupation with the political-ethical problems raised by the assault on liberalism in their day. All approached politics in terms of the personal choices involved in political action and the importance of ethos in informing these choices—though they varied in the extent to which they approached politics and its ethical demands from the perspective of political leaders (as Aron and, to a lesser degree, Berlin did), or from the perspective of ordinary citizens and committed activists (as Niebuhr and, especially, Camus did). They also differed in how they navigated between the perspectives of engaged political actor and critical intellectual—and their different formulations of a tempered liberal ethos reflect this. None of them were simple or sanguine in their commitment to liberalism; some went through periods of flirtation with anti-liberalism. Each sought to temper liberalism with an awareness of liberalism's drawbacks and defects; and to maintain an ethical equipoise between excessive moral idealism and excessive realism. Each struck this balance differently; their differences complement and temper one another, revealing tensions within tempered liberalism, but also contributing to its overall richness and capacity for self-correction.

In the conclusion I draw out some of these tensions, and the vulnerabilities to which they point. I also draw together the insights of the thinkers I have discussed to offer my own conception of tempered liberalism as a

distinctive political stance from which to interpret and evaluate liberal goals and practices. And I draw on the insights and lessons of tempered liberalism to offer arguments on how to respond to the ethical challenges liberalism recurrently faces.

The reader may ask: why look for answers, or at least matter for reflection, in the pages of twentieth-century history? Is there not a danger of foisting our perceptions of the present onto the past, thus distorting it by remaking it in our own image; or of being captured by the (purported) lessons of this past, so that we are blind to the specific conditions of the present? Ought we not do our thinking for ourselves, based on the circumstances of our own time? To this, three points can be made. First, we must of course do our own thinking for ourselves. But we seldom do such thinking wholly alone: we draw from others, different from ourselves, to sharpen our vision and widen our imaginations. The history of political thought should certainly seek a fuller and more faithful understanding of the past in its own terms; it may also serve to liberate us from the thrall of received ideas. But it also contributes to our political thinking as a source of good interlocutors, and even models.

Second, drawing on history to inform political judgment and imagination does not depend on discerning exact parallels or establishing simple lessons to be mechanically applied. We should, rather, use the combination of similarity and difference, proximity and distance, to see more clearly *both* the uniqueness of our time and the ways in which we are not the first to encounter certain problems—and that we may be unconsciously emulating follies that we readily recognize in others. Such comparisons need not assume eternal, unchanging verities; but they do posit recurrence. Like the Polish dissident intellectual Adam Michnik, I return to past political and moral thinking “not so that the language of that reign of terror may never repeat itself, but because I’m convinced it will inevitably do so”—if it has not already.⁴⁰

Third, there *are some* respects in which the twentieth century is lamentably relevant. While changes in technology, demographics, the workings of the economy, and the global political order have created a significantly different world,⁴¹ the mid-century world of economic collapse, cultural despair, mass displacement, and ever-looming war seems familiar; so do the responses of demagoguery, dehumanizing hatred of others, fanatical partisanship, a longing for macho “heroes” free of scruple and doubt, a taste for amoral “greatness,” and ideological extremism. Twentieth-century politics are, to borrow a phrase from James Joyce, a nightmare from which we are still trying to awake—and into which we often seem to be sinking.⁴² Political theory and moral inquiry

should not shrink from confronting that nightmare. In doing so, they may be greatly helped by those who lived through it—and in whom it bred an anxious, but resolute, wakefulness.

My retrieval of a facet of twentieth-century political argument, and of the tempered liberal response, is thus intended to be both of historical interest, and of more than historical interest. The story I tell has a resonance beyond the particular time I discuss. It is a story of the vices of virtue: of how terrible evil can grow out of idealism, benevolence, and conscientiousness. It is also (I hope) a story of how political actors can learn, not (as Machiavelli has it) “how not to be good,” but rather better and worse ways to go about trying to be good within the circumstances of politics. It is an argument for modesty, fortitude, forbearance, intellectual flexibility, ethical resolution, and decency as political dispositions—and a reminder that these seemingly humdrum, unheroic qualities may in fact be demanding and necessary virtues. My approach—turning from general ethical problems posed by ruthlessness for liberal politics, to a particular historical period and tendency of thought as a way of thinking about these more general problems—is admittedly, and deliberately, untidy. I have sought to address problems of political ethics through an exploration of history and psychology, which necessarily remains suggestive and open-ended. To deal with matters of ethos rather than concepts or logical systems introduces a necessary degree of imprecision. In a work animated by the conviction that the search for simplicity and purity is delusive and dangerous, a certain untidiness may be a virtue. Readers should not look to obtain answers to all questions raised in this book; the point is rather to show the importance of grappling with the questions—and that some ways of grappling are better than others.

Before proceeding, I wish to clear up a possible misapprehension. In this book I not only reconstruct, but defend, tempered liberalism, and draw on it to criticize a set of impulses often exhibited in anti-liberalism: intolerance, self-righteousness, craving for simplicity and certainty, deafness to dialogue, righteous ruthlessness. This threatens to produce an “anti-anti-liberalism” resembling that which it opposes in dogmatism, self-righteousness, and intolerance. This is a danger to which the thinkers I discuss were keenly alive (though not always immune). Indeed, tempered liberalism was defined by an effort to avoid becoming what it opposed. For my part, I disclaim any moral superiority. I have been preoccupied by the vices just mentioned not only because I feel horror at them, but because I recognize their pull in myself. One is less interested in diseases to which one is immune.

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