

Reflections on Wisdom and Politics

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Reflections on Wisdom and Politics

The subject of political wisdom is so complex that nothing less than years of study and at least a book-length work would do it justice. But a Google Search (in late 2011) of the subject turned up mainly links to quotes from people like Mark Twain or Edmund Burke, partisan blogs, or pieces that did not display much wisdom. So, perhaps the preliminary reflections presented here will prove useful. They will be concerned primarily with the exercise of such wisdom in the United States, though they may well also apply to other democratic countries in our globalized world. In a companion essay, “Barack Obama and Political Wisdom,” I will soon furnish a specific “case study” of the more general points made in this present effort.

To begin with, however, we need to examine ideas regarding political wisdom from past thinkers beginning with Aristotle. This ancient Greek philosopher wrote on both wisdom and politics, and what he had to say is still useful. He believed that a political leader should devote himself to exercising practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or prudence—more on this concept later—but he also believed that the goal of politics should be to help people lead as good a life as possible.

The Goal of Politics

Aristotle thought that the happiness or wellbeing (*eudaimonia*) of society, what we might label the common good, should be the aim of politics.¹ “Everything that we choose we choose for the sake of something else—except happiness, which is an end.” But he did not define happiness as some might today—gaining more wealth, fame, or pleasure—for they were insufficient. True happiness necessitated living according to reason and being virtuous, which, although pleasant, is “also good and noble.” Therefore, “the true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things.” Aristotle divided virtues into two categories, intellectual and moral (or ethical). Of the first type, he lists five: art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, and intuitive reason. Among the moral virtues he identifies or suggests are courage, temperance, justice, self-discipline, moderation, gentleness, modesty, humility, generosity, friendliness, truthfulness, humor, and honesty. But to exercise them properly wisdom was necessary.²

Following Aristotle, some political thinkers continued emphasizing that political leaders should seek to be wise, but stressed other goals such as maintaining power. Machiavelli is

¹ Kraut, Richard, “Aristotle's Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2010 ed.), at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/aristotle-ethics/>; Richard Hawley Trowbridge, “The Scientific Approach of Wisdom,” at www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc, 37. (All web sites referred to in this essay were accessed in Nov.-Dec. 2011.)

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Ch. 8, at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean05.html>; Book I, Ch. 13, at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean07.html>; Book II, Ch. 7, at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean11.html>; Book X, Ch. 6, at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean74.html>. See also Aristotle, *Virtues and Vices*, at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0062>.

perhaps the best example. In his Renaissance book of advice, *The Prince*, he frequently stresses how a prince should act if he wishes to rule wisely—for example, “a wise prince ought to adopt such a course that his citizens will always in every sort and kind of circumstance have need of the state and of him, and then he will always find them faithful.”³ But the main goal is gaining and retaining power and not the common good.

The twentieth-century French philosopher Jacques Maritain, who followed in the tradition of Aristotle and his chief medieval Christian admirer, St. Thomas Aquinas, criticized Machiavelli extensively for this approach. He wrote:

For Machiavelli the end of politics is power’s conquest and maintenance. . . . On the contrary, according to the nature of things, the end of politics is the common good of a united people. . . . This common good consists of the good life—that is, a life conformable to the essential exigencies and the essential dignity of human nature, a life both morally straight and happy—of the social whole as such, of the gathered multitude, in such a way that the increasing treasure and heritage of communicable good things involved in this good life of the whole be in some way spilled over and redistributed to each individual part of the community. . . . Justice and civic friendship are its cement. Bad faith, perfidy, lying, cruelty, assassination, and all other procedures of this kind which may occasionally appear *useful* to the power of the ruling clique or to the prosperity of the state, are in themselves . . . injurious to the common good and tend by themselves toward its corruption.⁴

Maritain believed that Machiavelli “thoroughly rejected ethics, metaphysics and theology from the realm of political knowledge and political prudence.”⁵

Although Machiavelli saw no contradiction between a quest for power and ruling wisely, historian Barbara W. Tuchman thought that one of the main reasons for political folly, the opposite of wisdom, was the “lust for power.”⁶ What Machiavelli’s political thought and the comments of Maritain and Tuchman demonstrate is the importance for politics of the goal or goals that rulers and people set out to achieve. In our own Declaration of Independence, our Founding Fathers declared that people had the “rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men.” A recent essay on this passage, attributed to Thomas Jefferson, suggests it was influenced by words from the English political theorist John Locke, who himself was influenced by classical thinkers like Aristotle. What Locke and Jefferson had in mind by happiness was similar to what Aristotle had meant by it. As Jefferson wrote in a later letter, “Happiness [is] the aim of life. Virtue [is] the foundation of happiness.”⁷

As Aristotle and Jefferson realized, it is important how we think about happiness. The Russian novelist and moralist Leo Tolstoy thought about it often, and in the mid 1880s he noted that purchasing goods did not lead to happiness and that something much more was required.

³ *The Prince*, at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1232/pg1232.txt>.

⁴ *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribners, 1952), at <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/range11.htm#p142>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/range11.htm#p134>.

⁶ Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), 381.

⁷ Quoted in Carol V. Hamilton, “The Surprising Origins and Meaning of the ‘Pursuit of Happiness’,” at <http://hnn.us/articles/46460.html>.

To-day we must buy an overcoat and galoshes, to-morrow, a watch and chain; the next day we must install ourselves in an apartment with a sofa and a bronze lamp; then we must have carpets and velvet gowns; then a house, horses and carriages, paintings and decorations, and then—then we fall ill of overwork and die. Another continues the same task, sacrifices his life to this same Moloch, and then dies also, without realizing for what he has lived. . . .

. . . One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature shall not be severed, that is, that he shall be able to see the sky above him, and that he shall be able to enjoy the sunshine, the pure air, the fields with their verdure, their multitudinous life. Men have always regarded it as a great unhappiness to be deprived of all these things. . . .

Another inevitable condition of happiness is work: first, the intellectual labor that one is free to choose and loves; secondly, the exercise of physical power that brings a good appetite and tranquil and profound sleep. . . .

The third undoubted condition of happiness is the family. . .

The fourth condition of happiness is sympathetic and unrestricted interaction with all classes of men. . . .

Finally, the fifth condition of happiness is bodily health.⁸

Despite the earlier thinking of many philosophers and religious thinkers, throughout the twentieth century many governments seemed to equate increasing the production of goods and services, as measured by increases in GNP or GDP, with increasing happiness. More recently, however, criticism of such an assumption has heightened.

A 2002 study used by the British government found that although people in faster growing economies were generally happier than those in more stagnant ones, “the relationship between economic growth and changes in life satisfaction appears weak—and certainly much weaker than would have been expected on the basis of cross-national association between GDP per capita and average life satisfaction.” That same study concluded that people “tend to overestimate the pleasure that they will derive from a given purchase. . . . Similarly, evidence indicates that people tend to overestimate the importance of income for their wellbeing.” An annex to this work refers to various alternate wellbeing indices, many of them reflecting an attempt to consider environmental and other factors often ignored in measuring GNP or GDP. These indices indicate two important points: 1) that measuring economic growth by such measures as increases in GDP is by itself an inadequate tool to measure overall progress, and 2) when factoring in environmental and other changes, some countries that displayed considerable GDP growth actually regressed in overall wellbeing.⁹

Although most people might agree that the goal of politics should be to increase the common good or “overall wellbeing”—and not as Machiavelli indicated to obtain and retain power—the problem, of course, is that people define the common good very differently. And

⁸ Quote is taken with slight modifications in keeping with original text from *My Religion*, at http://books.google.com/books?id=TVgpAAAAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbg_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false. By the time Tolstoy wrote these words, he had also become convinced that the highest happiness also came from following the teachings of Jesus (but not as often interpreted by the organized religions of his day).

⁹ This paragraph is taken from Walter G. Moss, *An Age of Progress? : Clashing Twentieth-century Global Forces* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2008), 266-67.

even if they agree on a condition necessary for it, for example freedom, they might disagree vehemently on what that condition means.¹⁰

In mentioning such disagreements we come to the question of judgment, and this leads us back to wisdom. One of the most prominent contemporary wisdom researchers, Robert Sternberg, states that “Wisdom is . . . the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good. . . . [It] is not just about maximizing one’s own or someone else’s self-interest, but about balancing various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and of other aspects of the context in which one lives (extrapersonal), such as one’s city or country or environment or even God.” Thus, he refers to his “balance theory of wisdom.”¹¹

Practical Wisdom, Virtues, and Values

Sternberg’s words bring us back to Aristotle’s practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or prudence, mentioned in our second paragraph. In their useful guide to conducting American foreign policy, *Ethical Realism*, two authors write that prudence “is the single most important ethical trait a state’s leader can possess in order to prepare for short-term crises and long-term historical decline.”¹² As compared to theoretical wisdom, which is concerned with contemplation, the end of practical wisdom or prudence is action. Aristotle also insists that the virtues necessary for this latter type of wisdom “involve appropriate emotional responses and are not purely intellectual conditions.”¹³ Political wisdom is just one type of practical wisdom, another type relates to what is good for an individual and others in any particular non-political circumstance. But what we say about practical wisdom in general also applies to political wisdom.¹⁴

Practical Wisdom is the ability to reason, deliberate, feel, and act well in particular situations so as to bring about good results. “Practical wisdom is the quality of mind concerned with things just and noble and good for man.” The aim of the deliberating must be good and not evil, for one could reason correctly about how to bring about evil results, but that would not demonstrate practical wisdom because it aimed not at virtuous results—that was one of the reasons Maritain thought that Machiavelli, despite his advice on how to rule wisely, did not demonstrate political wisdom. Aiming at the wrong target—maintaining power rather than furthering the common good—subverts any achievement of political wisdom no matter how clever the deliberating to achieve or maintain power. As we have seen, Aristotle perceived a strong connection between wisdom, happiness, and virtues. As he said, “practical wisdom . . . is

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 133-38, for twentieth-century debates on the meaning of freedom.

¹¹ Robert J. Sternberg, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152; Sternberg, “It’s Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>.

¹² Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman, *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America’s Role in the World*, (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 69-70.

¹³ Kraut, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/aristotle-ethics/>.

¹⁴ For a good overview of Aristotle’s view of “political virtues,” see Edward Halper, “Aristotle’s Political Virtues,” at <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciHal2.htm>.

of no use to those who have not virtue,” and “the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtue; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means.” Or more succinctly, “it is impossible to be practically wise without being good.” Conversely, Aristotle also thought “that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom,” because such wisdom helped us determine how to act, how to be good, in any particular situation. Since older people had more experience than younger ones, and experience was helpful when deliberating about choices, Aristotle thought that it was more difficult for younger people than older ones to exhibit practical wisdom.¹⁵

Contemporary scholars writing about political wisdom often do not emphasize the importance of virtues, but George Washington in his [Farewell Address](#) of 1796 expressed the belief that it was “substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government” and hoped that future government actions “be stamped with wisdom and virtue.” In addition, those writing about wisdom generally often emphasize values that are similar to Aristotle’s list of virtues. One leading wisdom scholar, Copthorne Macdonald, once wrote, “Wise values express themselves in wise attitudes and wise ways of being and functioning.” Among the wise values he mentions are clarity about what is, serenity, humility, humor, creativity, love, compassion, empathy, courage, intuitive understanding, passion, patience, positivity, openness, self-awareness, self-discipline, tolerance, and truth.¹⁶ Almost all of these are in keeping with Aristotle’s thoughts.

Among all the virtues and values listed, the following seem especially important for exercising political wisdom in today’s world: the proper mix of realism and idealism, love, compassion, empathy, humility, tolerance and a willingness to compromise, a sense of humor, creativity, temperance, self-discipline, passion, and courage. Let us look at each of these virtues or values more closely to see how they relate to politics today. In doing so, some of my own political judgments will become evident, but you readers may disagree with some or all of them and perhaps still find other parts of these reflections useful.

Realism, Idealism, Truth, and Hope

If we wish to deal with problems realistically and effectively, as wise policies must, then we must acknowledge the truth of their existence. Perhaps the most obvious present example is the role of humans in heightening global warming and climate change. To deny this reality for political or other reasons is simply unwise. Such denial does not reflect truth seeking. How can

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, Chs. 5-13, beginning at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean40.html#c05>. An attempt to apply Aristotle’s thinking on this subject to life today is provided by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), who state that practical wisdom is greatly needed if we Americans hope to deal successfully with our current disenchantment with political and other institutions. For a review of the book, see <http://www.wisdompage.com/MossReviewOfPracticalWisdom.html>.

¹⁶ Copthorne Macdonald, “Values That Various People Have Associated with Wisdom,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>. Although I see these values as similar to Aristotle’s list of virtues, some other writers, like historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, stress the differences between values and virtues. See Moss, 241-42, for more on Himmelfarb’s thinking.

one be truth seeking and reject the conclusions of the Academies of Science of the USA and other major countries, and most recently the [Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Study](#), funded in part by prominent conservative backers? As Al Gore wrote in his 2007 book *The Assault on Reason*, “Americans in both parties should insist on the reestablishment of respect for the rule of reason. The climate crisis, in particular, should cause us to reject and transcend ideologically based distortions of the best available scientific evidence.”¹⁷

Although scientific truth is not the only kind of truth, political wisdom must acknowledge its value. We have seen that Aristotle listed scientific knowledge as one of the intellectual virtues. One of the twentieth century’s wisest scientists and a leading human rights advocate, the Russian physicist Andrei Sakharov, became wise partly because of his scientific training. It strengthened wisdom qualities such as his “reality-seeking, truth-seeking orientation,” which implies being open to truth in an objective fashion; being self-critical and willing to admit error; self-discipline; a positive attitude toward problem solving; the ability to “to deal with situations appropriately, using a large repertoire of approaches and techniques”; “choosing the approach that best fits each situation”; and holistic thinking that combined reason and intuition.¹⁸

Two of the twentieth-century’s most prominent commentators on political wisdom, Britain’s Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) and America’s Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), stressed the necessity of realism when approaching political problems. The reality that Berlin emphasized in such books as *A Sense of Reality*, however, was one that went beyond the realm of science. In one of the book’s essays, “Political Judgment,” he stated that political wisdom was “a gift akin to that of some novelists, that which makes such writers as, for example, Tolstoy or Proust convey a sense of direct acquaintance with the texture of life; not just the sense of a chaotic flow of experience, but a highly developed discrimination of what matters from the rest, whether from the point of view of the writer or that of the characters he describes. Above all this is an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what; how things seem to vary to different observers, what the effect of such experience upon them may be; what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces.” To Berlin it was the “concrete situation” that mattered, and his enemy was any Utopianism that failed to acknowledge the plurality and variety of human existence. “Obviously what matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness, the particular men and events and dangers, the particular hopes and fears which are actively at work in a particular place at a particular time.”¹⁹

¹⁷ (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁸ The quoted material and the wisdom qualities I mention are spelled out or suggested in Macdonald and in his Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom*, available online at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>. For Sakharov’s wisdom, see my “The Wisdom of Andrei Sakharov, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SakharovEssay.pdf>.

¹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgment,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 45-46.

The Protestant minister Niebuhr was a leading voice advocating a Christian realism in politics, and even today he has President Obama as one of his strongest admirers.²⁰ In a 1932 essay, “Moralists and Politics,” he faulted moralists who failed to see “the limits of morality in politics.” He went on to say that “there is no political realism in all this [unrealistic] moralism. It does not deal with the fact that human groups, classes, nations, and races are selfish, whatever may be the moral idealism of individual members within the groups.”²¹ In his major work of that same year, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he elaborated upon this idea in great detail.

Saying that groups are selfish, Niebuhr did not wish to imply the pessimistic view of human nature reflected in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. In a 1960 “Foreword” to an updated version of one of his books, he wrote, “a free society prospers best in a cultural, religious, and moral atmosphere which encourages neither a too pessimistic nor too optimistic view of human nature.”²² And in his earlier 1932 essay, he called for a mixture of realism and idealism and warned that if it was “not achieved, sentimentalists and cynics will continue to guide our generation to disaster.”²³ Niebuhr’s thinking was similar in some ways to that of Maritain, who thought that “ethics and politics are about the real, existing world, and in this existing world humans are not purely rational agents but, rather, fallen creatures who are potentially redeemed by grace. . . . To proceed in merely philosophical categories about ethics and politics would be merely utopian; one must deal with real, existing creatures locked in the actual historical drama of sin and grace.”²⁴

Both Niebuhr and Maritain, while insisting on realism, were mindful that hope was one of the three theological virtues. And the idealism Niebuhr wrote of suggested being guided by ideals, by values such as love. His desire for a combination of idealism with realism can be seen in this quote from a work first published in 1941: “Against pessimistic theories of human nature which affirm the total depravity of man it is important to assert the continued presence in man of the *justitia originalis*, of the law of love, as law and requirement. It is equally important, in refutation of modern secular and Christian forms of utopianism, to recognize that the fulfillment of the law of love is no simple possibility.”²⁵ Maritain also believed that humans were capable of rising above their present state, that they should work “to cause that to exist which is not yet.”²⁶

²⁰ In an April 2007 interview with *New York Times*’ columnist David Brooks, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html?_r=2, then Senator Obama said about Niebuhr, “I love him. He’s one of my favorite philosophers.”

²¹ Niebuhr, “Moralists and Politics,” *Essays in Applied Christianity*, ed. D. B. Robertson (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 79.

²² Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xxvii.

²³ Niebuhr, “Moralists and Politics,” 84.

²⁴ Michael Novak, “A Salute to Jacques Maritain,” at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0066.html>.

²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Vol. I: *Human Nature* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), 296.

²⁶ Quoted in Novak at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0066.html>.

In the world of politics, hope is a powerful motivator, as John and Robert Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Barack Obama have all demonstrated—note, for example, the titles of Robert Kennedy’s *Tis Not Too Late to Seek a Newer World* and Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope*.

In crafting a foreign policy, Niebuhr recommended that policymakers mix idealism with realism. Lieven and Hulsman in their *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America’s Role* (2006), faulted the twenty-first-century Bush administration for failing to be realistic and advised that U. S. foreign policy should return to that tradition as advocated by Niebuhr, George Kennan, and Hans Morgenthau. The statesman and scholar Kennan once referred to Niebuhr as “the father of us all,” and Niebuhr’s Christian realism had a strong influence on the political realism of the younger Jewish political scholar Morgenthau, who became a close friend. All three men also “shared a belief in the values of modesty, prudence, moderation, and tolerance, leading in practical terms to a preference for negotiation over violence whenever possible, and a belief in peace as the necessary basis for human progress.” Although all three supported the U. S. entry into World War II, they were critics of the later war in Vietnam.²⁷

Love, Compassion, and Empathy

The interrelated triad of love, compassion, and empathy are a good example of how with many virtues, both the mind and the heart interact with action to demonstrate wisdom. One scholar writing on Shakespeare, noted that his wisdom “has far more to do with the heart than the head,” with “a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness.” Several other scholars have also mentioned love, compassion, and empathy as important wisdom values. Of course, feeling compassion or empathy for another does not always translate into loving actions, which result more from a strong moral code.²⁸

Especially concerned with wisdom in the political realm, Niebuhr wrote that loving self-sacrifice is “the ultimate moral ideal” and without it justice “is merely the balance of power.”²⁹ The thoughts of one of the twentieth-century’s wisest women, Dorothy Day, apply to social and political, as well as personal, life: “If we could only learn that the only important thing is love, and that we will be judged on love—to keep on loving, and showing that love, and expressing that love, over and over, whether we feel it or not, seventy times seven, to mothers-in-law, to husbands, to children—and to be oblivious of insult, or hurt, or injury—not to see them, not to hear them. It is a hard, hard doctrine.”³⁰

²⁷ Lieven and Hulsman, xv, 61.

²⁸ Alan Nordstrom, “Shakespeare’s Take on Human Wisdom,” <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>; Trowbridge, at www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc, 100, 135; and David Brooks, “The Limits of Empathy,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 29, 2011, at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/opinion/brooks-the-limits-of-empathy.html?_r=1&hp.

²⁹ Niebuhr, “Moralists and Politics,” 83.

³⁰ Dorothy Day, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ Pr, 2010), 245. For more on Day, see my “The Wisdom of Dorothy Day,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/DorothyDayWisdom.pdf>.

Although there may be little disagreement on the importance of loving others in our daily life, how such love is displayed in political life is a more complicated question. The same goes for the two related virtues of compassion and empathy.

In an [essay](#) about George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism," author Clifford Orwin, a professor of political science, classics, and Jewish studies at the University of Toronto, wrote, "Everyone knows that not conservatives but liberals are the party of compassion, and have been at least since the New Deal." But Orwin contends that "compassionate conservatism was the Defining Idea" of President Bush. In a [follow-up essay](#) Orwin sketches the influence on Bush of such books as Marvin Olasky's *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, *Renewing American Compassion*, and *Compassionate Conservatism*. Olasky argued that private individuals and organizations, especially Christian churches, had a responsibility to care for the poor and that they could do it more effectively than government welfare programs. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush stressed faith-based programs as a means of furthering compassionate conservatism, but such events as those of 9/11/2001 diverted him from effectively implementing it.

Other conservatives argue that governments display love of their citizens mainly by taxing them as little as possible and enacting and enforcing laws in keeping with Christian principles. Liberals might counter that love is best displayed by government programs that ensure adequate education, health care, and unemployment assistance for all in need.

Many conservatives believe that compassion and empathy should be practiced in our private life through non-governmental actions, but are not especially the business of government. After I wrote an essay stating that Florida Governor Rick Scott displayed little compassion and empathy in his February 2010 budget proposal, one commenter [countered](#): "Compassion and empathy are admirable and praiseworthy personal and social values, but they are generally destructive and immoral political values. In order to implement your compassion and empathy politically, you always take by force what is not yours from some people, in order to give to those other people who are the object of your empathy. That taking by force is evil and immoral, no matter how noble you believe your social goals to be."

Both conservatives and liberals agree that one of the government's main obligations is to safeguard its citizens against crime and any possible foreign foes, but that still leaves plenty of room for disagreement on specific anti-crime laws and foreign policies. Environmentalists would argue that another chief obligation of any twenty-first century government is to protect the environment. We have already seen that Sternberg mentioned that wisdom involved "balancing various self-interests . . . with the interests of others . . . and of other aspects of the context in which one lives . . . such as one's city or country or environment." How, one might ask, could a government display compassion for its present and future citizens if it allowed environmental degradation.

Humility

Sternberg thinks that many "smart and well-educated people" lack wisdom because they "are particularly susceptible to four fallacies," which he labels the egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, and invulnerability fallacies." All four are tied up with too big an ego, with

overestimating their own importance and powers, with a lack of humility. Although Sternberg was not thinking exclusively of politicians, he did mention as examples “Nixon with Watergate, Clinton with Lewinsky,” and he could have mentioned many more.³¹

Humility is closely connected to several other virtues on our list, especially tolerance and a sense of humor. In “[Citizen Ben’s 7 Great Virtues](#),” Walter Isaacson lists humility, compromise, tolerance, and humor as among the chief virtues that one of our most important Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin, emphasized—the other three virtues relate to freedom and idealism. Of freedom, more later, and we have already looked at idealism as mixed with realism. And while emphasizing Franklin’s idealism, specifically in regard to foreign policy, Isaacson also writes that “when he went to Paris as an envoy during the Revolution, Franklin proved himself a master of the diplomatic doctrine of realism.”

Author of a biography on Franklin, as well as on Einstein and others—most recently on Steve Jobs—Isaacson is also a past editor of *Time*. He admitted that humility did not come easily to Franklin and quoted him as stating: “There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride; disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive and will every now and then peep out and show itself.” And “Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I would probably be proud of my humility.”

Vanity, arrogance and false pride, the opposites of humility, show up in politics at various levels. In his essay “Politics as a Vocation,” the German social thinker Max Weber wrote of vanity as “the deadly enemy of all matter-of-fact devotion to a cause.” He added that “there are only two kinds of deadly sins in the field of politics: lack of objectivity and—often but not always identical with it—irresponsibility. Vanity, the need personally to stand in the foreground as clearly as possible, strongly tempts the politician to commit one or both of these sins.”³²

In their *Ethical Realism*, Lieven and Hulsman stress the emphasis that the three most distinguished advocates of such realism, Niebuhr, Kennan, and Morgenthau, placed on nations acting with “a sense of humility.”³³

The main thesis of Senator William Fulbright’s 1966 book *The Arrogance of Power* was that “many great empires in the past have collapsed because their leaders did not have the wisdom and good judgment to use their power wisely and well,” and that the United States was in danger of similar folly. A critic of the U.S war in Vietnam, he wrote that “a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God’s favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations—to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image. Power confuses itself with virtue and tends also to take itself for omnipotence.” And “one wonders how much the American commitment to Vietnamese freedom is also a commitment to American pride—the two seem to have become part of the same package. When we talk about the freedom of South Vietnam, we may be thinking about how disagreeable it would be to accept a solution short of victory; we may be thinking about how our pride would be injured if we settled for less than we set out to achieve; we may be

³¹ Sternberg, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>.

³² Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” at <http://www2.selu.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf>.

³³ Lieven and Hulsman, 63, 70.

thinking of our reputation as a great power, fearing that a compromise settlement would shame us before the world, marking us as a second-rate people with flagging courage and determination.”³⁴

In his *The Best and the Brightest* (1972), David Halberstam looked at how the “smart and well-educated people” (to use Sternberg’s phrase) surrounding Presidents Kennedy and Johnson could be so lacking in wisdom when it came to Vietnam. By “the best and the brightest” he meant the “whiz kids,” like Robert McNamara, whom President Kennedy brought into his administration from academia and industry. Describing an atmosphere that “prevailed in many quarters, a belief in American industrial power and technological genius which had emerged during World War II, Halberstam stated “later there would be a phrase for it. Fulbright, who was appalled by it, would call it ‘the arrogance of power.’ We had power and the North Vietnamese did not; besides, they were small and yellow.”³⁵

On March 19, 2003, the day the United States began its invasion of Iraq, Senator Robert Byrd, the longest-serving member of the Senate and a past colleague of Fulbright, once again [criticized](#) U. S. arrogance: “We flaunt our superpower status with arrogance. We treat UN Security Council members like ingrates who offend our princely dignity by lifting their heads from the carpet. Valuable alliances are split. After war has ended, the United States will have to rebuild much more than the country of Iraq. We will have to rebuild America’s image around the globe.”

A month after President Bush dramatically proclaimed the end of major combat operations on an aircraft carrier—against a backdrop of a White-House produced banner stating “Mission Accomplished”—*Time* columnist Joe Klein [wrote](#). “Bush promised a foreign policy of humility and a domestic policy of compassion. He has given us a foreign policy of arrogance and a domestic policy that is cynical, myopic and cruel.”

In a 2008 book, *Rumsfeld’s Wars: The Arrogance of Power*, scholar Dale R. Herspring, a conservative Republican, criticizes President Bush’s secretary of defense for his arrogance, which undermined both his Iraq efforts and his overall leadership. Herspring concludes that “Rumsfeld will go down in history as one of the worst U.S. secretaries of defense since the end of World War II. His arrogance and assumed omnipotence led him to destroy the existing cooperative relationship between the U.S. military and the Department of Defense. Rumsfeld dominated the Pentagon to such an extent that often his voice was the only one heard. He excluded the military from important meetings, ignored their advice, and surrounded himself with civilian sycophants and officers who were prepared to play the game of Pentagon politics the way Rumsfeld wanted it to be played.”³⁶

But it was not just President Bush, Rumsfeld, and other Bush officials who displayed a lack of humility. As Democratic Congressman David Price (N.C.) observed in late 2005, “humility is out of fashion these days. Political leaders, advocates, and pundits often display an

³⁴ J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), ix, 3-4,17.

³⁵ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 543.

³⁶ Dale R. Herspring, *Rumsfeld’s Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 193.

in-your-face assertiveness, seeming to equate uncertainty or even reflectiveness with weakness and a lack of moral fiber.” And he quoted Niebuhr about the spiritual pride demonstrated by claiming “divine sanction” for one’s actions.³⁷

In an [interview](#) with *U.S. News & World Report* in April 2009, historian Richard Beeman was asked about his book *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of America’s Constitution*, and why President Obama should read it. Beeman responded, “If one reads this book, one gets a better sense not only of the humility but of the fundamental uncertainty that these guys in the Constitutional Convention had as they went about crafting this government.” He also hoped that “he [Obama] would be somewhat humble, just as the founding fathers were, in developing his own views on how the Constitution should be interpreted.” And Beeman added: “I think the people, frankly, who are least humble right now are the people like Justice [Antonin] Scalia, who is absolutely emphatic in his view about how the Constitution should be interpreted.” To what extent President Obama has reflected the type of humility Beeman called for, will be dealt with in the companion piece mentioned at the beginning of this present essay.

In November 2010, *Newsweek’s* religion editor, Lisa Miller, [wrote](#), “Surely no professional group has a weaker claim to that virtue [humility] than today’s divided, self-righteous, and spin-savvy politicians. And too often the politicians (and religious leaders) who do make a case for humility have the least basis for doing so. In an August 2007 speech, New York governor Eliot Spitzer expounded upon Reinhold Niebuhr and the virtues of humility in the public square. ‘What I’d like to reflect on today, and this may come as a surprise to some of you,’ he said, ‘are the inevitable risks that occur when [political] passion and conviction are not sufficiently tempered by humility.’” Miller then reminded readers of his resignation in disgrace seven months later. She also quoted several religious leaders who stated that humility implied “charity toward people you disagree with,” and “not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.” She also linked it to a willingness to compromise if politicians truly desired to be “public servants,” as the public desired them to be.

Although she saw some glimmers of political humility and compromise near the end of 2010, a year later *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat wrote in [“Our Restless Meritocracy”](#):

In meritocracies, though, it’s the very intelligence of our leaders that creates the worst disasters. Convinced that their own skills are equal to any task or challenge, meritocrats . . . embark on more hubristic projects, and become infatuated with statistical models that hold out the promise of a perfectly rational and frictionless world. . . .

Inevitably, pride goeth before a fall. Robert McNamara and the Vietnam-era whiz kids thought they had reduced war to an exact science. Alan Greenspan and Robert Rubin thought that they had done the same to global economics. The architects of the Iraq war thought that the American military could liberate the Middle East from the toils of history. . . .

What you see in today’s Republican primary campaign is a reaction to exactly these kinds of follies — a revolt against the ruling class that our meritocracy has forged, and a search for outsiders with thinner résumés but better instincts.

But from Michele Bachmann to Herman Cain, the outsiders haven’t risen to the challenge. It will do America no good to replace the arrogant with the ignorant, the overconfident with the incompetent.

³⁷ Price, “Theological Roots of Humility in Politics,” at http://price.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2903&Itemid=100260.

In place of reckless meritocrats, we don't need feckless know-nothings. We need intelligent leaders with a sense of their own limits, experienced people whose lives have taught them caution. We still need the best and brightest, but we need them to have somehow learned humility along the way.

Tolerance and Compromise

Closely connected to humility is tolerance. Know-it-alls tend to be intolerant, while those willing to admit their own limitations are more likely to tolerate those of others and be open to their views. If one is humble and tolerant, one is also more willing to compromise. Former Republican Missouri senator John Danforth [noted](#) that “If legislators want to legislate—and not just appeal to a rabid group of supporters come hell or high water—that’s going to be in a system that involves compromise.” In such a system, he added, “It’s very helpful to believe that your program is not immutable. And that the other people you’re dealing with have something to say and something to add.” Other wisdom virtues, for example empathy, also further tolerance and compromise. As Sternberg writes about teaching wisdom, people should be taught to see “things from others’ perspectives as well as one’s own,” to tolerate “other people’s points of view, whether or not one agrees with such views.”³⁸

We have already seen that toleration and compromise were two of the virtues that Isaacson [wrote](#) that Ben Franklin emphasized. Franklin was especially insistent upon religious tolerance, which was contrary to the spirit of many Puritan colonists. Believing in God, but not adhering to any organized church, he helped raise funds for a new hall in Philadelphia that would be, in his words, “expressly for the use of any preacher of any religious persuasion who might desire to say something,” even “a missionary to preach Mohammedanism to us . . . would find a pulpit at his service.” To Franklin, the true test of religion was how we acted not the dogmas we believed—“I think vital religion has always suffered when orthodoxy is more regarded than virtue. And the Scripture assures me that at the last day we shall not be examined by what we thought, but what we did ... that we did good to our fellow creatures.”

To Franklin’s mind, toleration implied willingness to compromise. He thought that it would be foolish for anyone to claim that “all the doctrines he holds are true and all he rejects are false.” Isaacson refers to him as “the sage at the Constitutional Convention.” He embodied “one crucial virtue that was key to the gathering’s success: a belief in the nobility of compromise. Throughout his life, one of his mantras had been, “Both sides must part with some of their demands.” His biographer says that for him “compromise was not only a practical approach but a moral one. Tolerance, humility and a respect for others required it. The near perfect document that arose from his compromise could not have been approved if the hall had contained only crusaders who stood on unwavering principle. Compromisers may not make great heroes, but they do make great democracies.”

Franklin was not alone among the Founding Fathers when it came to appreciating the value of compromise. In a 2009 review Isaacson [wrote](#): “We like to think of our nation’s founders as men with unwavering fealty to high-minded principles. To some extent they were. But when they gathered in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 to write the Constitution,

³⁸ Sternberg, “It’s Not What You Know,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SternbergArticle01.html>.

they showed that they were also something just as great and often more difficult to be: compromisers. In that regard they reflected not just the classical virtues of honor and integrity but also the Enlightenment's values of balance, order, tolerance, scientific calibration and respect for other people's beliefs."

A contemporary of Franklin, the Dublin-born Edmund Burke, who served in the British Parliament, agreed on the importance of compromise. Urging conciliation of the American revolutionaries, he [declared](#): "All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter. We balance inconveniences; we give and take; we remit some rights, that we may enjoy others; and we choose rather to be happy citizens than subtle disputants."

Burke was often later quoted by American conservatives—as well as some liberals. He was a favorite, for example, of Russell Kirk (1918-1994), sometimes labeled "the Father of American Traditionalist Conservatism." Kirk also emphasized the importance of compromise. In an essay on the ["Errors of Ideology,"](#) he wrote that "Ideology makes political compromise impossible: the ideologue will accept no deviation from the Absolute Truth of his secular revelation. . . . Ideologues vie one with another in fancied fidelity to their Absolute Truth; and they are quick to denounce deviationists or defectors from their party orthodoxy. . . . The evidence of ideological ruin lies all about us. How then can it be that the allurements of ideology retain great power in much of the world?"

Kirk contrasted ideological politics with prudential [practical-wisdom] politics:

Ideology makes political compromise impossible The prudential politician, *au contraire*, is well aware that the primary purpose of the state is to keep the peace. This can be achieved only by maintaining a tolerable balance among great interests in society. Parties, interests, and social classes and groups must arrive at compromises, if bowie-knives are to be kept from throats. When ideological fanaticism rejects any compromise, the weak go to the wall.

Kirk mentioned a letter he received from a "seasoned conservative publicist," who was critical of "young people, calling themselves conservative, who have no notion of prudence, temperance, compromise, the traditions of civility, or cultural patrimony." The publicist lamented that the conservative movement had spawned "a new generation of rigid ideologists," and that it distressed him "to find them as numerous and in so many institutions." Kirk's response was "Amen to that."

Kirk, of course, identified ideologists as mainly those on the Left, including liberals. A U. S. liberal he described as "a man in love with constant change; often he has been influenced directly by the group of ideas called pragmatism and the writings of John Dewey; commonly the liberal has tended to despise the lessons of the past and to look forward confidently to a vista of endless material progress, in which the state will play a larger and larger role, and a general equality of condition will be enforced." Aristotle he considered a conservative.³⁹ But one can reject Kirk's biases and characterizing of liberals and pragmatists and still see value in his words on compromise.

President John Kennedy was a contemporary of Kirk and one who described himself as "a practical liberal . . . a pragmatic liberal." In the words of his wife, Jackie, he was also "an

³⁹ Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1956), 23.

idealist without allusions.”⁴⁰ And yet, his words on compromise are similar to those of Kirk. In his *Profiles in Courage*, written while still a senator, he stated:

Going along means more than just good fellowship—it includes the use of compromise, the sense of things possible. We should not be too hasty in condemning all compromise as bad morals. For politics and legislation are not matters for inflexible principles or unattainable ideals. Politics, as John Morley has acutely observed, "is a field where action is one long second best, and where the choice constantly lies between two blunders"; and legislation, under the democratic way of life and the Federal system of Government, requires compromise between the desires of each individual and group and those around them. Henry Clay . . . said compromise was the cement that held the Union together. . . .

. . . The fanatics and extremists and even those conscientiously devoted to hard and fast principles are always disappointed at the failure of their Government to rush to implement all of their principles and to denounce those of their opponents. But the legislator has some responsibility to conciliate those opposing forces within his state and party and to represent them in the larger clash of interests on the national level; and he alone knows that there are few if any issues where all the truth and all the right and all the angels are on one side.

Some of my colleagues who are criticized today for lack of forthright principles—or who are looked upon with scornful eyes as compromising “politicians”—are simply engaged in the fine art of conciliating, balancing and interpreting the forces and factions of public opinion, an art essential to keeping our nation united and enabling our Government to function. Their consciences may direct them from time to time to take a more rigid stand for principle—but their intellects tell them that a fair or poor bill is better than no bill at all, and that only through the give-and-take of compromise will any bill receive the successive approval of the Senate, the House, the President and the nation.

But the question is how we will compromise and with whom. For it is easy to seize upon unnecessary concessions, not as means of legitimately resolving conflicts but as methods of “going along.” . . .

We shall need compromises in the days ahead, to be sure. But these will be, or should be, compromises of issues, not of principles. We can compromise our political positions, but not ourselves. We can resolve the clash of interests without conceding our ideals. And even the necessity for the right kind of compromise does not eliminate the need for those idealists and reformers who keep our compromises moving ahead. . . . Compromise need not mean cowardice. Indeed it is frequently the compromisers and conciliators who are faced with the severest tests of political courage as they oppose the extremist views of their constituents.”⁴¹

In a [commencement speech at Yale in 1962](#), Kennedy said:

The central domestic issues of our time are more subtle and less simple. They relate not to basic clashes of philosophy or ideology but to ways and means of reaching common goals—to research for sophisticated solutions to complex and obstinate issues. . . . We must move on from the reassuring repetition of stale phrases to a new, difficult, but essential confrontation with reality.

For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

Historian and long-time liberal Arthur Schlesinger, one of Kennedy’s advisors, was impressed by Kennedy’s “pragmatic side,” by his willingness “to deal with a conservative

⁴⁰ Ted Sorensen, *Kennedy: The Classic Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 22.

⁴¹ John Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Pocket Books, 1960), 4-5, 17. The question of whether he or aide Ted Sorensen actually wrote most of the work is irrelevant here because either way the book reflected Kennedy’s views.

Congress. But when the chips were down about the most urgent domestic issue of the day, that is, civil rights, Kennedy the pragmatist also acquitted himself well as a liberal— although not, according to Schlesinger, without hesitation or difficulty.”⁴²

During Kennedy’s presidency, poet W. H Auden distinguished between “two kinds of political issues, Party issues and Revolutionary issues.” Regarding the latter he wrote, “There is only one genuine world-wide revolutionary issue, racial equality.” Almost all other issues, however, he placed into the other category. “In a party issue, all parties are agreed as to the nature and justice of the social goal to be reached, but differ in their policies for reaching it. . . . On a party issue it is essential that passions be kept at a low temperature. . . . Rival deputies should be able to dine in each other’s houses; fanatics have no place in party politics.” Auden thought that what was “so terrifying and immeasurably depressing about most contemporary politics” was the failure to admit that most issues were party issues, “to be settled by appeal to facts and reason.”⁴³

In pointing out how playing politics on a national scale can be “vicious” if the goal of establishing “a just and smoothly running society” is ignored, Auden cited [Charles Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*](#). Pickwick had observed that in the town of Eatanswill there were “two great parties that divided the town—the Blues and the Buffs.” Auden then quoted most of the following passage from Dickens’s book.

The Blues lost no opportunity of opposing the Buffs, and the Buffs lost no opportunity of opposing the Blues; and the consequence was, that whenever the Buffs and Blues met together at public meeting, town-hall, fair, or market, disputes and high words arose between them. With these dissensions it is almost superfluous to say that everything in Eatanswill was made a party question. If the Buffs proposed to new skylight the market-place, the Blues got up public meetings, and denounced the proceeding; if the Blues proposed the erection of an additional pump in the High Street, the Buffs rose as one man and stood aghast at the enormity. There were Blue shops and Buff shops, Blue inns and Buff inns—there was a Blue aisle and a Buff aisle in the very church itself.⁴⁴

But in 2011, a half century after Auden quoted these words, veteran news journalist Tom Brokaw commented that because of political partisanship in Washington, D. C. there was less conversation from members of opposing parties “about what was in the best interest of the country,” and that there was more polarization there than he had ever seen in his many decades of observing U. S. politics.⁴⁵

Humor and Creativity

Psychologist Erik Erikson wrote, “I can’t imagine a wise old person who can’t laugh.” Several wisdom scholars like Richard Trowbridge have listed humor as one of the qualities or values of

⁴² Sean Wilentz, “The Vital Centrist,” *The New Republic* (February 13, 2008), at <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/the-vital-centrist>.

⁴³ Auden, “The Poet and the City,” in *The Dyer’s Hand* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 86-87.

⁴⁴ Most, but not all, of the passage appears in Auden, “Dingley Dell & The Fleet,” in *The Dyer’s Hand*, 423.

⁴⁵ Interview on *The Daily Show*, at <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-november-2-2011/tom-brokaw>.

the wise.⁴⁶ We have already seen that seeing “the world as it is,” realizing “what fits with what” is characteristic of wise people. Such people are also more likely to recognize the opposite—that which does not fit, the incongruous. A philosophic encyclopedia declares that the most dominant theory of humor is one that sees it “as a response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness.”⁴⁷

Reinhold Niebuhr linked humor with humility when he stated that

Humor is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humor is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to “stand off” from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant little bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life. But we pretend that we are the very center of this organization. This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it. The less we are able to laugh at ourselves the more it becomes necessary and inevitable that others laugh at us.⁴⁸

Niebuhr also indicated how humor might be helpful to politicians:

All men betray moods and affectations, conceits and idiosyncrasies, which could become the source of great annoyance to us if we took them too seriously. It is better to laugh at them. A sense of humor is indispensable to men of affairs who have the duty of organizing their fellowmen in common endeavors. It reduces the frictions of life and makes the foibles of men tolerable. There is, in the laughter with which we observe and greet the foibles of others, a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance. We would not laugh if we regarded these foibles as altogether fitting and proper. There is judgment, therefore, in our laughter. But we also prove by the laughter that we do not take the annoyance too seriously.⁴⁹

The poet Auden was a good friend of Niebuhr, and similarly valued humor and humility. Like Niebuhr, he believed that humor should not be mean spirited. He thought that “laughing and loving have certain properties in common,” and that “real laughter is absolutely unaggressive.” A few years before his death, he wrote that “true laughter is not to be confused with the superior titter of the intellect, though we are capable, alas, of that, too.”⁵⁰

One politician who displayed both humor and wisdom was Abraham Lincoln. In *The War Years*, Carl Sandburg wrote “Lincoln was the first true humorist to occupy the White House. No

⁴⁶ The Erikson quote can be found at Trowbridge’s “The Scientific Approach of Wisdom,” www.wisdompage.com/TheScientificApproachtoWisdom.doc, 131. See also Macdonald’s “Values,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>, and John Lippitt, “Is a Sense of Humour a Virtue?” *The Monist* 88, no. 1 (2005), beginning at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb1364/is_1_88/ai_n29236036/?tag=content:coll.

⁴⁷ “Humor,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor>.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (1945), at http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp_djvu.txt, 119-20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁰ Auden, “The Prince’s Dog,” *The Dyer’s Hand*, 206-07; Auden, “Introduction: Concerning the Unpredictable,” in Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower*, Harvest Book ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1979), 21.

other President of the United States had come to be identified, for good or bad, with a relish for the comic.”⁵¹ Sandburg then devoted most of a chapter to examples of Lincoln’s humor. Joshua Wolf Shenk in his *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (2006) connects the president’s melancholy with humor in the following lines: “More than any medication, more than any doctor’s counsel, Lincoln drew on two therapies for inspiration and succor: He read poetry, which helped him cut straight into the heart of real life. And he told jokes, which he called ‘the vents of my moods & gloom.’ It’s an apt image, as humor helped keep Lincoln’s inner life in circulation, keeping him in a kind of equilibrium with the environment.”⁵²

Sandburg provides us with an especially apt example of how Lincoln used humor to keep his mental balance and cope with tragedy.

On the day after [the North’s crushing defeat at] Fredericksburg the staunch old friend, Issac N. Arnold, entered Lincoln’s office [and] was asked to sit down. Lincoln then read from [humorist] Artemus Ward. . . . That Lincoln should wish to read this nonsense while the ambulances were yet hauling thousands of wounded from the frozen mud flats of the Rappahannock River was amazing to Congressman Arnold. As he said afterward he was “shocked.” He inquired, “Mr. President, is it possible that with the whole land bowed in sorrow and covered with a pall in the presence of yesterday’s fearful reverse, you can indulge in such levity?” Then, Arnold said, the President threw down the Artemus Ward book, tears streamed down his cheeks, his physical frame quivered as he burst forth, “Mr. Arnold, if I could not get momentary respite from the crushing burden I am constantly carrying, my heart would break!” And with that pent-up cry let out, it came over Arnold that the laughter of Lincoln at times was a mask.⁵³

Another source on Lincoln captures his mix of melancholy and humor this way: “Lincoln was an intensely brooding person, plagued with chronic depression, and gloomy reflections about life and mortality. His poetry, speeches, letters, and conversations were filled with references to death, almost as if he were obsessed by it. He also worried about insanity and feared losing his mind. . . . Known for his humor and folksy anecdotes, he liked to tell all kinds of jokes, bawdy stories, and yarns—usually poking fun at himself. . . . When he was accused of being two-faced [during an earlier Lincoln-Douglas debate], Lincoln responded: ‘If I had another face, do you think I would wear this one?’”⁵⁴ The willingness of this man, who many thought homely in appearance, to make fun of his own looks attests to his willingness to combine humor with humility as Niebuhr later suggested one should.

Like Niebuhr and Auden, Lincoln earlier came to appreciate that wise humor was not mean spirited. In describing Lincoln’s years as a young Illinois state representative in Springfield, Sandburg wrote: “In this period of his life he let himself go in sarcasm and satire that was to bring him shame and humiliation. He would change. He was to learn, at cost, how to

⁵¹ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and The War Years*, Laurel ed., vol. 3 (New York: Dell, 1959), 607.

⁵² Quoted from Shenk’s web site at http://www.lincolnmelancholy.com/disc_jokes.html.

⁵³ Sandburg, vol. 3, p. 620.

⁵⁴ The source, <http://millercenter.org/academic/americanpresident/lincoln/essays/biography/print>, is located at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs.

use the qualities of pity and compassion that lay deeply and naturally in his heart, toward wiser reading and keener understanding of all men and women he met.”⁵⁵

To deal with our dissatisfaction with politics and politicians humor is often an effective means. From Mark Twain to today’s Jon Stewart, there has been a strong tradition of American political humor that has also included many others such as Will Rogers, Mark Russell, Pat Paulsen, Russell Baker, Art Buchwald, Al Franken (now a senator), Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert, and (mainly in rhyming form) Calvin Trillin. Twain quotes such as, “It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress,” and “Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself,” capture well, more than a century after his death, the current record dissatisfaction with our chief legislative branch.⁵⁶

Twain once stated that “genuine humor is replete with wisdom.”⁵⁷ He also spoke or wrote other words that suggest a connection between humor and the wisdom qualities we have already examined as being needed in the political world. “Humor is the great thing, the saving thing, after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.” His good friend William Dean Howells believed that “all his wisdom . . . begins and ends in his humor.”⁵⁸ Twain appreciated the following words from William Thackeray’s essay on Jonathan Swift: “The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness—your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture—your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. . . . He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher.” Twain once said, “To my mind, a discriminating irreverence is the creator and protector of human liberty.” And he believed that humor had to serve an “ideal higher than that of merely being funny.”⁵⁹ Howells once wrote that Twain’s humor sprung “from a certain intensity of common sense, a passionate love of justice, and a generous scorn of what is petty and mean.”⁶⁰ Before he gave a speech in London in 1907, a member of Parliament introduced him as follows: “Here he is, still the humorist, still the moralist. His humor enlivens and enlightens his morality, and his morality is all the better for his humor. That is one of the reasons why we love him.”⁶¹

⁵⁵ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1926), 60.

⁵⁶ The web site <http://www.twainquotes.com/quotesatoz.html> is useful for having his quotes searchable alphabetically and by topics such as Congress, Politicians, and Politics, and for providing the original source of the quotes in works by and about Twain.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Opie Percival Read, *Mark Twain and I* (Chicago: Reilly and Lee, 1940), 17.

⁵⁸ Mark Twain, “What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us,” at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3173/3173-h/3173-h.htm>; William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms* (Harper & Brothers, 1910). 183.

⁵⁹ Twain quotations are from Harold K. Bush, Jr., “Mark Twain’s American Adam: Humor as Hope and Apocalypse,” at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb049/is_3_53/ai_n29118466/pg_11/?tag=content:coll.

⁶⁰ Howells, 130.

⁶¹ See <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3188>, where his speeches (and some introductions to them) can be downloaded and searched.

Howells also suggested that much of Twain's humor was based on the incongruity between words and deeds, or pious platitudes and unseemly behavior—of which some of our contemporary politicians have furnished an ample share. In Twain's youth there was, for example, "the ludicrous incongruity of a slaveholding democracy nurtured upon the Declaration of Independence, and the comical spectacle of white labor owning black labor." As Howells noted, "If the knowledge and vision of slavery did not tinge all life with potential tragedy, perhaps it was this which lighted in the future humorist the indignation at injustice which glows in his page. His indignation relieves itself as often as not in a laugh; injustice is the most ridiculous thing in the world, after all, and indignation with it feels its own absurdity."⁶²

We have already seen that psychologist Sternberg wrote that "wisdom is . . . the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good." He thought creativity was necessary because "the wise solution to a problem may be far from obvious." Other wisdom scholars like Macdonald and Trowbridge list creativity as one of their wisdom values, and in writing about the wise people studied by psychologist Abraham Maslow, Macdonald writes that "they were creative, too." Another psychologist, Erik Erikson, and his wife Joan have also thought that wisdom required creativity.⁶³

Relating creativity more directly to the type of practical wisdom politicians are concerned with, two other scholars have written that "our world is much more complex and contradictory than his [Aristotle's] was and the need for practical wisdom is even greater. Such practical wisdom requires nuanced thinking, flexibility, creativity, and empathetic engagement with others."⁶⁴ When political leaders face great difficulties that seem to defy conventional solutions, creativity can be a great asset. Certainly one of the times of greatest peril for the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression when one quarter of the work force was unemployed. Coming into office in early 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt possessed no clear roadmap to guide the country toward economic wellbeing. The New Deal he cobbled together required creativity. In an introduction to a new edition to one of his books on Roosevelt, one of his most prominent biographers, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., wrote that "under the pressure of national crisis, *FDR* came into his own, combining eloquent idealism with astute realism. . . . He was more interested in creativity than consensus. He did not mind competition and rivalry within his administration; he rather encouraged it." As Schlesinger explained in his original text, "Competition in government, inadequately controlled, would mean anarchy. Adequately controlled, it could mean exceptional creativity. One consequence under the New Deal . . . was a constant infusion of vitality and ideas."⁶⁵

⁶² Howells, 180. For more on my thoughts on humor and wisdom, see my "Wisdom, Humor, and Faith: A Historical View," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomHumorFaith.pdf>.

⁶³ Sternberg, *Wisdom*, 152; Macdonald, Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom* at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>. For the Eriksons, see, e.g., Joan M. Erikson, *Wisdom and the Senses: The Way of Creativity* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).

⁶⁴ Schwartz and Sharpe, 49.

⁶⁵ *The Coming of the New Deal, 1933-1935*, Mariner Books ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), vii, 536.

Temperance and Self-discipline

Aristotle considered temperance (or moderation) and self-discipline two of the most important virtues required for practical wisdom and thus for statesmen. Temperance was central to his view of moral virtues because of his doctrine of "the mean," according to which such virtues attempt to achieve the mean between vices. For example, he perceived courage as the mean between rashness and cowardliness.

The philosopher believed that temperance and self-discipline should help us regulate what he called "the appetitive faculty," which deals with our emotions and desires: "The appetitive element in a temperate man should harmonize with the rational principle," for "the temperate man craves for the things he ought, as he ought . . . and when he ought."⁶⁶

Many modern wisdom scholars list some variants of temperance and self-discipline among their wisdom values. In their book *Practical Wisdom*, Schwartz and Sharpe give the example of a man practicing practical wisdom and mention that "he had the self-control—the emotion-regulating skills—to choose rightly. Emotions properly trained and modulated, Aristotle told his readers, are essential to being practically wise: 'We can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally any kind of pleasure and pain either too much or too little, and in either case not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue.'"⁶⁷

When it comes to political wisdom, about which Isaiah Berlin wrote insightfully, he viewed moderation as an important virtue, and he connected it to humility and tolerance. "Berlin's work also cautions against the self-righteousness of all who claim to have a monopoly on virtue, whether they be rulers or dissidents. It also condemns the . . . intolerance of those who think differently from oneself. It thus suggests that even when we encounter policies that we feel confident in condemning—and that Berlin's principles suggests [sic] we should condemn—we should do so moderately and humbly, while retaining doubts about our own program and resisting the lure of our own certitudes."⁶⁸ Berlin also thought that self-control was important. In his "Two Concepts of Liberty," he wrote, "Freedom is self-mastery, the elimination of obstacles to my will, whatever these obstacles may be—the resistance of nature, of my ungoverned passions"⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Ch. 12, at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean21.html>.

⁶⁷ Schwartz and Sharpe, 24.

⁶⁸ Joshua Cherniss, "Isaiah Berlin: A Defence," *The Oxonian Review of Books*, vol. 5 (Spring 2006), <http://www.oxonianreview.org/issues/5-2/5-2cherniss.html>; see also Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy, "Isaiah Berlin," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>.

⁶⁹ In Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), at http://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/wiso_vwl/johannes/Ankuendigungen/Berlin_twoconceptsofliberty.pdf.

Passion and Courage

Although Berlin and Aristotle valued moderation in achieving practical wisdom, they were not opposed to passion. Aristotle believed “that we should sometimes have strong feelings—when such feelings are called for by our situation. . . . Of course, Aristotle is committed to saying that anger should never reach the point at which it undermines reason; and this means that our passion should always fall short of the extreme point at which we would lose control. But it is possible to be very angry without going to this extreme.”⁷⁰ Berlin’s view was similar.

The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel once wrote that “a *wisdom* which does not include passion . . . is not worthy of being called wisdom.”⁷¹ We have seen that love is important for wisdom, and the wise poet and biographer Carl Sandburg thought that “at the root of love—romantic, patriotic, platonic, family love, love for life—was passion.”⁷² Twentieth century crusaders for the poor or for justice like Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King were passionate advocates of justice.

Max Weber listed passion as one of the “three pre-eminent qualities . . . decisive for the politician.” He wrote, “devotion to politics, if it is not to be frivolous intellectual play but rather genuinely human conduct, can be born and nourished from passion alone.” He was thinking of passion in the sense of passion for a cause, but he thought this passion had to be balanced with the two other pre-eminent qualities: “a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion.”⁷³ We shall consider the importance of balancing these values or virtues later in this essay.

Partly because they value reason, moderation, and tolerance and distrust any passion that seems to threaten these values, liberals are sometimes depicted as passionless. Many of them tend to believe that passion is more characteristic of zealots on the far Right or Left. In his *Politics and Passion* Michael Walzer writes that “liberalism is inadequate because the social structures and political orders that sustain inequality cannot be actively opposed without a passionate intensity that liberals do not (for good reasons) want to acknowledge or accommodate.”⁷⁴ And Michael P. Lynch in a 2005 essay entitled “Where Is Liberal Passion?” also faults liberals for too often being passionless.⁷⁵

But passion for our values is necessary in politics for it is often the engine that keeps us going when difficulties slow us down and tempt us to quit. Walzer quotes Emerson’s words that

⁷⁰ “Aristotle’s Ethics,” at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>.

⁷¹ Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond; Including, Conversations between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 198.

⁷² Quoted in Penelope Niven, *Carl Sandburg: A Biography* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1991), 697.

⁷³ Weber, at <http://www2.selu.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xii.

⁷⁵ *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 22, 2005), B7-9, available at <http://lists.extropy.org/pipermail/paleopsych/2005-April/002827.html>.

“nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” But not all liberals are lacking passion. The sobriquet “Fighting Bob” that was given to the Republican liberal progressive Robert La Follette Sr. (1855-1925), chosen by a Senate committee in 1959 as one of the Senate’s five greatest senators, is one indication of this. Another senator (elected in 1964, assassinated in 1968), Robert Kennedy, was in the words of one of his leading biographers, “a man of passion”—as contrasted to his brother President John Kennedy, who “was a man of reason.”⁷⁶ And for decades after the deaths of his two brothers, Ted Kennedy was considered the U. S. Senate’s preeminent liberal, and he was also a passionate advocate of his political ideas.

Aristotle perceived a connection between passion and courage. He thought that often “brave men also are passionate” and “act for honour’s sake, but passion aids them.” But “courage” aided by passion can only be true courage “if choice and motive be added.” And the philosopher distinguished between a courageous person and a reckless one. The former is not fearless, “for to fear some things is even right and noble.” Conversely, “he would be a sort of madman or insensible person if he feared nothing,” and “the man who exceeds in confidence about what really is terrible is rash.” The courageous person is one who “faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way,” and he “will face them as he ought and as the rule directs, for honour’s sake; for this is the end of virtue.” He also may have to face evils such as suffering and death, “but he will face them because it is noble to do so or because it is base not to do so. And the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death; for life is best worth living for such a man, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is none the less brave, and perhaps all the more so, because he chooses noble deeds.”⁷⁷

During the medieval period, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas stressed courage as a moral virtue. The authors of *Ethical Realism* write that “ethical realism brings with it a call to the greatest and most essential of all republican and democratic virtues, which is moral courage.”⁷⁸ Many modern wisdom scholars such as Macdonald have included it as a wisdom value. The latter’s words “being courageous: able to face dangers and fears with clarity and skill” remind us of John Kennedy’s definition (borrowed from Ernest Hemingway)—“grace under pressure.”⁷⁹

Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage* presented a thoughtful consideration of political courage. It contained chapters dealing with the courage of eight senators from John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) to Robert Taft (1889-1953). The two twentieth-century senators, George Norris (1861-1944) and Taft, were both Republicans, although after four terms in the Senate as a Republican, Norris was elected in 1936 as an Independent. Kennedy also included a few chapters that outlined his general views on political courage and noted that it is “a quality which may be

⁷⁶ Walzer, 118; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), xii.

⁷⁷ Quotes are from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chs. 6-9, beginning at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean18.html>.

⁷⁸ Lieven and Hulsman, 58.

⁷⁹ Macdonald, “Values,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>; Kennedy, 1.

found in any Senator, in any political party and in any era.”⁸⁰ He also mentioned more briefly others who demonstrated political courage including other senators, governors (including La Follette Sr. who was both a senator and governor), and our first president, George Washington.

Kennedy cited three main pressures that discouraged political courage: the desire to be liked; to be reelected; and, most significantly, “the pressure of his constituency, the interest groups, the organized letter writers, the economic blocs and even the average voter.” He also mentioned party pressures and obligations, but concluded that “when party and officeholder differ as to how the national interest is to be served, we must place first the responsibility we owe not to our party or even to our constituents, but to our individual consciences.”⁸¹

Because of “the tremendous power of mass communications,” which magnifies “any unpopular or unorthodox course,” and politics becoming “so mechanized and so dominated by professional politicians and public relations men,” Kennedy believed that political courage was becoming more difficult.⁸² More than a half century later these type of obstacles are more formidable than ever, especially when attempting to further the public good in the face of pressure from corporations and other “interest groups.”

The type of political courage Kennedy mainly admired was “the courage required of the Senator defying the angry power of the very constituents who control his future.”⁸³ Kennedy seemed to believe that a senator owed to his constituents what Edmund Burke once said: “[Their] wishes ought to have great weight with him It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and, above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But, his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you. . . . Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”⁸⁴

Kennedy recognized that human motivation was complex and that those courageous politicians he profiled were courageous for various reasons, but he thought that “national interest [the public good], rather than private or political gain, furnished the basic motivation” for the courageous actions he described. Moreover, for each senator “his conscience, his personal standard of ethics, his integrity or morality . . . was stronger than the pressures of public disapproval.”⁸⁵

And just as their courage sprang from different sources, so too it took on different forms: “Some demonstrated courage through their unyielding devotion to absolute principle. Others

⁸⁰ Kennedy, 192.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3-8, 13.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁸⁴ “Speech to the Electors of Bristol (November 3, 1774),” at <http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Burke/brkSWv4c1.html>.

⁸⁵ Kennedy, 203.

demonstrated courage through their acceptance of compromise, through their advocacy of conciliation, through their willingness to replace conflict with co-operation.”⁸⁶

Although Kennedy admired the courage of the profiled senators, he did not think they were always courageous or always right, even when they demonstrated political courage. He wrote that his nine years in Congress had taught him the wisdom of Lincoln’s statement: “There are few things wholly evil or wholly good. Almost everything, especially of Government policy, is an inseparable compound of the two, so that our best judgment of the preponderance between them is continually demanded.” Although concentrating on the courage of certain senators, Kennedy stated that “the problems of courage and conscience concern every officeholder in our land. . . . every citizen.”⁸⁷

Justice and Freedom

Although Aristotle listed justice as one of his moral virtues and Catholic theologians included it as one of the four cardinal virtues, most of us today think of it as more a value than a virtue. This is even more the case with freedom. But if we think of “justice” as being just to others, it is easier to see it as a virtue, and that is how Aristotle thought of it. He considered justice primarily as a virtuous character trait—“men mean by justice that kind of state of character which makes people disposed to do what is just and makes them act justly and wish for what is just.” He thought the just man was the opposite of “the lawless man and the grasping and unfair man The just, then, is the lawful and the fair.”

The philosopher divided justice into two types: distributive justice and rectificatory justice. The first “is manifested in distributions of honour or money or the other things that fall to be divided among those who have a share in the constitution,” and the second that which “plays a rectifying part in transactions between man and man,” whether voluntary (sales, purchases, loans, etc.) or involuntary (theft, adultery, murder, etc.). Often when a transaction, whether voluntary or involuntary, is thought to be unjust and “when people dispute, they take refuge in the judge; and to go to the judge is to go to justice; for the nature of the judge is to be a sort of animate justice.”

Aristotle disputed that “being just is easy. . . . no great wisdom, because it is not hard to understand the matters dealt with by the laws.” But to know exactly “how actions must be done and distributions effected in order to be just,” was not easy. And he realized that legal justice was not always equitable because it was not always fair or just in the best sense of the word—U. S. Southern segregation laws in the twentieth century would be one example.⁸⁸

Following the emphasis that Aristotle and Aquinas placed on justice, more modern thinkers like Jacques Maritain and John Rawls have emphasized it. Maritain wrote:

⁸⁶ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 207, 209.

⁸⁸ For Aristotle’s thoughts on justice, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, beginning, at <http://nothingistic.org/library/aristotle/nicomachean/nicomachean30.html>.

From the last period of the XIXth Century on, state intervention has been needed to compensate for the general disregard for justice and human solidarity that prevailed during the early phases of the industrial revolution. State legislation with regard to employment and labor is in itself a requirement of the common good. And without the power of the State – the democratic State – how could a free body politic resist the pressure or the aggression of the totalitarian States? The growth of the State, in modern centuries, as a rational or juridical machine and with regard to its inner constitutive system of law and power, its unity, its discipline; the growth of the State, in the present century, as a technical machine and with regard to its law-making, supervising, and organizing functions in social and economic life, are in themselves part of the normal progress. . . .

We may dislike the State machinery; I do not like it. Yet many things we do not like are necessary, not only in fact, but by right. On the one hand, the primary reason for which men, united in a political society, need the State, is the order of justice. On the other hand, social justice is the crucial need of modern societies. As a result, the primary duty of the modern State is the enforcement of social justice.”⁸⁹

Pope Paul VI credited Maritain for inspiring his papal encyclical on economic justice, *Populorum Progressio*. Rawls, one of the twentieth-century’s most influential moral philosophers, devoted his major work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971, 1999), to working out the proper balance between liberty and justice in a pluralistic society possessing many different religious and philosophic views.

Like many other virtues, justice can be interpreted in many different ways. In our own country during the present century, differences over the best qualifications of Supreme Court justices and how they should rule on controversial questions dramatically demonstrate these differences.

Virtues, including justice, imply freedom because for one to act virtuously (s)he must choose to do so. Freedom itself, however, has not traditionally been considered a virtue, but it has been an important American value since the beginning of our history. And any political wisdom must cherish it. But as historian James MacGregor Burns once wrote: “For over two centuries Americans had debated and squabbled and even warred over the definition of freedom. During the 1950s the quarrel turned into a cacophony.”⁹⁰ And the cacophony has continued ever since. One fundamental difference between conservatives and liberals is that the former emphasize freedom *from* big government, and the latter, following the example of Franklin Roosevelt, emphasize that true freedom should include “freedom from want” and that governments need to help create this condition. As he insisted in his State of the Union address in January 1944, true “freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. ‘Necessitous men are not free men.’” He called for a “second Bill of Rights” that would include various freedoms. Among them were the following:

- The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the Nation;
- The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;
- The right of every family to a decent home;
- The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;

⁸⁹ Maritain, *Man and the State*, Phoenix Books ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 19-20.

⁹⁰ *The Crosswinds of Freedom: From Roosevelt to Reagan—America in the Last Half Century*, Vintage ed. (New York, 1990), 276.

- The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment.⁹¹

Following in this liberal tradition Nobel-Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen wrote in his *Development as Freedom* (1999) that true freedom required not just political and civil rights, but also “substantive freedom,” which meant economic and social opportunities that might include such things as jobs and subsidies, unemployment benefits, and inexpensive health care. Martha Nussbaum, made a similar point when she declared “liberty is not just a matter of having rights on paper, it requires being in a position to exercise those rights. And this requires material and institutional resources.”⁹²

Conservatives like historian like Richard Pipes, however, take a contrary view. He declared that programs such as Affirmative Action and school busing impinged upon freedom and believed that “the entire concept of the welfare state . . . is incompatible with individual liberty.”⁹³

Exercising Political Wisdom

Even though the virtues and values we have examined are aids to political wisdom, they are still not enough. Something else is needed, and that is balancing them against each other, prioritizing them, fitting them together in a particular situation so as to achieve the greatest good. In their book *Practical Wisdom*, Schwartz and Sharpe apply Aristotle’s thinking to modern life and provide numerous examples of such balancing. They write, for example, of a case in which a judge had to balance retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation—or justice with mercy. In his “balance theory of wisdom” Sternberg was thinking more of the need to balance self-interests with those of others, but here again good judgment about how best to balance our values is involved.

Throughout American history politicians have had to balance different values like freedom and equality. The historian Clinton Rossiter once noted that “the preference for liberty over equality lies at the root of the Conservative tradition, and men who subscribe to this tradition never tire of warning against the ‘rage for equality.’” At the end of the twentieth century, historian Pipes echoed that sentiment when he wrote “the main threat to freedom today comes not from tyranny but equality—equality defined as identity of reward.” A related concern has been “the tyranny of the majority,” which was already a serious fear mentioned by the nineteenth-century Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America*. He also

⁹¹ Quoted in Cass R. Sunstein, *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR'S Unfinished Revolution and Why We Need It More than Ever* (New York, 2004), 242-43.

⁹² *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge U. Press, 2000), 54.

⁹³ Richard Pipes, *Property and Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 284; I have discussed twentieth-century debates about freedom in more detail in, Moss, *Age of Progress?*, 133-38.

expressed his concern that under certain conditions “democracy would extinguish . . . liberty of the mind.”⁹⁴

In the final decades of the twentieth century, the preference of another value over at least one type of freedom was dramatically illustrated in the struggle over abortion rights between pro-choice and pro-life factions. The very selection of labels indicated that one side believed a woman’s freedom to choose for herself on this question was paramount, while the other side was willing to deny that freedom because it believed the right to life of a fetus was a greater value.

In dealing with governmental and other problems, Schwartz and Sharpe note the temptation to think that we can fix our problems by just devising new rules and incentives. But they believe that such changes alone will not be sufficient and indeed are sometimes counterproductive. Too many rules and incentives can inhibit and skew the development of practical wisdom, both in individuals and in institutions. And practical wisdom for the authors is the “master virtue” or maestro of our other virtues. They point out, for example, that passing laws requiring certain mandatory sentences—often as a means of curtailing the leniency of “liberal” judges—has often prevented judges from exercising practical wisdom. Like Edmund Burke and John Kennedy, the authors of *Practical Wisdom* believe it is important for people, including representatives, other government officials, and judges, to exercise judgments using practical wisdom to do so.

In his essay on “Political Judgment,” Isaiah Berlin begins by asking: “What is it to have good judgment in politics? What is it to be politically wise, or gifted, to be a political genius, or even to be no more than politically competent, to know how to get things done?” We have already seen that in discussing realism he believed that good judgment involved possessing “an acute sense of what fits with what.”⁹⁵ But he also realized that judgments required balancing values. As one perceptive account of his thinking put it: “Berlin was more sensitive than many classical liberal or libertarian thinkers to the possibility that genuine liberty may conflict with genuine equality, or justice, or public order, or security, or efficiency, or happiness, and therefore must be balanced with, and sometimes sacrificed in favour of, other values. Berlin’s liberalism includes both a conservative or pragmatic appreciation of the importance of maintaining a balance between different values, and a social-democratic appreciation of the need to restrict liberty in some cases so as to promote equality and justice and protect the weak against victimization by the strong.”⁹⁶ Max Weber, as earlier noted, also perceived the importance of a politician balancing values, specifically passion with humility, responsibility, and a sense of proportion.

Although the chief political goal of all individuals should be the public good, how one best helps bring it about depends on one’s role, for example, president, senator, Supreme Court justice, or ordinary citizen. In his *Virtues and Vices* Aristotle stated that “it belongs to wisdom to take counsel, to judge the goods and evils and all the things in life that are desirable and to be

⁹⁴ Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 24; Pipes, 283; de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 12.

⁹⁵ Berlin, 40.

⁹⁶ Cherniss, Joshua and Hardy, Henry, “Isaiah Berlin,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2010 ed.), at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>.

avoided, to use all the available goods finely, to behave rightly in society, to observe due occasions, to employ both speech and action with sagacity, to have expert knowledge of all things that are useful.”⁹⁷ If one is a president, exercising political wisdom requires more than just possessing the virtues and values indicated, and the judgment in particular circumstances how best to combine them, but also various leadership skills. Without these skills, s(he) will not be able to maximize the good results, the common good, that should be the aim of political wisdom. For political wisdom is about acting as well as deliberating.

We note, for example, that Aristotle mentions the need “to employ both speech and action with sagacity.” A U. S. president who cannot communicate effectively will not be able to act as wisely politically as one who can. Besides communication skills, a president must be a good judge of people if s(he) is to demonstrate a maximum of political wisdom, for the complexity of government necessitates a great reliance on selecting and relying on the Cabinet, other advisers, and officials.

Political wisdom for the average citizen entails primarily the good judgment of knowing whom to vote for and what political positions to support. And the latter can be quite complex because of differing ethical approaches. Weber wrote, “We must be clear about the fact that all ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims: conduct can be oriented to an ‘ethic of ultimate ends’ or to an ‘ethic of responsibility.’” In the first, “the Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord.” Jesus’s “Sermon on the Mount . . . implied a natural law of absolute imperatives based upon religion.” In the second, “one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s action.” The first was an absolute ethic (or “acosmic ethic of love”) that proclaimed such teachings as “Resist not him that is evil with force.” But because the second ethic takes into consideration the consequences of one’s actions it has often been called consequentialist ethics. Weber maintained that while a pacifist may choose to follow the dictum “Resist not him that is evil with force,” follow “the gospel . . . [and] refuse to bear arms”; for the politician the reverse proposition holds, ‘thou *shalt* resist evil by force,’ or else you are responsible for the evil winning out.”⁹⁸

A pacifist such as Dorothy Day, who believed the U. S. was wrong to enter World War II, also believed that “pure means” had to be used to reach one’s goals. In September 1975, she wrote: “It is a lesson for us all in the peace movement that gentle pressure, constant hard work, a faithful, straightforward—one might even say respectful—adherence to the Scriptural command to love our opponents and to exercise the virtue of hope even when all seems hopeless, offer a great example of the pure means to achieve our ends. Jacques Maritain impressed this use of pure means upon us as in the earliest days of the Catholic Worker [the charitable organization she had co-founded].”⁹⁹ Despite her words, however, Maritain, concluded that war against Hitler was

⁹⁷ Aristotle, *Virtues and Vices*, Ch. 4, at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0062:chapter=4>.

⁹⁸ Weber, at <http://www2.selu.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf>.

⁹⁹ “Bromley Eviction Halted,” at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=556>.

justified, as did many other religious thinkers of Day's time, most notably Reinhold Niebuhr, who strongly criticized pacifists' stand.

Weber conceded that ethicists must realize that "the attainment of 'good' ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones—and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications. From no ethics in the world can it be concluded when and to what extent the ethically good purpose 'justifies' the ethically dangerous means and ramifications." Moreover, he warned that "whoever wants to engage in politics at all, and especially in politics as a vocation, has to realize these ethical paradoxes. He must know that he is responsible for what may become of himself under the impact of these paradoxes. I repeat, he lets himself in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence. . . . He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence. The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner tension with the god of love, as well as with the Christian God as expressed by the church. This tension can at any time lead to an irreconcilable conflict."¹⁰⁰

But a moral trap also existed for those following a pure pacifist ethic, for Weber argued that their "goals may be damaged and discredited for generations, because responsibility for consequences is lacking." He concluded that "one cannot prescribe to [any private citizen] . . . whether he should follow an ethic of absolute ends or an ethic of responsibility, or when the one and when the other." But Weber distrusted those who proclaimed "the responsibility for the consequences does not fall upon me but upon the others whom I serve." He believed they were often "windbags who do not fully realize what they take upon themselves but who intoxicate themselves with romantic sensations." He was more sympathetic to the "mature man . . . [who is] aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: 'Here I stand; I can do no other.' That is something genuinely human and moving. And every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in that position. In so far as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man—a man who can have the 'calling for politics.'"¹⁰¹

In many ways the position of Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote of "the limits of morality in politics," was similar to that of Weber. About pacifists, he wrote that they "do not know human nature. . . . They merely assert that if only men loved one another, all the complex, and sometimes horrible, realities of the political order could be dispensed with. They do not see that their 'if' begs the most basic problem of human history. It is because men are sinners that justice can be achieved only by a certain degree of coercion on the one hand, and by resistance to coercion and tyranny on the other hand."¹⁰² Like Weber and Niebuhr, Lieven and Hulsman in

¹⁰⁰ Weber, at <http://www2.selu.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 109.

their *Ethical Realism* advocate an ethics that stresses responsibility and consequences rather than just pure intentions.

While Niebuhr was still living, a debate emerged over a book that had major implications for political ethics and political wisdom. It was *Situation Ethics* (1966), written by the Anglican theologian Joseph Fletcher. Basically, Fletcher argued that an ethics based on unbending moral laws with no exceptions, like the “absolute ethic” mentioned by Weber, was too rigid. He gave the specific example of abortion, rejecting the moral position that it was always wrong regardless of the situation or circumstances, for example even in case conception was due to rape. In place of a system of absolute “dos” and “don’ts,” he advocated acting in the most loving way possible in any particular situation.

For the remainder of the century, conservative Christians argued against such thinking. One Christian writer was appalled when most of the people in a Bible class agreed that in some cases it might be appropriate to lie, for example “if a robber breaks into your house and seems to be interested in doing harm to your wife and children, and asks you if they are in the house.” Obviously rejecting what Weber called an “ethic of responsibility,” the writer [argued](#) that it was not permissible to lie even in such a case. In the year 2000, the editor of the conservative *Christian Courier* [wrote](#) an article “Did Jesus Endorse Situation Ethics?” In it he stated:

Situation ethics is the notion that there are no absolute rules governing “right” and “wrong.” Rather, all human activity is determined by the situation of the moment – supposedly guided by “love” alone. . . . This philosophy of situation ethics is bereft of merit. . . . Subjectivity can never be the standard for human conduct. . . . If “situation ethics” is valid, there is no act under heaven that cannot be justified! . . . Situation ethics is a vogueish belief in a world of immoral rebels who are determined to cast off divine restraints and “play God.”

Such differences about ethics as mentioned above have major relevance for political wisdom when it comes to such questions as wars and abortions.

Still one more point is relevant about how political roles affect political wisdom, and it relates to Niebuhr’s comments about the role of pressure groups. He wrote: “Political strategy, therefore, always involves a combination of coercive and persuasive factors. Sentimental moralism which underestimates the necessity of coercion, and cynical realism which is oblivious to the possibilities of moral suasion are equally dangerous to the welfare of mankind. . . . The welfare of society demands that enough social intelligence and moral idealism be created to prevent social antagonism from issuing in pure conflict and that enough social pressure be applied to force reluctant beneficiaries of social privilege to yield their privileges before injustice prompts to vehemence and violence.”¹⁰³

He applied these ideas already in 1932 to the black (Negro in the language of the time) struggle for justice. He declared, “The Negro will never win his full rights in society merely by trusting the fairness and sense of justice of the white man. . . . Neither will the Negro gain justice merely by turning to violence to gain his rights. . . . If he is well advised he will use such forms of economic and political pressure as will be least likely to destroy the moral forces, never

¹⁰³ Niebuhr, “Moralists and Politics,” 80-81.

completely absent even in intergroup relations, but which will nevertheless exert coercion upon the white man's life."¹⁰⁴

Considering these words and Niebuhr's strong influence in Protestant circles, it is not surprising that he had a strong influence on Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. In his famous April 1963 "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)," King wrote: "We have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals." On April 13, 1970, two years after King's assassination, the editor of the journal *Christianity and Crisis* wrote to Niebuhr: "Let me tell you that Andy Young told me recently that in the quiet hours when he and Martin King would sit and talk that Martin always said he was much more influenced by you and Paul Tillich [another important Protestant theologian] than by Gandhi and that the nonviolent technique was merely a Niebuhrian stratagem of power. Enough said!"¹⁰⁵

Niebuhr believed that Gandhi's techniques went beyond "pure pacifism," and "ended up initiating a vast strategy of nonviolent coercion," but "nothing less realistic than Gandhi's policy can ever hope to be politically effective." For workers he also advised pressure tactics because "the group which is able to wield the most economic and political power really determines its [the state's] policies."¹⁰⁶

The advocacy of various forms of pressure by Niebuhr and the employment of nonviolent pressure tactics by Gandhi and King all suggest that among the masses and non-politicians, political wisdom often calls for more partisanship and passion and less compromise than for politicians, who often must compromise to advance the common good.

Gandhi and King were not modern-day politicians, but more akin to the Biblical Jewish prophets who attacked the evils of their day. These two modern prophets displayed the "prophetic charisma" that Weber believed was helpful to challenge an increasingly rationalized and bureaucratic state.¹⁰⁷ A contemporary of Weber, the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), also perceived the need for the prophetic function along with ones for church and state in the idealized political order he proposed, but "the prophet was a free agent, controlled neither by the hierarchy nor by State officials."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰⁵ The quote can be found on the Public Radio site at <http://being.publicradio.org/programs/niebuhr-rediscovered/d72.shtml>. Andrew Young was a friend and important follower of King and later became the UN ambassador under President Carter. See also Gregg Blakley, "The Formative Influences on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Peace Magazine* (Apr-Jun 2001), 21, at <http://peacemagazine.org/archive/v17n2p21.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, "Moralists and Politics," 82-83.

¹⁰⁷ H.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press Galaxy Book, 1958), 51-55, 245-52. Weber's "Politics as a Vocation," previously cited in its online form, is also in this collection, pp.77-128.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolas Zernov, *Three Russian Prophets: Khomiakov, Dostoevsky, Soloviev*, 3d ed. (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1973), 142.

During Niebuhr's era, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton identified more with the Biblical and later prophets than with contemporary politicians. In his 1960 collection, *Disputed Questions*, Merton devoted one section of his long essay on "The Primitive Carmelite Ideal" to "The Prophetic Spirit." Prepared by "prayer, contemplation and solitude," true prophets, he thought, advocated "the destruction of the inequalities and oppressions dividing rich and poor; conversion to justice and equity." In 1968, just months before his death, he gave a talk to a group of contemplative nuns at his Kentucky monastery on "Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation." In it he said:

The great problem we're up against now is that we live in a society that incorporates dissent into it. In other words, the thesis behind this position is that we're living in a totalitarian society. It's not fascist in a political sense, but in the way that it's economically organized. It's organized for profit and for marketing. In that machinery there's no real freedom. You're free to choose gimmicks, your brand of TV, your make of new car. But you're not free not to have a car. In other words, life is really determined for everybody. . . .

. . . This is the system that calls for some kind of prophetic response.

What are we going to do? What is the prophetic person going to do? . . .

One of the central issues in the prophetic life is that a person rocks the boat, not by telling slaves to be free, but by telling people who think they're free that they're slaves. . . .

If we're going to live up to our prophetic vocation, we have to realize that, whether we're revolutionary or not, we have to be radical enough to dissent from what is basically a totalitarian society. And we're in it. It's not a society that's coming, it is here."¹⁰⁹

More recently, Cornel West has emphasized the importance of prophetic action within the political realm. He asks, for example, "Can prophetic religion, in all of its various forms, mobilize people, generate levels of righteous indignation against injustice—not raw rage at persons, not ad hominem attacks—can we put pressure on President Obama? He's listening to technocratic elites in his economic team who have never had any serious concern with poor people and working people."¹¹⁰

Conclusion

Political wisdom is a type of practical wisdom. Both set out to reason, deliberate, feel, and act well in particular situations so as to bring about good results. In politics the results should contribute to the common good. Following Aristotle, George Washington, and others, I have stressed the importance of exercising and properly balancing virtues and values in order to act wisely in the political sphere. Among those we have examined are realism and idealism (properly

¹⁰⁹ On Merton as a prophet, see, e. g. "Thomas Merton: A Prophet For The 21st Century," at <http://www.mertoncenter.org/ITMS/Seasonal/1995PresidentialAddress.pdf>; Merton, *Disputed Questions*, Mentor-Omega ed. (New York: New American Library, 1965), 171, 173; block quote from his *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 129-30, 133. I have written more on the influence of Soloviev on Day and Merton in my "Wisdom from Russia: The Perspectives of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton," at www.wisdompage.com/WisdomFromRussia.doc.

¹¹⁰ Cornel West, "Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Judith Butler et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 100.

balanced), love, compassion, empathy, humility, tolerance, a sense of humor, creativity, temperance, self-discipline, passion, courage, and a commitment to justice and freedom.

Exactly how one exercises political wisdom will depend on one's position, for example, president, senator, Supreme Court justice, or ordinary citizen. For political wisdom is about acting as well as deliberating. Moreover, acting effectively implies possessing the necessary skills. For a U. S. president, for example, communicating effectively and being a good judge of people will be an asset in exercising political wisdom. The average citizen demonstrates such wisdom primarily by supporting political measures and candidates which or who will best further the common good. Of course, determining how best to achieve that aim in any particular circumstance is complex and often passionately contested. The virtues of humility and tolerance are thus as important for the electorate as for officials because no one has a lock on truth. Politically wise people are truth-seekers, open-minded, and committed to rational dialogue.

Nevertheless, political wisdom sometimes also requires passion and pressure, as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Andrei Sakharov, and Nelson Mandela all demonstrated. In fact, among private citizens political wisdom often necessitates more pressure than bipartisanship, which is required more from wise politicians. In 1968, the year of maximum protests against the U. S. war in Vietnam and a year in which both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton declared that our system required a "prophetic response," one that he had earlier identified as one that works for "the destruction of the inequalities and oppressions dividing rich and poor." It is likely that if he were living today amidst the Occupy Wall Street Movement he would sympathize with many of its protests. As Max Weber indicated, political wisdom is not passionless, but passion should be balanced by a sense of responsibility and proportion—and, as we have seen, humility, rationality, and tolerance.