Reinhold Niebuhr and International Relations Theory

This is the first book in international relations theory entirely devoted to the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Focusing on the existential theology which lies at the basis of Reinhold Niebuhr’s theory of international politics, it highlights the ways in which Niebuhrian realism was not only profoundly theological, but also constituted a powerful existentialist reconfiguration of the Realist tradition going back to Saint Augustine.

Guilherme Marques Pedro offers an innovative account of Reinhold Niebuhr’s eclectic thought, branching out into politics, ethics, history, society and religion and laying out a conceptual framework through which his work, as much as the realist tradition of international political thought as a whole, can be read. The book calls for the need to revisit classic thinkers within IR theory with an eye to their interdisciplinary background and as a way to remind ourselves of the issues that were at stake within the field as it was growing in autonomy and diversity – issues which remain, regardless of its disciplinary development, at the core of IR’s concerns.

This book offers an important contribution to IR scholarship, revealing the great historical wealth, intellectual originality but also the limitations and paradoxes of one of the greatest American political thinkers of the twentieth century.

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   Cosmopolitanism as hospitality
   Gideon Baker

2 Social Justice, Global Dynamics
   Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives
   Edited by Ayelet Banai, Miriam Ronzoni and Christian Schemmel

3 Reinhold Niebuhr and International Relations Theory
   Realism beyond Thomas Hobbes
   Guilherme Marques Pedro
Reinhold Niebuhr and International Relations Theory
Realism beyond Thomas Hobbes

Guilherme Marques Pedro
To Francisca
who speaks not of God,
but of Stars.
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**Abbreviations**

Reinhold Niebuhr’s major books, as well as the titles of the anthologies of essays and other writings which he authored or edited, are abbreviated as indicated below. When quoted, the titles of single articles and essays, including those that were integrated in some of these collections, appear in full.

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td><em>Beyond Tragedy</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>CL</td>
<td><em>The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness</em></td>
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<td>CRPP</td>
<td><em>Christian Realism and Political Problems</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>DST</td>
<td><em>Discerning the Signs of Times</em></td>
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<td>FH</td>
<td><em>Faith and History</em></td>
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<td>FP</td>
<td><em>Faith and Politics</em></td>
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<td>GU</td>
<td><em>The Godly and the Ungodly</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>IAH</td>
<td><em>The Irony of American History</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ICE</td>
<td><em>The Interpretation of Christian Ethics</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LJ</td>
<td><em>Love and Justice</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>MM</td>
<td><em>Moral Man and Immoral Society</em></td>
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<td>MNC</td>
<td><em>Man’s Nature and His Communities</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NDM I &amp; II</td>
<td><em>The Nature and Destiny of Man (2 Vols)</em></td>
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<td>NE</td>
<td><em>Nations and Empires</em></td>
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<td>REE</td>
<td><em>Reflections on the End of an Era</em></td>
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<td>SDH</td>
<td><em>The Self and the Dramas of History</em></td>
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Reinhold Niebuhr’s social and political thought has not yet received the attention which his fundamental contribution to IR theory calls for. Surely, his religious and social views have been praised and critiqued both in academic circles and in more mainstream literature in America and Europe (Bell 2009: 9; Harries and Platten 2010). Most obviously, President Obama’s recent tribute to Niebuhr as his favourite philosopher has brought an increased attention to the mid-century American theologian (Harries in Harries and Platten 2010: 1). Nonetheless, Niebuhr remains an underestimated figure in political theory and especially in international relations theory. While one of the founding fathers of the realist tradition in IR, the likes of Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan and Kenneth Waltz have attracted far more attention than Niebuhr himself, in spite of their continuous appeal to his intellectual impact and foundational role. But the more recent revivalist waves of classical realism cannot go without an insightful return to Niebuhr’s Christian existentialism. In fact, if there is any figure that can be reinterpreted in ways that lead to a radical reconfiguration of the traditional readings of classical realism which are still predominant in IR scholarship, Niebuhr is that figure. The critical reappraisal of his legacy in terms of its contribution to political theory and IR is therefore urgent.

This book presents Reinhold Niebuhr’s political thought in ways that can contribute to contemporary international political theory and in that sense it does not pretend to be a merely descriptive account of his thinking and context. Most importantly, in advancing the notion of an ‘anarchical community’ to characterize Niebuhrian realism, I want to suggest that his theoretical project was, however unfinished, inspiring of new ways to look at international politics. They allow for a general reflection on the challenges which globalization, technology and science, and the increased interdependence between countries pose to democracy, international order and the human condition more broadly. As such, Niebuhr can and should be regarded as a major source of theoretical and political imagination, from both the viewpoint of his innovative description of international realities and the development of a normative horizon from within them. His ‘realism of distance’ allowed precisely for that delicate and tense balance between what the world is and what it should be (Castellin 2014).

Apart from this more general aim, this book also addresses some of the key concerns of the Realist tradition of political thought in ways that allow for a
Introduction

renewed understanding of the disciplinary history of IR and of its debt to Christian theology. Indeed, this makes the recovery of Reinhold Niebuhr’s social and political reflections so imperative today. As we gradually realize, many of Niebuhr’s concerns throughout the interwar and the post-war periods were not only constitutive of an important way of thinking about domestic and international politics – and of how they relate to each other – but they were also shared across various different philosophical schools both in IR scholarship and in the social sciences more generally. Above all, many of the themes and features of Niebuhr’s international political theory – as well as of his theological, ontological and ethical thinking – are as pressing now as they were then. Let me explain why this is the case.

Niebuhr’s Christian realism matters mostly because of the attention he paid to the relation between international anarchy and the world community. I present this conceptual relation as grounded in Niebuhr’s philosophical investigations which in turn sustain what I have called a Christian ‘existentialist realism’. This book’s suggestion of the ‘anarchical community’ as a theoretical model that expresses Niebuhr’s paradoxical view provides a way of approaching his intellectual path. This path starts with a gloomy characterization of international relations as anarchical, fraught with tragedy and sin, and ironically ends with the hopeful, albeit prudent, call for the need to seek a higher norm upon which a world community can be founded. It is hence through the triangulation between Christian theology, existentialist philosophy and realist political theory, that one gets a true sense of how Niebuhr’s synthesis was truly groundbreaking for both the disciplinary history of IR and the debates within it.

With this aim in mind, I have intentionally focused on Niebuhr’s existentialist insights as an important via media between his Christian background and his realist approach to international affairs. With the exception of Niebuhr’s adherence to Marxism and socialism, I tend to disagree with many Niebuhrian scholars about a fundamental difference between the young and the mature Niebuhr, even though he was far from a systematic thinker. All his writings show signs of a close connection with existentialist sources of one sort or the other and to the extent that this book is not an exhaustive account of his religious and social thought, I have decided not to follow a chronological order in the contextualization of his ideas or when reading most of his works. My concern here was rather with the creative ways in which Niebuhrian realism could be revisited with a view to establishing important bridges with contemporary audiences and theoretical strands.²

The traditional Christian concern with the themes of love, faith, community and destiny as much as Niebuhr’s focus on the realist tenets of human nature, fear, survival, power and self-interest will be filtered through his re-articulation of important theoretical insights which, this book argues, were either drawn from European continental philosophy or were anyway sufficiently suffused with the sort of romantic overtones and rhetorical strategies commonly associated with existentialist thinking. His engagement with such important realist thinkers as Saint Augustine or Thomas Hobbes, as much as his influence upon modern IR
scholars such as E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, will be interpreted here in light of his Christian-existentialist endeavour to merge immanentist philosophies with transcendental ones, which he owed greatly to the thought of Soren Kierkegaard. As we conclude, the overlap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ which became the favourite target of many realists when accusing liberal internationalism of a dangerous idealism was not straightforwardly targeted by Niebuhr. In fact, this book takes issue with Niebuhr’s paradoxical rejection of that tradition – the classical natural law tradition – which had accomplished precisely what he sought through the combination of Christian theology and existentialism: discerning the signs of God’s transcendence and of the law of love in the very immanence of human relations and power struggles.

It is important to note at this preliminary stage that by doing this I also seek to qualify Alastair Murray’s view that ‘there is essentially no tradition of thought capable of providing a basis on which to resolve’ inherent tensions within the realist tradition (1997: 47). I want to argue that there is indeed such a tradition. Far from reducing Niebuhrian thinking to Augustinian realism as Murray does, and even though I also account for the salience of Augustine, I point to the classic natural law tradition as an important gateway through which to critically assess the complexities and paradoxes which pervaded Niebuhr’s thinking as much as the realist tradition itself. I want to claim that the excesses of which Niebuhr accused Augustine – of being excessively realistic – as much as in Nietzsche or Kierkegaard – of conceding too much to naturalism – would have been better dealt by Niebuhr, had he not discarded the classic natural law tradition as hastily as he did. Furthermore, his views on such diverse topics as anxiety or the world community would have found a more sustained account in this tradition as well.

Many of the themes which this book deals with and on which Niebuhr focused in his theoretical and practical discussions can be approached from different perspectives and with distinct aims. Most obviously, many of them will appear to the reader as rather apolitical topics. Such themes as love, transcendence, death, care, fear or anxiety, which usually fashion as a concern for the ethical and ontological grounds of political reflection and social theorizing, seem not to figure in any of the dominant research agendas of IR scholarship or in any of its endless subfields. Certainly, they do not feature among so-called realist approaches. This book suggests, however, that they should, by following Niebuhr’s understanding that any system of political thought – indeed any sort of political reflection – must take into account the ontological grounds on which it stands as much as the ethical implications which it yields. It suggests this for one major reason: in direct opposition to many of the dominant schools of political thought – namely those of a Rawlsian sensibility – this book assumes that any political theory must acknowledge and delve into its own metaphysical underpinnings. Without doing so, it runs the risk of becoming totally overwhelmed by the linguistic and ontological prejudices of time and place while claiming to transcend them.

On the other hand, the plunge into the metaphysical intricacies and idiosyncrasies of Niebuhr’s political thought which this book undertakes does not
suggest in any way that his meta-political claims were not themselves politi-
cized. His metaphysics, as well as his moral and social thought, were politically
embedded. Indeed, Niebuhr was aware of the inevitable paradoxes of political
theorizing as much as of any way of thinking. He thought that while the human
being reveals an endless capacity to transcend politics – indeed to transcend
almost anything in theory – political and social power usually leaves its imprint
in those realms of action and thought in which they would appear less likely. My
emphasis on the topics of anxiety and love, fear and power, self and community
thus follows from Niebuhr’s own concern to spell out the ontological assumptions
and ethical presuppositions which underlie his political realism – and which,
however, allow for a limited glimpse of higher ethical and political possibilities.
These themes constitute the bulk of this book for they were the threshold of Nie-
buhr’s description of a human condition permanently oriented towards higher
ends and yet constantly falling short of their definite achievement.

Furthermore, by dealing with these ontological and ethical concerns first, this
book prepares the reader for the introduction of Niebuhr’s IR theory as grounded
in his vision of the world community. The world community consisted, in his
view, of both a possibility and an impossibility – or as he ironically put it, an
‘impossible possibility’. I suggest that it remains a valid point today still and I
claim that this understanding was derived from an existentialist take on the
notions of transcendental love and ontological anxiety, which culminate in the
construction of a critical account of the international realm as akin to an ‘anar-
chical community’. This carries important implications for the relation between
ethics and international politics which I also explore.

The recasting of Niebuhr’s political realism in light of his Christian existen-
tialism can thus help us to understand some of the past debates and intellectual
shifts within the history of IR and the realist tradition. As such, this book seeks
to contribute to the dialogue between realism and other traditions within IR
theory. More generally, it assumes that Niebuhr’s existentialist sensibility
allowed him to build meaningful bridges between idealism and realism, ontology
and theology, politics and ethics, reality and utopia, immanence and transcend-
ence, the domestic and the international sphere, individual and collective
behaviour. It also allowed Niebuhr to approach traditional IR themes – such as
human nature and political sovereignty, anarchy and order, power and survival,
and so on – in a refined and innovative way which set a new realist canon for
twentieth-century realism.

Structure and method

This book starts by revisiting Niebuhr’s critique of liberal idealism or utopianism
as a form of modern paganism. This will allow for a clear understanding of his
vindication of a realist worldview in Chapter 1, as well as an account of the over-
whelming influence of Augustine upon Niebuhr which I explore in Chapter 2. In
Chapter 3, I offer an account of Niebuhr’s departure from Hobbesian realism. His
tense relation to Hobbes will help us to understand, in a better light, why and
how Niebuhr resorted to the existentialist legacies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger which are the focus of Chapters 3 and 4. More specifically, I want to argue that Niebuhr’s realism can be read all the way through as an Augustinian-existentialist critique of classical and modern presuppositions – if not prejudices – regarding the constitution of human subjectivity as a rational, autonomous, all-powerful and godlike source of self-fulfilment, precisely the sort of self-reifying tendencies which are usually levelled against the realist tradition in IR.

With that in mind, I seek to tease out in full the implications of that critique so as to push further his philosophical assault on modern ideals of human nature and collective identity in ways that illumine the more subtle features of his realism, often obscured by the more canonical and narrow readings of the tradition. Chapter 5 thus ends this trajectory by pointing to the notion of the world community as an important instance of Niebuhr’s flirtation with Kantian international thought, in what appears as a retraction from too cynical an outlook upon international politics and the destiny of humankind. As I argue, this can indeed be combined with his existentialist account of human existence as anxiously pulled by the immanent desire for power and yet pressed by the transcendental imperative of love. These are the themes which delineate the focus of each chapter, as much as their overall sequence within the argumentative thread of the book.

Chapter 1 focuses on how Niebuhr’s life path and social concerns are reflected in his work and in what can at the end be presented as a very distinct and influential branch of the realist tradition – Christian realism. It also argues that Niebuhr’s opposition to idealism – from which his realism ensued – was an expected outcome of the context of political disillusion and international failure – even frustration – which confronted American society in the interwar and post-war periods. Niebuhrian realism can only be understood as set against the background of Wilsonian liberalism – but I make the claim that this does not mean that Niebuhr rejected all of its aspects, nor, more specifically, the very idealism that stood at the core of Wilsonianism. I return to this subject many times throughout the book but it is only in the last chapter that I develop a full engagement with Niebuhr’s international thought. Chapter 1 thus serves the overall purpose of setting out the major themes and discussions which allow us to go deeper into the theological, ontological and ethical aspects of Niebuhr’s political thought.

In Chapter 2 I develop a more comprehensive account of Niebuhr’s realism, deeply influenced as it was by the writings of Augustine and the Christian tradition more generally. I also explore further Niebuhr’s critique of political idolatry which I had already introduced with regard to Woodrow Wilson. I argue that Realism can be essentially defined as a tradition specifically concerned with the problem of collective pride as grounded on the deification of sovereign states, with all the implications that Niebuhr foresaw in that modern agenda. In this regard, Niebuhr was not far from the so-called secularization theorists of his time, which led him in part to adhere to a sort of hermeneutical and methodological suspicion towards political intentions of universal scope, an attitude in
which he admitted being influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. At this stage, Niebuhrian realism reveals its concern not only with power politics but also with the power of language to disguise politics under a pretentious and moralist discourse, the idealism of which may reveal even more tragic outcomes.

Following this, Chapter 3 looks at the ways in which Niebuhr was led to distance himself from the political realism of Thomas Hobbes, while still claiming the realist label for himself. This was perhaps the most revealing stage of Niebuhr’s intellectual trajectory. It allows us to understand the differences between Niebuhr’s realism and the more widespread version of Hobbes. By looking in particular at the notion of the fear of death, this chapter seeks to tease out the implications for Niebuhr’s realism of his demarcation from Hobbes which was inspired by his Augustinianism as much as by his existentialist recasting of more modern thinkers. The fear of death appears as both a theological and an ontological theme which allows Niebuhr to redeliver realism to an understanding of God and hence to open it up to the necessary reconsideration of human freedom and transcendence which, in Niebuhr’s view, had been seriously compromised by Hobbes’ deterministic naturalism. But while Niebuhr’s critique of Hobbes’ secularization of human nature could send him back to a more classical understanding of ‘nature’ – such as that espoused by the medieval natural law tradition – he adopts instead a modern existentialist framework, however reminiscent of Augustine.

In this context, I present Niebuhr’s realism as severely deflecting Hobbes’ understanding of the fear of death, which clears the way for an account of anxiety and love in Chapter 4 where Niebuhr’s departure from Hobbesian realism becomes evident. Chapter 5 thus describes Niebuhr’s views on the human condition as one caught in a state of anxiety which, in turn, reveals the fundamental ethical imperative of love. The law of love consists of the highest form of communion which, however, is never fully accomplished due to the corrupting effect of anxiety upon human achievement. Niebuhr was aware that these issues had been the central concern of Soren Kierkegaard and his reliance on the writings of the Danish philosopher attest to the central argument of this book. I conclude Chapter 4 by showing how the notions of love and anxiety, when approached in an existential manner, can help to reinstate the idea of God as an important rhetorical device that can enact social resistance, political dissent and philosophical critique without compromising the traditional concerns for democracy, international order and the possibility of a larger and more just political community.

The tensions between ontology and ethics which Niebuhr deals with in his writings are also manifest in the tensions, previously highlighted in Chapter 1, between God and ‘man’, religious transcendence and immanent power, morality and politics. Hence, Chapter 4 approaches the theme of power as a central tenet of Niebuhr’s political thought, of the realist tradition and hence of IR scholarship more broadly. Indeed, we are led to reconsider what I claim to be the Nietzschean foundation of Niebuhr’s account of moral history and of the
overwhelming impact of power and pride – of the will-to-power – upon the ethical and the apparently noble conducts of individuals and of groups. This chapter accounts for Niebuhr’s resort to the realist tenets of power and survival to depict the international realm as fraught with those power struggles that come to constitute international anarchy as the fruitful ground of an anxious demand for a world community.

Finally, Chapter 5 confronts Niebuhr’s seeming cynical emphasis on power, tragedy and anxiety with his hidden and strategic suggestion of a utopian and normative backdrop to the discourse of anarchy. This chapter offers an image of Niebuhr’s realism in which his Augustinian pessimism is set along a prudent existentialism of hope towards moral progress and collective fulfilment in a world community. In this context, I suggest that the entire edifice of Niebuhr’s realist international political theory can be best described according to the theoretical model of an ‘anarchical community’, a community of universal meaning where the very notion of anarchy is deployed in teleological fashion to instil a foundationalist search for a renewed world order.

For the remainder of this introduction I would like to briefly set out the methodology which frames my approach to the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr as well as my attempt to draw from it those insights which appeared as both the most relevant for political theorizing and the most interesting contribution to contemporary IR theory. Indeed, this book assumes that Niebuhr’s approach to many of the themes which I have laid about above was not only innovative and compelling in many different ways, but provides a totally different image of the history of the field of international politics and of the role of the realist tradition in it. I deal with these aspects in Chapter 4 and in the conclusion, but it is important to note, at this preliminary stage, that Niebuhr’s rather loose approach to intellectual history might be worth appropriating as a useful methodological tool for the study of his own ideas, intellectual trajectories and rhetorical strategies.

In general, this book follows Niebuhr’s own attempt to use intellectual history as a means to revisit the metaphysical premises and ontological assumptions which underpin social theories and political practices. By approaching and using Niebuhr’s ideas in this way, this book does not purport to have definitely found the real or intended meaning of each single concept, idea or argument of his. Instead, I have chosen to revisit his work because of its potential contribution to contemporary debates in IR. In this sense, I have sought to tentatively dig out the potential hidden meanings of important signifiers or of other concepts that do not feature as central in most accounts of his thought nor appear, in a more superficial reading, as the more visible notions of Christian realism. Also in this regard I follow the Wittgensteinian suggestion that the performance of certain roles and functions by certain ideas or concepts in particular traditions or ‘language games’ is far more important than any attempt to dig out an essential meaning, since such digging is itself constitutive of a semantic essentialization which is more intended by the interpreter than the author whose ideas are being approached (Skinner 2002: 2). However, I would like to add to this remark the
important caveat that, contrary to the specific periods or contexts in which a specific set of language games occurred, Niebuhr’s language game, if one can refer to it in this way, is still going on and so is the realist conversation about what he could have meant and what his use still is.

Hence, this book shows that Niebuhr’s ideas are still relevant and will continue to be for quite some time. However unusual the focus of this book on Niebuhr’s existential insights might appear to those readers who are familiar with his thinking, reading Niebuhr in this light is, this book argues, what allows his ideas to resist common-held views regarding both the history of the realist tradition and the taken-for-granted narratives about the birth of IR as a social science and an academic field in its own right. Making an author useful in this way is precisely what should concern intellectual history, in its capacity to make the past speak to present and future generations. Moreover, this also contributes, even if indirectly, to establish important bridges between different approaches and ideational categories within IR scholarship, by bringing forth those philosophical sources of Niebuhrian realism which nowadays usually feature as the bedrocks of anti-realism – that is, of critical theory, constructivism and even postmodernism. I side with Gerald Holden’s view that ‘we need to appreciate that IR’s intra-disciplinary debate has itself been influenced by broader intellectual-historical and political factors’ (2002: 255).

For the greater part of this study I have adopted what, following Gadamer and others, I loosely designate as a hermeneutical approach (Baumann 1978; Gadamer 2008; Palmer 1969; Skinner 2002). By hermeneutics I mean to place past authors within a dialogical horizon that can accommodate both the necessary contextualization of meanings and concepts, and the need to place them in dialogue with present readers and writers. For why should we revisit history if it were not for the sake of a dialogue between past and present? Hence, instead of looking for any inherent truthfulness or stable meaning in Niebuhr’s concepts – and, more importantly, instead of deriving particular meanings from Niebuhr’s intention to mean this or that – I want to tease out their explanatory potential so to shed light on those discussions, themes or concerns which might compel many to return to Niebuhr today or read him for the first time. By doing this, I purposefully leave open the potential of each of Niebuhr’s concepts or ideas to renew their meaning in ways yet unforeseeable from any available interpretative grid. This will hopefully counter any pretension of disciplinary historians to close down the semantic horizons of the realist tradition, opening it up instead to the future as much as to the past.

My approach to intellectual history is not indifferent to Niebuhr’s own. It would obviously be unwise to draw an interpretative method from the work that constitutes the object of this study – for that would mean to favour, from the beginning, a work from which I am supposed to distance myself critically. However, one cannot ignore that one of Niebuhr’s favourite topics was precisely that human capacity for demarcation and ‘transcendence’ that any human being reveals toward any object (be that a rock, a speech or a person). When committing myself to the task of historicizing Niebuhr’s ideas, it becomes necessary to
reflect upon the level of engagement and the level of disengagement that is required from the intellectual historian. I understand the task of a history of ideas to be that of balancing out the ‘historical’ with the ‘ideational’. While the intellectual historian attempts to distance himself from the concepts and ideas he is seeking to contextualize, this distancing requires certain concepts to be left uncontextualized while others are scrutinized, placed and dissected. Hence, this book assumes that intellectual history is neither about the study of the ethereal permanence and ideational indifference of ideas to history, culture and social realities; nor about the study of how they are permanently caught in those contexts in which they originated. Rather, intellectual history is about a balance between the immanence of ideas and the very transcendent leap that allows us to consider them so. We can only historicize them by attaining to a specific set of concepts (‘context’, ‘situation’, ‘circumstance’, ‘time’, ‘period’ and so on) the very contextualization of which must be temporarily suspended. This means, in turn, that no contextualizing effort is ever complete for in each step that one takes in attempting to capture an idea by looking at its productive surroundings, one places oneself in a plane that is necessarily out of context (Holden 2002).

This paradoxical situation was itself a subject of enquiry for Niebuhr and even for Heidegger himself, who kept on stressing the existential swing between immanence and transcendence as the culprit of a being who is neither here nor there – a theme which I explore further in Chapter 3.

Hence, intellectual history must do justice to the very label that gives name to it: the intellectual and the historical are mutually constitutive. Historical practices and events produce certain outcomes on the way we think as much as the way we think is productive of history – at least to some degree. With this in mind, Niebuhr’s focus on transcendence as the ultimate definitional element of humanity accurately grasps the paradox in which any ‘intellectual historian’ finds himself or herself: any history is an intellectual enterprise as much as any intellect is a product of history. However, the mere acknowledgement that ideas are constituted by historical occurrences and are, in return, constitutive of them is still highly insufficient to withstand the challenges that a proper history of ideas yields, let alone hiding the controversies that arise from the study of the link between ideas and practices. We therefore need to look deeper. Indeed, the problem that a history of philosophical ideas poses can be stated as follows: to what extent can history find its way through philosophy and to what extent can philosophy find its way through history? To put it in simple terms, how are we to respect the potential of an idea to transcend history (at least partially) while remaining loyal to the task of historicizing it? Is it not the case that any historical contextualization necessarily implies the neutralization of the human capacity to think above history and to make history itself an object of philosophical enquiry?

The obvious answer to these questions would be that it depends on what conception of intellectual history we adopt. This book departs from the traditional and yet still quite predominant approach of Arthur Lovejoy for whom, as Quentin Skinner has eloquently put it,
the task of the historian of ideas is to study and interpret a canon of classic texts. The value of writing this kind of history stems from the fact that the classic texts in moral, political, religious and other such modes of thought contain a ‘dateless wisdom’ in the form of ‘universal ideas’. As a result, we can hope to learn and benefit directly from investigating these ‘timeless elements’, since they possess a perennial relevance. This in turn suggests that the best way to approach these texts must be to concentrate on what each of them says about each of the ‘fundamental concepts’ and ‘abiding questions’ of morality, politics, religion, social life. We must be ready, in other words, to read each of the classic text ‘as though it were written by a contemporary’.

(2002: 57)

Indeed the temptation of contemporary realists to treat a Niebuhr or a Morgenthau as contemporary thinkers pervades all IR, and so do the anachronistic tendencies to level them with contemporary debates as if they were ‘alive and well, and working just down the corridor’ (1998: 38). This book claims instead that Niebuhr must be reread not only because his contribution is important for contemporary debates, but also because (1) it explains a lot of the disciplinary history of international relations theory and of the realist tradition more specifically, and (2) it embodies much of the intellectual mood of the interwar years and can hence inform us of the context in which Niebuhr and other writers were placed. With particular regard to the label of realism I follow Skinner for the most part, in claiming that the label emerges as a speech-act against liberal idealism and can only be understood as a rhetorical device to accommodate not an opposing view to the liberal tradition, but rather the political action of selecting within that tradition, those elements of tragedy, paradox and ambivalence which were worth preserving and exploring further – in the case of Niebuhr, with recourse to existentialism mostly. Like him, I rely on the Austinian view that linguistic locutions are necessarily performative and that Niebuhr was doing something when applying labels to several bodies of theories, rather than just identifying possible meanings (Skinner 2002).

But it is one thing to say that this is what intellectual history should unveil – the doing of an idea as it were; it is another to be able to achieve that sort of contextualization. As I conclude below, the task of intellectual history understood in this Skinnerian fashion remains quite unachievable in spite of the interest of what it promises. I thus attempt to adopt a methodology that sits in between Skinner’s and Lovejoy’s approach: intellectual history can indeed be both a genealogical enquiry into the speech-act nature of concepts and value some of the core ideas of a tradition as something more than mere objects of an author’s manipulative intentionality. As Mark Bevir claims:

We cannot justify historical knowledge either by reference to a method we used to reach it or by tests against pure facts designed to identify true theories or to exclude false ones. Instead, we must develop an anthropological
epistemology based on appeals to shared facts, a critical attitude, and the possibility of comparing rival webs of theories. Once we do this, we can relate our concept of objectivity to truth by means of an anthropological turn that appeals to the nature of our being in the world.

(2000: 8)

Hence, the history of political ideas cannot be understood simply as a mere contextualization of ideas. It is much more than that. It is a way of doing history because it acknowledges the limitation of philosophical discourse along Skinnerian lines. But it is also a way of doing political philosophy of the sort that Quentin Skinner does. To be able to contextualize a philosophical system or an author would mean to assume that the content-matter – the ‘unit-idea’ in Lovejoy’s sense – can be put into a form (‘history’, ‘time’, ‘context’). But this form is itself a concept, just as much idealized or, as John Milbank cleverly argued, ‘etherealised’, by means of an intellectual instrument which we call ‘contextualisation’ (Milbank 2005: 394). As Holden observes:

While not disputing the right of ‘critical’ authors to work in this spirit if they wish to do so, I contend that the ‘critical’ project or projects are themselves part of intellectual history, and not a privileged vantage point from which IR’s disciplinary history can be written. This means that ‘critical IR’ itself needs to be analysed and contextualised.

(2002: 255)

Surely, nothing could be more misleading then placing oneself outside of contextualization when contextualizing others. For the ideas that fill in the form ‘context’ cannot go without the very idea of context. Hence, ideas are of such a nature that they ultimately evade their context. In the understanding of intellectual history adopted here, the ‘intellectual’ takes over the ‘historical’ so to shape it in ways which are however not amenable to any form of Hegelian idealism in which the ideal realm of reason is able to master history. What happens is rather that both ideas and their practical context are co-constituted as two interlocking realities. This happens for the reasons which I now turn to.

First, ideas can be seen indeed as interlocked with actual (even material) facts – as in the now habitual analysis of Hobbes’s metaphor of the ‘state of nature’ as the idealtional reproduction of the historical background of the English civil war. Though that event might explain much of his thought, it does not explain why we read Hobbes today. Certainly it is not because we are interested in the English Civil War. The possibility that his ideas were an offshoot of the social and political realities of his time offers no answer whatsoever as to why the present chooses the past in the way it does. Indeed, we choose or are led to read a particular author, not because history lives on in their thinking and writing – even though that can happen too – but mostly because we start from the premise that Hobbes’ thinking had a major impact upon the history of the state as both a theoretical construct and a social reality. It is in the sense that his ideas – if we
assume that ideas can pertain to anyone in this way – were eventually fed back into reality so as to constitute it that we can claim, especially in regard to the modern developments of the sovereign state, that Hobbes has been a product of history and now stands as an important reference in common narratives of political thought under the banner of his name, the title of his major work or even under such descriptive categories as ‘Hobbesianism’ or ‘Hobbism’. Indeed, if history produced ‘Hobbes’ it can also be claimed that Hobbes lends itself to various narratives of Western history. In this sense, this book wants to remain open to the possibility that we study ideas not because they are a product of history – although they are that as well – but, more importantly, because they have grown to condition history itself. And although there is no consensus as to ‘how’ this happens, there is a fair amount of consensus that it does (Giddens 1984: xxxiii). For we would never come across some ideas were it not for their real effect upon history.

But the intellectual historian is confronted with yet another dilemma. He or she is conscious of the duty to advise against misinterpretations along the line that what we understand from a text ‘today’ is not what the author meant ‘in his own time.’ He or she then proceeds to seek, in the author’s intellectual context, those criteria that allow for his or her thinking to be interpreted in ‘his or her own terms’. Again, this tells us nothing as to why some authors have come to be regarded as important and remain so. It might even be the case that an author is taken as central precisely because it has been ‘misinterpreted’ over the years, or has been made accountable for a meaning and an intention which were never his or hers. Normally, the intellectual historian would then move on to deconstruct such misconceived authorship. But if the idea that has been misattributed to that particular author still holds as relevant (for whatever reasons and purposes) then certainly it matters less if it was that particular author who came up with it or not. Rather, this attests to the fact that ideas can hardly be owned in this way and that their relevance, as much as their impact upon real practices and actual conducts in society, stems from the way they have been depersonalized from the beginning. Moreover, this might also suggest that the reason why we find it so hard to bring some ideas under some form of authorship is that they are important as ideas in themselves, with their own history, structure and autonomy vis-à-vis whoever wrote them down.3

Another challenge that confronts contemporary intellectual history is that of an author’s historical and temporal ‘representativeness’.4 Some trends of intellectual history take ideas to be representative of their own time but find it hard to admit that the reason why we study those ideas – and not others – is precisely because they are also partly representative of our own time – that is, of the time of the interpreter. Again, the reason why we read Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant is possibly because in some way they speak to us and therefore they are representative of a time which is not their own: they have transcended their period. In turn, it is not a coincidence that the contextualization of classical authors is usually oriented towards the search for those historical residues in their writings that can justify some identification with their period (Holden 2002). And surely
this is a worthy endeavour if and when it allows for a better understanding of the relevance of their thoughts for today and for the future. To be sure, we cannot deny that there are contextual elements in all thinking. But these aspects – usually related to their personal life, professional career and political engagement – make authors hostage of the spider web of their own context. The decision to prioritize and select those contextual elements over those aspects that allowed a particular author to abstract from his or her context so as to become readable to us is ultimately a decision of the interpreter. But the interpreter is just as within history as its object and must deserve as much contextualization as the one he develops (Holden 2002). We should therefore be more open to the possibility that what defines a classic author is not the fact that it is representative of its period but that he or she speaks to the future and hence goes beyond his or her present circumstances in ways that deserve as much attention as the more contextual aspects. In short, an author’s worth might be in the very capacity to be unrepresentative of a particular period or place, and not the contrary (Holden 2002).

The timeframes that intellectual historians use must hence privilege a chronology that stands outside the chronology of the authors’ lives and focuses on the historical path of the ideas as relatively autonomous bodies – *with a life of their own* – and which are part of very diffuse and complex processes of socialization, transmission and distortion, in which the author’s intentionality gets lost. Indeed, it is only from a retrospective point of view that the author is recalled to its function as a *decisive* and *willing* actor, so to suit the interpretative purposes of the intellectual historian (Holden 2002). This purpose has to do with his priority to materialize or circumscribe a particular set of ideas and meanings in a mind and under a name, so to turn the author into a valid social actor, whose intentionality becomes a legitimate source of truth and significance. This suggests, in turn, that intellectual history would do better in taking into consideration the different cultures of reception of a text, a theory or an idea and how they are strictly connected to the dominant intellectual moods of diverse audiences – an effort which I have partly developed, albeit in a limited way, by looking at how Niebuhrian realism can address various issues which lie at the core of other IR traditions, let alone of other fields in the social sciences.

Realistically, this seems an impossible task since it requires the study of the reader as well as of the reading process itself as a means for the ‘contextualization of the contextualizer’ (Holden 2002; Iser 2005: 57–69). This impossibility does not, however, stop us from concluding that intellectual history must acknowledge that what makes a text a ‘classic’ is the fact that it has been read, rather than written, in very different and historically important ways, some of which have, for reasons that which must be studied, become dominant. The emphasis on the reader should point in the direction of our need to study the transmission, the appropriation and the misappropriation of ideas, their depersonalization as well as materialization in the ontological unit of the ‘author’, rather than assuming from the start their possession and creation by him or her. We should therefore ask how certain ideas, spelled out and received as they are
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(and not only in a textual format), come to constitute the author’s subjectivity from the point of view of the reader but also empower the interpreter to create or at least recreate ideas making him the focal point of a tradition as well as of political theory itself (Holden 2002; Iser 2005). I hence follow Michael Williams’ own debt to hermeneutics when he claims that:

while a text may be multivocal, it is not omnivocal: the relationship between reader and text requires a degree of respect and indebtedness toward the text itself, however much the reader may be directed by his or her own interests. But this distance and multivocality means that any text is subject to contrary readings.

(2005: 15)

In fact, along with Skinner’s intention to revisit past authors with a view to ‘so far as possible, see things their way’ I want to suggest that in seeing things through his or her own eyes the intellectual historian, philosopher, theorist or interpreter is never just using his or her own devices either (2002: 3). The intellectual historian is always expected to have specific theoretical presuppositions, if not even inbuilt traditions, and a certain familiarity with specific themes, contexts and authors, which will always cause him or her to see things beyond their own way.

I thus side with Quentin Skinner’s attempt to reformulate intellectual history in such a way as to be able to incorporate various contributions from various interpretative and philosophical schools – from the post-analytical philosophy of language to continental hermeneutics to postmodernism. His appears undoubtedly as the most complete effort to come to a consensus regarding both the task and the methodology employed. Contrary to what Robert Lamb claims, it seems to me that he succeeds in displacing the traditional naive focus on ideas as ethereal phenomena whose meaning floats above time and history, without relapsing into the ‘contextualism’ that encapsulates the potential uses of concepts in overdetermined bubbles of meaning and action (Lamb 2009). This is so as long as Quentin Skinner is willing to admit that not just the specific ideas of particular authors, but also their interpretation by someone, is liable to constitute a speech-act just as well.

Hence, in spite of my overall sympathy to the Skinnerian approach, and of its laudable breakthrough in the method of the history of ideas in the Anglophone world, I wonder to what extent it brings any novel contribution to the continental hermeneutical tradition as represented by such names as Gadamer or Ricoeur (Gadamer 2008; Scott-Bauman 2009). I follow Skinner’s point that what is at stake in any re-reading of past traditions is

to elucidate concepts not by focusing on the supposed ‘meanings’ of the terms we use to express them, but rather by asking what can be done with them and by examining their relationship to each other and to broader networks of beliefs.

(2002: 4)
Skinner goes on to conclude that ‘the question of what it is rational to believe depends in large measure on the nature of our other beliefs’, that is, of the beliefs of the interpreter and of his capacity to withhold them or to bring them to bear upon what he is reading or studying (2002: 4). But after having claimed this, Skinner still wants to emphasize that the intentions and motives of authors actually matter more than his (sort-of) hermeneutical approach would concede. For seldom in his writings is there any concern to account for the intentions of readers and audiences in constituting the meanings which become crystallized in history, and especially in political history independently of the intentions of their specific authors. Skinner’s stress on intentionality seems to betray the presupposition of consciousness or of will in the creative process of political theorizing, a presupposition which assumes that authors are always intentional and that their intentions are discernible by us through their texts. Regardless of the actual possibility of unveiling such authorial intentionality – even when a supposed intention is clearly stated by the author – it is important to clarify Skinner’s emphasis on this matter has to do with his very subtle point – which many seem to miss – that by revealing an author’s intentionality Skinner does not want to discover a specific meaning; rather, he wishes to understand some of the motives and beliefs which have led an author to use a certain word or concept in the ways he or she did, precisely because the performance of a concept has not only to do with its variable and unstable meanings it inspires, but also with what they actually do in being meant the way they are (2002: 105). While the employment of the notion of speech-acts to understand concepts seems useful, it also appears to reify even more the author in his or her will to mean and do this or that.

Having safeguarded Skinner from an abusive association with more conservative traditions of textual interpretation, it seems nonetheless fair to say that while pretending to distance himself from the analytical approach to the history of ideas – by claiming, in a rather simplistic manner, the Nietzschean legacy of historical genealogy or even some odd affinities with Foucault’s method – Skinner still wants to cling on to the idea that the project of an intellectual history should consist of attempting to recreate, as much as one possibly can, the view of the author who is being studied and the usages of the concepts and words which he resorted to. I want to argue that, as laudable as this enterprise might seem – and as utopian as any worthwhile project is – one wonders about the margin that the Skinnerian method allows for regarding the possible recreation of concepts and meanings once they have been associated with a particular tradition or author and must now carry such historical and semantic burden. Quentin Skinner is certainly aware that in tracing the specific content or usage of a signifier to a particular author’s view one must be careful not to kill the meaning of a concept or idea in a way which closes it off from further reinterpretations in the future. Hence, Skinner’s middle-ground between the excesses of too loose an interpretation and a strict contextualism is itself deserving of a careful interpretation as one can find many ways to be a Skinnerian. I have found my own in attempting to balance Niebuhr’s use of certain concepts with my own
capacity to recreate them and stir them in a direction which I think can appeal to contemporary audiences while maintaining a significant bond with Niebuhr’s intended meaning and more broadly with his mindset and his time. In doing this I am aware that the degree of authorship that interpretation requires, means to settle for the creative role that any interpreter performs when attempting to see what Niebuhr saw in his way – but with my own eyes.

Notes

1 There is not one single book in the English-speaking IR scholarship devoted exclusively to Niebuhr’s thought. Indeed, the religious overtones of his thinking and the permanent recourse to biblical jargon and mythological imagination made it difficult for his ideas to find their way through to the highly secularized audiences of IR theory, especially as the realist tradition, due mostly to the influence of Hobbes and of Morgenthau later, left its theological backbone in the closet, perhaps for the sake of scientific respectability.

2 I believe that to be necessary if one wants to produce a biographical, or anyway an exhaustive and descriptive account of the author and of his ideas. However, for the purpose of highlighting his contribution to IR theory and establish Niebuhrian realism as a new conceptual framework from which new ideas can emerge, I thought that the focus on a hidden aspect of his realism – precisely his Christian existentialism – indeed empowers the sort of creative research that, in turn, reveals the true relevance of Niebuhr for today.

3 I agree with Mark Bevir when he claims that ideas must hold some degree of autonomy even vis-à-vis their ‘authors’ so to speak. The same idea can give rise to several speech-acts, and to study ideas strictly from the viewpoint of their agential power or effect can be misleading. I would not, however, go as far as to claim they are ‘sovereign’ as Robert Lamb has recently argued. The fact that I cannot establish a direct correlation between concepts and their use or practical meaning, does not mean that they obtain without usage. For a highly informed debate on these matters see Bevir 2000 and Lamb 2009.

4 If modern philosophical discourses succeed more and more because they are able to anticipate, by the employment of various strategic discourses and rhetorical artifices, the reception of the audience, then this also means that the status of authorship comes more from the audience than from the author himself (Iser 2005: 57–69). In turn, this suggests that the writer’s freedom is less able to resist the structuring effect of the readers’ retrospective interpretation – or at least that he must be better prepared for the posterior constraints that future interpretations might impose upon initially intended meanings. If a text is given meaning by the way in which it is read rather than by the way in which it is written this certainly means that the intellectual historian must be as much concerned with the reception of ideas as with their production, since they are both even parts in the dialogical constitution of a meaning, of a paradigm and, more generally, of symbolic regimes of truth.
Could it be that we are most religious partly in consequence of being the most secular culture?¹

(Reinhold Niebuhr 1958)

Niebuhr’s recourse to the ‘realist’ label pervaded his entire work since the publication of his first acclaimed book, Moral Man and Immoral Society, in 1932. The occasional criticism levelled against what he saw as a ‘too consistent political realism’ clearly shows that this was an internal critique, and that he saw himself as a political realist of sorts. His form of realism can only be understood vis-à-vis his broader critique of liberal idealism and, more specifically, in view of his intellectual move against those liberals who sought to extend a particular understanding of the internal functioning of domestic societies onto the world scale, such as the American president Woodrow Wilson (Andersen 2007; Bucklin 2001; Butler 1997; McWilliams 1962). Before that, however, Niebuhrian realism was essentially a theological move against recent American religious thinking which was growing increasingly liberal in its tendency to sanction human action and individual achievement with the sort of divine immanence that progressive liberals felt exceptionally endowed by. In this regard, realism started as a theological movement, internal to American protestant theology. Niebuhr was aligned with the departure that many American theologians felt compelled to embrace against liberal protestantism (Warren 1997: 35–55). The major point of contention between Niebuhr and liberal utopians was the perceived collective self-image which lay at the core of the American liberal tradition. This self-image relied, in Niebuhr’s view, on a deep essentialization and sanctification of the rational capacity of human beings to master their nature and their destiny. The liberal and rationalist idealization of the self thus became the central target of Niebuhr’s criticism and can be read as the point of departure of his Christian-existentialist reconstruction of the realist tradition, with Augustine and Hobbes as its major representatives.

This chapter portrays Niebuhr’s realism essentially as a critique of liberalism – and especially of the liberal internationalism of Woodrow Wilson. Liberalism, in its many incarnations, constituted Niebuhr’s intellectual and political
environment, and it was against its backdrop that his thought unfolded in the direction and with the shape which this book is set to recount. As far as Niebuhr’s rhetorical strategy is concerned, I argue that it was by labelling particular forms of liberalism as utopian and idealistic that Niebuhr was able to substantiate the term ‘realism’ in ways that could appeal to his audience without the need to specify what exactly the term referred to. In fact, the notion of realism remains so vague throughout Niebuhr’s writings that he could claim his own assessment of realism to be, in a way, a critique of realism too.

Naturally, in this respect, Niebuhr’s was not an original strategy. But in his particular take on the tradition, the intellectual disposition deemed ‘realistic’, gains greater salience due to its dialectical opposition to liberal rationalists and utopians. This opposition was semantically engineered for purposes of intellectual demarcation, but carried nonetheless the philosophical weight of what it aspired to be and never really became: a substantive signifier with a positive meaning and a clear epistemological jurisdiction. Within this overall strategy, Niebuhr’s critique of Wilsonianism, as well as his departure from Hobbes, was led by his profound belief that in both extremes of the ideational and philosophical spectrum of modern politics – from liberal idealism to realist cynicism – lay a deep, albeit subconscious, sublimation of the human ego and of its modern powers. This idealizing move ran parallel to capitalism as much as to communism, and had, in Niebuhr’s view, to be ‘tamed’ in order to safeguard the possibility of democracy against the backdrop of modern tyrannies and new religions. We will look in particular at Niebuhr’s criticisms of one historical figure who has been more responsible for the political internationalization of liberalism: Woodrow Wilson. From the point of view of Niebuhr’s critique of the liberal discourses which sought to analogize domestic societies with the international realm, an overview of his critique of Wilsonianism seems all the more appropriate given that Wilson was not only an intellectual figure of some repute but, above all, a political protagonist of the greatest impact, both domestically and internationally. Before doing that, however, some biographical note on Reinhold Niebuhr is in order if we want to understand why Niebuhr came to oppose liberalism – in both its internationalist and capitalist variants – in the first place.

**Who was Reinhold Niebuhr?**

Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the most influential American theologians between the two world wars, perhaps along with his brother Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962). He was born to German parents in 1892 in Wright City, Missouri. His father was a minister of the Evangelical Synod of North America, an inter-denominational church that inherited both the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions of Germany, and in which he was educated in the German language. Niebuhr’s early education was strongly protestant. After college, Niebuhr went to Yale Divinity School, an experience which he did not particularly enjoy – apparently he sounded too German and too Midwestern for the likes of the Yale elites (Fox 1985). He decided, after finishing his master’s in theology, not to move up the
academic ladder, and most of his life would be spent travelling through America as a protestant preacher, mostly as a pastor in the very industrialized Detroit, between 1915 and 1928. Detroit was a shocking experience – even though he clearly enjoyed being what he called a ‘circuit rider’ as a preacher and later as an academic (Schlesinger 2001: 190). There he became acquainted with the conflicts and miseries of an over-industrialized urban society and what he saw as the frenetic mechanization and moral degeneration of social relations caused by capitalism:

it was the then distant war so much as the social realities in Detroit which undermined my youthful optimism. My first interest was not so much to challenge the reigning laissez-faire philosophy of the community as to ‘debunk’ the moral pretensions of Henry Ford, whose five-dollar-a-day wage gave him a world-wide reputation for generosity. I happened to know that some of his workers had an inadequate annual wage, whatever the pretensions of the daily wage may have been. Many of them lost their homes in the enforced vacations, which became longer and longer until the popular demand for the old Model T suddenly subsided, and forced a layoff of almost a year for ‘retooling’.


As he recounts in his early diary Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, published as early as 1929, it was in this context that he grew sympathetic to the Social Gospel movement and, for some time, he was a mild supporter of Marxism (Bullert 2002). This early publication, as well as his first book, entitled Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927), revealed a strong tension between his social concerns and democratic ideals and a strong hesitation between Marxism and liberalism, usually tempered by his Christian beliefs. Later he would join the Union Theological Seminary in New York to teach Christian social ethics, followed by an academic position at Columbia University until 1960 when he retired and his health begun to weaken until his death in 1971. Long before America would face the Great Depression in the early 1930s, Niebuhr had already become very sceptical of the liberal utopia that pervaded American economy, culture and religion:

the war was dissipating the other illusions of the nineteenth century world view which informed American Christianity. But I was influenced in my disillusionment more by local than by international experience. In my parish duties I found that the simple idealism which the classical faith had evaporated was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as it was the complex social issues of an industrial city.


Politically, as well as internationally, America’s faith in the innate virtue of capitalism was accompanied by the understanding, epitomized in Wilsonianism,
that the generosity and solidarity of person-to-person relations could be transposed to relations between countries and communities. This would become a key issue in Niebuhr’s theory of international politics – and one that runs through his entire work, appearing more explicitly in his major works: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941; 1943) and *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness* (1945). In fact, all of Niebuhr’s writings manifest a dualistic approach to various areas of thought and action, from philosophy to politics, theology to ethics, economics to science and technology. His binary frameworks, which were derived mostly from his Augustinianism and from the thought of Soren Kierkegaard, were present in all his titles. In spite of the interesting nuances between his various books and the different stages of his intellectual path, these methodological and intuitive dichotomies were manifest in all of them and marked, in one way or the other, the whole trajectory of Niebuhr’s writings, comprising over twenty books and hundreds of sermons, essays, letters, articles, papers and lectures he authored or co-authored, making him, without any doubt, the most prolific American intellectual of his time and certainly the realist thinker who has written the most in the twentieth century.

These dichotomies, which I will explore further in the present chapter, had to do with three major vectors of his thinking: the opposition between the individual and the group; the separation between the immanent realm of history and the transcendental realm of God – or alternatively between human nature and metaphysical destiny; and the contrast between reality and utopia and hence between the children of light (or idealists) and the children of darkness (romantic cynics or pessimistic realists). Even though his division between individuals and groups seems more relevant in explaining many of his intellectual and political analyses, it was the latter division between realism and idealism which was obviously more appealing for him, for his commentators and even to his critics. Niebuhr’s embrace of realism, turned him into a ‘tamed cynic’, that is, an intellectual adversary of the modern ‘idolatrous religions’ that fed the blind march of capitalism, backed by the theoretical and ethical legacies of the Enlightenment. Clearly, for him, the children of the Enlightenment – among whom he counted Comte, Hegel, Marx, his contemporary John Dewey and Woodrow Wilson himself – had failed to understand both the tragedy of limited action and the historical irony of its tentative overcoming by humans, which the Christian notion of sin alluded to.

Niebuhr thus attempted to recast only those few thinkers that had, like Immanuel Kant, endeavoured to tame rationalism or, like Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, sought to destroy its pretensions to become the dominant philosophical discourse of modernity. His Augustinian view of sin can be meaningfully filtered through these anti-rationalist philosophical systems. The appeal of his imaginative theological jargon was simply meant to warn ‘modern man’ of the ways through which good intentions can easily turn into bad outcomes. Many of his political views, as well as philosophical positions, can be derived from the anti-Enlightenment mood of someone who stood firm in his view that
‘the paramount problem for contemporary study of international relations is to supplant the illusions which we have inherited from the French Enlightenment’ (Niebuhr, ‘The Moral Issue in International Relations’, in Guilhot 2011: 272).

If not carefully dealt with in terms of policies that can realistically manage and contain the increasingly wide gap between experience and expectation, the radical failure or perversion of the best intentions would end up surrendering human virtue to the sort of cynical dismissal of dreams which had for long been the traditional asset of realism, at least since Machiavelli (Niebuhr, ‘The Moral Issue in International Relations’, in Guilhot 2011). Niebuhr was hence led to conclude about the ‘irrelevance of the mild moralistic idealism … to the power realities of our modern technical society’ (‘Intellectual Autobiography’ 2001: 5).

In turn, this means that his sources, as much as his own potential to impact the research agenda of IR theory, can be framed, even today, in terms of those IR strands and theoretical schools which have manifestly embraced the ideals and the visions of modernity espoused by ‘the nineteenth-century world view’ as much as by those who remain sceptical about it (‘Intellectual Autobiography’ 2001: 5).

Clearly, for Niebuhr, the Enlightenment represented an important but paradoxical step in the moral development of humankind, as it also consisted of a plunge into the generalized blind belief that technical progress can be left to its own devices and even inform those realms of life which remained, until recently, unfettered by ‘scientific technics’ – such as those of politics, ethics, religion and philosophy (Niebuhr, ‘The Moral Issue in International Relations’, Guilhot 2011: 272). His anti-Enlightenment posture hence allowed for his emergence as a public intellectual and a political thinker of national repute. Indeed, the traditional narratives that are presented about Niebuhr seem to agree on the point that he was everything that an intellectual could be at the time. His anti-intellectualist charm was much derived from what he represented beyond the university and from his popularity outside his academic ivory tower. He was not unaware of what it takes to become a leading scholar known outside of academia, and his critique of rationalism and positivism seemed to be part of a general, albeit not always conscious, strategy to build himself up as a public intellectual who could claim enough social experience and practical engagement with the ‘real world’ as to criticize other intellectuals for being too intellectual and too caught up in theoretical categories that always fail to grasp social realities.2

On the other hand, he had enough philosophical imagination to understand that reality is always symbolically mediated and constructed in ways that seek to provide actors with the necessary tools to cope with the world – and he was also convinced that, most of the time, this coping operates by means of a symbolic power held by only a few. The attention he paid to meaning, revelation, faith and truth attest to his critical awareness of the fact that reality is about perception and that since perception is mediated by a language emerging from power relations, the power of words becomes hard to control, manipulate or even scrutinize in any simple or definite way. Language and symbolic power thus featured as core aspects of any political construct or ideal and in this sense Niebuhr expected
neither too much nor too little from the human capacity to mould events through discourse or to change the fate of the world through communicative action or scientific analysis.

Indeed, as I show in Chapter 4, he was quite assertive of the view that because reality already appears to us as articulated in some way, language and speech end up in the same paradoxical situation of existence itself: at once shaping reality and becoming overwhelmed by it. Therefore, the agential reserve of human beings lies not in their capacity to articulate reality through language but in knowing that the symbolic power of language is, in a way, much more real and effective, than whatever material capabilities actors may hold. The transcendental power of speech which human beings have must hence be seen as a source of trust in the possibility of social change as much as a motif for scepticism towards any simple change, given its capacity to dominate and manipulate behaviour in covert and hidden ways.

Niebuhr’s concern for social change and the impact of transformative ideals – indeed, his direct engagement with the social crises of his parish as much as of America in general – led him to adopt an existentialism akin to a sort of social activism that finds parallels in other known existentialist thinkers. Hence, I portray existentialism, along with liberalism and the realist and Christian traditions, as one of the central philosophical traditions of Niebuhrian realism, and arguably the richest source of Niebuhr’s theoretical creativity – apart from that of realism, which meaning deserves a more substantial discussion in the present chapter.

The influence of existentialism in Niebuhr’s political realism was first acknowledged by Paul Ramsey in what he designated as a ‘theological’ or ‘deistic existentialism’ (2001: 145). I also claim that it is this particular aspect which allows us to understand both his politically driven re-conceptualization of God as both transcendental and ‘critical’ and to link it with those contemporary debates in IR which call for the need to question the ontological assumptions of major theories. Even though existentialism refers to a specific philosophical current which gained its climax with Jean-Paul Sartre’s appropriation of Martin Heidegger’s thinking and although, as Paul Ramsey rightly points out, Niebuhr was a major critic of Sartre, his views can still be said to be akin to some sort of existentialism in different ways (Kroner 2001). Hence, I follow Paul Ramsey’s claim that even though Niebuhr rejected many of the claims of secular and atheist existentialists, he adopted what Ramsey calls a ‘deistic existentialism’ or an ‘existential deism’ in which experience and existence are valued on the grounds that they constitute the gateways to the revelation of God as transcendent and yet critical of human behaviour (Ramsey 2001).

But Niebuhr’s existentialism was also in his style. As Crouter remarks, his ‘approach as a writer resembles the insight of early German romantics that rational systems of thought can never catch up with the unfolding mystery of the universe’ (2010: 75). Indeed, Niebuhr’s method, as much as his understanding of the task of a public intellectual and of political theory more broadly, reflects his concern with doubt, and especially self-doubt, as the path to a truer sense of oneself. Only by doubting could one build a critical positioning vis-à-vis the
social world and hence strengthen the capacity of humans to act within it and to shape it according to a general and intuitive sense of those things which ought to be avoided – regardless of those that might be agreed upon as ultimately good. This was a direct consequence of the fact that many of the political failures and frustrations which Niebuhr witnessed – namely that of the League of Nations – had been the product of good intentions and of an ideal of the good life deemed universal and forever righteous.

The novelty of his work is also in this implicit sense of the urgency to change, or at least redirect, the traditional functions of theory into the establishing of those conditions that allow for the offspring of more creative and plural possibilities – including new possibilities of community, brotherhood and love which still remain unimaginable today. In this light, Niebuhr clearly opted for an understanding of the political theorist or public intellectual as the ‘philosopher-king’ and the architect of the community to come (IAH: 73). He clearly anticipated that the task of the modern thinker was to destroy those obstacles that stood in the way of the increase and diversification of forms of community. To formulate its exact shape was to compromise higher possibilities of communion which, as such, always escape formulation. He was definitely more concerned with the destitution of grand narratives and large systematic theoretical constructs from their standing as legislative authorities over the political fate of the world. This was perhaps a logical outcome of the imprint of Weberian scepticism towards reason and how it could contribute to the freedom of the mind almost as much as it was responsible for the political imprisonment of freedom.

Niebuhr’s emphasis on doubt, ambivalence and paradox as an essential condition of being – and also as the right pathway to become more human – certainly reflected his walk through life. One could hardly imagine a more multi-faceted intellectual in that period (see correspondence between Niebuhr and his wife Ursula Niebuhr, 1991). He was a religious thinker, but not a theologian tout court; a deep philosophical writer but not a philosopher in any formal sense. He was overly philosophical to rest content with the presentism of everyday journalism, and yet too engaged to remain satisfied with pure philosophical abstractions. More than a priest, he was a political preacher, and more than a preacher, he wanted to be the prophet of an empire still looking to know itself (Ursula M. Niebuhr 1991). Niebuhr was deeply conscious of this and of how America’s immense power posed a challenge to its own identity and self-image. He was convinced that the best way to prophesize America’s doom and glory – indeed of its destiny, halfway between man and God – was to position himself as an anti-intellectual, bringing down or at least questioning as many theoretical systems as possible – except his own (Fox 1985). As the theologian Michael Novak had claimed in an article that praised Niebuhr’s writings, ‘realism, of course, can itself become a kind of moralism. One prides oneself on yielding to “things as they are”, feels superior to those who do not deadens one’s imagination so as to avoid disillusionment’ (1972: 61).

And Novak was right. It was hard not to spot some sense of pride in Niebuhr’s pursuit of realism, albeit self-controlled and at the service of what he
saw as a greater cause: to tame America’s pretension to become a God on earth, and yet defend her role in stopping others from attempting the same. In his realism of hope, Niebuhr was beyond categorization, and on many occasions, he definitely seemed to think of himself as such: a post-foundational thinker, a prophet of one single God but of many religions, willing to speak to all believers, above theology and philosophy, beyond history and politics, and yet deeply immersed in them too – indeed, a bit like the ancient prophets:

It was Amos he wished to follow. The Hebrew prophet had warned that the day of the Lord would be darkness and not light, that Yahweh had not use for solemn assemblies or burnt offerings. God would be impressed when justice rolled down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream. He scorned those who were at ease in Zion, who lay upon beds of ivory and ignored the urgency of the hour. Niebuhr shared Amos’ sense of crisis. He also shared Amos’ awareness of the risk of pride. Amos denied any special competence: ‘I am not a prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees’. Niebuhr yearned to speak with Amos’ authority and to appropriate his humility.

(Niebuhr 1991; Stone 2001). He wanted to rid the world of human righteousness, to liberate politics from ‘false eternals’, unfettered by pride and vainglory (NDM II: 147; Rosenthal 1991); he wanted us to fear and be anxious, and yet acknowledge human frailty only as a means to place the amazing creative capacity of human beings in perspective; he wanted politicians and leaders to interpret power in such as way as to redeliver it to civil society, empowering the concrete person to love God over anyone in particular and above all institutions, elites and groups (Gilkey 2001). However, while he thought that some limited measure of ethical concerns should and could be levelled against the cruel world of politics, he was also very much aware of the ability of politics to transmute, manipulate and eventually distort ethics from its true meta-political and metaphysical vocation.

Hence, Niebuhr thought that the ways in which ethics could contribute to politics was by isolating the realm of transcendental love, conceiving it as a meta-political horizon, untouched by human power and pride and immune to earthly fears or anxieties. Only as such could this meta-ethical principle serve as an appeal trial – and as a critical tool – of the individual person to resist, diverge and rethink the shape of government, of the state or of the human community more generally. But he knew that the need – indeed the urgency – to find ways of compromise between politics and ethical consciousness was as easy a conclusion to reach as it was difficult to theorize and implement, as was most of the Enlightenment legacy of political thought. Hence, Niebuhr was drawn into an
appropriation of anti-Enlightenment discourses as a safer ground for an approach to the paradoxes of human nature and hence to an ethical reconfiguration of modern politics, however tentative (Kroner 2001).

In spite of his realist attitude, often radicalized in rather dark forms of apocalyptic scepticism, Niebuhr was able to dovetail it in a semi-utopian concern for the possibility of ethics – the prerogative of liberal internationalism – as much as with a profound critical awareness of the dangers of both liberal utopianism and realist cynicism (Andersen 2007). His limited deconstruction of some of the most idealized images of nations and communities, as much as of the ideals of the ‘rational man’, of the transcendental ego and of modern subjectivity in general, bring him quite close to critical theorists within the humanities and the social sciences, and even closer to those who, within IR, have attacked realism for its lack of ontological self-reflection, for a certain absence of epistemological discussion or for its ethical and analytical narrowness. Most probably, Niebuhr would have agreed with these criticisms, had he become familiar with the sort of realism that has turned into common practice in IR since the Waltzian turn. Indeed, contemporary realism has rendered itself incommensurable with the sort of realism practiced and preached by Niebuhr, whom George Kennan once referred to as ‘the father of us [realists] all’.

It would not be an unfair judgement – even though it says a lot about the intellectual poverty of contemporary realist approaches – to claim that Niebuhr has totally disappeared from the intellectual landscape of contemporary realism, let alone from IR in general. Indeed, many of today’s most prominent IR scholars seem to rejoice in the comfortable consensus that realism has become, and has always been ‘a mark of failure: morally obtuse and historically anachronistic, it represents a lack of political understanding and imagination that is misleading at best, pernicious and destructive at worst’ (Williams 2005: 1). Indeed, if one takes this account of contemporary realism as accurate, it is obviously unsurprising that Niebuhr is rarely quoted today, and features minimally in those few IR manuals or general introductions which refer to him (once or twice) as one of the founding references of twentieth-century realism – almost suggesting that, as such, he is not really worth reading. As Ken Booth has observed:

Almost all those who were students of international relations (in Britain) in the 1960s lived on a diet of realism. For the most part it was not the high cuisine realism (the actual works) of the founders of this school, but a form of fast-food realism. It showed rather little of the complexity, sophistication and moral anguish of Reinhold Niebuhr and others – as Nicholas Wheeler insists – but was instead a body of ideas neatly packaged for teaching purposes in order to make them easily palatable to students. It was made into a very persuasive story.

(1994: 7)

On other occasions, Niebuhr appears as an interesting relic which newer forms of realism have now surpassed in their analytical sophistication and systemic
The making of a Christian realist

focus, in face of which the poetic existentialism of such Christian ‘classics’ will seem as a prosaic and an archaic form of pre-scientific ‘wisdom’, worth quoting at times given its rhetorical power and theological imagination, but without any explanatory value whatsoever. This seems to be the image of Niebuhrian realism circulating in the contemporary IR milieus of Britain and the US. Even those who studied Niebuhr back in the 1960s and 70s – and who now hold some of the top professorial chairs in the field – read him then, as they do today, as part of a vulgate of early IR writings which were never seriously studied or exhaustively explored.3

But there is nevertheless some truth in the charges made to IR realism for being ‘obtuse’, ‘anachronistic’ or simply unimaginative. Were it not so and realists would not have neglected one of their most creative thinkers in the way they did. Notably, by these standards, Niebuhr could hardly be considered a realist (Andersen 2007). Many of the issues that he initially addressed – and especially the ways in which he addressed them – have now become more common in other strands of IR and political theory than those which claim a realist label, from cosmopolitanism to constructivism, from post-structuralism to critical theory. I am referring to the themes of the paradigmatic shifts from sovereignty to post-sovereignty, the social construction of identity and of the self as well as their deconstruction, the dialectic between justice and order or how anarchy is related to the transformation of the political community. This book shows how these concerns were all very much present in Niebuhr’s spirit, even when he was discussing those theological or ontological themes which would appear secondary for the IR scholar, whose pressing concern for – and surrender to – immediate political events has led him or her to a position of existential and ontological blindness. Niebuhr’s direct concern with the themes of the human self, God, love, the fear of death, anxiety and community which constituted the conceptual spine of his philosophical system run counter to the first stages of the mediatization of politics, and can hence help to found more innovative epistemologies and methodologies set to address the most pressing issues of a newborn international liberal order.

Wilsonian temptations

Niebuhr’s critique of Woodrow Wilson, and more generally of what will here be labelled as Wilsonian liberalism,4 recalls an analytical and ontological tension which simultaneously distance and approximate Niebuhr from the broad – sometimes too broad – category of liberalism: this tension revolves around the question of how personal freedom can be combined with the moral rules of the community and hence how the confrontation between individual rights and collective responsibilities can be reconciled or find some temporary solution, while remaining open to novel forms of identity and to the community to come (NE: 294). For Niebuhr, this reasoning could, in some limited ways, be transposed to international relations by asking how human communities, nations, states and groups of all kinds, can participate in a political system which will forever
remain larger than themselves and which, however, ought not to compromise the ‘vitality of its parts’ (NDM I: 29).

In the context of this discussion, Niebuhr read Wilson’s understanding of human freedom as directly linked with a idealistic vision of the whole of humanity, fed by particular narratives of historical progress and human perfectibility, to be obtained mainly through advancements in science, technology and economics (see Niebuhr’s 1945 article ‘Will Civilization Survive Technics?’). He thought that to the extent that the freedom of each individual impinges directly on that of another, the notion of community emerged as central in empowering, but also compromising, human freedom. In this sense, he remarked that ‘all political and moral striving results in frustration as well as fulfilment’, concluding that, with all its virtues, liberalism could not offer any way out of this political and existential quagmire (CL: 126; see also Williams 2001). The relationship between freedom and community were therefore directly underpinned by certain assumptions regarding human nature and human destiny, a binary framework which was a known classic topology of political thought, and pointed to a necessary divide between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, ‘reality’ and ‘utopia’. Niebuhr was to reengage with these dualisms in an Augustinian manner so as to criticize those thinkers, such as Woodrow Wilson himself, who had downplayed power politics in favour of the realization of their dream society – with the prospect of an actual universal community or world government as its teleological corollary, contradicted by the freedom of nation-states.

In spite of this preliminary criticism, Niebuhr’s critique of Wilson seemed to suggest that the realist tradition was not diametrically opposed to liberal world-views – indeed that they were perfectly commensurate – even when it sought to criticize aspects of liberalism which he deemed central to both its historical development and its international expansion (Andersen 2007; McWilliams 1962; Williams 2001). On the one hand, a careful reading of his most acclaimed essay on democracy and on the ‘impossible possibility’ of a world community, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1945), leads to the conclusion that Niebuhr disliked particular aspects of the liberal tradition, rather than the tradition as a whole. Indeed, the subtilte read ‘A vindication of Democracy and a critique of its traditional defenders’ (CL 1945). On the other, as a recent historian of American foreign policy has observed,

after a more complete examination, the evidence is clear that Wilsonianism was as interest-based as any ‘realist’ approach to the problems of international organization and domestic reform. In fact, the terms ‘idealist’ and ‘realist’ serve students of history poorly. Woodrow Wilson’s legacy is neither idealistic nor realpolitik.

(Bucklin 2001: 1)

The question thus becomes one of knowing what it was that Niebuhr disapproved of in the sort of liberalism that had become dominant in American society and what he was doing when claiming realism for himself, rather than just what he meant by it. As Roger Shinn points out:
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If we ask why Reinhold Niebuhr assaulted utopianism, we must investigate what it was that he actually attacked. He was no enemy of transcendental vision. Prophecy and eschatology were at the heart of his theology. Yet he insisted in what he called ‘realism’ as against utopianism. In his battles against ‘the children of darkness’ he was not willing to join unequivocally ‘the children of light.’ Everybody knew Niebuhr opposed tyranny, exploitation, and oppression. But everyone felt also his scorn for naiveté, sentimentality, and all those hopes that did not take into account the tragic qualities of history or the sin in the human heart.

(1974: 410)

Indeed, an implicit sense of irony towards liberalism seems to pervade the whole of Niebuhrian realism, and this might have something to do with the fact that what he was opposed to in liberalism – especially in its rationalist, positivist and capitalist incarnations – was the religious assumptions lurking behind its supposed atheism. As he remarked:

new fanaticisms are the much more probable consequence of the modern position than complete skepticism. In these fanaticisms an ultimate position and a final truth are implicitly or explicitly insinuated into what was provisionally regarded as a realm of partial and fragmentary truths. Thus new religions emerge in an ostensibly irreligious culture.

(NDM I: 239)

Hence, contrary to many common views, Niebuhr’s apparent anti-liberalism cannot be read simplistically as the desperate and nostalgic opposition of a conservative theologian to the unstoppable march of secular liberalism; actually, his was a critique of too faithful a liberalism, that is, of those elements in liberalism which corresponded to historical residues of religious idolatry and could hence easily lead to tyranny if resurrected in political practice⁵ (Warren 1997; Williams 2001).

In critiquing liberalism in the ways which I spell out below, Niebuhr positioned himself within an overall ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ regarding the self-images of manmade institutions and human achievements (Scott-Baumann 2009). Niebuhr delineated this anti-rationalist and anti-religious critique of idealism – in which the sublimation of instrumental reason⁶ operated in tandem with the political deification of ‘Man’ – as the very premise of his realism: ‘If we analyse the unavailability of this political hope we may arrive at a fairly general principle of criticism for all political utopianism’ (BT: 178). Niebuhr was hence a fierce opponent of the specific idealistic elements of the specific form of liberalism that had come to dominate American politics before the first world war. Niebuhr’s recourse to the label goes to show that in order to tell the ‘tale of realism as a particular form of liberalism, it is necessary to understand that it was only a very narrow and distinct expression of the liberal creed that it attacked and rejected’ (Tjalve and Williams 2015: 52). Indeed, liberal idealism

had seen its way through to prominent academic and theological circles and Niebuhr found it extremely dangerous that any reformist attempt that succeeded could immediately be seen as mandated by God. Short of the sort of apocalyptic fundamentalism that also saw its daylight before the war, liberal theology seemed equally blind to human limitations, especially in the so-called social gospel movement, that had progressively disbanded from the more conservative theology of sin, and was now increasingly becoming combined with progressivism to feed an optimism that disposed the leadership of the protestant denominations to set aside their differences and work together for social improvement. Their attitude resembled … Andrew Carnegie’s ‘gospel of wealth’, which argued the financially strong were suited to dominate for the good of society. Such Church leaders took for granted that they were the ones best suited to give America its moral bearings on the landmark issues of the day, to articulate national goals and prescribe practical measures for implementing them.

(Warren 1997: 11)

Hence, realism was originally a label used mostly within theological circles to oppose the sort of optimism that had – erroneously in Niebuhr’s view – become the very rearguard of the liberal worldview. Niebuhr preferred, of course, a different version of liberalism, and perhaps an older one. At the core of his negative liberalism lay the theologically burdened critique of idolatry, permeated by a deep realistic sense of tragedy, which the liberal tradition had always mobilized against tyranny and which Niebuhr thought to infuse with classic elements of Augustinianism as well as modern ingredients found in existentialism. Liberal theology now embraced a great many things that the Christian worldview had alerted against, starting with idolatry and ending in the neglect of sin. The American protestantism propounded by such names as Washington Gladen, Richard Ely or Walter Rauschenbusch was becoming an immanent cult where the ideal of God’s transcendence was being forgotten as the necessary metaphysical condition against the belief that humans were gods (Warren 1997: 10).

In a way, it was the spirit of liberal reformism that needed reform. The reaction against prewar new theology came in the form of a ‘crisis theology’. It quickly gained adherents and spread to America. Detractors called it “neo-orthodox” because its partisans did so much talking about the old-fashioned doctrines of original sin, creation *ex nihilo*, and the divinity of Jesus’ (Warren 1997: 41). ‘Crisis theology’ was not originally an American phenomenon. After the first world war, more prominent theologians then Niebuhr himself – starting perhaps with Karl Barth – had fashioned a new intellectual pessimism that mirrored in philosophical prose the scenario of postwar devastation in Europe (Warren 1997: 41). But American theologians like Francis Miller, John Bennett, Henry Van Dusen, Georgia Harkness, Samuel McCrea Cavert and Reinhold Niebuhr himself, would find it useful to temper the optimism of the new theology. Niebuhr thus followed many continental theologians that were themselves
inspired by the same sort of existentialist thought that Niebuhr embraced, and sought to read the Christian classics in light of the events of period. Warren explains:

A theological shift had already begun in Europe with the publication of Karl Barth’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* in 1918. Barth, having given up his liberal optimism during the war, undertook a systematic examination of the Bible, beginning with Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, using the most recent biblical scholarship…. His admiration for Paul soared, and beyond Paul … he found a God radically different from what liberal theology made of him, a transcendent God ‘wholly other’ than humankind. The implications served as a basis for a critique of culture and politics. Barth was unsparing with modern Protestantism. He thought all Christian groups and movements of that time were flawed by their emphasis on God’s immanence. It had led them not just to lose a sense of God’s transcendence but to make the facile assumption that God accepted whatever they did.

(1997: 41)

The political tragedy of liberalism was therefore essentially religious. Contrary to what realism has become, Niebuhr’s realism was essentially a theological category, even though a vague one in theology as well as in political thought (Guilhot 2010: 224). Its religiousness relied in its apparent secularity: more precisely, in the religious appeal against the fundamentalism of idolatry which secular liberalism championed. No matter how successful the modern age had been in affirming the secular identity of liberal democracy, Niebuhr was under the impression that such assertion was by nature religious. If secularism represented the dissolution of God in dispersed idols, prewar protestant theology was now playing along with that, justifying faith and even God’s very existence in light of the dominant culture, obsessively driven by economic prosperity and industrial growth. The former were to serve the latter according to the ‘new theology’ – not the other way around. In his view, liberalism – and liberal democracy – should be able to learn from Christian theology how to accommodate and deal with what Niebuhr saw, along with other supporters of this neo-orthodoxy, as the existential meaning of ‘the cross’ – as opposed to its literal or historical significance. It ‘stood for more than the abstract atonement; it stood for the way of life that combined Stoic acceptance of the tragic with active striving for the ideal. Real happiness demanded suffering and struggle’ (Fox 1985: 66). Niebuhr was therefore, since his early writings, carefully carving out the treacherous path of a Christian realism that stood as the delicate midway between liberalism and Christian orthodoxy. ‘It seems pathetic to me’, he writes,

that liberalism has too little appreciation of the tragedy of life to understand the cross and orthodoxy insists too much upon the absolute uniqueness of the sacrifice of Christ to make the preaching of the cross effective. How can anything be uniquely potent if it is absolutely unique? It is because the cross
of Christ symbolizes something in the very heart of reality, something in universal experience that it has its central place in history. Life is tragic and the most perfect type of moral beauty inevitably has at least a touch of the tragic in it. Why? That is not so easy to explain. But love pays such a high price for its objectives and sets its objectives so high that they can never be attained. There is therefore always a foolish and a futile aspect to love’s quest which gives it the note of tragedy. What makes this tragedy redemptive is that the foolishness of love is revealed as wisdom in the end and its futility becomes the occasion for new moral striving. About heroes, saints, and saviors it must always remain true ‘that they, without us should not be made perfect’.

(Making the ‘preaching of the cross effective’ – that was Niebuhr’s quest and the quest of his Christian realism. What was at stake with political idealism for Niebuhr was hence its persistent unawareness or stubborn unwillingness to recognize ‘that all power in human history is too partial to be good’ (BT: 179). In his view, ‘Hosea was the first prophet to see this. “Where”, said he [Hosea], “is the king who will bring prosperity to all your cities?”’ (BT: 179). Niebuhr’s intellectual quarrel with the American liberal tradition had to do with its occasional flirtations with the sort of messianic righteousness which American administrations had come to embody and which culminated in the belief in Wilson’s divinely commanded ‘kingship’ to control the world’s conflicts and master the future of all political communities (Rosenthal 1991).

Niebuhr wanted to be Wilson’s Hosea. And for that purpose he sought to mobilize a political and religious worldview by recasting those intellectual traditions which he saw as capable of retaining the ethical meaning of, and the hope in, a coming kingdom – without having to overrun the importance of social realities as the very condition of a just and free world. He knew, however, that in order to do this he had to turn religion upside down due to the intricate connection between religious belief, individual emancipation and acritical nationalism which he witnessed in American civil society. As Michael Foley observed:

the demonstrative attachment to the nation is a ubiquitous element of American culture. It is evident in the daily recitation of the oath of allegiance in schools, the high incidence of the national anthem and ‘God Bless America’ at public events, and the extraordinary presence of the ‘Stars and Stripes’ throughout the visual field of American society. What makes this expression of national fervour even more remarkable is that so much of it emanates from social convention and voluntary practice. This reinforces the impression that just as American attitudes to the nation have a cult-like quality to them, so the object of their veneration possesses the characteristics of a faith-based community or even arguably a civil religion.

(2007: 363)
Initially, Niebuhr thought, religion had helped to create a very powerful and convincing understanding of the balance of power in America’s early steps towards nationhood, bringing together the liberal values of individual freedom and resistance against tyranny, the republican principle of the separation of powers as well as of civic virtues, the protestant appeal to contrition and, finally, a realist understanding of the relation between nationality and individuality, which were combined to enact Niebuhr’s critical national pride. However, Niebuhr also thought that this realistic liberalism could not easily be transposed to the realm of international relations, where imperial hubris could easily defeat the purpose of an international order whose prospect to achieve a world community could only be sustained through a balance of power with other countries. This meant that for Niebuhr, realism and liberalism were not contradictory but were actually the means of a ‘destiny’ which had for long been ‘manifest’ (Foley 2007; Stephan- son 1995). In this sense Michael Williams has rightly pointed to the fact that

one of the oldest and most pervasive contrasts in International Relations theory – the strict division between liberalism and Realism – is fundamentally misleading both in itself, and as a way of thinking about the evolution of Realism. The most basic source of this confusion lies in the reduction of liberalism to a form of rationalism. Once this move is made, two options follow. Either Realism’s rejection of rationalism is a repudiation of liberalism, or its acceptance of rationalism signals its subsumption within liberalism. The first is the basis of the fundamental opposition between realism and liberalism that has been a starting point for discussions of International Relations theory for decades. The second has, in recent years, become the basis for the claim that Realism has largely ceased to exist as a definable position in contemporary debate.

(2005: 129)

Even though Niebuhr started off with an apparently strict, but fundamentally vague differentiation between realism and liberalism, a more attentive reading of his arguments clearly reveals an intention to mobilize Christian and existentialist theoretical resources so as to outstrip liberalism of the residues of an Enlight- ened rationalism – and which Niebuhr further associated with the rise of modern paganism, economic individualism and political idolatry (Williams 2001). His demarcation between realism and liberalism was hence rather superficial, consisting more of a rhetorical strategy of opposition to certain predominant views of human nature, with too stringent an association between freedom and instrumental reason, political decision and scientific expertise (Tjalve and Williams 2015). I follow Guilhot’s argument that mid-century realism developed IR theory as

a way to secure a space for its alternative vision of politics and scholarship…. Those involved in the development of IR theory were not so much opposed to science per se as they were deeply suspicious of the liberal faith
in the power of science to subdue political conflict. Because politics was ultimately impervious to rationalization, its best rational rendition was under the form of prudential maxims, not scientific principles.

(2011: 129)

Hence, Niebuhr’s stance was one akin to a sort of liberal realism or, as another famous realist, John Herz, referred to it, a ‘Realist Liberalism’ (Herz 1951). Niebuhr was worried – a concern which Herz would repeat in the 1950s – that realism could remain trapped in the sort of ‘Machiavellian’ power politics of the sort which I describe in Chapter 4 with regard to Max Weber (Herz 1964: 132; see also Williams 2013: 652–653). He thus sought to denounce the dangerous anti-liberal features of many forms of realism – deemed cynical – while pointing to the excesses of anti-realism in many strands of liberalism. In this sense, Niebuhr’s targeting of Wilson provides a more comprehensive depiction of Niebuhr’s international political thought.8 He sought to identify the particular roots of Wilson’s idealism while conserving the possibility of a democratic liberal order. He attributed it to that feature of modern culture which had been sanctified, absolutized and given godlike attributes after the French and industrial revolutions and also in the wake of various intellectual movements and scientific shifts, from the Renaissance up to the Enlightenment, but which was also at the centre of an overall national sense of American exceptionalism (Weaver 1995). That cultural feature was the rational Self. In an enlightening passage of one of his most widely read books, Niebuhr stated:

In any event, the significant unit of thought and action in the realm of historical encounter is not a mind but a self. This unit has an organic unity of rational, emotional and volitional elements which make all its actions and attitudes historically more relative than is realized in any moment of thought and action. The inevitability of this confusion between the relative and the universal is exactly what is meant by original sin. It is the rejection of the reality of original sin in the mind of the controllers of social process which has bred either cruelty or confusion. It has bred cruelty if the elite managed to achieve power proportioned to their pretensions and confusion if they only wistfully longed for it.

(IAH: 83–84)

In this light, the Christian and realist discourse of sin and human sinfulness – with its stand against a too strict, adulatory and essentialist conception of the human self – certainly bred a certain romantic existentialism, which strengthened the anti-rationalistic opposition to Wilsonianism and to the philosophical sources that inspired it. Wilsonianism represented, for Niebuhr, a utopian revision of those key beliefs which were central to liberalism and the philosophical discourses since the Enlightenment that sought to dismiss sin: the essential goodness of human nature; the inevitability of historical progress grounded in a limitless acquirement of scientific knowledge; and the universal reach of human
perfectibility. The Christian realists, led by Niebuhr, thus saw it as an intellectual, moral and political imperative to moderate Wilson’s enthusiasm about the realization of those ideals in an actual universal democracy or political system of some sort, by recasting, in an existential light, the Augustinian stress on human limits in which the revision of the dialectics between reality and utopia was the key thread of philosophical argument (McWilliams 1962; Shinn 1974).

While critiquing Wilson’s voluntarism, Niebuhr wanted nonetheless to prove himself distant from religious asceticism as well (NDM I: 267). Ascetics of all sorts attempted to deny selfhood as a means to overcome sin, thus hiding the same sort of utopian thinking of liberalism beneath their apologetics of inaction and stillness. Against them, Niebuhr emphasized the view that theology – and indeed the Christian tradition – neither sanctioned, nor represented a return to, the sort of Christian idealism of previous times, akin to the sort of pacifism later espoused by the social Gospel movement in America. As Lovin writes:

The call for ‘religious realism’ or a ‘realistic theology’ originated with a small group that had ties to Yale Divinity School and included Reinhold Niebuhr, his brother H. Richard Niebuhr, their teacher at Yale, D. C. Macintosh, Walter Marshall Horton, and others. To these younger theologians, the Social Gospel movement, which had sometimes believed too easily that moral exhortation would lead people to work for justice, now seemed hopelessly sentimental.

(Lovin in NDM I: Introd., xii)

Niebuhr’s realism can hence be read as a strategic positioning within the Christian tradition as well as outside of it. He was a realist in the precise sense that he aspired to a kind of political existentialism, that is, to an understanding of how human beings operate in everyday power relationships and as part of larger wholes which are as constraining as they are changeable in shape and in scope – the nation-state, the family, the social class, or any other form of community (Kroner 2001). As a reader of Heidegger, he thought that the philosophical discourse of modernity was still caught up in a sort of Platonism where notions of agency, individual and collective, reported back to an idealized notion of will and intentionality which posited too stable an understanding of human nature and collective selfhood (NDM I: 162). In this light, he ambivalently remarked that ‘man actually has a greater degree of freedom in his essential structure and less freedom in history than modern culture realizes’ (NDM I: 107). The idolatry of the modern national self as grounded in a social contract between citizens projected an understanding of the human will as rooted in instrumental reason, compromising deeper understandings of human nature and of its fundamental instability and variability.

He hence charged many liberals – Wilson not excluded – for their Cartesian grounds of social action and political decision: a rational will capable of knowing itself. According to Niebuhr, this ideal was a key ingredient of what he referred to as the ‘easy conscience of modern man’, akin to a ‘wilful’ subject
‘cut in two’, constantly placing his mind outside of his body so as to govern every single one of its moves in almost robotic fashion. He claimed that rationalism produced an understanding in which:

The part which is immersed in natural process is essentially evil and the part which is subject to reason is essentially good. But the freedom of man is always freedom from nature and not freedom from reason. In Kant ‘freedom is the ratio essendi of the moral law while the moral law is the ratio cognoscendi of freedom’. It is thus inconceivable that the human spirit in its freedom should defy reason. Non-rational actions and immoral actions are the consequence of natural inclinations and passions which defy the law of reason.

(NDM I: 120)

Niebuhr was, for the reasons that this book brings out, very suspicious of this sort of rationalist transcendentalism of which Kant and Hegel had been, in different ways, the major references (NDM I: 120). Following Heidegger, he was convinced that that was not how human beings behave for the most part; and he was even more adamantly about his belief, inspired by Nietzsche and later by Freud, that groups behave mostly according to subconscious impulses rather than conscious ones (Schuett 2007). Indeed, if there was any rationality to be found in the conduct of human communities, it was only in the sense that specific behavioural patterns could be pursued in detriment of others, not in the sense that communities are actually morally rational or self-reflective, i.e., capable of pursuing ends higher than their immediate interests.

A different understanding of collective agency – of its ultimate ground – had thus to be found through a profound rethinking of human selfhood and a powerful critique of its perceived ‘autonomy’ (NDM I: 61). Many were the resources that Niebuhr used for this purpose. In criticizing utopian liberalism, and in particular that of Woodrow Wilson, Niebuhr was definitely taking up some of Marx’s insights about the historical evolution of capitalism. Marx had been one of the major exponents of the critique of the Enlightenment, along with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Marxism was probably the most influential intellectual movement in Western history, mostly because of its success in revealing the hidden motives behind economically and politically engendered forms of personal and collective identity. Many of these had been exposed by Marx as superstructural illusions, created by dominant groups of society and seeking to integrate, justify and reproduce the position of subjects in the diverse alignments of power relations and social hierarchies that sustained ‘the powerful’ (IAH: 113). However, early on in his career Niebuhr had come to the realization that, just as Wilsonianism, so Marxism revealed the same sort of millennial utopianism and messianic self-righteousness in its attempt to actualize, in one single stroke, all the expectations and dreams that modernity had opened up regarding the emancipation of humans, idealistically construed as Gods on Earth (Rosenthal 1991). He was hence led to conclude that:
both liberalism and Marxism are secularized and naturalized versions of the Hebrew prophetic movement and the Christian religion…. In common with apocalyptic religion it transmutes an immediate pessimism into an ultimate optimism by its hope in the final establishment of an ideal social order through a miracle of history.

(ICE: 26)

In view of this it is unsurprising that, as many other theologians of his generation, Niebuhr was less concerned with the atheism of the communist revolution or of some American liberalism than he was with their latent religiosity and fundamentalism. He saw in them the privileged political followers of the Enlightenment, and he would even go so far as to claim that:

in a sense, the world of Marx is true: ‘The beginning of all criticism is the criticism of religion’. For it is on this ultimate level that the pretensions of men reach their most absurd form. The final sin is always committed in the name of religion.

(Niebuhr, quoted in Shinn 1974: 342)

Hence, in Niebuhr’s view,

Modern secularism is not, as religious idealists usually aver, merely a rationalization of self-interest, either individual or collective…. On the contrary, the social idealism which informs our democratic civilization had a touching faith in the possibility of achieving a simple harmony between self-interest and the general welfare on every level.

(CL: 13)

Niebuhr’s acute awareness of the complicity between ideological forms usually deemed opposite by mainstream discourses and political propaganda would pass on to later IR theory as a means to discern in the taken-for-granted virtues of liberal government and scientific progress, those ideological prejudices and assertions of symbolic power which served the interests of the powerful in liberal or less liberal societies. One of the major IR theorists of the 1970s, Hedley Bull, would pick up on this theme to argue, in a very similar vein to that of Niebuhr, that ‘indeed, the Wilsonian notion of an ultimate identity of interests among the peoples of the world, of which the United States was the best interpreter, has always been more truly represented in the communist world’ (Bull 2000: 132). For Niebuhr this harmonization of interests did not necessarily point in the direction of a generalized welfare – let alone of a universal fulfillment – revealing in its stead the capacity of particular groups and nations to concentrate power and alienate individuals under the legitimizing discourses of final revolution or divine mission, oriented towards the inauguration (or restoration) of an age of universal harmony. As the more traditional strands of political philosophy had assumed since Aristotle, the human being was indeed a social being (NDM I:
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82); but the transmutation of its natural social instincts into intelligent and complex identities inevitably led, Niebuhr observed, to a certain incommensurability of pursuits and hence to the clash of interests (NDM II: 1). This was due to his belief that identities did not shape power as much as power shaped identities.9 Hence, only by means of the re-establishment of the transcendental God as a critical instance of nationalist pretensions and imperial hubris could political theory endeavour to achieve a comprehensive ‘recognition of the limited constructability of the world – a limitation that emerges from its very constructedness, and is thus the objective condition of social and political existence’ (Williams 2005: 134).

The modern pursuit of complete and unabashed ‘Selves’ – individual and collective – was, in Niebuhr’s view, the byproduct of the ‘superstructures’ born out of power relations which posited forms of identity in order to reproduce their governing strategies and preserve their power into the future (NDM I: 35). Therefore, ‘the deification of his [man’s] spirit in the universality of reason’ was not, in his view, a viable answer to the problems of injustice and conflict which those structures had created (NDM I: 82); indeed, the rationalist conception of selfhood which we had inherited from Descartes appeared to be, on the contrary, quite subservient to those structures. The increased obsession with selfhood could thus be read not only as the utmost ontological premise of modernity as Hegel had remarked but, more importantly, as a sign of the persistence, and indeed of the unrestrained reproduction of the sin of pride in modern times (Habermas 1990: 23–44). The technological emancipation of human beings from nature which philosophers and scientists had so much longed for, revealed itself as another instance of the recurrent tendency for self-glorification, expressed domestically in the materialist egocentricity of the individual, and internationally in the collective egoism of nations. In this context Niebuhr claimed that ‘most of the uncritical devotees of the “scientific Spirit” of modernity have not discerned the peril in this idea of autonomy’ (NDM I: 61).

Therefore, Niebuhr thought that the ideal of an autonomous rational self ought to be critically analyzed with recourse to God’s judgement upon human pride as expressed in Biblical narratives and also in the thought of Augustine. In turn, this also meant that all modern critiques of the rationalist paradigm of selfhood and of subjectivity would do well to return to biblical inspiration and advice on the issue. Niebuhr’s concern with the persistence of selfhood was hence in his acute awareness of its capacity to claim, often violently, the allegiance of individuals as the source of political idolatry and existential meaning. The human ego was problematic in the precise sense that social structures had the capacity to surrender transcendental Love – that is the possibility of a pure and absolute altruism and self-giving – to self-satisfaction and self-glorification – and do so at the expense of others and of God. Niebuhr was convinced that the sin of self-love and pride had thus become the central problem of human existence and of political interaction; its inescapability meant that it could not be avoided, only corrected or attenuated, perhaps by turning the self against too proud an affirmation of its own selfhood. This meant that the ideal of pure love
consisted of something unachieved and unachievable in history, and ought therefore to be respected as such, that is, an ideal capable of informing and inspiring action while remaining forever unrealizable.

Notwithstanding, as I argue in the next chapter, the idolatry of the Self was not a prerogative of idealism alone; realist writings such as those of Hobbes or Machiavelli had, in Niebuhr’s account, demonstrated an idolatrous edge as well. In fact, Niebuhr observed that, at least since Plato, the aspiration of the philosopher to become, in some way, a ‘king’, was patent in all systems of thought – and his was not immune to that temptation (IAH: 73). Niebuhr’s realist critique of liberalism can hence be read as his attempt to liberate liberalism from the philosophical-totalitarian remnants which still loomed large over its ontological and axiological horizon. This book shares Michael Williams’ view that ‘the realist tradition … is a form of liberalism’, not its ideological or intellectual opposite (2005: 130). Following Niebuhr, one can better understand how the ‘rejection of rationalist liberalism’ can be:

taken as the starting point for an attempt to generate more substantial foundations for identifiably liberal political practices. In this tradition, the essence of a liberal politics does not lie in transparent knowledge of the (rational) self, or in objectivist knowledge of the social and the natural worlds…. In this vision, by contrast, the irreducible plurality which has been a strong element of almost all forms of liberalism is embraced as a political value and a practical imperative. Will and power are not solely conceived as dangerous and irrational forces that must be negated in the construction of a liberal polity which fosters and secures individual autonomy; they are resources and dynamics which must be taken seriously and worked with if one is to create a viable liberal order.

(Williams 2005: 130)

For the remainder of this part I will seek to highlight how Niebuhr’s vindication of realism actually corresponded both to a strategic way of coining a particular strand of liberalism, and to defending liberal democracy without falling prey to the same kind of idolatry which could easily plunge any society to the tyrannical wave which was spreading in Europe throughout the 1930s. It is important to note that Niebuhr’s critique of political idolatry of nation-states, and of America in particular, represented his own strategy of intellectual positioning, above the traditional division between idealism and realism. His tentative and fragile division of intellectual labour between ‘extreme idealists’ and ‘radical cynics’, as many others he used, served him well in claiming a moral and intellectual superiority over them. Niebuhr’s play of theoretical labels and ‘isms’ was, after all, the very prerequisite of Niebuhr’s intellectual and social affirmation, and he certainly took advantage of it to obtain the public prestige which not all academic philosophers could claim and which turned him into a central figure in the interwar American public sphere (Brown 2002; Fox 1985; Marty 1974).
As a social theorist and public thinker who had left theoretical theology behind to devote himself to the more demanding task of prophesying America’s destiny, Niebuhr cleverly anticipated that his polemical assault on philosophical transcendentalisms – which he directly equated with political idealism – was the key to obtain an even higher transcendental point of observation and critique. Whether this was a consciously adopted strategy all the way through, one cannot know for sure; but it certainly contributed to the consolidation of his influence and of his power position within American intelligentsia, the appraisal of which by his colleagues would be reconfirmed by the presidential medal of honour and by his appearance in the covers of *Life* or *Time* magazines, among others, making Niebuhr a must-read for any American president. Therefore, Niebuhr’s critique of idealism – but more importantly of those idealistic features of realists themselves – turned him into a realist liberal or even, I venture to suggest, a post-realist, capable of maneuvering the rhetorical tools of realism as masterfully as he could twist them for self-critical purposes – or even dispense with them altogether when no longer needed.

Beyond the divide between idealism and realism, Niebuhr wished to confront those modern ‘deceivers’ who presented the interests of certain communities as *naturally* derived from their collective and historical intimation of a natural selfhood (NDM I: 206). Contrary to this *naturalization* of interests and identities – which the apparently divine sanctioning often legitimated – Niebuhr attempted to describe such inferences as the mere transmutation of natural desires into cultural symbols, capable of mobilizing the crowd into the particular pursuits of elites. Moral and cognitive claims hence had to be read against the backdrop of the power arrangements and specific interests that conditioned such claims in the first place, or as Richard Ashley has observed, in an unsurprising combination of critical theory with classical realism, ‘knowledge is always constituted in reflection of interests’ (1981: 207). The portrayal of interests, identities and values as *natural*, legitimate and essential for the ‘survival’ and ‘self-preservation’ of ‘all’ by liberals – and even by some realists – represented what Niebuhr, following Nietzsche, called a ‘transmutation of values’, that is, a self-justificatory strategy where passions were not restrained, but were instead licensed, empowered and legitimized under new symbolic and discursive forms (BT: 1–24, 195–214).

With this in mind, Niebuhr could not but be very suspicious of Wilson’s America, where national identity was presented as perfectly commensurate with humanity’s global interest. For him this was merely a way of veiling the ‘spiritual decay’ that lay underneath the highest expectations of the ‘Age of Reason’, whose ‘rational man’ turned out to be everything but a ‘reasonable’ dreamer (‘Pious and Secular America’ in GU: 6):

This spiritual decay is a matter of historical record in liberal bourgeois culture. It can be gauged with historical precision by comparing the dreams of the Age of Reason, of a Godwin, a Diderot, a Rousseau, or even an Adam Smith with the pathetic inanities by which twentieth-century idealists seek to give spiritual dignity to the sorry realities of a brutal capitalistic
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civilization. A perfect symbol of the contrast in an abbreviated span of
history is found in the Wilson who conceived the vision of a warless world
and a League of Nations and the Wilson who tried to make himself believe
that the treaty of Versailles approximated his ideals.

(Niebuhr 1946: 30)

Niebuhr thus offered, from the beginning, a stark and very compelling portrait of
the challenges and problems facing world politics, at a time when forms of col-
clective identity could, in the name of freedom, empower tyranny, imperialism
and a ‘brutal capitalistic civilization’ in a ‘covert’ way, while claiming their tri-
umphal restraint (MM: 16; IAH: 41). Modern liberal culture was naively con-
venced that the vindication of rationalized identities and rights could emancipate
individuals and communities from tyrannical governments with total disregard
for the fact that such essentialization of identity was exactly what had led to the
rise of those threats in the first place.

Niebuhr’s realism lay therefore in this profound awareness of the extent to
which collective identity relied on the tentative power arrangements at play in
each society and of how, therefore, any form of resistance to potential power
imbalance necessarily had to entail a revision of the ontological premises of
America’s collective Self – indeed of any form of Selfhood (Griffin 1973;
Suzuki 1991). Niebuhr agreed with Wilson in that the political community was
much more than a contract and certainly more than a mere accumulation of indi-
vidual wills. Earlier than any other realists and attuned to many ‘elite theorists’
and existentialist thinkers of his time, Niebuhr had consolidated the protestant
thesis that groups should be regarded, analytically, ontologically and ethically,
as a separate reality from that of its constituent parts, which he eloquently
espoused in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932). This early book concluded
that intergroup relations could hardly reach the level of solidarity, identity-
egotiation, ‘self-transcendence’ and ethical purpose that interpersonal relations
could.11

Note that at this juncture three elements of Niebuhr’s international relations
theory are vividly spelled out. First, there is a clear tension between protestant
individualism and Christian organicism. Second, this tension collapses Nie-
buhrian realism into a sort of negative liberalism where the individual subject
appears on a higher moral standing than the group. Third, Niebuhr’s characteri-
zation of humanity as possessed of transcendental qualities applies only to indi-
viduals which in turn means that organic forms of community are obviously
inferior to contractarian models from a moral viewpoint. For if individuals are
more rational and reasonable than groups, then so are those political com-
munities that are grounded on individual consent and autonomy, rather than on
the instinctive features of tribalism and other natural bonds. In this, Niebuhr was,
just like Wilson, thoroughly liberal, but also profoundly Hobbesian:

he grounds political collectivities on the contract model, which imagines
social life as a coming together of individuals who already in isolation
possess intelligence, imagination and morality. To acquire these, they must have started to struggle free of their original organic context. It is this model … which permits the classic antithesis of ‘moral man’ and ‘immoral society’.

(Milbank 1997: 240–241)

The hypothesis that states are predisposed to international violence precisely to the extent that their legitimacy is constituted on the basis of consenting parts which are themselves naturally competitive never occurs to the American theologian. Niebuhr sees that as an atavism and prefers to safeguard his individualism from any responsibility in the way groups function. This is partly because he sees in that individualism the moral reservoir of possible critique of, dissent from, and correction to the behaviour of groups.

He thus warned that the Wilsonian emphasis on a foreign policy aimed at fostering America’s economic and moral hegemony was no less powerful than an open and explicit form of political imperialism, since it privileged those groups which had come to dominate the power spectrum of modern capitalism (IAH: 41). ‘Wilsonianism’s call for a plural political world of countries engaged in an open international economic network corresponded with the interests of powerful social and political domestic forces’ (Smith, Vol. III, 2002: 620; see Butler 1997). Domestically, the role model of the ‘self-made-man’ which had been paradoxically cultivated as an individual archetypical form for the whole of society was a covert way of affirming capitalism and the lifestyle it necessarily yielded. The very abstract character of this formatted selfhood was therefore as much a vehicle of personal identity-formation as it was of the social alienation of individuals in selves which they had neither created nor chosen, but were willing to embrace individually and, Niebuhr thought, fairly uncritically.

Hence, contrary to Wilson, Niebuhr thought that the emphasis on America’s collective identity and national cohesion, set in terms of the divine purpose of universal democratization, could just as well lead to the exportation of violence and the counterintuitive release of the will-to-power against political enemies. This consisted, after all, of the tragic pattern in international relations for the reasons outlined above. He anticipated that the Wilsonian prospect of establishing a world democracy that could safeguard the rights of (rational) human beings hid a subconscious penchant for American hegemony and imperialism which, even if unintended by Wilson himself, would certainly be used by future administrations in their attempt to advance American national interest. Niebuhr was one of the first public intellectuals to call attention to this perverse side of American foreign policy, colouring it with the Christian-existential sense of irony and tragedy to which the Nietzschean reappraisal of the myth of the fall through the concepts of ‘transvaluation’, the ‘will-to-power’ and ‘eternal return’ pointed (Mulhall 2005: 16–45). Indeed, Wilson wanted to:

‘make the world safe for democracy’. But critics of Wilsonianism sometimes have understandably been concerned that in these circumstances
democracy might not be safe for the world, that it might become the rallying call for an international crusade, waging war in the name of peace and bringing American domination in the guise of national self-determination. What is certainly the case is that Wilsonianism is part of an American bid for international hegemony, and it should be more widely recognized as such by those who might otherwise treat the doctrine as more altruistic and less self-interested than it actually is.

(NSmith, Vol. III, 2002: 620)

Niebuhr also remained a very harsh critic of Wilson’s organic view of politics. He felt that he was way too naïve in believing that political organization can naturally emanate from society and embody it unproblematically, without falling into the temptation of a false sanctification of the group that stands at its very top, or of giving too much power to the elites that claim to be the supposed representatives of the community’s ‘general interest’. For sure, Niebuhr was willing to recognize that:

the sinful self needs these deceptions because it cannot pursue its own determinate ends without paying tribute to the truth. This truth, which the self, even in its sin, never wholly obscures, is that the self, as finite and determinate, does not deserve unconditioned devotion. But though the deceptions are needed they are never wholly convincing because the self is the only ego fully privy to the dishonesties by which it has hidden its own interests behind a facade of general interest.

(NDM I: 206)

The liberal creed, when idealized to the extreme, could lead to the praise of the nation – and hence to the identification of American citizens with the prospect of an American-led soft empire – as the major insurer of security and of collective identity and even of the very sense of personhood of each single individual, divesting him or her out of any sense of inwardness which was an essential asset of Protestantism and of its precept of a direct connection between the individual and God – beyond and above all political loyalty. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, Niebuhr was suspicious of the Hobbesian nexus between security and identity which the social contract tradition established as modern paradigm of human sociability and public peace, and in which one’s sense of individuality and self-determination was a mere derivative of the State’s capacity to secure a priori one’s property, selfhood and freedom. The nationalistic praise of the state meant therefore a return to the ego’s self-idolatry, a circle where statehood and selfhood fed on each other. This move replaced, in turn, the praise of God as a fundamental means to limit human ambition and greed, its major political rendition being totalitarianism as the extreme form of the human attempt to handle its own destiny.

Niebuhr remained, for all these reasons, very suspicious of an American president who, along with his prophetic pro-democratic proclamations, had enough
of a fundamentalist vein to categorically state that ‘God is against every man that plots the nation’s downfall’ (Woodrow Wilson, ‘Address in Denver on the Bible’, 8 May 1911, in Butler 1997: 42). Indeed, Wilson had shown no embarrassment in expressing his vision for America and for the world in a way that suggests his overly confident expectation that other nations would easily embrace American leadership in the path towards the advent of a world community, sanctioned as it had been by God:

The stage is set, the destiny disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way. We cannot turn back. We can only go forward, with lifted eyes and freshened spirit, to follow the vision. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else.

(Wilson, quoted in Butler 1997: 43)

Such religious proclamation could only frighten those who were wary of their beliefs and who had come to realize that the zeal made imperative by faith in God could sometimes turn against religion itself. Indeed, as Anders Stephanson argues, ‘Wilson’s messianic passages about the League of Nations read like a throwback to an earlier era of blood and redemption, the language of transcendence. He was not merely being prophetic. He was being apocalyptic in a seventeenth-century manner’ (1995: 114). Against the Wilsonian essentialization of America as the legitimate forerunner of universal democracy, and the maker of the world community, and against the nationalistic exceptionalism implicit in both – an exceptionalism which was present in European totalitarianism but had sneaked into America’s mission under the banner of its identification with God’s design – Niebuhr advocated a more plural understanding of political allegiance, of community and of the very notions of selfhood and subjectivity which stood them (Butler 1997; Smith 2002; Stephanson 1995; Weaver 1995). Such community ought to be capable of multiplying, rather than narrowing down, the subject’s various possibilities of loyalty to the various available sites of devotion so as to disregard them as unconditionally ultimate and worthy of every sacrifice (Buzan 2004: 124). In the sense that he advocated the possibility of power restraint through the diversification of polities and power centers capable of balancing out each other, he was indeed a ‘realist liberal’ (McWilliams 1962). As Robert Lovin puts it,

Niebuhr, who made his reputation as a political thinker by dissenting from the hopeful consensus of progressive liberal optimism, remained in some ways a liberal in his own mature politics. Politics was for him an instrument of proximate goals, rather than ultimate commitments. He was interested in compromise and pragmatic choices, rather than in theological or ideological purity…. For all his complaints about liberalism, especially in its post-Enlightenment forms, what he wanted, as he acknowledged late in his
career, was a ‘realistic liberalism’ that would combine an appreciation of incremental gains in justice with a realistic assessment of the limits of reason and the power of tradition.

(1995: 160)

Such commitment meant that, for Niebuhr, as much as for other liberals, ‘the form of liberalism embraced within the realist tradition focuses on processes involving the social construction of subjects and political orders, and upon the willful creation of self-limiting agents and polities’ (Williams 2005: 130). If Niebuhr did not explicitly aim at some sort of post-sovereign polity, his methodological and ideational pluralism definitely left that scenario at close bay while simultaneously critiquing the hasty attempts by humans to actualize it in the immediate future. For sure, the attention paid to the theme of the world community was precisely akin to the possibility that the nation-state could hardly be the ultimate form of community that could exhaust man’s highest realizations:

both the individual and the community require freedom so that neither communal nor historical restraints may prematurely arrest the potencies which inhere in man’s essential freedom, and which express themselves collectively as well as individually.

(CL: 10–11)

In order to approach the challenges that the rise of fascism and capitalism posed to political order and justice one ought therefore to reconsider the political construction of modern subjectivity and the apparently ‘secular’ demise of God that had paved the way for those phenomena in the first place. He sought to question not only the role of the Enlightenment in the formation of modern idolatry and ideology but also the way in which political idealism was premised in the social contract tradition. In spite of the contribution of this tradition to realism Niebuhr was convinced that, at least since Hobbes, God had been unduly robbed of the transcendental stature He previously held and that the task ahead was to restore God’s critical transcendence, capable of spiritual inspiration and social mobilization against injustice and oppression, while remaining uncontaminated by the human lust for power and pride.12

In what follows I introduce the Christian critique of political idolatry as one of the most important legacies of Augustinianism, and hence a central feature of Niebuhr’s realism. The Augustinian critique of political idolatry will be presented here as an important starting point for the analysis of Niebuhr’s ‘deistic existentialism’ which was the groundwork of his ethical thinking and of his international political theory (Ramsey 2001: 145). As Chapter 3 shows, Niebuhr sought to highlight the ways in which Hobbes had gradually moved astray from the Augustinian agenda of transcendental critique of paganism preferring to tame the egoism of human being by means of a larger form of collective egocentricity, the ‘Leviathan’. By turning the Leviathan into another instance – albeit the most sophisticated one – of national self-deification and idolatry, Hobbes had revealed
an extreme suspicion to the sort of trust in the metaphysical God which Auguste

tine entertained. Niebuhr thought that, in such a post-Hobbesian context, a return
to Augustine’s defense of the transcendental God was hence an urgent task ofmodern political theory, for only such a (critical) God could constitute a uni-

versal refuge for the safeguard of human communities against the dangers of
paganism, fanaticism and fundamentalism. It is therefore essential to revisit Nie-

buhr’s Augustinianism if we are to understand the departure of the American
realist theologian from the Hobbesian paradigm of international political

thought.

This chapter has described the main features of Niebuhr’s assault on the
Wilsonian idealization of the subject and of America as grounded not on a vol-
untary dismissal of any ideal of selfhood, but on a conscious critique of a spe-
cific type of collective selfhood that came to be regarded by Niebuhr as dominant and also central to the phenomenon of political idolatry as espoused in the idealist and utopian strands of the philosophical discourse of modernity. Despite Niebuhr’s philosophical conservatism about what I have described as the persist-
ence of selfhood, it is nonetheless important to stress those instances of Nie-

buhr’s thinking in which he clearly attempted a deconstruction of certain
idealized notions of political community precisely to the extent that they were

grounded in ontological misassumptions about human nature. In fact, Niebuhr

thought that even though all communities had a certain shared understanding of
human identity and hence of the nature of human beings and of their mutual rela-
tions, he also alerted to the fact that such identities and self-images had been
partly induced by social structures themselves, making selfhood – and especially
rationalistic forms of conceiving the subject – more rather then less subservient
to the power structures of society.

After the overview of Niebuhr’s via media between complete cynicism and absolute idealism that this chapter has laid out, we are now ready to understand how Niebuhr’s political realism occupies a unique position within the history of the realist tradition and the disciplinary path of IR in general. Before explaining how existentialism is crucial in differentiating between Niebuhrian realism and Hobbesianism, I will show that the latter’s departure from the former has its roots in the political thought of Saint Augustine. Niebuhr’s Augustinianism led him to embrace the ideal of democracy not as a good in itself but as a necessary correction to the totalitarian temptations bred through the idealization of collective pride. In what follows I argue in spite of Niebuhr’s understanding of ideology and utopia for the constitution of totalitarianism, he still found it germane to any political project and hence manifested the same sort of ambiva-

lence we witness in Augustine toward earthly politics as both tragically cor-
rupted and morally necessary. From this point onwards, it was clear for Niebuhr
that realism could not afford to neglect the constitutive role of ideas and ideals in the production of those political structures that concentrate power – as much as in those which resist it.
Notes


2 Niebuhr was a prolific writer about American society and what he saw as the major challenges against social cohesion. He wrote articles about the sociological consequences of television – of which he was very critical – as well as the generalization of cars as a means of transportation (see The Cult of the Automobile). Even though these references are of little relevance for his IR theory, they attest to his multifaceted intellectual interests and the eclectic character of his writing. They also suggest that Niebuhr did not mistake the reality of the world for the normative criteria according to which we are to judge it morally or politically.

3 Exception made to more recent studies in the intellectual history of the field such as those of Nicholas Guilhot (2011), Brian Schmidt (1998), Vibeke Tjalve (2008), Michael Williams (2005) and Peter Wilson (1999).

4 For a comprehensive and succinct account of Wilsonianism in both its philosophical and historical dimensions see Tony Smith’s article ‘Wilsonianism’ in Encyclopaedia of American Foreign Policy, Vol. III, 2002. See also Gregory Butler’s excellent essay entitled Visions of a Nation Transformed: Modernity and Ideology in Wilson’s Political Thought (1997) and Steven Bucklin’s Realism and American Foreign Policy: Wilsonians and the Kenan-Morgenthau Thesis (2001) who makes the argument that the major target of realists, Woodrow Wilson, was much more of a realist then an idealist and that the labels do not withstand a closer historical scrutiny. His comprehensive account of Kennan’s and Morgenthau’s opposition to Wilsonianism fails to consider the role that Niebuhr had in the thought of both realist thinkers and how most of what realists consider as idealism was actually a myth the construal of which Niebuhr was highly responsible for reproducing. On the so-called ‘myth of the first great debate’ see Nicholas Guilhot (2011), Brian Schmidt (1998) and Peter Wilson (1998).

5 The recent American presidential elections show that the immunity of American democracy to political tyranny can hardly be seen as the great historical legacy of economic liberalism; instead, a return to republicanism, and to its reliance on the autonomy of the political vis-à-vis economics, seems to be the most obvious choice to ensure that the separation of powers yields the necessary checks and balances and that the balance of power among institutions can remain aware of its role in assuring public order, both domestically and internationally.

6 My use of ‘instrumental reason’ will probably scandalize the more attentive readers of Niebuhr, as he himself never uses the concept as it came to be interpreted in many neo-Marxist traditions, and especially in the Frankfurt School. Note, however, that this employment is not without purpose, as the notion of reason in the Humean sense of a mere means, rather then something which determines the content of rational action internally – i.e. ‘natural reason’ – was precisely what Niebuhr stood against, together with Nietzsche, Weber, Heidegger or Freud, to quote just a few anti-Enlightenment thinkers. Since Niebuhr himself valued reason on occasion, while at other times he criticized it, but never went to the trouble of specifying what he meant by it in any consistent manner, I take him to be saying that as a means for achieving consensus and peace, we must remain aware of how this search must be guided by an awareness of how reason is always informed by the power struggles that it is suppose to transcend in the first place, and hence is always ‘the servant of interest in a social situation’ of conflict where ‘power must be challenged by power’ (MM: 5).

7 I want to leave a word of appreciation and gratitude to the late Michael Foley for his help and discussion about liberalism and liberal democracy which partly feature in this book.

8 For a complete account of the debates and disputes between Niebuhr and Dewey see Rice 1993.
Note that when constructivists argue that identity should be placed as the condition of formation, construction and reconstruction of an agent’s powers and interests, and hence studied in terms of how social identities and specific cultures shape it – i.e. in terms of the agency-structure relation – a realist would argue that such symbolic and cultural settings are themselves the product of power relations which precede agents, and structure them in such a way as to infuse in them a self-regard and self-knowledge as capable or incapable of action, decision and so on – hence Richard Ashley’s claim, quoted further ahead, that ‘knowledge is always constituted in reflection of interests’ (1981: 207). If it is fair to say that identities strongly condition the scope of agency it is an equally valid point that identities have already been set and superimposed by the power structures at play in given social and political systems when one gets to have a sense of what agency is. As the contemporary of Niebuhr, Leo Strauss, once remarked, the concept of ‘culture’ should be interpreted critically as part of a Western hegemonic discourse in which specific analytical units (the ‘culture’, the ‘race’, the ‘nation’ and so on) are posited and ontologized to suit the observational gaze of the scientist or observer, who apparently merely wishes to know, but subconsciously desires to overpower others by knowing (i.e. by identifying) them in such and such way (Strauss and Voegelin 1993: 110). Following Nietzsche, Strauss shows how the term ‘culture’ emerges mostly from the attempt by various European states to frame their colonial periphery in terms of an imperial matrix which they have to label (as ‘culture’) in order to govern, administer, manage, relocate, delete or create by means of knowledge, a knowledge obtained from a distanced scientific and panoptical point of view. Niebuhr himself claimed that if the minimal unit of thought and action is, from a critical point of view, ‘not the mind but the self’ one ought to qualify this rather constructivist point with his own christian personalism, according to which ‘life is power’, but human existence stands beyond life as such and cannot be exclusively derived from experience (DST: 137).

In fact, many recent American presidents have claimed to have read Niebuhr. Regardless of the truth of this statement, it attests to both the centrality and the rather ambivalent position of Reinhold Niebuhr in American culture (Suzuki 1991). His self-image as a powerful and iconic prophet of national destiny and imperial anxiety – unparalleled, in this respect, by any other realist thinker – probably justifies the lack of attention paid to him in more academic circles and especially in IR scholarship.

The division between individuals and groups – culminating in the ethical and moral worthiness of interpersonal relations over intergroup relations – would forever frame Niebuhr’s analysis of international politics, even it became more nuanced towards the end. Most obviously, it carried an important impact upon E. H. Carr’s vindication of a scientific status for IR (Carr 2001; see also Chapter 5). This was, after all, a common view among many social theorists and public intellectuals of his, and the previous generation since Hegel’s description of modernity as the age of the ‘herd animal’ and Heidegger’s follow up with the notion of the alienated ‘they’ which causes the subject to fall back into an overall state of ‘inauthenticity’ (MM: 14; see Heidegger 1962 (origin. 1927); Ortega y Gasset (origin. 1930) 1994; Pareto (origin. 1901) 1991; Michels (origin. 1911) 1962).

This also justifies Niebuhr’s late approximation to Catholic theology, claiming that ‘despite its own corruption of fanaticism, the Catholic version of the Christian faith is at least a bulwark against the idolatry of political and national absolutisms’ (NDM I: 242).
2 Against the pagans

Christian realism as a critique of political idolatry

In claiming to be wise they [the pagans] become fools and exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, animals and reptiles.¹

(Saint Paul AD 55)

We have seen how Niebuhr’s deployment of the category of realism was not incidental, nor was its vagueness. Indeed, Niebuhr often used it in several ways and with different purposes, sometimes to approximate it, other times to demarcate himself from it.² The previous chapter initiated our journey into Niebuhrian Christian realism by setting it up as an unorthodox version of the realist tradition, strongly oriented towards a compelling critique of modern paradigms of collective selfhood, national identity and political idolatry. Niebuhr’s critique of modern anthropocentrism was partly drawn from Augustine’s political thought – even though its existential overtone owes a great deal to the continental assault upon the Cartesian and Enlightenment traditions. But despite his Augustinianism, I want to claim that the paradoxical character and the modern features of Niebuhr’s realist approach to society, politics and the human condition more generally, did much to grant him a specifically foundational role in the modern development of the realist tradition, as much as in the ontological and axiological grounding of modern IR theory. This chapter thus argues that the particular elements of Augustine’s political thought Niebuhr chose to mobilize through his modern existentialist lenses were decisive for his realism – as well as for the departure from Hobbesianism which I describe in Chapter 3.

To be sure, Niebuhr’s critical understanding of modernity and of the birth of what he called the ‘modern man’ is immediately reminiscent of Nietzsche’s predicament of the death of God, in fact, of God’s assassination by ‘men’. Nietzsche’s much acclaimed phrase was reinterpreted by many modern theologians who sought to denounce the deification of human achievements and the sanctification of those mundane symbols which stood at the top of modern and postmodern secular religions. But for Niebuhr the Nietzschean nihilistic predicament was paradoxically aligned with Augustine’s crusade against paganism. Hence, the Nietzschean motto is a useful starting point for our study of Niebuhr’s Augustinianism, in the sense that it brings out the main features of the historical rise of
national sovereignties as the new secular gods, with enough religious power to alienate and subdue individual subjects, and vindicate their lives for purposes unauthorized by a true transcendental God. The death of God thus constitutes the overall theoretical canvas of our depiction of Niebuhr’s thinking, in which the constitution of modern political subjectivity emerges as the key problematic, with important consequences for the evolution of IR theory and of the realist tradition.

In the second part of the chapter, I shed light on the particular understanding of selfhood that Niebuhr was targeting when attempting to dissuade modern utopianism from its intellectual naiveté, prone as it was to the sort of political idolatry that Niebuhr critiqued in Wilson and other idealists. Despite the inexorability of self-love for social and political order, Niebuhr did not rest content with the dominant conceptions of collective subjectivity, political community and self-immunity which the Enlightenment had championed. He would therefore endeavour to criticize the rationalization of collective selfhood carried out by liberal idealism on Augustinian grounds, before embarking on a reconstruction of modern subjectivity in terms of a Christian existentialism, whose ethical concerns could claim some, albeit limited, political bearing.

**False gods**

Niebuhr’s Christian realism was, in both its style and content, deeply indebted to the thought of the classical Christian thinker of the fifth century, Saint Augustine. This part revisits Niebuhr’s reading of Augustine giving particular emphasis to his critique of political idolatry. I do not provide an exhaustive account of Augustine’s influence upon Niebuhr’s political thought; instead, I wish to spell out Augustine’s classical critique of paganism as a starting point for the understanding of Niebuhr’s dualistic approach to politics, the structure of which was already implicit in the title of Augustine’s most important work: *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (413–427) (Augustine 2003). The logic of the dualism between paganism and transcendentalism pointed to a dialectical relation between the two essential planes of human existence, the secular and the spiritual, which in turn correspond to the two traditional topologies of ‘is’ and ‘ought’. For Augustine, the ‘City of God’ constitutes the utopian and transhistorical plane of transcendental love and universal harmony which provides guidance to human behaviour and constitutes an example of ethical conduct, for that is where God rules over the angels; down below is the city of men, ploughed by the fears and anxieties of limited creatures haunted by devils who were once angels, and where, under such conditions, the power struggles and the spectre of death render the evil of government morally necessary (Augustine 2003, Book I, Ch. 32: 43). Let us now look at the ways in which this topological dualism, as much as their interweaving, became Niebuhr’s major theoretical problem and also the major axiological framework onto which he sought to map his existential reflections about international politics.

I should start by spelling out the existential spectrum which is implicit in this dualism. For Augustine, as much as for most of classical Western thinking, the
human being ranges from the everyday animal activity of the earthly city to the highest transcendent possibility of loving communion with God. The former is obviously more habitual than the latter given the fact that, for Augustine, and for Niebuhr as well, there are obvious limits to human agency and the occasions in which these are overcome are rarer than the occasions in which they are not. Many analysts, including Niebuhr himself, have tentatively shown that this sense of limited freedom did not amount to any despairing understanding of the human condition – even though it might appear so for some. Instead, they have stressed that it reveals how the human being can recognize such limits while animals cannot – precisely due to what Niebuhr refers to as humans’ innate ‘religious nature’ (NDM I: 156; Arendt 1998, fn. 1: 8). Therefore, Niebuhr remarks that the importance of Augustine’s existentialism lies less on his stress upon human limits and more on the amazing transcendental freedom of humans, which is precisely what allows them to acknowledge their limitations as much as to position themselves in an outer realm, beyond their given selves: ‘His description of the capacity to transcend temporal process, and of the ultimate power of self-determination and self-transcendence stir a sense of amazement in Augustine and the conviction that the limits of the self lie finally outside the self’ (NDM I: 156). In acknowledging such limits, human beings already assumed a higher transcendental standpoint – made to cohere with that of a single God – against which background they gain perspective over their own powers and abilities (Kroner 2001).

Following Augustine, Niebuhr was hence led to recognize the immanent religiosity of human existence, whose self-awareness as standing at the mercy of the world immediately begs the question as to the whence of such self-reflective capacity. Notwithstanding its inscrutable and mysterious nature, the omnipresent transcendence of God was, however, crucial in the production of any self-understanding or self-image by human beings, indeed, of the very possibility of the subject’s self-awareness. This was after all a point made by Niebuhr’s contemporary Hannah Arendt, who along Augustinian lines observed that

the *quaestio mihi factus sum*, is a question raised in the presence of God, ‘in whose eyes I have become a question for myself’ (x. 33). In brief, the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ is simply: ‘You are a man – whatever that may be’; and the answer to the question ‘What am I?’ can be given only by God who made man. The question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer.

(Arendt 1998, fn. 2: 10–11)

Niebuhr remained strategically silent about the exact characteristics of the kingdom of God. For reasons which I spell out in this chapter and in Chapter 5, the godly city had to remain a mysterious site of eventual fulfilment – a philosophical statement of both the moral desirability, and the historical improbability, of its *possibility*. Its content could not be entirely known to humans, only
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represented in its incommensurability vis-à-vis existence as well as in its historical performativity as the most adequate moral standard that could play a corrective role of human behaviour. To define its exact contours would mean to surrender to the pagan temptation of believing in its actual possibility, irresponsibly adding even more credence to the expectation of its institutionalization in an actual political community or government. Hence, for the reasons which I set out below, the major lesson which Niebuhr drew from Augustine was that of the necessity to maintain the Civitas Dei alive as an utopia, that is, as both unrealizable and extremely necessary for the critique of those political ideals which fell short of ultimate ones – a lesson which, Niebuhr would conclude, not even Augustine had been able to withstand completely (McWilliams 1962).

As I observe later in the book, Niebuhr’s search for an ‘ontology of possibility’ – that is, a general understanding of existence as pointing beyond itself – would lead him to borrow Kierkegaard’s description of fear, anxiety and melancholy to describe the situation in which the human being finds itself primordially, halfway between ‘actuality’ and ‘potentiality’ – to use Heidegger’s terminology which Niebuhr also employs (see Chapter 4). However, before arriving at an ontological theory, Niebuhr had already become drawn into Augustine’s prudential insight that the ‘Love of human praise is to be checked, because all the glory of the righteous is in God’ (Augustine 2003, Book V, Ch. 14: 203). Hence, as a public theologian and a Christian ethicist, Niebuhr’s existential concerns were dovetailed in a theology or in a ‘theistic existentialism’ of Augustinian inspiration (Ramsey 2001: 145). Niebuhr’s understanding of human existence as grounded in the limited intelligibility of God, a premise derived from Augustine. He remarked on several occasions that Augustine had explained, better than anyone else so far, how existence appeared to humans as mysterious and hence as requiring further enquiry into its meaning:

Great is the force of memory, excessively great, Oh my God; a large and boundless chamber; who ever sounded the bottom thereof? yet is this a power of mine and belongs to my nature; nor do I myself comprehend all that I am. Therefore is the mind too strait to contain itself. And where should that be which it containeth not of itself? Is it without it and not within? and how then does it not comprehend itself? A wonderful admiration surprises me, amazement seizes me upon this.

(Niebuhr quoting Augustine in NDM I: 156)

A mysterious God necessarily led to a mysterious existence dominated by the fear of the unknown and the remaining ‘fear of the Love of God’ (Augustine 2003, Book V, Ch. 14: 203). This Augustinian understanding of fear described the anxieties bred by our permanent and immanent loving disposition towards the world and towards its outer dimension. These fears and anxieties often led, Niebuhr thought, to either the sinful surrender to physical desire and sexuality on the one hand, or to the attempt to overpower the world and others through pride (see Chapter 4). Therefore, Niebuhr emphasized the difficulty of
understanding human existence without first attempting to comprehend its relation to God, in light of the old biblical presupposition of the Imago Dei (NDM I: 156). In this light, no valid knowledge of the human condition could be complete without considering God’s role both in existence and in the very possibility of knowing it (Gregory 2008; Griffin 1973).

In attempting to scrutinize a human selfhood anxious to know itself, Niebuhr presented Augustine’s writings as the best example of a full explanation of the existential meaning of the Imago Dei, that is, of how our relation to God impacts directly upon society and politics. It is important thus to stress that the idea that humans are created in God’s image, as conveyed in Augustine’s writings, operates as the central axiom of Niebuhr’s existential and religious thought as much as of his ethical and political theorization, for it is premised in the law of love (Gregory 2008). Before exploring the notions that were central to Niebuhr’s Christian existentialism and political realism, it is hence important to lay out the intellectual frame to which Niebuhr’s major concerns were fitted. To be sure, the themes which were the major concern of Niebuhr’s theorization of human nature – love, anxiety and power – were not an existentialist novelty of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; rather, they had for a long time been an asset of a loosely defined realist lineage of intellectual exchange between ancient and modern philosophy, an exchange which finds its major classic reference in Augustine’s City of God (Patomaki 2003: 36). As it is commonly acknowledged this was the source that carried the greatest influence on Niebuhr’s thinking and part of Niebuhr’s larger intellectual effort to achieve a more comprehensive ontological account of the human condition capable of withstanding an international political theory (Cary 2000; Elshtain in Harries and Platten 2010; Gregory 2008; Mathewes 2001).

This account was systematized in the two volumes of The Nature and Destiny of Man (1941, 1943). Heavily resting on the same Augustinian grounds, Niebuhr’s major work provided the overarching theoretical framework of his entire thinking. It consisted of a lengthy synthesis of past traditions of thought that endeavoured to define human subjectivity in terms of a fundamental nature. The Nature and Destiny of Man represents not only Niebuhr’s most accomplished account of political ideas about human selfhood and collective identity, but also his own positioning in face of the problem of ‘Human Nature’, the title and central concern of the first volume. Published in 1941, roughly two years after Niebuhr’s delivery of the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, it sought to explain how the meaning of existence is inherently related to its mystery and, more importantly, that the fact that existence appears to our eyes as both mysterious and miraculous already signals the transcendental scope of the human condition. In turn, this points to the existence of God and to the principle of our creation in His image, for without these our self-image would never appear to us as essentially limited, and yet loving those who delimit ourselves, suggesting a permanent state of self-estrangement and outer-devotion.

Following this, The Nature and Destiny of Man reproduces Augustine’s view that divine love represents the ultimate ground of life’s meaning as much as of
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its mystery and miraculousness (see Chapter 3). Were it not mysterious, and we would not consider it a miracle; were we not love-seeking creatures and we would not understand mystery as a gap in a meaningful totality as well as a fault in our capacity to become gods, for if we were the miracle of life would not appear to us as exceptional and only intelligible as an act of a unique love – usually referred to, in theological parlance, as the Grace of God (Kroner 2001: 259). In this sense, Niebuhr’s existential approach to the human condition refers back to a theistic system where God and love, as ultimate possibilities, merge into one. Existentially, they appear both at the start of human creation and as its very telos. Politically, they confirm Augustine’s depiction of the city of men as the city that, as mundane and worldly, has corrupted the higher ideal of a ‘kingdom not of this world’ and is hence constantly in a position of anxiety and of longing for that kingdom (NDM I: 35).

In Niebuhr’s narrative, human nature thus appears as constantly striving for a better world and yet always falling short of its perceived destiny of ultimate fulfillment. Indeed, Niebuhr starts off the *Nature and Destiny of Man* by stating that ‘Man has always been his own most vexing problem’ (NDM I: 1). To this categorical statement he adds an important rejoinder, which he sees as the most urgent question in the history of Western thought, and yet also, in his opinion, the most unanswerable of all: ‘how shall he think of himself?’ (NDM I: 1). For the remainder of the paragraph, Niebuhr sets the tone of his criticisms against past thinkers who sought to answer this question but have failed dramatically:

> Every affirmation which he [man] may make about his stature, virtue or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analyzed. The analysis reveals some presupposition or implication which seems to deny what the proposition intended to affirm.

(NDM I: 1)

Niebuhr’s Augustinianism was hence in his conviction that only the faith in a loving God can illuminate the moral deficits of human ontology, making theology and ethics inseparable from it as well as from the prospect of building a realist theory of politics. It certainly seemed particularly suited to the challenges which American society and the interwar period presented to any political theorist or public intellectual who could bear the weight of prophesying both the disenchantment and the hope towards present and future political solutions. It also consisted of the most challenging example of a philosophical system capable of grounding political dissent and social critique, namely due to the incredible amount of creative imaginary and historical detail that Augustine had mobilized to support such framework. Niebuhr was drawn into Augustine’s passion for paradox and irony, emphasizing the ambivalences and the ambiguities which made the political such a peculiar field of human action, so distinct from the ethical realm and yet so much in need of a valid morality (Kroner 2001).

In turn, as I also point out in Chapter 5, Niebuhr was aware of both the normative and the analytical usefulness of the strict division between the two cities:
only from the point of view of a godly kingdom could the state of domestic and international politics be surveyed and scrutinized from a more distant perspective. Augustine thus provided the best critique of idolatry which Niebuhr had seen so far, centrally featuring in his major work, both in its title – ‘Concerning the City of God against the Pagans’ – and right at the introduction. Its framework was useful for Niebuhr not only from the point of view of the domestic order but also extremely incisive about how idolatry could constitute the major challenge to a political order between nations. In the dedication of his seminal opus, addressed to his son, Augustine claims:

Here, my dear Marcellinus, is the fulfilment of my promise, a book in which I have taken upon myself the task of defending the glorious City of God against those who prefer their own gods to the founder of that City.

(2003: 5)

This constituted the threshold of the Christian realist attitude. In its wake, Niebuhr’s project can be read as standing at the heart of the confrontation between two religious worldviews: on the one hand, a pagan worldview demanding that all transcendental schemes should be put at the service of mundane loyalties and social mores, leading to an understanding of God as the ultimate bearer of the legitimacy and righteousness of parochial communities vis-à-vis other communities; on the other hand, the Christian view, requiring the assertion of God’s transcendental character by means of an emphasis upon His meta-ethical and meta-political distance towards any specific people or nation, a sort of loving indifference dictated by the very ethical imperative to love them all (Syse 2000: 257). This latter view was depicted as the only way of guaranteeing the true universal reach of his love, embracing all human beings equally, regardless of their origin or birthplace.

Niebuhr sought to trace these two worldviews as the dominant trends of Western thought and of modern international politics. He identified the latter with his own Augustinian perspective, with its eschatology of world community stressing the need to separate the ‘City of God’ from earthly communities so as to allow for some ethical reserve and political prudence against the dangers of supposedly divine mandates of collective actions. In turn, he identified the former with the millennial and idealistic view according to which national aims required a divine sanction in order to be efficient in the conduct of foreign policy and in the establishment of political order. According to Wilson, America had such a divine mandate and it is thus unsurprising that Niebuhr regarded Wilsonianism as a modern stripe of classical paganism, exchanging ‘the glory of the incorruptible God’ for America’s self-ascribed special responsibility (Augustine 2003: 5).

In fact, among the so-called ‘secularization theorists’, many of them readers of Niebuhr, there seemed to be a shared impression that the pagan worldview had become dominant in modern times, with its emphasis on the possibility of an ‘immanentization of the Spirit’, to be actualized through the works of rational
human beings, whose reasonableness and enlightened maturity could easily be transposed to nations, groups and communities (Voegelin 1987; see also Blumenberg 1985 and Syse 2000). Indeed, what Niebuhr sought to criticize in liberalism – namely by recalling the biblical stories around the theme of human sinfulness as an inexorable and timeless trait of selfhood – was its innate religiosity, manifested in the unstoppable production of ‘false eternals’ (NDM II: 147). With the establishment of Wilsonianism as an important benchmark of American foreign policy, and later with the spread of Fordism in civil society, liberalism had established itself as the new religion of America, only rivalled abroad by other forms of religious creed in political symbols such as Stalinism or Nazism, but sharing with them an irresistible penchant to sanctify ‘modern man’ (NDM I: 154).

The targeting of liberal idealism provided the ideal occasion for the revival of the Augustinian critique of human achievement among theologians and religious thinkers who sought to engage with the disastrous effects of the modern faith in total control over the environment and its teleological understanding of ‘efficiency’ as the end of politics (‘Pious and Secular America’, GU 1956: 3; see also Burtt 2001). In the context of this depersonalizing trend, the philosophical discourse of interwar and post-war periods sought to recall the Jewish prophetic activism as the philosophical source of the modern critique of instrumental reason (Burnstein 2001; Heschel 2001). In spite of their mutual differences, as distinct figures of mid-century European Judaic intelligentsia as Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Karl Lowith or Leo Strauss seemed to share a common concern for the rise of idolatrous tendencies in politics and in international relations and sought the deconstruction, of modern forms of pride and righteousness that only the technological age of popular democracies could have brought to power (Rosenthal 1991).

As in Niebuhr’s case, these thinkers were not only familiar with the thought of Augustine, but with all those major continental references of modern thought which Niebuhr sought to reappraise as important contributors for a renewed, anti-utopian and realistic understanding of human nature and the modern condition. In all of them there seemed to be an acute awareness of the dangers of the idolization of political communities, of which the most ancient voice seemed to be that of the Jewish prophet Amos, loathing the self-glorification of Israelite kings who walked around as if they were gods (Fox 1985: viii). In an impressive genealogical description of the embryonic relations between the meaning of life and collective existence Niebuhr observed that

The fact that the nation cannot be god to primitive man, without the suggestion that a god who transcended the nation claimed it as its very own, is an instructive indication of the complexity of the problem of the meaning of life. Even in early culture there was some realization of the hazardous and insecure character of all human existence, of even the seemingly collective existence. Therefore a god greater than the nation must guarantee its permanence and worth.
Pointing to Amos as the first prophet who succeeded in highlighting the fundamental ‘logic of insecurity’ of human existence made evident in the history of Israel, Niebuhr added that in ‘emphasizing the transcendence of God over Israel, he insisted that the same god who had called Israel to a peculiar relationship might destroy it, if it transgresses his laws’ (BT: 117; see also Fox 1985: viii). Niebuhr’s personal experience seemed to confirm what he had learned from this theological scepticism against idealism. He was well aware that utopianism was not a novel phenomenon, even in spite of its renewed strength in the twentieth century. He observed that even though Judaism represented the first consistent critique of political idolatry forms of utopianism based on human self-idealization and of the identification of a specific self with God – be that of a ruler or a thinker – had been there since at least the ‘Egyptian and Babylonian life and history’, culminating in the known example of ‘Plato’s philosopher-king’ (BT: 178). There was, according to him, a common denominator to all political utopias, and that denominator was filled with religious overtones – if not a product of a human inherent vocation for the religious:

The ideal world would come with an ideal king, who would use its tremendous power for purely ideal ends. Perhaps Plato’s philosopher-king is merely a rationalized version of this old hope of the ideal king.... Perhaps it ought to be mentioned that even in this political hope a transcendent element appears. A king as good as that would have to be sent by God. As early as the messianism of Egypt we have the conception that Re himself, the sun god of Egypt, would come to the world as such a King.

(BT: 178)

The fact that Niebuhr’s period was prolific in the reappraisal of anti-Enlightenment deconstructions of the social and political dynamics of idolatry, of pride as well as of their ambivalent relation with religion, is well documented (Lowith 1993, 2001; Syse 2000; Wolin 2003). His was not the first attempt at a reinterpretation of premodern philosophy under the spell of modern existentialism. Augustine had been a fundamental concern of Heidegger and the preferred dissertation topic of one of his most acclaimed students, Hannah Arendt (1929); in the same way, the thought of Thomas Hobbes had been the object of a profoundly existential reappraisal by Carl Schmitt and, later on, by Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss (Oakeshott 2000: 141; Schmitt 2008; Strauss 1996; Voegelin 1987). Therefore, Niebuhr was definitely not alone in the recovery of classical realist thinkers, nor was he stepping into unknown territory when seeking to translate them into modern existentialist jargon. As Nicholas Guilhot observes:

Mid-century Augustinism was arguably a crucial element in the development of ‘realism.’ It offered an alternative to the teleological and progressive vision of politics associated with interwar liberalism. By disconnecting the realization of eschatological designs and ideals of justice from the fortunes of mundane politics, it also provided an intellectual compass for
navigating the uncertainties of the postwar order. Progress no longer found a transparent translation in history. What mid-century thinkers retained from Augustine was … a conception of politics as an essentially conflictual arena that could, at best, ensure a fragile modicum of peace allowing the denizens of the *civitas terrena* to peregrinate toward the *civitas Dei*. The relation to transcendental values was thus shifted from the imperfect realm of politics, where they remained unattainable, to the conscience of the believer. This irresolvable tension between the imperfect necessities of politics and individual ethics was indeed at the center of many early discussions of statecraft among realist scholars. In reclaiming Augustine as ‘the first great “realist” in Western history,’ Niebuhr was in fact engaged, along with others, in the invention of a realist tradition that was first and foremost a product of its time, rather than a legacy of the past.

(2010: 229)

As I show in Chapter 3, Niebuhr’s reconstruction of Augustinianism thus had to be fuelled by more recent sources of European philosophy. Neither Realism nor Augustinianism ‘constituted “established traditions”’ (Guilhot 2010: 229). His reading of Augustinian and Hobbesian themes allowed him to reconstruct a political vision capable of encompassing all the elements of the ‘human situation’ that previous metaphysical systems had failed to gauge sufficiently – a process in which Kierkegaard played perhaps an even more important role than Augustine, and certainly more than other protestant thinkers like Luther or Calvin (Kroner 2001: 259). Regardless of how Niebuhr succeeded in demarcating himself from Augustine as much as he wished, he did recover some themes from the *City of God* – such as divine love, human sinfulness or existential anxiety – in order to couch the human condition in more generous and flexible ways than the Augustinian strict dualism allowed for. Without losing sight of the fundamental ambivalence between the transcendental realm of ultimate fulfilment and the historical, Niebuhr felt that Augustine had left us in the dark about the ways in which the former could stop the latter from falling into despair and disbelief regarding the possibility of moral improvement and partial fulfilment.

Surely, for Niebuhr at least, Augustine’s *City of God* did not leave much scope for human progress and his parsimonious treatment of how it actually was to play out ‘in the world’ amounted not only to a sort of political conservatism at the end, but could also turn actual politics into something even worse than it is, given his cynical pronouncement upon the ‘city of men’. Therefore, Niebuhr took upon himself the task of *liberalizing* Augustine by studying the complex web of relations between the ‘godly’ and the ‘ungodly’ (GU 1958), that is, by looking at how ideals play a role in politics – indeed, how both realms were inextricably connected despite their very distance. But Niebuhr’s focus on the themes which this book seeks to explore cannot be understood outside of this overall Augustinian framework. They only obtain in the context of Niebuhr’s appropriation of the Augustinian dualism of the two cities, because they are precisely meant to characterize the theo-ontological paradox of human selfhood,
A critique of political idolatry

permanently caught between God and beast. Niebuhr set out to reconstruct Augustine’s meta-theoretical divide only to posit those existential manifestations which, when phenomenologically interpreted, could lead us to a better characterization of the dialectic between human actuality and potentiality and between the reality of power politics and the transcendence of our highest ideals.

Furthermore, Niebuhr believed that every conception of knowledge or any theorization of human affairs must be premised upon some ontology, that is, on a more or less explicit understanding of what it means for the human being to be (NDM I: 1; see also Tillich 2001). For Niebuhr, any theory necessarily presupposes a certain familiarity with, or is derived from, more primary meanings which are given in the immediacy of our day-to-day existence precisely because we can transcend any specific mode of existence, at least in theory. His political and international theory is not an exception to that rule, nor is it a coincidence that Niebuhr sought to spell out his own ontological presuppositions but also, and most importantly, their theological underpinning. As Niebuhr had claimed in one of his later works, ontology alone, understood as ‘a science of being, to be distinguished from the particular sciences which analyze the structure of particular beings’ (SDH: 76), could not sufficiently gauge the root of life’s mystery and hence of the human being’s anxious propensity to seek meaning by projecting himself outside of mere existence through power and pride. In this sense, Niebuhr would probably have agreed with Colin Wight’s founded suspicion that all epistemological and disciplinary debates within IR – or any social science for that matter – come down to major, albeit often hidden, disagreements regarding their ontological premises and assumptions, as many critical theorists claim today (Wight 2006: 2). But he would certainly add to this claim the important rejoinder that all ontologies presuppose, in turn, an understanding of God and of the good and that therefore all ontological systems are also necessarily grounded on metaphysical or ethical premises – and that, in turn, these come down to theological truths.

Indeed, according to Niebuhr, even Augustine had gone too far in thinking that the City of God could ever be identified with earthly institutions such as the Church. Niebuhr thought that the old Greek ideal of ecclesia came very near to the sort of immanentism that Augustine denounced in earthly political institutions. This point in particular represented an added difficulty to the already complicated relationship between reality and utopia, between the political and always corruptible character of the possible and the moral dignity of the impossible. While contributing to the awareness of the necessity of a transcendental realm for the critique of mundane existence, Augustine had placed the bar too high for the dialogue between the two realms to bear any actual fruit. In turn, in attempting to privilege the Church as the forbear of the kingdom of God, Augustine seemed to be falling into the trap which he accused in paganism: that of seeking to claim a transcendental stature to a parochial loyalty or a special community.

Hence, Niebuhr’s protestant reaction was to downplay these features and return to those instances of Augustine’s writings which sought to express moments of pure spiritual fruition where our immanent drives reveal their transcendental backbone and where our innermost anxieties and fears unveil their
hidden roots in the love of God for creation. As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, those experiences had to be brought to light, thematized and worked out in such a way as to reinstate the principle of the *Imago Dei* as the foundational and existential premise of the human condition. For the remainder of this chapter I will conclude our account of Augustine’s impact on Niebuhr by focusing on Niebuhr’s unorthodox problematization of modern idolatry. His philosophical critique of idolatry was undoubtedly the most important trace of his Augustinianism as well as of his realism. Augustine is therefore an interesting starting point for charting Niebuhr’s theoretical output, and for analysing his mode of argument as well as his philosophical method. At its core lay a paradoxical framing of selfhood in terms of the ambivalent existential swing between transcendence and immanence, theology and ontology, ethics and politics, which offers an important guideline for his readers. In what follows I frame his approach to the major challenges that assailed modern politics by setting it up in relation to what he perceived as the devastating political outcomes of the loss of the Christian paradigm of the transcendent God.

**God reborn**

This part concludes our preliminary assessment of Niebuhr’s take on modern politics, which he rooted in a Christian understanding of human action as tragi- cally stranded between the demand for a transhistorical *telos* and the attempt to place it in the course of history. As such, modernity was depicted as a paradoxical stage of human history in the sense that it rejected the moral necessity of having one single transcendental God standing above all earthly sovereignties – while waiting in anguish for His ultimate coming. Important religious thinkers such as Karl Lowith or Paul Tillich followed Niebuhr in believing that the dismissal of the Christian God constituted the symbolic and cultural background of the idealization of selfhood which in turn explained the modern rise of tyranny and domination (Lowith 1993, 2001; Syse 2000; Wolin 2003). According to them, ‘modern man’ had evolved from a position of spiritual communion with the world and with God, to the public usurpation of God’s place for egotistical and self-glorifying purposes. Niebuhr saw this overall frame as containing many of the essential elements that could allow us to understand modern social and political developments, from the sanctification of collective egos in political tyrannies up to their dissolution in anarchistic utopias.

The political leaderships of the first half of the century – from Woodrow Wilson to Adolf Hitler – were, in their very distinct ways, representative of the modern tendency to equate nations with gods. Against that trend, Niebuhr set himself the task of rescuing God from what others had characterized as the assassination of God. Niebuhr asked himself the same question that Nietzsche’s character the madman posed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885):

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and
mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

(Nietzsche 2006: 47)

This problematic stood behind Niebuhr’s belief that the religiosity of the modern self, the centrality it had gained and the pride that accompanied the vindication of identity of the nation, the proletariat, the race, the Empire and so on, were killing God (‘Faith and the Sense of Meaning in Human Existence’ in FP, New York: George Braziller 1968 [origin. 1966]). God was dead in the sense that all modern notions of identity and subjectivity, political and existential, had become strongly reliant on the idea of self-creation, that is, on the belief that the human being is actually able to create himself and control his environment to an endless degree, without any regard for his finitude, his sinful character or his dependence upon the environment. Read in this light, Niebuhr’s project can be understood as that of bringing God from the dead in order to remind the human being of his contingency on Earth and of the timely urgency to humble those apparently harmless ideals.

But Niebuhr’s appeal to this sort of agential restraint did not represent a call for inaction or indecisiveness; in fact, Niebuhr had criticized the social pacifism of Christian mystics and even traditionalists, whose ‘desire for perfection’, expressed in terms of the demand for ‘selflessness’, ‘invariably express itself parasitically’ (‘The Impulse for Perfection and Community’ in GU: 115; see also ‘A Critique of Pacifism’ and ‘Pacifism and the Use of Force’ in LJ 1957). His was rather an appeal to our capacity to take meaningful action in face of our deepest uncertainties. This action ought to take place by means of an internal dialogue with God, whose absolute transcendence could provide humans with a sense of the potential fallibility and assured ambivalence of their actions, in face of an uncertain future. His was a project against pacifistic conformism as much as it stressed the relativity of moral righteousness in all its incarnations – from fascism to Stalinism, from fundamentalism to imperialism (Rosenthal 1991). Niebuhr regarded most human-made disasters, not as the product of ‘men’s’ lack of genius, or of some sort of an inherent evil in human nature, but rather as a consequence of the constant attempt to realize impossible ideals, turning good prospects into bad outcomes. Indeed, as Nietzsche said, men had ‘become gods simply to appear worthy of it’ (quote above). In face of this challenge, modernity’s task was one of restraint of power, resistance to domination, political critique and philosophical deconstruction of the hasty attempts to materialize the city of God.

Hence, as stated at the start, it is through Niebuhr’s critique of liberalism – in particular of its irresistible propensity for idolatry – that one realizes how his realist standpoint evolved into a vindication of all those past traditions that sought to oppose the various historical incarnations of a messianic politics. This messianic or millennial view consisted of a divine sanctioning of human reason.
and political authority which claimed for itself the responsibility of carrying out God’s plan on Earth. Wilson was, in Niebuhr’s view, the American epitome of this trend – and one with a great political impact. The philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment, with its pivotal centre in the ideal of the autonomy of the individual, had hence given way to its empirical application through the hands of social scientists such as John Dewey – who was one of Niebuhr’s favourite targets among American intelligentsia of the interwar period – or decision-makers such as Woodrow Wilson. Central to its underlying liberal messianism was not only the idea of progress, but of free agency defined in the Hobbesian terms of negative liberty (from hindrances) thus begetting absolute knowledge of, and total control over, the environment. Human perfectibility depended therefore on the establishment of political and peaceful conditions for progress towards freedom from nature. Certainly, Niebuhr did not disagree with this liberal premise completely and to that extent he remained deeply attached to some sort of democratic liberalism:

Man requires freedom in his social organization because he is ‘essentially’ free, which is to say, that he has the capacity for indeterminate transcendence over the processes and limitations of nature. This freedom enables him to make history and to communal organizations in boundless variety and in endless breadth and extent. But he also requires community because he is by nature social. He cannot fulfil his life within himself, but only in responsible and mutual relations with his fellows.

(CL: 10–11)

In his rare optimistic moments, Niebuhr remarked that science and technology had historically guaranteed some increase in human freedom and opened the way for larger horizons of historical fulfilment – even though historical self-realization could never amount to a true fulfilment, to be found only outside and at the end of history, in God (NDM II: 76).

Above all, however, Niebuhr suspected that their role remained ambivalent regarding the pursuit of an ultimate good. They certainly did not guarantee its achievement. In this regard he was much attuned to the Heideggerian critique of technology which emerged in the anti-positivist writings of contemporary political philosophers such as Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Karl Lowith and Hans Morgenthau (Lebow 2008: 18; Syse 2000: 256; Wolin 2003). Like these, and unlike other liberals, he was deeply aware of the irony of human freedom, as of the tragic history of its development, seen as an unstoppable swing between moral harmony with nature and the sheer impulse to overpower nature in order to satisfy animal desires. The irony was in the fact that while the human being needed to acquire more power in order to set himself free, human power remained, at the same time, the greatest threat to human freedom. Modernity was therefore confronted with a paradox: in the process of gaining more freedom through power, freedom had come to be obsessively identified with power.
It is in this sense that Niebuhr’s defence of democracy can be read as an advocacy of the only regime that he saw capable of maintaining order without surrendering to the destruction of ultimate horizons which could allow humans to look beyond those more immediate aims which science and economics were set to serve. The durability of democracy required a difficult freedom, not the easy freedom of contemporary consumerist societies, where, as Marx had shown, work had been alienated by capital and had hence detracted the human being from his role as co-worker of God and the creator of new forms of justice, equality and community (MM). The corruption of the relation of freedom to ultimate fulfilment happened when the structures of ‘capitalistic civilization’ identified the former with the enjoyment of commodities, thus equating the fulfilment of society as a whole with the material happiness of its parts. Freedom had come to mean, in this context, the power to consume goods, while fulfilment, understood as material happiness, was no longer attached to any ideal of ultimate good. In this sense, Niebuhr would have agreed, God was slowly dying. The deification of worldly institutions and political leaderships – of the nation-state itself – was, for Niebuhr, a dangerous sign of a moral narrowness and ‘spiritual decay’ caused by the shrinking of metaphysical horizons and their reduction to instrumental reason as well as to the aims of productivity and efficiency. Niebuhr thus disagreed that ‘we [Americans] have been able to give ourselves to technics with greater abandon than any other nation’ (‘Pious and Secular America’, GU 1956: 3).

In his earlier writings, Niebuhr often expressed the view that there were new covert forms of power emerging, a power operating in different ways, disguising its centralization and monopolization by the few, under the illusory claim of its supposed distribution (IAH: 41; see Chapter 4). In face of this challenge, he endeavoured to recast the notion of the balance of power as a regulative principle capable of acting as an antidote against fundamentalism, idolatry and tyranny (Murray 1997: 181; Rengger 2000: 43). Niebuhr’s realist understanding that ‘only power can restrain power’ and that as such power can never ‘remain ethical’ led him to a traditionally realist prioritization of order over justice – even when acknowledging that no order can sustain itself for a long time without at least appearing to be just (CL: 10; DST: 137; Smith 1990: 144). This advocacy was directly related to the possibility, indeed the necessity, of tentative equilibriums between different powers in society, which Niebuhr saw as necessary for any ideal of justice to take root. Niebuhr would obviously attempt to bring the balance of power into international politics, already a century-old regulative principle of American society and a central concept in earlier realpolitik doctrine. At its core, however, lay a theological premise of the mutual prudential recognition of human frailty, rather then the calculism of the economic interest of competing individuals or states. The point was hence to balance out the ‘self-love’ of the various actors without falling into the total neglect of selfhood which ultimate justice demands from the subject but which, in his view, could also lead to a generalized complacency with violence and tyranny (Scheuerman 2011: 30–34; Williams 2005: 130).
This was a very difficult balance to strike. Niebuhr was as concerned with tyranny as he was with the potential lack of opposition to it that some liberal views seemed to endorse and which created the conditions for more tyrannical governments to emerge. The dangers of American isolationism were thus exposed, and Niebuhr clearly targeted Franklin Roosevelt’s first mandate as it sat quietly in face of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. In realizing how self-hood had accommodated the sin of pride and egotism throughout history the modern subject could enter an age of self-denial and collective martyrdom and hence lose his or her strength and capacity to produce the social change that was needed to achieve a better, and more just world. In light of this dangerous deception, Niebuhr observed that ‘the justice of the community does not require this selflessness. It requires the expression of competing and balanced vital capacities for the sake of community’ (‘Pious and Secular America’ in GU: 115). Hence, as Niebuhr’s contemporaries Karl Lowith and Eric Voegelin advocated, the demand here seemed to be one of a moderate view of government, not an unreflective call for ‘less government’ nor an unrestrained belief in ‘big government’. Government must not become an instrument of oppression, but neither can governmental institutions be jettisoned…. There is to be found in these thinkers a strong warning against all extremism in politics and against all attempts at absolutizing and divinizing the political realm. From this perspective it seems that the more fervent forms of religious conservatism of the so-called religious right as well as the more extreme versions of economic liberalism that comprise part of the political right, should be viewed with skepticism and watchfulness by conservatives, not least due to their absolute character as well as their anti-institutionalism.

Niebuhr resorted to the conservative opposition between freedom and order only to argue for a progressive political system capable of producing resistant subjectivities, arming citizens with enough sense of a prudential dissent and self-critical wisdom to debunk America’s most idealized self-images, be that of the legitimate inheritor of the British empire or that of the ultimate forbearer of Jewish exceptionalism. Niebuhr thus claimed that ‘democracy can therefore not be equated with freedom. An ideal democratic order seeks unity within the conditions of freedom; and maintains freedom within the confines of order’ (CL: 10). In Niebuhr’s view, the modern obsession with the national ego was directly related to the centrality which reason had come to occupy in the lives of every individual and of every nation. Western metaphysics pointed more and more to instrumental reason as the key element that distinguished men from beasts and brought them closer to God – and this was even more the case for nation-states than for the single individual. He praised Augustine and Hobbes – as well as the later existentialisms of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche – for their capacity to show how human reason was deeply embedded in nature and how
the intellectual and rational impulse had historically surrendered to passions and interests. Hence, Niebuhr diagnosed, the rational mind remained ‘on the circumference, serving merely as an instrument of the anxious self’, something which was even more self-evident in the relations between collective selves (DST: 5). Human nature was, to an unimaginable degree, caught up in the pursuit of power which betrayed those elements of animality that it sought so desperately to escape through reason.

For Niebuhr, as much as for many others of his generation, nationalism and imperialism grew out of what Voegelin described as the *immanentization of the eschaton*, that is, the ‘absolutizing’ of ‘finite’ perspectives (McWilliams 1962: 877; Syse 2000; Voegelin 1987: 24). This included, above all, the embodiment of divine standards and qualities, capacities and possibilities, in the human subject – leading to the ‘death of God’ and His replacement by political sovereignty. He referred to this as the process of ‘disavowal of otherworldliness’ which

will seem very natural to American observers even today; but it was, unfortunately, accompanied by the frontier’s rather sentimental ‘thisworldliness’, that is by the hope that the frustrations of life, as known in the old world would disappear on the frontier where ‘liberty and equality’ seemed for the first time realizable ideals. Thus, the Enlightenment and evangelical Christianity were merged on the American frontier and the result was that note of sentimentality which has characterized both political and religious thought in our nation ever since. ‘If one compliments an American’, declared De Tocqueville, ‘on the virtues of the American life, he will take the compliment for granted and enlarge upon the vices and corruptions of European nations’.

(‘Pious and Secular America’, GU 1958: 9)

Niebuhr was concerned with the possibility that, as the Church had once been made the legitimate representative of the *Civitas Dei* on Earth, the United States – and the project of a League of Nations – were now ready to embrace that aim wholeheartedly, thus exhausting in this sort of benevolent empire the possibility of a perfect world community: ‘The heaven of evangelical Christianity and the utopia of the Enlightenment were, thus, blended on the frontier. *And it was an achieved utopia, not a future one*. America was a kind of Kingdom of God’ (‘Pious and Secular America’, GU 1958: 9). Faced with this scenario he attempted to draw theological resources against the apocalyptic and millenial actualization of Wilson’s liberalism, famously summarized in his characterization of the Great War as ‘the war to end all wars’. It was precisely the righteousness of Wilson’s all-or-nothing dychotomy that Niebuhr found dangerously extremist:

Wilson … spoke famously in the name of humanity and rendered all enemies by nature therefore inhumane and/or criminal. In doing this he was, as he himself said, merely expressing American traditions which were also those of humanity at large.

(Stephanson, *in* Dalby and Tuathail 1998: 77)
This vindication of a godly approval of political action corresponded to a sub-
version of the existential cathartic purpose of any divine stance, which ought to
remain as a meta-ethical reserve against any false assumption of ultimate author-
ity and political destiny. Niebuhr remarked:

Genuine piety sets up an authority for the individual conscience which pre-
vents the state or the community from becoming an idolatrous end of human
existence. Religious faith makes a rigorous affirmation ‘We must obey God,
rather than men’, in opposition to all tyranny.

(‘Pious and Secular America’ in GU: 6)

Naturally, Niebuhr thought that liberalism was very different from other kinds of
millennial experiences – and he became more convinced of this throughout the
1930s and 1940s. Indeed, it was precisely to the extent that liberalism still
offered some resources against all kinds of fundamentalism, that he was willing
to outstrip liberalism of the remnants of the modern trend to constitute the indi-
vidual purely in terms of his or her absolute allegiance to any institutionalized
ideal. In this sense, ‘democracy, a “perennial necessity”, had to be extricated
from the “bourgeois” associations of its origin’ (McWilliams 1962: 877). The
moral life of the subject had to open up to, and be constantly reminded of, its
meta-ethical potential, without which society would end in moral stagnation and
political apathy, thus paving the way for tyranny. However, in order to preserve
that potential – the possibility of endless possibilities – the reformist projects of
modern decision-makers and educators had to concede to the fact that it was of
the nature of human possibilities that they cannot be fully exhausted in reality.

Even though as a category Niebuhrian realism did claim a philosophical dis-
position that can be reduced to a set of principles or core ideas – and namely to
what I have described so far as the Augustinian anti-paganism – the vindication
of a realist attitude consisted essentially of a rhetorical strategy of opposition to
certain forms of liberal rationalism and idealism, namely that propounded by
Woodrow Wilson and his vision for America and the world. In this sense, Nie-
buhrian realism can be interpreted as a speech-act in the way suggested by
Quentin Skinner’s approach to political thought. Niebuhr was doing something
by uttering the label, as well as by describing a number of classic or modern
authors as ‘unrealistic’ – an adjective he used even more than ‘realistic’. Realism
was a handy label for a theory of international politics that placed American
foreign policy halfway between the excesses of liberal and imperial overstretch
and the shortsightedness of isolationism (see Chapter 5).

If anything, Niebuhr’s ambiguous realism was a call for the tradition to ques-
tion itself, before embarking on deeper developments. Approaching American
responsibility in global governance in ‘realistic’ fashion meant that Niebuhr had
to rethink the conceptions of collective action that remained constant throughout
the intellectual history of the realist tradition. This is why Niebuhr’s Augustini-
anism was far from an orthodox form of political realism and the philosophical
and existential depths of his critique of political idolatry, spelled out in this
chapter, provide a clear picture of Niebuhr’s complex and unorthodox Christian realism. In light of the need to realistically combine the pessimistic awareness of the autonomy of the political and the optimistic concern for ethics, Niebuhr developed a sustained critique of that figure who had contributed the most to the naturalization of the myth of human autonomy and political sovereignty: Thomas Hobbes. It is to Niebuhr’s critique of Hobbes that we now turn so as to understand his departure from the English political philosopher as a fundamental aspect of Niebuhrian realism, and one which sheds light on the novelty of the international thought of the American theologian.

Notes

2 For an overall impression of different versions of interwar realism in IR theory see Bucklin 2000, Clinton 2007, Craig 2003, Elman 2014, Guilhot 2011, Molloy 2006, Schmidt 1997 and Tjalve 2008. With the exception of Craig and Tjalve, on which I heavily rely to make some of my points in this book, all of these accounts remain incomplete as they neglect Reinhold Niebuhr’s particular input into both the tradition and in the field.
3 Critical accounts of the impact of Augustine’s ideas on modern political are numerous. With regard to his reception in international political thought and in twentieth-century realism see De Margerie 1967, Gregory 2008, Gilkey 2001, Loriaux 1992 and Mathewes 2001 to name just a few.
4 Niebuhrian existentialism was indeed very much aligned with the core themes of the continental tradition, especially in its theological strands. Niebuhr points to an existence which is always separated from God and yet always reaching for his transcendental love (ICE: 114–115). This love, which features in Niebuhr as the ultimate meta-ethical and meta-political norm, is revealed in human experience through justice (at the collective level) and through self-knowledge (at the individual level). Both of these manifestations also found their corrupted counterpart in pride – the assertion of the self as if it were a god – or in the dissolution of the self – the loss of self into bestiality. Niebuhr’s existentialism lies hence in the idea that the transcendence of God and of love are revealed in existential immanence which means that (1) the centrality of God cannot dispense with history and nature as important vehicles of divine revelation; and (2) that history and the immanent realm of nature cannot be valued and properly analysed unless they assume themselves a transcendental sphere which pulls the human being out of its worldliness and into the realization of his destiny beyond nature.
5 Paul Ramsey was the first commentator of Niebuhr’s work to spot the signs of a hidden existentialism beneath the dense theological jargon of his Christian realism. His article ‘Love and Law’ remains the most profound analysis of the connections between Christian realism and philosophical existentialism, as well as of Niebuhr’s critique of Sartrian existentialism, which, however, never led Niebuhr to abandon existentialism completely as an important philosophical source of ontological and religious reflection (Ramsey 2001).
6 For a very interesting comparison between Niebuhr and Alfred North Whitehead on how understandings of ontology and of subjectivity are necessarily backed by theology and notions of God see Griffin 1973.
7 Even though this book claims an existentialist pedigree in Niebuhrian realism, I sideline with most analysis of Niebuhr’s political theology as owing most of its insights to Augustine. What I do claim, however, was that the central themes of his IR
A critique of political idolatry

theory – such as anarchy and community, anxiety and fear, love and justice, prudence and faith, human nature and political destiny – while being derived from Augustine, were read through the magnifying glass of existentialism, which allowed Niebuhr to demarcate himself from Hobbes while keeping with the realist tradition of IR theory. Even though the Nature and Destiny of Man appeared to be the least ‘political’ work in the context of his intellectual devotion to international relations – a concern that is given full scope in other works such as Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) or The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944) – this is the book that contains the key ontological claims that allow for a clear and systematic understanding of Niebuhr’s political views and their place in the intellectual history of realism and of IR theory. In it, the triangulation between theology, ethics and ontology features as the central axis of the existential balance between man’s ‘nature’ and his ‘destiny’. This dualism between the historical realm of immanence and that of transcendence also features in other titles such as Faith and History, published in 1948, and The Self and the Dramas of History, which appeared in 1955. Niebuhr’s views about international relations thus find their philosophical ground in the theological axis between transcendence and immanence, which in turn represent a translation of the Augustinian contrasting dualism between the ideal city and mundane human polities.

For the present purposes, I will focus mainly on the two volumes of The Nature and Destiny of Man as they provide, perhaps with more detail than any other of Niebuhr’s writings, a fundamental insight into his understanding of human selfhood set in reference to Augustine.

In Chapter 3 I characterize further Niebuhr’s theology as aiming at an overlap between ontology and ethics, culminating in a sort of ‘ontological ethics’ or ‘ethical ontology’ where the ethic of love features as preceding and culminating an existence characterized as anxiously longing (for love).

In regard to the challenges which American political science faced during the interwar and postwar years it is worth mentioning Eric Voegelin’s The New Science of Politics (1987, [origin. 1952]) and Hans Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations with more than six re-editions since it first came out in 1948. As Morgenthau would acknowledge in a letter to Hannah Arendt, Voegelin’s book was a must-read for any political scientist or theorist and Niebuhr would later recognize Morgenthau’s influence on his own ideas as well.

Augustine is usually presented as the oldest source of Niebuhr’s realist critique of national pride and political hubris, but it is important to note that older religious sources of Jewish prophetic thinking also featured in Niebuhr’s Christian realism and were even a source of inspiration for Augustine himself, as well as for other Christian thinkers before him like Saint Paul (Kroner 2001). Augustine had sought to import Paul’s reformulation of the ancient Jewish critique of political self-righteousness into a Christian theology capable of defending the Roman Church against paganism. Indeed, Augustine’s introduction to the City of God provides fruitful guidance into the key challenges that assailed Roman Christians in his time. His concern for the dangerous liaisons between philosophical anthropocentrism and pagan idolatry could be traced back to traditional Judaic conceptions of God’s transcendence over human governments and of Paul’s attempt to establish God’s universal love towards all peoples on Earth – and hence of no people or king in particular. It is thus important to read Christian Realism in light of the Pauline critique of political idolatry, since it inspired Augustine’s own critique of paganism. In Paul’s Epistle to the Romans the critique of idolization is thematized for the first time as an existential and political problematic in its own right (Paul 1932: 49–50; vv. 22, 23, 24, the Epistle is said to have been produced between the years of AD 55 and 58 but there is no precise date as to when the Apostle actually wrote the letter). Indeed, Augustine himself quoted the Apostle’s critique of those who dismissed the transcendental God and who ‘have exchanged the
glory of the incorruptible God for images representing corruptible man, or birds, beasts or snakes’ (Paul, quoted in Augustine 2003: 312). It was only with Augustine, however, that Paul’s critical call against the temptation of nations and governments to claim a special and chosen status in the eyes of the transcendent God, would be systematized and articulated in a theoretical treatise.

13 An important analysis of this particular aspect of Niebuhr’s political thought can be seen in two recent Italian books on Niebuhr: Gianfranco Sabattini’s Reinhold Niebuhr e la critica della democrazia (2005) and Luca Castellin’s Il Realistadelle distanze (2014).

14 There are more studies relating Niebuhr to other figures of the realist and existentialist streams of political theory and philosophy of religion. Also, the category of realism has recently been subjected to a considerable enlargement so to accommodate other intellectuals who were not traditionally perceived as realist thinkers such as Leo Strauss (Rengger in Bell 2009) or Hannah Arendt (Owens in Bell 2009). For an interesting comparison between Niebuhr and Levinas see Flescher 2000; between Niebuhr and Jurgen Moltmann see Cornelisson 1993; between Niebuhr and Habermas see Ahn 2009; between Niebuhr and Ricoeur see McCann 1980; between Niebuhr and John Gray see Markham in Harries and Platten 2010; between Niebuhr and Dewey see Rice 1993; between Niebuhr and Rawls see Gregory 2008 and Wright 2011; between Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain see Cooper 1985; between Niebuhr and Morgenthau see Tjalve 2008.

15 For a refreshing account of the history of this concept see John Bew’s new book Realpolitik: A History (2016).

16 In this respect, Niebuhr’s theorization of modernity as the gradual secularization of metaphysical expectations on Earth and Voegelin’s acclaimed formulation of the ‘immanentization of the Christian eschaton’, or what he described as ‘Gnosticism’, is strikingly similar (Voegelin 1987; also see Syse 2010). In a book of formidable reach, which Morgenthau would strongly recommend to Hannah Arendt in a letter, Voegelin claimed that ‘Gnosticism itself underwent a process of radicalization, from the medieval immanentization of the Spirit that left God in his transcendence to the latter radical immanentization of the eschaton as it was to be found in Feuerbach and Marx’ (1987: 188; see also Lowith 1993). Equally striking is the absence of any comparative study of both thinkers, given the content of their writings, their purposes and their shared attempt to triangulate existentialism, phenomenology and theology.

17 See the introduction for a discussion of Quentin Skinner’s methodology and why I found his particular use of Austinian speech-acts both useful but also problematic.
3 Fear God
Human nature redefined

For, being assured that there be causes of all things that have arrived hitherto, or shall arrive hereafter; it is impossible for a man, who continually endeavoureth to secure himself against the evil he fears, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in a perpetual solicitude of the time to come.¹

(Thomas Hobbes 1651)

In the previous chapter, I offered an account of the intellectual environment in which Niebuhr was writing (Augustinianism) as well as of the political context to which he was reacting (Wilsonianism). I claimed that Niebuhr’s understanding of realism owed greatly to his demarcation from Woodrow Wilson, the paragon of the idealistic and messianic righteousness which Niebuhr sought to counter by recasting the Augustinian suspicion towards religious paganism and political idolatry. However, Niebuhr was not so sure that the voluntarism and righteousness which one could easily spot in modern idealism was totally absent from the strands of political cynicism and moral pessimism that apparently opposed the perceived naiveté of utopians. Indeed, he thought that these idealistic features also abounded in so-called realist approaches to politics and in particular to human nature and social agency. Therefore, the specific purpose of this chapter will be to look at how Niebuhr critically engaged with the theme of the fear of death, a core, albeit usually neglected, theme of the thought of that English thinker whose work is usually portrayed as foundational of modern liberalism and a major – if not the major – benchmark of the realist tradition: Thomas Hobbes.

This chapter claims that Niebuhr represented a turning point within the realist canon of political thought precisely because he revolutionized its ontological ground, paving the way for a paradigm shift of the greatest magnitude regarding the realist characterization of human nature dominated by power, desire and fear. In this respect, no modern realist went as far back and as deep down as he. Niebuhr’s realism was so profound, radical and complex in its ramifications – and contradictions – that one wonders if the label can still be used by realists in any meaningful or rigorous way. As this chapter makes evident, it certainly cannot contain all the richness and subtlety of Niebuhr’s thinking. By revisiting...
Niebuhr’s approach to Hobbesian fear of death, and by relating it to anxiety, this chapter will also suggest some of the ways in which the realist tradition, and especially the place of Hobbes within it, might be reengaged in novel and meaningful ways.

The Hobbesian ‘natural’ revolution: fear death, not God

Niebuhr was both very interested in, and in profound disagreement with, the Hobbesian view of human nature. He agreed with what seemed to be a descriptive element of this characterization – up to the point where it actually turned Hobbes’ purposively normative reconstruction. Hobbes offered an account of an original ‘fearful’ human subject, fundamentally driven by the desire for self-preservation. The human being encounters himself as naturally afraid and hence eager for those powers that can grant individual survival above all else (Hobbes 1996: 76; see also Blits 1989). This inescapable drive, which the instinctive anticipation of death prompts, leads ‘man’ to be ‘inquisitive’ about his insecurity and ‘to be curious in the search of the causes of their own good and evil fortune’ (Hobbes 1996: 76). In turn, this search for knowledge of the causes that is so proper to humans and which ‘beasts’, in ‘the enjoying of their quotidian food, Ease and Lusts’ never care about, creates ‘anxiety’ (1996: 76). This natural human condition posits the understanding of the human subject as future-oriented, that is, as fearful of, and ambitious about, what is to come. In turn, this implies, according to Hobbes, an anxiety directed towards the past, where the causes of future events lie.

For Hobbes, ‘man’ is by nature a Prometheus ‘which interpreted, is, The prudent man’ (Hobbes 1996: 76). His anticipation of death leads him to question the causes of death so as to be able to escape fear and prolong a life in which fear can be as absent as possible. Niebuhr described this as a condition of ‘preparedness’ but reinterpreted it in the classical sense of the human being facing up to God as both above and at the end of all things – precisely the sense indicated by the etymological origin of ‘Prometheus’ (DST: 43). In direct connection with this notion of ‘promise’ as an important feature of the human condition, and of its innate ‘solicitude’ towards the future, Hobbes’ articulation of fear and anxiety features in the famous chapter XIII of the Leviathan, where he deals with Religion and ‘the nature of man’.2 In characterizing the human subject as a ‘Prometheus’ Hobbes depicts man as fundamentally anxious and fearful of death:

So that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by fear of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep.

(added emphasis 1996: 76)

In other words, the subject’s self-awareness is always already conditioned by an immediate and pre-given notion of life as having an end to it. Human nature is therefore characterized in the Leviathan as an ‘anxious anticipation of death’ (Odysseos 2002: 385). In line with much of the modern discussion on the topic,
Hobbes establishes the Self-constitutive and individuating role of death as an essential tenet of realism – indeed of any political theory. As we will see, Niebuhr would explore the issue in light of Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s own appropriation of the theme, merging classical political realism with modern existentia-lism. However, one can already find some signs of the affinity between realism and existentialism in Hobbes’ ontological concern to ‘return to the beginning’ to ‘the first principle of a commonwealth, man’ (Evrigenis 2008: 98). Indeed, Hobbes was concerned with establishing a specific understanding of the human subject by means of a politically oriented enquiry into the ontological meaning of fear and anxiety as well as into the potential political significance of death (Blits 1989).

Fear of death thus featured centrally in Hobbes’ political thought as a natural drive that prompts the (negative) action of moving away from something – along with desire as the positive action over something. For the purposes of this book, I place a higher emphasis on fear of death, but most accounts of Hobbes tend to focus on desire. Hobbes’ focus on fear shows a specific and somewhat novel – albeit not original in the history of Western thought – concern with the future-directedness of human existence. Hobbes’ empiricism interpreted human curiosity about death as giving way to religion and to imaginative interpretations of the end of existence as a point of transition to another life – inspiring various practices of political suicide, religious martyrdom, self-emulation and self-harm as ways of stressing the transitory character of the present life. The salience of fear of death was also due to Hobbes’ belief that the fear of others remains a relevant political issue, because death can happen at the hands of others (Blits 1989). He thought, therefore, that death was, or ought to be regarded as, the root cause of all our fears and that, as such, the others should be feared especially as potential killers, that is, as responsible for the ‘untimely’ or ‘violent’ end of human lives. In Hobbes, the fear of others was hence reduced to the fear of death, considering that killing appeared as the extreme possibility – indeed the ultimate limit – of inherent human unsociableness.

By deploying the notion of the fear of death in this way, Hobbes wanted to undermine the traditional meaning of the metaphysical aspirations which, in his view, carried some devastating consequences upon social cohesion and political order. Contrary to what Niebuhr would suggest, Hobbes thought that death ought to be seen as the source of fear – not the Christian transcendental God. For to regard such God as the ultimate end of life – understood as either its actual termination or as its final aim – could result in the failure of any secular institution to invoke obedience and allegiance through the threat of violence. Security had hence to be seen as the highest common good and one which only the state was entitled to affirm or deny. As such the sovereign could indeed replace God as the principle and end of all order. Hobbes thought that only organized coercion could bend a multitude of individuals to regard life before death as a value in and of itself (Martinich 1992). Amid the events of the English civil war, Hobbes wanted therefore to avoid what he regarded as the nihilistic effects of the prospect of the afterlife as the realm of ultimate fulfilment – for this could lead to
the total devaluation of our earthly existence and hence to anarchy and chaos (Martinich 2008).³

The concern of the English philosopher with the fear of death was due to the dangerous consequences which the religious depreciation of mundane life could lead to. He thus set out to construct a paradigm of human nature in which physical death could function as the horizon of human existence and all possible realization. In doing this he was consciously replacing divine love with earthly peace, thus limiting the pursuit of justice to the demand for collective security. In order to resist death as much as possible, natural individuals had to engineer the political conditions that allowed their survival to the maximum extent possible. And since death could come from killing, what seemed as a mere individual striving now gained a political dimension on which social order could rest. The social contract hence prefigured a rational subject capable of striving for self-preservation, freedom and even the enjoyment of the ‘Ease and Lusts’ of life (Hobbes 1996: 76). Conceived in such way, Hobbes’ understanding of the fear of death was ontological precisely because of Hobbes’ political concerns. Indeed, Colin Wight’s recent suggestion that ‘all ontologies are political’ seems thoroughly applicable to Hobbes – and to Niebuhr as well (Wight 2006: 2). If on the one hand, Hobbes understood fear as standing behind any form of identity or sovereignty and hence as preceding all possible forms of its materialization and objectification in something or someone – as Niebuhr did too – on the other hand, this ontology was ultimately derived from the concern for establishing a specific secular form of order that could dispense with religion altogether, namely by forging a new one around a reinvented god: a ‘mortal god’ (Hobbes 1996: 120; see also Martinich 1992).

For any Christian thinker this was obviously problematic: the ‘dutiful citizen’ was now in a legitimate position to abandon love as the premise of a universal obligation, given the fact that for Christian theology only love could be seen as a compelling principle of all creation. The idea of a transcendental God to whom the human subject was ultimately accountable was hence endangered by loyalty to the sovereign since Hobbes, and Niebuhr obviously saw the concentration of violence in an authority unbounded by God – and uncommitted to any destiny beyond its securitarian vocation – as the real danger to a just order (‘The Politics of the 1930s’: 14). He attempted by all means to resist an understanding of liberalism in which, after the individual’s surrender of liberty in exchange for security, the Leviathan could now stand above God’s critical role of condemning, guiding or even resisting the specific configurations of political communities. Moreover, he sensed in Hobbes the rather naïve assumption that the fear of death could ultimately secure political ends, an expectation which seemed to him as inaccurate as it was dangerous – but one which, as we have seen, would give rise to the sense of absolute allegiance known only in despotic and totalitarian regimes.

Hence, Hobbes and Niebuhr’s different takes on the fear of death were due to important dissimilarities in their ontological assumptions as well as their political implications. With this in mind, one can understand better Niebuhr’s critique
of Hobbes’ physicalist determinism and scientific naturalism if one bears in mind Niebuhr’s own purpose of releasing liberalism from its ‘false majesties’ as much as from the residues of authoritarianism which, he sensed, were already lurking in the Leviathan (NDM II: 306). In many ways, Niebuhr’s reading of Hobbes was much more revealing than his apologetic recasting of Augustine, precisely because of the existential and theological assumptions that his understanding of the fear of death carried. Indeed, few of Niebuhr’s intellectual engagements with other authors reveal so much about his own positioning within the realist tradition and also about his further appropriation of existentialist themes and sources. What concerned Niebuhr, apart from all those aspects in which he concurred with Hobbes, was his inability or unwillingness to accommodate love, freedom and transcendence as essential to human existence but also, paradoxically, as the necessary theological counterparts of anxiety, fear and death. For Niebuhr, the awareness of the latter was impossible without the former.

As we will now see, Niebuhr’s attempt to relate his existential investigations into fear and anxiety with a political theory that could accommodate a proper understanding of transcendence and love – indeed of God as their very source – led him to recall the Hobbesian notion of the fear of death and to pair it with a Kierkegaardian take on anxiety. This endeavour constituted a central aspect of Niebuhr’s intellectual journey through human selfhood and intergroup behaviour and can be read as a major development of those themes, as well as of the realist tradition as whole, since Hobbes engaged with them.

Niebuhr’s recasting of the Augustinian framework which I have laid out in the previous chapter, led him to emphasize, in Kierkegaardian fashion, Hobbes’s understanding of the human condition as in a ‘perpetuall solicitude towards the time to come’ and hence ‘anxious’ (1996: 76). But his Kierkegaardian emphasis on anxiety led Niebuhr to replace Hobbes’ focus on the causality of human behaviour with an emphasis on its destiny, thus stressing the need to account for the ways in which human freedom endlessly forges a whole array of future possibilities, the frustration of which is even more frightful than physical death. But the thought that anxiety was rooted in frustrated expectations about the future, rather than in actual threats, meant that a sense of destiny beyond history had to be an inbuilt feature of human nature by default and design – not the mere outcome of human experience or choice.

Niebuhr was obviously neither original nor alone in the attempt to explore further the meaning of death for politics as well as the social implications of fear and anxiety. He was part of a larger and modern transatlantic intellectual trend that voiced a profound disenchantment about the destiny of humanity on the wake of one of the most devastating episodes of its history. Death had become the preferred theme of all humanistic thought – from psychoanalysis to social theory, from theology to political thought, from existentialism to post-structuralism. As I show in the next chapter, Niebuhr’s existentialist demarcation from Hobbesian naturalism set the stage for his ‘realist critique of realism’, with important implications for both the future outlook of the realist tradition and for its potential dialogue with the other theoretical strands of IR. In turn, this cleared
the way for what I call an ‘existential turn’ regarding the common assumptions about human nature held by most realists (Donnelly 2000; Williams 2005). Before understanding what this turn consisted of, we first need to clarify Niebuhr’s critique of Hobbes.

Niebuhr was of course suspicious of Hobbes’ empiricist reformulation of the natural law tradition and of his claim that religious belief was created out of fear (Hobbes 1996: 76). This was a core aspect of Hobbes’ intellectual project, set out to construct a godly Leviathan capable of arousing as much loyalty as that of a transcendental God and of ‘creating behaviour’ precisely out of fear (Schmitt 2007). It is unsurprising therefore that Hobbes’ naturalistic ontology represented Niebuhr’s favourite target. He portrayed Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, along with Descartes’ *Method*, as a definite break with medieval metaphysics. Hobbesian empiricism had been able to disarm past theological worldviews in important ways, perhaps more than any philosophical system. Niebuhr reacted against this ‘naturalism’ and its anti-theological attempt to interpret human existence and social behaviour on the strict basis of natural drives and immanent desires (NDM I: 25). As we saw in the previous chapter, he had charged Augustine himself with relapsing into naturalism on several occasions. However, Niebuhr was particularly concerned with Hobbes’ naturalist ontology precisely to the extent that it actually consisted of an anthropology the political implications of which were a direct consequence of the dismissal of any transcendental authority – divine or moral. Niebuhr thought that Hobbes’ account of the relation between political authority and human agency inevitably led to the absolutization of the former and the dissolution of the latter. Hobbes had found the solution to the monstrous character of individual desires in the promulgation of an even greater monster, whose ability to control its subjects depended on its freedom to remain uncontrolled. The Hobbesian idea that sovereigns remain in the state of nature meant that moral decision and individual freedom were merely operative functions of a highly sophisticated beast, the cogs of a larger machine of desire-production (Hobbes 1996: 181):

> The egotism and the will-to-power which Christian thought regards as the quintessence of sin and which, in the view of bourgeois liberalism, is a defect to be sloughed off by a new education or a new social organization, is regarded as normal and normative. Hobbes accepts and Nietzsche glorifies the will-to-power. In Hobbes a political vantage point against individual egotism is gained but none against the collective egotism, embodied in the state.

(NDM I: 25)

Hence, Niebuhr set out to rescue God from the Hobbesian disavowal of its meaning for human existence and also for political and international order. As we will see, however, Niebuhr did not, for that reason, abandon Hobbes’ views on many issues. Rather, his realistic attitude led him to convey some Hobbesian notions – such as the fear of death and the concept of anxiety – through a
Christian existential lens so as to extricate them from the naturalistic and immanent connotations which made it impossible for religious transcendence and Christian metaphysics to find their critical way into ethics and politics.

Naturally, this was a rather difficult task. Niebuhr knew that many of the existential thinkers he appreciated were themselves sympathetic to naturalism in both its dismissal of the rationalistic precept of the autonomy of the will and its critique of the possibility of a human agency truly freed from social constraints. The obvious choice against Hobbes for a theologian such as Niebuhr would have been the return to the medieval natural law tradition, where the notion of nature was able to accommodate the Aristotelian connection with a cosmological view of creation. This was, as I claim at the end of the book, the route taken by many of Niebuhr’s contemporaries, especially the Catholic theologians that found inspiration in the social doctrine of the Church. But as a practical theologian, Niebuhr did not develop an ecclesiology for the reasons already highlighted and was also a harsh critic of the natural law tradition as well and of its appeal to natural reason.4

In spite of the renewal that the natural law tradition witnessed during the interwar period, the existentialist zeitgeist that followed the great war was even more overwhelming. Niebuhr’s appropriation of this tradition, however subtle, also made him less able to disarm the modern immanentism which he despised in Hobbes, but nevertheless wanted to keep for further use. As I argue in Chapter 4, he had learnt from both Hobbes and Nietzsche how ‘reason’ could be manipulated to excuse, legitimize and reproduce the pursuit of interest and power, hence turning into evil’s own self-justificatory strategy. It is thus quite clear that he saw in Hobbes more insights than he was willing to admit. As I show in the remaining chapters, Niebuhr did not necessarily succeed in critiquing or setting himself free from the naturalism that he saw as irremediably compromising the possibility of God’s existence, with all the implications that this carried for his beliefs and his own reputation as a public theologian. So bearing in mind Niebuhr’s epistemological divide between transcendental philosophers and naturalist ones, Niebuhr’s reception of Hobbes can be read in terms of two of his major aims.

First, Niebuhr tried to demarcate ‘transcendence’ from ‘reason’ so as to be able to criticize the liberal creed in the autonomy of rational will or consciousness as a source of human pride and hence of political idolatry and voluntarism. Niebuhr wanted to cling on to an idea of transcendence as a fairly immaculate proviso of hope in moral progress and as an important site of God’s critical omnipresence. He agreed with Hobbes in that rationality strengthens the pursuit of natural ends but does so in ways that transform and denaturalize those ends, culminating in their achievement as much as in their corruption. In this view, the more primary desires were rapidly spiritualized in man into ‘love’ or ‘hate’ and given higher metaphysical qualities which their initial physicality did not contain (Hobbes 1996: 38). Niebuhr thus followed Hobbes in acknowledging the potential of human beings to denaturalize and renaturalize themselves – but also to make ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ those things which are not. He often referred to such
‘transmutation’ or ‘transvaluation’ of natural drives into artificial and collective capacities as fuelled by a ‘will-to-power’ – even though, unlike Nietzsche, he categorically asserted that not all forms of transcendence lend themselves easily to the sinful corruption of the ego as reason does (MM: 6; see also Chapter 4).

Second, and in spite of his strong belief in the transcendental or semi-transcendental capabilities of human beings, Niebuhr felt compelled to take up many of Hobbes’ points about human nature, not so much in their generality but, more specifically, in what they tell about collective behaviour. ‘Men’ – Niebuhr interpreted this in the masculine plural5 – act, indeed, according to desire and refrain from acting when there are impediments to that desire – even though Niebuhr promptly qualified this point in saying that desires are easily denaturalized and transmuted from their primary animal status into means of propaganda and idolatry, of cohesion and power. He thus retained from Hobbes the idea that human groups seek to guarantee those biological and material conditions which allow the pursuit of desires; that they acquire those technical and technological powers that enable the satisfaction of desires further into the future, and not just in the present; and that they do so in a way that seems the most appropriate for that end: through the production of mechanized egos, self-images and techniques of collective control and self-government (Williams 2005: 130). Surely, Niebuhr agreed that, for the most part, sovereigns remain in the state of nature, even though that did not exhaust his view of human nature broadly speaking, and hence the potential for change and progress towards which individual agency could push the international system of states.

Contrary to Hobbes, however, Niebuhr manifested an ambivalent relation to the human subject, especially when considered individually. His Kierkegaardian individualism was not the abstract individualism of the liberal Hobbes nor of a Kant; it suggested, to the frustration of many of his readers, that some of the most realistic answers regarding traditional doubts about the inherent goodness or evilness of the human condition could indeed be met only case by case and always by stressing, rather than overriding, such ontological ambivalence. Evidently, Niebuhr thought that nature was far from constituting a monolithic source of egocentric behaviour or conduct, exclusively driven by the selfish obsession for desire and power as Hobbes suggested. While all the resources that the human subject possesses, or has been given, can be used to favor, expand and stagger up the power of the natural drives to unintended and unseen proportions, they can, just as well, end up serving the most noble, and also the most human, intention to transcend and overcome the self’s attachment to itself.6

This ambivalence was the natural consequence of a permanent ontological swing between human natural animality and its innate semi-divinity, both of which had been attributed by God through creation (see Chapter 1 for a characterization of the ‘Christian view’ along Augustinian lines). And whether or not single persons could resist, as relatively free agents, to the structural pressure of ontological anxiety towards ultimate love and towards God, what mattered most for Niebuhr was that in an age of dense global interchange and increasing economic interdependency, nation-states could not. At the level of collective
selfhood and of intergroup relations, what Niebuhr observed internationally and experienced domestically led him to agree with Hobbes’ diagnosis:

that in the first place, I put for a general indication of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power; but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.

(Hobbes 1996: 70)

But Niebuhr’s effort to spell out the existential meaning of fear and anxiety much beyond what Hobbes’ Leviathan had done, is quite representative of the theological grounds on which Niebuhr’s stood in order to oppose Hobbes’ naturalism. More generally, his demarcation from Hobbes constituted the precondition for Niebuhr’s later appropriation of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the two thinkers that contributed the most for the construction of Niebuhr’s ontological enquiry. So far we have seen that even though Hobbes and Niebuhr wanted to stress the fear of death as an important characteristic of existence and an important ontological source of human agency, Niebuhr thought that what men feared was not death in itself, but rather what death actually means, that is, the fact that it symbolizes the impossibility of realizing those prospects which transcendence over nature arouses in the human spirit. In this sense, both thinkers were led to employ concepts which stressed this future orientation of human agency – such as ‘solicitude’, ‘anxiety’, ‘longing’, ‘melancholy’, ‘prudence’, ‘fortune’ and so on – focusing on religiosity as pointing to both the fear of ontological groundlessness and existence’s own attempt to overcome such nothingness by projecting itself onto a higher transcendental plane. Naturally, while Hobbes seems to suggest that religion amounted to fear, Niebuhr wants to argue that God’s transcendence cannot be reduced to such immanentism and, as ultimate truth, divine love must inspire humans to remain critical of any attempts to regard God as the mere byproduct of natural drives or as a mere creative manifestation of biological impulses or cultural arrangements. In this particular regard, Niebuhr emphasized the inherent anxiety of the human condition towards the future and towards possibilities which existence makes available and death compromises, rather than turning the fear of death into the ontological grounds of political order, as Hobbes intended.

Hence, Niebuhr was keen to stress the ways in which the common destiny of humanity bears upon our conception of human nature. Contrary to Hobbes, he was led to emphasize destiny as both the existential vocation of human beings – towards fulfilment in the final God and in the ultimate love which stand at the end of history – but also as the very grounds where the possibility of moral progress and personal fulfilment can stand as legitimate life aims, albeit never realizable in full. Niebuhr’s stress on transcendence as the meta-ethical ground of our immanent drives – the shortcomings of which ironically point in the
direction of the love commandment – was radically opposed to Hobbes’ immanentism, where all the possibilities of communion are born out of desire or mutual fear but never out of a pervading universal love which the Christian tradition appealed to. Niebuhr was not indifferent to many of Hobbes’ insights into human nature, and he remained attentive to naturalism as a suitable source of philosophical critique and political scepticism. His characterization of human nature as fearful, anxious and sinful, allowed him to draw, in Kierkegaardian style, a more complex and sophisticated picture of human existence than the simple Hobbesian notion of fear could contain – and yet uphold a legitimate claim to a Realist political philosophy deeply steeped in fear, albeit of a different kind. Niebuhr believed that, if interpreted in light of anxiety, fear could claim an important role in describing human nature thus opening the way for thinking of sociality, security and community in fundamentally different ways, while remaining in line with the major contributions of the realist tradition with regard to power, tragedy and the limits of moral action in international relations.

‘In a perpetual solicitude of the time to come’

As a way of guiding us throughout the rest of this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate how Niebuhr’s conceptualization of human nature could accommodate the human potential for transcendence and freedom which Hobbes neglected, and still account for the structural fear that conditions and formats human agency. Most obviously, this was not an easy balance. Niebuhr wanted his realism to remain attached to its traditional pedigree of moral scepticism, political wisdom and prudential action, while safeguarding the transcendence of human freedom and divine love from its entrapment within the mechanical logic of Hobbes’ sensorial immanentism. Such difficult interplay comes out more clearly in his later writings and principally in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943). In the fifth part of the fifth chapter, entitled ‘The Destruction of Individuality in Naturalism’ Niebuhr points to the fact that the neglect of human agency by too stringent a focus on the structures that condition it, started with Hobbes himself and the character of his materialistic ontology:

Beginning with Thomas Hobbes a fairly consistent denial of the significance of selfhood, certainly of transcendent individuality, runs through the empirical and naturalistic tradition. In Hobbes’ sensationalistic psychology and materialistic metaphysics there is no place for human individuality. His individuals are animal natures whose egohood consists in the impulse of survival. Human reason serves the purpose of extending this impulse beyond the limits known in nature, thus creating conflict between equally valid claims of various individuals.

(NDM I: 74)

Not without some sense of irony, Niebuhr places Hobbes at the origin of modern liberal culture whose paradigm of a social contract between rationally fearful
individuals has actually led to the suppression of their singularity. Individuals were all naturally equal in their fear of death, and their common nature as security-seekers ensured the theoretical possibility of the contract. By mastering history through the creation of a past myth, Hobbes sought confirmation of his belief that knowledge allowed for the control over destiny, a strategic move which Niebuhr deconstructed in the following way:

While it [modern culture] reduces human freedom to such minimal proportions as will conform to its naturalism, its social theory assumes man’s mastery over his social destiny. It fails to understand how every social decision is modified and circumscribed by natural circumstances and historical tendencies, beyond the control of human decision. There is a peculiar pathos in the social contract theories of government, which dominate the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They all attribute a more absolute freedom to man in history than the obvious facts of history justify, and certainly more freedom than is justified by their own philosophy.

(NDM I: 105–106)

Niebuhr thought that ‘this paradox is most striking in the thought of the father of modern empirical naturalism, Thomas Hobbes’ (NDM: 106). He was therefore critical of the fact that for Hobbes

there is no rational transcendence over impulse where these claims might be arbitrated. They must therefore be suppressed and arbitrated by a political power, which is the sole source of all morality. Fear of mutual destruction prompts the historical decision, the social contract, by which government comes into being. But this decision lies significantly in a mythical past. This philosophy may be regarded as symbolic of the curious vagary of naturalistic thought which, throughout subsequent ages, interprets human history as the consequence of pure human decisions without having an individual with sufficient transcendence over the social processes to make significant decisions.

(NDM I: 75)

Niebuhr thought that such a naturalistic attitude could only obtain by means of transcendence. And, in turn, this meant that

it is precisely the pure or transcendent ego, which stands above consciousness as the consciousness of consciousness and which expresses itself in terms of memory and foresight, which is the real centre of human personality.

(NDM I: 76)

His focus on transcendence appears therefore much earlier than his characterization of human nature as fundamentally anxious. Clearly, for him, it was
transcendence that allowed the human subject to realize its limitations and hence be fearful of – and anxious about – the impossibility of realizing all the aims that transcendence ideally sets out for him. He certainly agreed with Hobbes regarding the centrality of fear and anxiety in human life and social existence. But they radically differed on the conceptualization and prioritization of the two. While Hobbes wanted to think of freedom in terms of fear, that is, freedom as an effect or manifestation of fear (hence his stress on causality), Niebuhr thought of fear and anxiety in terms of man’s innate (i.e. Godly ordained) freedom for transcendence. He believed that transcendence could make the human subject understand what life potentially has to offer – and hence instil the fear of losing it all. Against Hobbes, Niebuhr thus asserted that some degree of transcendence – and therefore some level of realization of the natural potential for freedom – could be levelled against radical naturalism. Niebuhr’s understanding of human freedom did not provide any guarantee as to the realization of those possibilities that our semi-transcendental existence opened up. Instead, the fact was that possibilities are inevitably opened up from the start, for that is the nature of existence itself – and its destiny. Niebuhr thus concluded in his late *Man’s Nature and His Communities* that ‘man’s reach is always beyond his grasp’ (1966: 29).

Note that Niebuhr was not less of a sceptic towards idealism than other realists. Like theirs, his aim was that of deconstructing the optimistic worldviews which came out of academic or bureaucratic elites. But he undoubtedly wanted to stress the otherworldly scope of human existence and its precedence over the fear of death. This fear was a product of what we had been already set out to envisage according to the logic of divine creation. As ontological it stood beyond our wills and whims: regardless of what we want, our destiny would always lie beyond death, even beyond our most immediate posterity, projecting the present worth of our collective lives into a future of endless possibilities. In this sense, he saw Hobbes’ strict separation between nature and history as a blunt contradiction with his own system of thought, vindicating a voluntarism and a human agency which could not withstand Hobbes’ own critique of metaphysical transcendence:

Hobbes ostensibly regards the peril of anarchy as a peril of nature. He meets this peril by a free decision of human history, which involves him in the contradiction of assuming a distinction between historical man and natural man in his social philosophy which he denies in his psychology.

(NDM I: 107)

Niebuhr thought of Hobbes’ philosophical system as an insufficient ground for the constitution of an ideal of community that could contain within itself the endless social vocation and immanent sense of universal responsibility of the human being. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* seemed to culminate a historical demand for a political order that could withstand the tragedies of history and the anarchical temptations of men, by attempting to contain or minimize the dreadful effects of
Human nature redefined

Human nature redefined

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war and disorder. This also meant that for Hobbes anxiety could and should be overcome. All that was needed was the will to do so and such voluntarism could be found in nature itself – as long as nature was rethought in modern terms as something to be used against itself. He hence sought to stress the limitations of human action by building a political imaginary society upon the presupposition that, in a previous stage, war was the only rule. Hobbes’ stress on ‘safety’ was therefore not to be seen as a human aspiration for a destiny beyond individual existence – it was rather the result of the fear to go back to a stage where such individualism was unwarranted. Indeed, Hobbes’ understanding of anxiety leads one into thinking that human existence is permanently open to renewed and unseen possibilities of sociality and of community; however, Hobbes was categorical about the need to create a community so as to escape the past, a reflection that was coherent with his own personal experience of the civil war in seventeenth-century England.

Therefore, notwithstanding Niebuhr’s adherence to some of Hobbes’ views regarding the fear of death, the persistence of egoism in history and the overwhelming power of physical and even subconscious desires over human action, he interpreted Hobbes’ *Leviathan* as a dangerous admixture of Cartesian rationalism with English empiricism, where Christian metaphysics and religious belief were crushed by the *rational desire* to control the human body, with the means that its own immanent life made available, to be regarded as ‘normal and normative’ (NDM I: 25). Clearly, for Niebuhr, the central challenge facing the philosophical discourse of modernity since Hobbes was to reset immanence and transcendence apart in order to safeguard the autonomy of morality vis-à-vis the political. Contrary to the Weberian and Schmittian trends of political realism, Niebuhr thought that the political was not autonomous from ethical constraints (Scheuerman 2011: 20). Rather, these constraints could not themselves be seen as internal to politics. All of this contributed to Niebuhr’s departure from the traditional Hobbesian paradigm of realism, with its pursuit of a holistic political science based on ‘timeless’ truths about human nature, and its commitment to the production of a Leviathan capable of taming that nature as only a God could.

It is from this turn against Hobbesianism, that Niebuhr’s writings gain even more salience within the realist tradition and can actually be seen as very distinct from other twentieth-century developments. Niebuhr’s definite cut with Hobbes operated by means of the introduction of a theological dimension which was germane to his Augustinian background and which opened the way for his appropriation of Kierkegaard’s insights about anxiety as a core feature of his *realist* description of the tragedy of the human condition, culminating in what I describe as an existential turn in this brand of IR theory. Niebuhr was convinced, as Hobbes was, that human beings live in a permanent condition of insecurity and anxiety; but unlike Hobbes, this anxiety increases, not because of death, but with the constant multiplication of possibilities – as well as with man’s frustrated realization that a great deal of them will forever remain unaccomplished. Indeed, Niebuhr was quite insistent on the view that human achievements, as great as they appeared to be from the point of view of actors, would never appear to their
eyes as final, for in each achievement there lies a new horizon of expectation. Hence, even though the religious nature of human existence seems to suggest a destiny of ultimate fulfilment – or carries such presupposition – Niebuhr felt the need to stress the inherent sense of tragedy of the Christian worldview which existentialism reinforced by showing that such metaphysical fulfilment can hardly ever be achieved in any definite way.

In line with Augustine and the whole realist tradition, Hobbes was not dismissive of anxiety, and one reads in him a concern for destiny as also an important feature of the human condition. He referred to this ‘anxiety of the time to come’ as that which leads humans to forsake religion, as an expression of that ‘invisible’ realm where ‘fortune’ is laid out but which remains, for the most part, inscrutable to the human eye – a point which Niebuhr would follow suit by recalling Augustine’s *Confessions* in the ways described previously. He observed that this spiritual or metaphysical capacity consists, after all, of ‘some peculiar quality, or at least in some eminent degree thereof, not to be found in other Living creatures’, making it a specifically human characteristic (Hobbes 1996: 75). But the metaphysical horizon that this aspect opened up had to be shut off for the sake of erecting the Leviathan. Hobbes thus reduced the metaphysics of destiny to the empirical science of causality. He conceived of ‘Man’s’ concern for his future as evident in the fact that he permanently desires to know the ‘causes’ of past events *with a view to their potential repetition*. On the one hand, Hobbes’ focus on the need to investigate the causality of phenomena is fundamentally led by a concern for the future, and in particular for the ‘good or evil fortune’ that it yields (1996: 75). On the other hand, he thought of any historical enquiry as grounded in an immanent desire to avoid certain repetitions and prompt others, gauging the present as that decisive moment where the past is recalled only as a means to control the future. Hobbes thus concluded that this leads to a situation of:

*Anxiety*. For being assured that there be causes of all things that have arrived hitherto, or shall arrive hereafter; it is impossible for a man, who continually endeavoureth to secure himselfe against the evil he feares, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in perpetuall solicitude of the time to come.

(Hobbes 1996: 76)

In a way which Hobbes chose not to carry further, he arrives at the conclusion that human fundamental fears and anxieties do not increase due to the fear of others, nor are they related to any objective fear in any essential way. Indeed, fear and anxiety are hardly political, if by this we understand that fear lies in the identification of others as a threat. Hence, this sort of oppositional standpoint was not what Hobbes was aiming at initially, as Odysseos suggests (2002: 385). Rather, fear and insecurity are derived, for the most part, from too great an expectation to fulfil those possibilities that only a pure transcendental ego such as God could realize. This is at least what a Niebuhrian reading of Hobbes would suggest.
Indeed, Niebuhr would explore this point in ways which are worth looking at in more detail. Like Odysseus he derived the same belligerent implications from Hobbes’ political theory, acknowledging that ‘a too consistent political realism would seem to consign society to perpetual warfare’ (MM: 101). On the other hand, he seemed to think that human expectations – and especially collective dreams – had risen to unsustainable levels in the modern period, mainly due to its technological and scientific advancements as well as the increase in expectation toward more prosperity through social mobility and economic interdependence. Niebuhr’s appeal to the example of Christ was precisely due to this (Badham 1998; Lehmann 2001):

[Christ] may be a stumbling block because, though expected, he proves not to be the kind of Messiah who was expected. In fact one can assert dogmatically that the true Christ *must* be a stumbling block in the sense that he must disappoint, as well as fulfil, expectations. He must disappoint some expectations because Messianic expectations inevitably contain egoistic elements, which could not be fulfilled without falsifying the meaning of history. Every Messianic expectation contains an explicit or implicit assumption that history will be fulfilled from the particular locus of the civilization and culture which has the expectation.

(NDM II: 16)

Niebuhr warned that human possibilities constitute existence in its most primordial state of insecurity, preceding even the fear of violent death and pushing the human mind to achieve things which lie beyond the human bodily capacity. In doing so, he was taking Hobbes’ approach to futurity one step further, in ways which show a truly innovative reading of the English classic and which announce an existential turn within the realist tradition. Indeed, this confirms my previous point that what really concerned Niebuhr in modern societies and in the relations between them was not the belief in ultimate possibilities – which he strongly upheld – but the naïve belief in their absolute realization in the present. This realization would amount to perfection – a perfect world where there would be no sin or fault and hence no need for the possibility to overcome them. This would be a world without possibilities and hence a lifeless world, if one is to assume, as Niebuhr did, that possibilities are exactly what existence is about. In this sense, perfection could only be found, symbolically and yet significantly, in a transcendent entity for whom all possibilities are realizable. Such was not the case of the human subject who, Niebuhr insisted, can neither be a god nor stop aspiring to become one.

In this sense, Niebuhr’s existentialism, as well as his realism, was essentially grounded in the contingent and yet foresighted exploration of the possibilities that the contingency of human sinfulness itself contained. Against idealism, Niebuhr could argue that possibilities could only be conceived in terms of man’s contingency, for possibility is always a possibility *of* something which already *is*. On the other hand, against cynicism and pessimism, Niebuhr would claim that one can only conceive of contingency and human finitude by reference to some
ultimate possibility – hence the need to think of human existence as fundamentally unstable, insecure and always lacking. Niebuhr’s relevance for the contemporary debates on Hobbes – as well as for those interested in the realist tradition – lies not only in his reversal of the Hobbesian ontology of fear, but also in the fact that, in doing so, he was able to safeguard the theological from the political and preserve a horizon of utopia and ethics, uncontaminated by human interest and pride.

By setting the political and the theological apart, Niebuhr was able to depoliticize fear and anxiety by delegitimizing them as valid sources of the authority and sovereignty of the modern state. And yet, this also meant that both fear and anxiety were all the more relevant for understanding political behaviour in an anarchical realm. Instead of aiming at the creation of a political order, Niebuhr sought to introduce the ethical component of human transcendence into a tradition which, at least since Max Weber, was becoming more and more dominated by Hobbesianism (Craig 2003). This emphasis would allow him to reset the concept of anxiety as the ontological ground for an ethical critique of the normativity of sovereignty, invested as it was in an appeal to its social indispensability, historical inevitability and moral necessity. Niebuhr stood his ground to remind all realists that state sovereignty only obtained, both historically and from an ethical viewpoint, in the larger framework of a universal search for larger and more universal forms of community, such as empires or the Christian world community. By championing the turn of the Hobbesian reasoning upside down, Niebuhr seemed to anticipate many of the more recent theoretical attempts to bring existentialism to bear upon epistemological debates in the field of IR. His realism also remains untouched by most of the criticisms addressed to the traditional IR theories as born out of the belligerent orientation of Hobbesianism.

Therefore, against many critics of the realist tradition – especially those of existentialist leanings – I would like to suggest that the concern with ontological enquiry has been around for much longer than they are willing to concede. It was certainly present in Niebuhr’s writings. Even though a realist, Niebuhr was perhaps one of the first IR theorists to seriously engage and challenge Hobbes’ prominence in that field, in ways that would not be incompatible with the sort of deconstructive attempts that have targeted its ontological assumptions (Odysseos 2002). This is even more the case as both Niebuhr and many IR critical theorists resort to Heidegger to develop their critique of the sort of Cartesian metaphysics which Hobbes upheld. In this sense, it is quite surprising to observe how, not only contemporary realists, but both constructivists and critical theorists, overlook Niebuhr’s role in bringing into political theory and international relations (1) a sustained concern for the ‘ontological question’; (2) a systematic critique of Hobbes’ reliance on a naturalistic understanding of fear and of human nature more generally; and (3) an introduction of an alternative ontology as well as the introduction of existentialist thinking into IR theory.

But even if couched in these terms, Niebuhr’s strategy in this regard was not without its problems. Most obviously, his reasoning begs the question as to whether his critique of Hobbes ended up surrendering to the sort of utopianism
which he so eagerly despised. How could the transcendental critique of Hobbes, and the charge that it lacked a more complex characterization of the role of freedom, hope and utopia, preempted the relapse into the sort of idealistic liberalism that naively believed in the human being’s endless capacity to realize all his potential on Earth? More importantly, why should one exempt Divine love and God’s transcendence from the critique which Niebuhr addressed to modern reason and its pretension to transcend all forms of transcendence? Why should we believe that such meta-ethical transcendence was not as corruptible as any other way of moral reasoning or any other value system which always assumes, by default, a ‘supramoral pinnacle’ as a strategy to save both its moral values – and the power structures that stand underneath them – from ‘degeneration’ (ICE: 240)? How can we be sure of the extent to which the specific notion of transcendence on which Niebuhr relied to conduct its assault upon scientific reason, political idolatry and modern selfhood was not itself reproducing human pride rather than constituting its antidote?

Niebuhr never really addressed this problem. Perhaps he realized that some nihilism would follow from rendering any value system futile, once the possibility of transcendence – of any form of transcendence – had been compromised. Niebuhr understood transcendence as both the unabashed superiority of God and, simultaneously, as present in the human being’s capacity to participate in God’s love (NDM II: 98–99). Transcendence was the only means by which a self could pursue the virtue of justice, combining a strategy of self-regulation with a sense of limited empowerment over its surroundings. And yet, in order to achieve this, the self had to be ‘shattered’ in order to do away with its prideful self-assertions and find fulfillment in God as the outer limit of Selfhood (NDM II: 107–110). So even though, as we saw, Niebuhr sought to criticize specific understandings of selfhood – as rationalistic, alienated, overly righteous, proud or idolatrous – this did not mean a dismissal of selfhood as such, but only the proposition of a self in which God could, through grace and revelation, find its way through to the city of men.

The fact that God’s ways were always in danger of becoming corrupted did not distract Niebuhr from forging an understanding of selfhood capable of preserving the belief in God and in the ethical validity of Christ’s example. Such ‘shattering’ of selfhood represented in the crucifixion and reincarnation of Christ ought to be read as the power of redemption and renewal of selfhood – its death as a means of rebirth – thus signaling a God eternal and yet inimitable (NDM II: 107–110). Niebuhr cleverly articulated the cathartic metamorphosis of selfhood in terms of the Pauline aphorism ‘Nevertheless I live’:

The Christian experience of the new life is an experience of a new self. The new self is more truly a real self because the vicious circle of self-centeredness has been broken…. This new self is the real self; for the self is infinitely self-transcendent; and any premature centering of itself around its own interests, individually or collectively, destroys and corrupts its freedom. (NDM II: 108)
Niebuhr never once posed the materialist possibility that the transcendental God could be an emanation of human passion or fear. To venture such possibility would have appeared in Niebuhr’s eyes as resulting in a total loss of selfhood, compromising both the possibility of community and of a God standing above all communities (NDM II: 107–110). Also, Niebuhr never once suspected that by modeling selfhood on the principle of the *Imago Dei* he was also premising his ‘image of God’ on a very specific vision of selfhood whose universal reach hid the common imperial pretensions of the logocentric, sexist and racist Western ‘Man’. However, only such unexplored assumptions can explain Niebuhr’s rather hesitant appeal to America’s mission to promote democracy as I show in Chapter 5.

Regardless of the limitations of Niebuhr’s genealogical enquiry into human nature, he did succeed in rooting human reason and freedom in those fears and anxieties which intimated the ontological necessity of a transcendental God. Only from the transcendental perspective of a God could the self be understood, for ‘the possibility of a reconstruction of the self is felt to be the consequence of “power” and “grace” from beyond itself’ (NDM II: 109). The human being’s use of reason did not only allow him to overcome particular challenges in the world; nor was freedom a mere consequence of the absence of fear or constraint as it was for Hobbes. Instead, knowledge and wisdom were the product of a fear and of an anxiety which, in turn, derived from the infinitude of life’s potentialities vis-à-vis its contingency and hence announced the possibility – indeed the existence – of another world (NDM I: 183). For how would humans ever think of life as contingent if there was not present, underlying their very existence, the pre-given horizon of transcendental plane? How could they think of the temporal without some preconception of, or at least some familiarity, with a horizon of eternity? In short, how would humans think of themselves as limited without some intuitive sense of the unlimited? For this reason – and also due to his strong religious beliefs – Niebuhr was led to think that the possibilities of being that life opens up to the human subject are already there, *in life* – and hence in the subject’s innate reason – when fear and anxiety come about: ‘What emerges is an original endowment present from the beginning. The uniqueness of this special endowment is proved not only by the fact that it develops in human life alone but by the character of primitive existence’ (NDM I: 59). Niebuhr’s stress on transcendence allowed him to characterize the human condition as fundamentally anxious *by reference to* love and hence by reference to God (NDM I: 58, 194). In this sense, Niebuhrian ontology had succeeded in bringing the core of a Christian-existentialist framework to bear upon the realist tradition, with the important implications which I lay out in Chapters 4 and 5. He stood against the naturalism of Hobbes which he saw as too deterministic; and yet also against the excessive freedom that Hobbes’ ‘leviathanical’ voluntarism seemed to attribute to sovereign states as semi-divine monsters in the state of nature. His stress on the horizons of human realization – as much as on the imperceptible limits of freedom – can thus be understood by reference to his politico-theological agenda: he wanted to safeguard the possibility of a loyalty higher
than the secular authority of the State and protect it against any attempt to capture it in any secular institutions.

Niebuhr was, after all, in agreement with both the theoretical and the political aims of many early proponents of realism, which many neo-realists seemed to have irremediably forgotten. He was a realist in the precise sense that he demanded that the tradition ought never to:

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\text{\textit{\footnotesize bracket off from its primary concerns an understanding of the possible worlds in which the polity, the republic, or civic virtue could flourish. Indeed, a central characteristic of the realist tradition – if one can speak at all of a singular ‘tradition’ in this regard – is the essential incompleteness and ‘indefinite’ quality of the state which is both the subject and object of its concerns. This quality has to do with countering the sacred realist assumption of a sharply edged, politically sovereign political entity of hierarchic authority which is presented as the centre of power and whose units comprise the dominant actors in the world community.}}
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(Klein 1994: 8)

Hence, Niebuhr thought that the focus on human possibilities, rather than fears, represented a safer ground for a theo-ontology that could privilege love as the only way to fill out the emptiness of meaning felt by ‘modern man’. He thus conceived of potentiality as the realm par excellence of the human being: the human condition was for Niebuhr a condition of possibility. By tracking the concept of the fear of death back to that of an ontological anxiety, Niebuhr’s existential realism carried an explanatory potential about the subject’s relation to time, to others and to future possibilities which fear alone, understood within the rigid frame of Hobbesian naturalistic determinism, could not provide.

In this particular respect, Niebuhr’s was not very far from many contemporary critiques of Hobbes, including post-structuralist ones. Like them, Niebuhr sought to make the existentialist understanding of the human condition the very ground of the constitution of subjectivity and agency, instead of strictly focusing on the political fear of others. Therefore, this chapter has raised important reservations about the view that Hobbes’ intention was to forge a politics of fear, strictly speaking. Niebuhr’s emphasis seemed to be more on the lack of hope and faith of Hobbesian naturalism, and the ensuing concentration of power in an authority which, given that lack, was unbounded in its natural sovereignty. Niebuhr thus sought to depoliticize fear and approach human nature in terms of an ontology of anxiety, the political consequences of which we will explore in the following chapters. Anxiety would open the way to an inter-subjective or, even better, to a pre-subjective understanding of fear, since fear emanates from the immanent condition of love that we all share before God and hence from the ontological anxiety that the longing for others and for God creates in us.

Transcendental love – of which justice and anxiety were secular manifestations – was Niebuhr’s antidote against the idealist tendencies to sublimate selfhood and to lift it up to a godly stature. In Chapter 1, I explained in some detail
how Niebuhr’s stress on the dark side of human affairs was paradoxically turned into a solid intellectual basis of social activism and of political decision and how that contributed to his emergence as America’s most prominent critical prophet. Against the modern trend to sanctify human communities he posited a fairly peculiar understanding of God and in consequence of the human subject, targeting taken-for-granted ideas about human nature and collective selfhood. He conducted a measured and calculated assault on the modern idealization of the self – or what he called, depreciatively, the ‘modern man’ (Wolf 2001). His method definitely represented a new way of doing international political theory, negating all the pretensions of nations to see themselves as ideal communities and final paradises, while cultivating enough of a political imagination to keep the ideal of a perfect polity on the horizon (Schlesinger Jr. 2001; Thompson 2001).

His critique of Hobbes can hence be read as an attempt to reveal the possibilities for freedom and hope that the Hobbesian understanding of anxiety and fear of death withheld. As I argue in the next chapter, Niebuhr’s reliance on theology and existentialism did much to turn this into a viable research avenue. From the viewpoint of the history of the realist tradition, Niebuhr’s emphasis on existential possibilities would allow him to downplay the role of objective fear while still clinging on to a fairly cautious understanding of anxiety and an understanding of the human condition as fundamentally insecure, indeterminate and, above all, sinful. Indeed, Niebuhr had pioneered the concern for an ethic of possibilities within realism, while remaining a classical realist in his suspicion towards liberal idealism. Niebuhr’s stature as both a key realist thinker and an outsider to its Hobbesian strand owes greatly to his understanding of human nature as contingent upon a destiny that is by definition open-ended, pointing to an understanding of agency as both ‘anxious’ and ‘loving’ towards the world and the future. This framework was grounded in a Christian interpretation of the interplay between animal finitude and divine transcendence strongly indebted to Augustine, and yet highly mediated by the influential writings of the Danish nineteenth-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, to whose influence we now turn.

Notes
2 For a very insightful account of Hobbes’ political theology see Martinich (1992).
3 I want to thank Michael Williams for having pointed out this important aspect to me, without which I would not have understood the importance of the notion of the fear of death in Hobbes – and perhaps also in Niebuhr. Williams’ account of Hobbes’ political thought, laid out in various of his writings but especially in The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations is one of the most, if not the most, interesting and enlightening ones which I have come across among the thousands of studies on Hobbes that are available (Williams 2005).
4 Niebuhr clearly misread the background against which Hobbes was fighting. His superficial reading of Aquinas attests to this, even though his critique of modern naturalism as much as modern rationalism is derived from that tradition. Niebuhr’s argument was that reason should be checked by a higher order – the order of love – and could not be made the object of political idolatry lest it become the uncontrollable
source of a reckless voluntarism. That is, reason ought to be considered as part of a
nature which is inherently good and true and, for that very reason, neither self-created
nor the product of the human hand (Milbank 1997). The framing of reason in terms of
‘natural reason’ would have saved Niebuhr from a mistaken reading of the natural law
tradition. In turn, to think of reason as a means to search for the law of love in the
natural order of things – something which Niebuhr saw as the true virtue of freedom –
was precisely the sort of search that could accommodate the depiction of human
nature as fraught with anxiety. Above all, it would have helped his recast of Augus-
tinianism in ways that would also avoid the relapse into what he saw as Kierkegaard’s
own naturalistic excesses.

5 I want to thank Professor Jenny Edkins for having pointed out to me the sexist conno-
tations implicit in Niebuhr’s writings. Niebuhr’s has been accused by many – and
rightly according to my view – of prejudice against women (Fox 1985; Lovin 1992).
His references to ‘men’ and his insistence upon the masculine, rather than the fem-
inine, nature of selfhood, subjectivity or identity are demonstrative of how his decon-
structive or critical sense only went as far as his deep-seated sexist bias allowed.

6 Niebuhr was not of the view that this applied to the behaviour of states. But he
thought that individuals could and should condition the external conduct of states
from the inside, precisely in those cases where their ideological configuration and
regime type allowed for the sort of self-reflective capacity that individuals had and
states lacked. Niebuhrian realism thus supported the idea that the internal features of
states – their political regime – was therefore of extreme importance for their inter-
national behaviour, an aspect which radically contrasts with the later ‘structural’
variant of Kenneth Waltz’s neorealism (Waltz 2008).

7 As I mention in the general Introduction, Niebuhr’s experiences in Detroit left him
with a very pessimistic impression of how groups – in this case the capitalist elites
and the proletariat – operate when unrestrained by the ethical transcendence and
moral conscience of single individuals. His moral scepticism towards international
relations, which I spell out in Chapters 4 and 5, had more to do with the fact that it is
a field dominated by groups, and not with the fact that it is foreign to domestic soci-
cies, where groups also operate according to a will-to-power, but are restrained by
moral codes and ethical ideals which were the product of individual minds, interper-
sonal relations (MM: 6).

8 Hence, as I claim at the end of this book, I disagree with Campbell Craig’s view that
Weber was crucial to Niebuhr’s realism. Niebuhrian realism was radically opposed to
the Weberian view of international politics and can actually be seen as founding an
alternative to Weber’s Hobbesianism.

9 Note that Niebuhr did not adopt a ‘literalistic interpretation of original sin’, using it
instead as an image of human vulnerability to impulses and desires (Rees 2003: 88).

10 I thank Professor Anders Stephanson for having explained to me Niebuhr’s eschato-
logical way of thinking better than anyone else.
Following our enquiry into the notion of the fear of death as the starting point of Niebuhr’s critique of Hobbes this chapter seeks to account for his core contribution which I refer to in terms of an ‘existential turn’ in the realist tradition. As in previous accounts of Niebuhr’s ideas, I approach his understanding of anxiety by charting its development along other interrelated concepts. This corresponded, after all, to Niebuhr’s own method of dialectical semantics in which particular concepts such as power, fear, sin or love only gain their meaning by reference to other notions. As I mentioned in the introduction, Niebuhr was not a thinker specifically concerned with providing a clear and straightforward definition of each concept he used. Instead, he endeavoured to bring out the meaning of specific conceptual constellations at the end of a genealogical investigation into their impact and social power so as to reveal the inherent paradoxes and tensions of each concept before arriving at a more cogent signifier.

This chapter is not, however, exclusively concerned with Niebuhr’s considerations about anxiety. Before arriving at a clear understanding of Niebuhr’s view of international relations as dominated by selfish groups which unconsciously yearn for the salvific coming of a world community (Chapter 5), I offer an account of Niebuhr’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s thought, whose own contribution to the realist tradition was mainly catalyzed by the writings of Max Weber on politics, and is now well documented. Niebuhr’s major writings are usually placed within an overall intellectual trajectory of gradual demarcation from important Marxist insights about the human condition, about the nature of modernity as a specific historical stage of Western economic growth and also about the particular conditions of inequality, injustice and racism which Niebuhr witnessed when he was a Church minister in the over-industrialized Detroit of the 1920s. Although he was for a considerable time sympathetic to Marxism, I want to claim that his assessment of power relations was not as Marxist as it is usually presumed, and is actually more indebted to Nietzsche.
Culminating his personal experience as a preacher engaged in the social struggles of the American working class, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) is usually characterized as an important instance of Niebuhr’s early Marxist sympathies and it is undeniable that Marx carried a great impact upon his practical concerns about the living conditions of many workers in a Detroit surrendered to Fordism. Marx was key to Niebuhr’s understanding of social power, especially regarding his understanding of the ‘covert’ ways in which imperial ambition and capitalist greed operated socially (IAH: 41). He was particularly concerned with the ways in which the upper classes exerted their symbolic power over the oppressed and how, in the processes of social and economic domination, the powerful resorted to specific discourses so as to bring the exploited sectors of the population under their control.

However, as I argue in this chapter, Niebuhr’s suspicion towards capitalist elites did not only present a debt to Marxism – even in spite of Niebuhr’s permanent recourse to Marxist terminology. Indeed, Niebuhr started very early to employ a Nietzschean approach to the study of morality and politics, often resorting to Nietzsche’s own terminology such as the ‘transvaluation of values’ or the ‘will-to-power’ to interpret the struggles of his time. If one can definitely notice the influence of Max Weber in interwar political thought and science – and most notably in many later realists – the same cannot be said about Niebuhrian realism specifically. Indeed, Niebuhr never engaged with Weber, preferring instead to resort to other readers of Nietzsche as diverse as Freud or Heidegger. What seems certain, however, is that underneath his Marxist deconstruction of interclass relations, there lay a profoundly Nietzschean understanding of power as well as a deep suspicion towards institutionalized ethics and of positive law to determine the political destiny of humanity.

Even before arriving at an understanding of Christian theology through Augustine and Kierkegaard in his later writings, Niebuhr was already cultivating a profound Nietzschean distrust in the millennial and messianic aspirations of both Marxists and liberals. And in spite of Niebuhr’s reservations toward Nietzsche on several counts, I want to demonstrate in this chapter that his critique of Marxism, normally couched as extremely influential upon Niebuhr’s early thought, was already being deconstructed since its adoption by means of a Nietzschean genealogy of Christian values and of the ways they were progressively incorporated into the ideologies of Marxism and liberalism. With this in mind, I will develop a parallel reading of Niebuhr and Morgenthau on the difficult relationship between power and love, before assessing the potential impact of Niebuhr’s ideas upon IR scholarship namely by suggesting some of the ways in which his thinking can be brought to bear upon contemporary debates in the field regarding both its disciplinary history and the dialogue between the different schools and approaches in IR.

This chapter starts by recasting Niebuhr’s affinity with Nietzsche and with what the German philosopher described as the ‘will-to-power’ which Niebuhr employs in his study of the relation between power struggles and normative in international politics. I then proceed to account for the key implications of Nie-
buhr’s reformulation of the fear of death in terms of anxiety, which I take to be the cornerstone of his contribution to the realist tradition, and which is indebted almost in full to the father of existentialism: Soren Kierkegaard. I conclude that the combination of Kierkegaardian and Nietzchean legacies in Niebuhr’s writings constitute the threshold of his account of human nature which in turn grounds his IR theory.

The ‘will-to-power’: international politics beyond survival

Niebuhr resorted to the notion of the will-to-power to explain how collective behaviour is trapped in the egocentric dynamics of self-love and of pride, and to account for its nature as fundamentally self-preserving and power-driven. In describing international relations between groups in this way, Niebuhr certainly echoed some of Darwin’s own insights into collective behaviour and the dominant drives of ‘species’, akin to the sort of Hobbesianism which I have characterized previously. This part also indicates that, in one way or the other, all realists seem, on some occasions, to adopt the sort of deterministic holism of social Darwinism3 – at least as far as intergroup relations are concerned (Craig 2003; Jervis 1998). In line with Nietzsche’s critique of Darwin, however, Niebuhr was convinced that socialization between groups could hardly be guided by a pure desire for survival and self-preservation (Richardson 2009). Indeed, as Nietzsche had observed in his posthumous work, entitled The Will-to-Power:

Physiologists should bethink themselves before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being. A living thing thinks above all to discharge its strength: ‘self-preservation’ is only one of the results thereof – Let us beware of superfluous teleological principles! – one of which is the whole concept of ‘self-preservation’.

(2008: 128)

Instead, these first-order impulses were themselves rooted in a deeper, second-order drive to overpower things and people and hence mobilize all other instincts towards that specific pursuit. Nietzsche sought to demonstrate this with the example of the smallest possible form of organic life: the living content of cells, called the protoplasm. According to Nietzsche, the protoplasm shows how the most ‘primeval’ drive of any living creature

cannot be ascribed to a will to self-preservation, for it absorbs an amount of material which is absurdly out of proportion with the needs of its preservation: and what is more, it does not ‘preserve itself’ in the process, but actually falls to pieces…. The instinct which rules here, must account for this total absence in the organism of a desire to preserve itself.

(2008: 128)

Hence, for Nietzsche, there was some alternative drive feeding organic forms with life, energy and with a proper telos which was generalizable to all living
organisms but which was not that of survival or preservation. In Nietzsche’s view, physics required a different metaphysics than that of self-preservation. He thought that the concept of the ‘will-to-power’ pointed precisely to a will grounded not on some abstract freedom of choice or intentionality but on a power instinct capable of combining and absorbing all the remaining drives, from the most transcendental and noble intentions to the most basic biological impulses. This power impulse was forged by Niebuhr as the corrupted version of an original will-to-God, a lost but virtuous strive for metaphysical possibilities that the logic of sin perverted. Niebuhr thus felt the need to appropriate this notion so as to explain, in very different ways to those of Max Weber, what it was about this view of power that escaped any reduction to individual will or biological survival. Also, in this regard, Niebuhr was far removed from the Hobbesian anthropocentric view of power. Indeed, seldom has the point been made that the concept of the will-to-power was one of the most important tools of Niebuhr’s political analysis, greatly contributing to his reaffirmation of the notion of power as a core conceptual asset of the realist tradition. Niebuhr’s stress on possibility and on the power pursuits of human beings was a direct consequence of his belief that human existence was, as Augustine had remarked, ‘too straight to contain itself’. But Niebuhr also resorted to existentialism to make that point and this influence was not accidental. As I am about to show, it was definitely one of the greatest sources of his realism. Niebuhr believed that the human being was in a permanent position of ontological inbetweenness, constantly caught ‘between actuality and potentiality’ as Heidegger had described (Niebuhr quoting Heidegger, NDM I: 43, fn. 1). As followers of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both Niebuhr and Heidegger criticized the modern figure of the speculative philosopher for trying to ‘put the whole of existence into the realm of thought’ pointing to the fact that ‘while existence includes man’s thought about it, thought can never contain existence’ (Watkin 1990: 68; see NDM II: 84). At the political level as well, there was no way of escaping the constant ontological swing between the ‘signs of times’ and ‘the face of the sky’ – another of Niebuhr’s favourite metaphors to describe the ambivalence in which the modern anguished subject found itself, at the end of the Second World War (DST: 34; see also Bullert 2002). According to Niebuhr the statesman was, more than the philosopher, in a particular position of responsibility, for the temptation to merge the two dimensions was greater in his case.

So there is no doubt that, at least on some occasions, Niebuhr’s tragic sense of history was akin to a sort of despairing and apocalyptic prophesizing, with its stress on the catastrophic offshoots of an unrestrained expansion of transcendental expectations. He was convinced, following Nietzsche, that human nature was caught up in an eternal return to history, that it was marked by the reproduction of identity formations that made too much out of themselves and easily relapsed into sin. More than a historical repetition, Niebuhr’s characterization of the tragic events of the Second World War seemed sometimes to suggest a historical downturn in the moral progress of humankind: after all, never in history had human beings become so reliant upon utopias – and yet so disastrous
The existential turn

in their implementation. The absorbing character of collective fanaticisms and ideologies, with their capacity to extricate individuals from their singularity in favour of collective pursuits, could make humans lose sight of the possibility of a common destiny – something which the advent of the atomic bomb during the Second World War made even clearer (DST: 67; Bullert 2002). As Ned Lebow has argued:

The modern world led to the emergence of the individual, which is often considered one of its defining features. Cut loose, at least in part, from socially determined roles and clientalist relationships, people suffered from psychological isolation, or anomie. Thinkers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Simmel, Tonnies, Durkheim, Heidegger, Sartre and Arendt describe it, or its equivalent, as an expression of modernity. People forced to look somewhere else for identities, self-esteem and purpose in life often turned to states. Others turned to class, race or professional affiliations, or combinations of them … the search for self-esteem via class and national affiliations was an important underlying cause of imperialism and both world wars, and continues to influence not only contemporary conflicts but efforts to put international relations on a more orderly footing.

(2008: 18)

Niebuhr was hence very much influenced by the revival of nineteenth-century existential thought, whose sense of tragedy resurfaced in periods of crisis, especially during the interwar period. One of Niebuhr’s least read books, Discerning the Signs of Time, was perhaps the best example of this intellectual mood. Indeed, as far as his characterization of the human condition is concerned, Nietzsche seemed to share Kierkegaard’s understanding that the dialectic between reality and utopia manifested itself existentially in a situation of anxiety from which the subject attempts to escape or, to put it better, from which the subject is tempted to escape:

The individual must be consecrated to something higher than himself – that is the meaning of tragedy; he must be free of the terrible anxiety which death and time evoke in the individual: for at any moment, in the briefest atom of his life’s course, he may encounter something holy that endlessly outweighs all his struggle and all his distress – this is what it means to have a sense for the tragic; all the ennoblement of mankind is enclosed in this supreme task.

(Nietzsche 1997: 213)

The idea that existence was premised upon a foundational and uncaused anxiety seemed hence to be shared across a whole range of continental thinkers who for various reasons had become associated with existentialism. This category of thinking described the process of moving beyond contingency – which anxiety prompts – to achieve a level of self-awareness which, however, does not
necessarily result in the relaxation of that original state but can actually lead to its reinforcement by means of an escape into pride and self-empowerment. The tragic sense of history which existentialists were so passionate about was in the tragic realization fact that self-reflection does not curb anxiety. Hence, following Nietzsche, Niebuhr added to this claim the important understanding that, in fleeing from contingency and in becoming anxious, the human being was corrupted by the lust for power – reinforcing and reproducing his inherent and almost irresistible penchant for an evil which was never ontologically given, but was a consequence of the corruption of God’s love by its ‘concomitant’ sinfulness (NDM I: 195; see also Mulhall 2005 and Siemens and Roodt 2010). Standing between God and the world, Niebuhr claimed that the ‘created world as such is good’, to which he added the important remark that:

all forms of creation represent various strategies of power. Life is power; but all created power points beyond itself to an ultimate source. The fact that life is power is not the cause of the evil in it; and the power of the Creator is not a contradiction, but an aspect of His Holiness.

(DST: 137)

The fact that human beings were transcendent enough to realize their limitations did not necessarily make them capable of overcoming their sinfulness in any definitive way – although it did facilitate their acceptance of their limits, empowering them to act or refrain from acting, depending on the redemptive potential of each action. Hence, there was no easy way out of the existential quagmire of anxiety, and even less so at the political level. The pursuit of the highest possibility was as inherent to the human condition as was its exposure to corruption. The notion of the will-to-power helps us to understand why Niebuhr thought so.

The will-to-power – as much as the will to pride or ‘self-love’, as Niebuhr also called it – appear in Niebuhr’s writings as the social and political distortion or subversion of the divine in human existence. This element was, according to Niebuhr, transcendental Love because God’s love was the highest possibility opened to human beings. It is important to recall Niebuhr’s view that, given the human permanent condition of anxiety – the internal structure of human nature as both destined and sinful – Love never remains, once it is put into practice among humans, in its pure godly state, that is, it is never completely the love of God. Instead, anxiety and pride are responsible for Love’s fall into a sort of demoted justice which is always, and fundamentally, short of the ultimate ethic and yet anxiously aspiring to it. The will-to-power thus features in Niebuhr’s writings as that subconscious drive which, prompted by ontological anxiety corrupts love so as to serve the sinful and prideful purposes of a human ego too caught up in itself (NDM I: 192).

What matters for our present discussion, therefore, is that power and pride are combined in Niebuhr’s writings to form the dominant sinful outcomes of ‘our anxieties as weak creatures in competition with other forms of life’ (DST: 13). In its constant attempt to become God the human subject is confronted, through
the anticipation of death (fear), with his worldly limitations (sin), and hence with the impossibility of achieving such Godlikeness (love). The existential persistence of anxiety prompts a flight or ‘escape into falsehood’ which seeks to securitize the human ambivalence between world and God (Percy in Harries and Platten 2010: 123). Hence, pride and the will-to-power emerge almost indistinguishably in Niebuhr’s narrative of the rise of ‘modern man’ as the earthly renditions of the highest possibility, thus grounding ‘man’s’ strategy of assurance against the threat of the loss of Love (Rees 2003). Ironically, the subject’s attempt to escape this possibility actually prompts anxiety even more, leading to the intensification and densification of Self-assertion against others and against the world (NDM I: 187–192).

Hence, the ultimate possibility of God’s love – and of total release from anxiety – remains forever unavailable, especially in that realm where self-assertion is more violent and widespread: the realm of international relations. Combined with pride, power is described by Niebuhr as the basic volitional reaction to the ontological paradox of anxiety – an escape from the inevitability of an existence that is always neither here nor there. Therefore, power and pride are for Niebuhr the drives which characterize the tentative flight from anxiety, operating by means of its suspension or neglect for the sake of securing a metaphysical selfhood capable of projecting itself universally and of absorbing other selves (NDM I: 187–192). But Niebuhr’s understanding of power takes us beyond a mere existential interpretation of the human condition and actually suggests possible research avenues for international political theory and for political analysis.

Indeed, Niebuhr often shifted between an understanding of power as an intentional capability of the subject and as a structural feature of the social system, capable of directing and even of producing the subject’s will. Indeed, the fact that he referred to it as ‘will-to-power’ does not mean that power is always free-willed. Instead, Niebuhr seemed to think that both possibility and power are systemic features of the human condition, human inclinations which are embedded or inbuilt in the will from the start, and hence form part of the existential structure that produce a willing subject. For Niebuhr, the prideful self is an outcome of the interplay between fear and the love of God which means that his will only comes a posteriori, as a reactive outcome of that original turn. Given the foundational state of anxiety, that divine possibility prompts, the will consists of an empowering reaction against fear and towards love. However, fear and love get distorted (i.e. ‘transmuted’) by the logic of sin which anxiety causes. Sin ‘transmutes’ inner fear and outward love into their very opposites: while fear is turned into fear of death, sacrificial love retracts back to the ego, and becomes anthropomorphized in ‘self-love’ and pride: ‘The will-to-power is thus inevitably involved in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity which it intends to eliminate’ (NDM I: 192).

Thus Niebuhr suggested that the will-to-power operated in tandem with pride, as a means to overcome the original anxiety which God’s love induces in the subject. On many occasions, Niebuhr suggested that they function subconsciously and in parallel by turning ontological fear of death into the fear of
enemies – as Hobbes suggested – and by reducing the scope of sacrificial love to the domestic realm, thus surrendering love to the assertion of collective egoism. Power and pride are weaved into a will-to-power which is responsible for the subject’s escape from sinfulness and anxiety, forging a sense of inwardness and property proper to selfhood which is then redistributed in the differentiated social forms of the ‘individual’, the ‘group’, the ‘community’ and so on.

Niebuhr was convinced that, at the level of international relations, the affirmation of collective identities was rarely aimed at the constitution of a universal community of love, but was rather informed by a logic of domestic solidarity which obtained by means of national self-love and hence through the projection and externalization of aggression, hate and violence upon other nations. The will-to-power was therefore the constitutive factor of the primary units of international relations. Niebuhr’s understanding of international politics as fundamentally anarchical was not so much due to the absence of government but was primarily caused by the righteous affirmation of social power over personal singularity, leading national powers to format individual wills to their purposes. The constitution of a collective consciousness by nation-states and social classes was therefore flawed by comparison to individual consciousness: their supposed self-transcendence was never akin to self-denial and ultimate love and was, from the start, an instrument of the egocentric and oppositional logic of self-love which the sin of pride necessarily entails (Percy in Harries and Platten 2010: 123).

Niebuhr observed that, in their attempt to overcome anxiety, groups – and especially nation-states – failed to perceive the irony of any security-seeking endeavour. Indeed, as an offshoot of anxiety, collective power was not able to restrain anxiety – instead, it only reproduced it (NDM I: 192). In this sense, pride and power were seen as endemic to international relations, turning anxiety into the central tool of an ontological analysis of foreign policy making, without which the will-to-power could not be properly grasped. Since the human self is so fundamentally relational, the will-to-power – in its capacity to render transcendent love as a servant of the pursuit of the ego’s interests – appears in Niebuhr as the inescapable feature of any political construct and hence of any political theory of universal scope, even more than the notion of survival.

In this context, it becomes necessary to explore the notion of the will-to-power by relating it to the idea of survival and self-preservation, usually couched among realists as the primordial drive of collective behaviour. What Niebuhr wanted to show was how the search for the highest possibility grounded all power pursuits and that, as such, these pursuits could not be explained away by the merely naturalistic discourse of survival, as Hobbes had attempted. Indeed, Niebuhr sought to privilege this specific understanding of power so as to qualify common-held assumptions regarding the predominance of the ethics of survival and self-preservation in international political theory and in the history of the realist tradition more specifically. In this context, he attempted to highlight the ways in which the quest for survival actually entails the reproduction of power as much as of life itself, thus leading to the conclusion that ‘life is power’ (see quote above). For Niebuhr, the search for life’s preservation – as much as the human being’s search
for an afterlife – was power’s own ‘metaphysical’ way of maintaining its reach and performance operative beyond the physicality of the material world. In a passage of his major work, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Niebuhr pointed to the ambiguity of the power/love relationship between a parent and a son as a very significant example of the metaphysics of the will-to-power:

The parent is anxious about his child and this anxiety reaches beyond the grave. Is the effort of the parent to provide for the future of the child creative or destructive? Obviously it is both. It is, on the one hand, an effort to achieve the perfection of love by transcending the limits of finiteness and anticipating the needs of the child beyond the death of the parent. On the other hand … it betrays something more than the perfection of love. It reveals parental will-to-power reaching beyond the grave and seeking to defy death’s annulment of parental authority.

(NDM I: 196)

Niebuhr wittingly observed that, apart from a feeling of love, there was something else going on in this rite of passage through which all the expectations and anxieties of the former generation are handed over to the next one in the form of a responsibility to own and administer a set of goods and properties. Naturally, this pointed to a strategy of survival beyond the preservation of selfhood. On the surface, the social practices of inheritance that occur in various contexts undoubtedly represented an act of love which is part of the natural bondage between people who are biologically linked. On a deeper subconscious layer, however, Niebuhr wants to suggest that there is a relation of power going on which transcends the awareness or intention of the agents performing the action and yet conditions them to look for possibilities beyond self-preservation.

Through Nietzsche, Niebuhr thus arrived at a metaphysics of power that could ironically accommodate Christian eschatology. The ‘will’ of the will-to-power attested not only to the love of a father, but to his subconscious desire to extend power beyond his own existence and into the afterlife, securing his selfhood against the annihilating effect of death. In sum, the father seeks to survive beyond those physical limitations which nature sets upon him; and he does so by extending his power over and above his material capabilities, suggesting both a power and a self reaching beyond the body and beyond death. Through this example, Niebuhr concluded that the subjectivity of the parent – his identity as a loving being but also as a legitimate authority in a specific social setting – is determined by the relationship of responsibility in which he finds himself even before he arrives at any sense of selfhood. Parenthood revealed therefore an important complicity between power and the possibility of love beyond death.

For Niebuhr parenthood was a clear example of two aspects of existence which had escaped traditional accounts of human nature up until Nietzsche, and which are worth exploring here in a lengthier way: first, the will points to the possibility that discourses that appear to be morally good hide an element of power which corrupts or at least taints every human action, making it a reactive
outcome of an original state of anxiety; second, and related to this, it shows how agents are less in control of their actions than they actually think, precisely because power is informed by possibilities which we do not own. The subject performs certain actions and justifies them in terms of an intentionality which he or she never really willed. In looking at parenthood as an example of a power relation, Niebuhr sought to highlight the fact that power does not belong to the agent that performs a particular relation, but consists of the relationship itself, agencing and modelling each instance of that relationship in view of its efficiency in attaining a particular result.5

Niebuhr demonstrated how the eternalization, continuity and even expansion, of the authority of the parent into the future operated through a governing strategy, involving a specific ritual and a concrete set of rules which were prescribed upon the son’s conduct. The agents involved in an interaction governed by the will were mutually constituted through the differentiating performance of each others’ role: the father and the son were not autonomous agents in the process; instead, they appear as mere embodiments of a structural power which functions through the differentiation between command and obedience. The agency of the father to compose a will as much as the agency of the son to conform to its command, appeared at the end as enactments of a will-to-power informed by the possibility of love which transcends the father-son relational alignment and power hierarchy. The structural strength of the power relation between the two was therefore contained not in the intentions of each agent to perform a certain action and hence relate to each other, but in their very constitution as hierarchically different vis-à-vis each other, a constitution that is made functional by a destiny already set.

This was Niebuhr’s at once Christian and realist claim to the constitutive strength of power over human subjectivity, subconsciously and anxiously assuring itself against the possibility of its death. The will-to-power appears as the major psychological and subconscious drive of human behaviour – and especially of collective conduct – because it conditions the self to perform in those ways which make power both efficient and endurable. As a will-to-power, the human self survives by means of its preservation against physical death, which in turn requires the self to be symbolically transmuted from one body to another. Indeed, Niebuhr’s realism lay in this Nietzschean capacity to unveil the internal workings of power relations; to study the ways in which they lend a certain durability and stability to society; and how they revealed the anxiety of each actor to preserve selfhood beyond its contingency – without knowing that in doing so they are merely reproducing and legitimizing the status quo of specific power alignments and the re-emergence of new ones according to the same pattern.

Niebuhr thus found Nietzsche’s notion of the will-to-power to be very explicative of the relationships of hierarchy and authority without which actual communities would disintegrate. What was at stake politically and sociologically, was not how certain powers subordinate others – even though that was also a concern; more importantly, it was how power is itself productive of a selfhood, dictating its metaphysical preservation as a means of its own functioning and growth. And Niebuhr would naturally extrapolate the example of a parenting
relation to other realms of activity, most notably those of philosophy and of politics. As I mentioned previously, he read the philosopher’s pursuit of truth as manifesting the same sort of anxiety to preserve itself into the infinite through the affirmation of a philosophical truth as the ultimate and absolute one, hence turning the will-to-power into a will-to-truth (NDM I: 184–185). Along similar lines he observed that, at the collective level, the statesman represented the glorification and aggrandizement of single selves who, individually, could never afford the demands of their pride and ambition and hence had to resort to the expansion of the ego onto others through some form of shared symbolism (justice, legitimacy, etc.) and under the legitimizing claim of national cohesion, of a shared interest or a common good:

The statesman is anxious about the order and security of the nation. But he cannot express this anxiety without an admixture of anxiety about his prestige as a ruler and without assuming unduly that only the kind of order and security which he establishes is adequate for the nation’s health. The philosopher is anxious to arrive at the truth; but he is also anxious to prove that his particular truth is the truth. He is never as completely in possession of the truth as he imagines. That may be the error of being ignorant of one’s ignorance. But it is never simply that. The pretensions of final truth are always partly an effort to obscure a darkly felt consciousness of the limits of human knowledge. Man is afraid to face the problem of his limited knowledge lest he fall into the abyss of meaninglessness.

(NDM I: 184–185)

In spite of the self-legitimizing discourse of survival against potential threats to collective existence, Niebuhr was convinced that most polities were the byproduct of a certain desire for power and not of survival per se. In this light, Niebuhr warned that our ‘absolute responsibilities’ are not to turn our finite existence into an eternal one but to understand how our responsibility to others ‘represent the challenge of the eternal to our finite situation’ (DST: 109). In view of this, he persistently alerted against the corruption of the ethical imperative of love by the subconscious attempt of human beings to extend their individual pride and ambition through the exercise of power upon others and upon death, under the banner of the apparently ‘legitimate’ preservation of the self.

The will-to-power thus occupied a much more central role in Niebuhr’s realism than the notions of survival or self-preservation. Through it, the expansion of egotism and pride led the individual to forget his duty for self-giving – to offer itself to others by ‘dying to Self’ (ICE 1935). In face of the certainty of death, the human subject was led to reassert himself above others – often against others – by fleeing into the psychological security of an ideologically engendered selfhood, which the power arrangements at play in society had themselves produced as a means of preserving and reproducing themselves into the future. Niebuhr’s suspicion of modern forms of voluntarism lay precisely in the idea that power structures were constitutive of wills and not the other way round.
Following Nietzsche, he believed in a certain degree of agency against those structures; but in a realist fashion, he thought that that sort of transcendental agency was certainly not an attribute of groups or of larger aggregates. Instead, it was to be found in individuals who, differently from animals or groups, could vindicate a sort of critical and negative transcendence over established hierarchies and power structures, animal impulses and anxious fears – appealing to God as the only overriding loyalty, standing above all other forms of allegiance.

Indeed, in affirming the impulse of the will-to-power as the behavioral tendency of collective agency, Niebuhr was implicitly questioning the traditional realist tenets of power and survival as the most basic biological drives of human agency. Against Hobbes, Niebuhr remarked that human communities could hardly obey this principle since they had been socialized into the cultural and political aims of particular elites, classes or groups who were now in a position to define what ‘Self’ ought to be preserved and at what cost. Niebuhr saw the discourses of self-preservation as hidden attempts to pursue certain power aims, sometimes emancipatory in purpose, other times imperialistic. While he recognized that under certain circumstances survival could explain action – especially in individuals and in animals – at the collective level the idea of survival had a political and ideological meaning which had long departed from its actual biological significance. It had become a discourse which sought to assemble and cement the loyalty which the pursuit of power by certain classes and nations necessitated in their confrontation with other groups.

However, as we saw in the previous chapter, it was not only the will-to-power that grounded human behaviour in a more or less surreptitious and subconscious fashion. In ways that approximate Niebuhr from Emanuel Levinas, he considered love to be pre-subjective, configuring a human subject in constant internal struggle between the love-impulse and the power-drive (NDM I: 82; Flescher 2000). Indeed, Niebuhr thought that the human longing for community was, after all, a product of the tension between these two pre-subjective drives, pointing to a community as both a product of power and an outcome of love – and hence as both frustrating and fulfilling. The love impulse was therefore as innate as its sinful corruption by an anxious and power-seeking subject. Niebuhr’s depiction of human nature was therefore not altogether pessimistic or deterministic. His trust in the ever-increasing scope of human brotherhood allowed him to characterize his realist disposition as amounting to that of a ‘tamed cynic’. At the end, he was not only an acute observer of the power impulses hidden under moral claims for brotherhood and universal love; his sober pessimism also allowed him to look at technical and economic globalization as forcing upon human destiny the inevitable intensification of togetherness.

Anxiety and the ‘realism of distance’

We have so far seen how Niebuhr depicted human existence as ontologically grounded in anxiety and yet immanently aiming at the transcendental law of love. In the first two chapters, I introduced Niebuhr’s realism as derived
primarily from Augustine’s theology and from Hobbes’ naturalism but I have refrained from exhaustively exploring the full content of Niebuhr’s ontology in order to better prepare the reader for a clear understanding of it, of its sources and of its theoretical and political implications. Chapter 2 showed how Niebuhr’s realist critique of political idolatry was thoroughly indebted to Augustine’s separation between the city of God and the earthly city, pointing to the impossibility of the sacred status of political authority – of the sort which Wilson claimed for the United States.

On the other hand, Niebuhr’s departure from Hobbesian realism was both ontological and theological, in the precise sense that his ‘transcendental’ realism sought to retreat from Hobbes’ naturalistic approach to agency, grounded in the fear of death and in the desire for power. Niebuhr sought in this way to recall the classical natural law argument that such immanent dynamics are a consequence of the natural human realization of a higher transcendental plane of divine love, toward which the human subject felt permanently anxious. In this sense, Niebuhrian realism was a conservative reaction to the modern secularism which Hobbes had inaugurated with his biological reduction of human nature to a closed system of physical laws. As I argue further in the last chapter of this book, the Christian Niebuhr was obviously at odds with the Hobbesian modern view that nature should be repressed as the source of desire and appetite; instead, he backed the natural law alternative of a fundamental divine sense of the good and the true, as made manifest by God through nature. For how would our self-realization as fearful creatures be possible without a transcendental understanding of ourselves as partially knowledgeable and hence both within and beyond the animality that captured us completely according to Hobbes? Indeed, how could Hobbes formulate such a sophisticated and revolutionary understanding of sovereignty and the need for its idolatry without recourse to the sort of transcendental distance that only a God could reveal?

Niebuhr realized at this point that even realism required the sort of metaphysical distance that it often scorned in other philosophical traditions. While agreeing with Hobbes in that the human subject is essentially insecure and fearful, Niebuhr interpreted this shared point about human nature as already indicative of the future-oriented scope of human subjectivity, of a self longing for security – and hence destined to that very ‘longing’, or ‘solicitude’ towards the future. While Augustine’s formulation of this condition appears rather scattered throughout his writings, Hobbes ingeniously constructed such immanent sense of destiny in terms of an imperative fear of death which confronts the human being with the fact that his ultimate destiny cannot be fulfilled and must hence search for those minimal desires which can be satisfied at the individual level, while enacting a Leviathan that is committed to ensuring the thriving conditions of that individualism.

In Hobbes, the fear of death was posited as a way of redefining the whole normative horizon of politics and of the individual subject, depicting the Leviathan as the very source of the subject’s individualization, to be performed by means of a social contract. While for Hobbes the fear of death allowed for the
self-constitution of the subject into a rational citizen who, as such, seeks security (and freedom) from fear, for Niebuhr fear could never be a legitimate source of individualization or of personality more generally. The future expectations of a person could never be fully contained within his or her own lifespan, nor could they ever be secured by obeying a mortal God. Also, from a Christian perspective the Hobbesian subject would be forced to abandon his expectation of an afterlife, thus lowering his horizon of fulfilment down to the earthly security provided by the Leviathan. Since Hobbes saw human expectation only through the lenses of our natural anticipation of death, the containment of all expectation within one’s lifetime was presented as unproblematic and even desirable. Hence, Hobbes’ deterministic account of a human drive toward the future as an offshoot of fear was meant to trump the theological claim that this future-directedness could actually be caused by a transcendental creator.

Contrary to Hobbes, Niebuhr seems to believe that anxiety expresses that ontological apriori of transcendental destiny as a permanent characteristic of existence precisely because existence is always looking outwards. The will-to-power could thus only be conceived as the will to a pre-given possibility. As a Christian theologian, he did not think that life ought to be lived or celebrated only from within, as if we were constantly fearful of death and hence had to exhaust all immediate possibilities of happiness or as if our final self-fulfilment could ever emerge from enjoyment and entertainment. The highest possibility of divine love commanded prudence toward its potential subversion into pride.

I concluded Chapter 3 by claiming that Niebuhr’s critique of Hobbes did not correspond to an overall dismissal of his thinking. Indeed, Niebuhr saw in him some themes which were worth exploring if one was to start from an understanding of human existence as the proper basis of a political theory. One of those themes was anxiety, which in Hobbes sought to explain the human condition in terms of the fear of finitude. In that context, I recalled Hobbes’ characterization of human being as both fearful of death and as standing in ‘perpetuall solicitude of the time to come’ (Hobbes 1996: 76). According to Hobbes, ontological fear and existential hope constituted the immanent grounds of man’s transcendence over nature, for it was of man’s very nature that he should seek control over the environment within a limited timeframe. Therefore, transcendence and religion were for Hobbes a natural development of an intelligent and sophisticated animal, spurred by its anticipated awareness of death. He thought that the direct metaphysical inclination for what lies beyond our immediate environment is intensified and reaches an extreme of rationalization because of our innate capacity to anticipate death and hence feel anxious about it.

For Niebuhr this was clearly an insufficient account of anxiety and hence of human nature. Indeed, he seemed to think that the pressure of future possibilities upon the present – that is the possibility of unrealization of human hopes and dreams or their corruption by human greed and ambition – poses a metaphysical, but nonetheless considerable threat, hidden beneath the more objective threat of physical death. Hobbes’ overwhelming description of how, out of its very contingency, existence was capable of projecting itself above its physical end so as
to preserve the life of the body politic beyond individual death, led Niebuhr to qualify traditional understandings of a God-given transcendence by adding to it an existentialist reflection on human contingency, finitude and immanence. He developed this existentialism under the banner of a historical analysis of the various approaches to the ‘human situation’, which he narrated in the prestigious Gifford Lectures, delivered in 1939, later published as a two-volume monograph entitled *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943).

Overcoming Hobbesian realism demanded the adoption of an overall theoretical strategy in which Augustinian themes and perspectives had to be filtered through the modern lenses of Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger (De Margerie 1967). Indeed, throughout all his writings, Niebuhr remains strongly reliant upon both. In a footnote to *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr claims that ‘Kierkegaard’s analysis of the relation of anxiety to sin is the profoundest in Christian thought’ (NDM I: 195). With no less enthusiasm, Niebuhr also remarks that Heidegger’s *Being and Time* consists of ‘the ablest non-theological analysis of human nature in modern times’ (NDM I: 173). Clearly, Kierkegaard and Heidegger appeared to Niebuhr’s eyes as the synthesizers of an intellectual trajectory which sought to reveal in existential self-reflection the very tools for transcending the traditional division between immanence and transcendence, the temporal and the eternal, being’s endless possibilities and the limitation of time.

Kierkegaard’s existential and theological reflections deeply interested Niebuhr, whose dialectical Augustinianism found in him a good starting point for the undermining of Hobbes’ realism of fear. In spite of the lack of attention paid to Kierkegaard’s influence upon Niebuhr in the literature, his praise of the Danish philosopher was quite unsurprising, given Kierkegaard’s own debt to Augustine. Previous interpreters of Augustine – such as Hobbes, Luther or Calvin – appeared, for Niebuhr, to have missed Augustine’s insightful points about the paradoxical character of the human condition and of social agency as premised upon the *Imago Dei* – that is, upon the presupposition that God created the human being in His image, thus inheriting some of his features, among which was a transcendental love capable of reaching beyond desire (NDM I: 161). This important understanding of love, which Niebuhr drew mostly from Augustine and which would frame his ethical and political thought in definite ways, consisted of an indifferent loving attitude, justified and validated only transcendentally. We are asked to love our enemies so that we may be children of our father in Heaven. An attitude of spirit in enjoined without any prudential or selfish consideration. We are not told to love our enemies because in that case they will love us in return. The love that is asked of us does not move on the plane of emotion and desire.

(‘Love your Enemies’, LJ 1942: 218)

In his *Confessions*, Augustine’s take on love was already aiming at an understanding of human existence as constantly placed between immanence and
transcendence. However, it was not until Kierkegaard’s recall of the Aristotelian divide between ‘actuality’ and ‘potentiality’ that the concept of love could be developed as pointing to an ontological anxiety, hence providing a more accurate expression of the internal tensions of human agency and social action. Anxiety was therefore Niebuhr’s indispensable qualifier of the fear of death as it was through it that he successfully restored the theological and Augustinian grounds of the realist tradition. Let us explore this notion in more detail.

Niebuhr set out to reconstruct the concept of human nature that sat at the core of the realist tradition. The remainder of this chapter shows how he did that. Following Kierkegaard and Heidegger, he described the human condition as one of ‘angst’. Even though Niebuhr’s categorical statement regarding anxiety as the precise depiction of the human condition originated from a Lutheran version of Augustinianism, Kierkegaard’s own reinterpretation of that tradition was crucial for Niebuhr’s existentialist rejoinder to Hobbesian realism. The view that the human subject is at once part of nature and outside of nature, that he can transcend material existence to some partial extent, and yet ultimately remain entangled in it, was the central concern of Kierkegaard’s Christian understanding of the subject as an always incomplete ‘synthesis’ (Kierkegaard 1980: 30; Kosch 2006: 200). This ontological problematic was framed in terms of an unaccomplished love, of a despairing anxiety, of a self-defeating will-to-power, strategically conceptualized to culminate in an understanding of God as standing both within and at the end of history. Niebuhr’s aim, which was to grasp the relation between the two extremes of the existential spectrum without being influenced by the sort of immanentist outlook which purports to appropriate a transcendental stature over life and thought, was hence thoroughly Kierkegaardian (Holand 2006). As De Margerie has argued in an important study of Niebuhr published in French:

The theological dialectic consists of maintaining, in our understanding of God’s word, an affirmation and a negation, a thesis and an antithesis, and to report them endlessly to each other, so that their opposition can redeliver us to the centre of the living, to the ineffable origin, and to the inaccessible synthesis from which they originate. This dialectic remains an insolvable antinomy, a paradox, such as that of Socrates and Kierkegaard.

(De Margerie 1967: 37, translated from the French)

Niebuhr saw Kierkegaard as the first modern thinker to find in anxiety the ontology of love, that is, the imperfect materialization of a transcendental norm which could both encourage moral obligation as much as sinful inclinations. The very experiencing of life as such, that is, as unavoidably loving and yet looking to achieve a higher love stood at the root of human anxiety, a sort of fear which was incommensurable with the mere fear of death. Hence, Niebuhr fully supported Kierkegaard’s view of the human subject as standing ‘at the juncture of spirit and nature’ (ICE: 87). As unavoidably subjected to the world and to the inevitable encounter with others, existence represents the ontological
instantiation of the dialogue between the temporal and the eternal, where the contours of finite things are drawn upon the pre-existent canvas of infinitude. Since Augustine, Christian thinkers like Kierkegaard himself would refer to this fundamental temporal ‘affectio’ of being in many different ways, but the most common term used to describe it was Love (Kierkegaard 1980: 30; Augustine 2004: 328). Niebuhr would thus follow them in the belief that existence is about an inextricable connection between finitude and transcendence:

Against orthodox Christianity, the prophetic tradition in Christianity must insist on the relevance of the ideal of love to the moral experience of mankind on every conceivable level. It is not an ideal magically super-imposed upon by a revelation which has no relation to total human experience … While the final heights of the love ideal condemn as well as fulfil the moral canons of commonsense, the ideal is involved in every moral aspiration and achievement. It is the genius and the task of prophetic religion to insist on the organic relation between historic human existence and that which is both the ground and the fulfilment of this existence, the transcendent. (ICE: 114–115)

Both Kierkegaard and Niebuhr knew how, in Augustine’s Confessions, love was already interpreted as constituting both the internal content of existence and its external yardstick, pointing to important continuities between immanence and transcendence which inhere in the very logic of divine creation. As godly, love could be apprehended paradoxically as ‘God’s being in the world’ in the sense that love is both real and surreal – that is, realizable and yet never fully realized. Niebuhr was hence led to characterize love as an ‘impossible possibility’: a possibility that all loving relationships yield and yet one that they never completely exhaust. But in spite of its actual impossibility – indeed because of it – Niebuhr sought to highlight its practical relevance by pointing to the ‘relevance of an impossible ideal’:

the Christian believes that the ideal of love is real in the will and in the nature of God, even though he knows of no place in history where the ideal has been realized in its pure form. And it is because it has this reality that he feels the pull of obligation. The sense of obligation in morals from which Kant tried to derive the whole structure of religion is really derived from the religion itself. The ‘pull’ or ‘drive’ of moral life is a part of the religious tensions in life. (ICE: 5)

In loving others we are hence led to a detachment from our selves which, however, does not necessarily mean an overall break with selfhood in general, but rather its internal transfiguration and reincarnation in a different body – individual or collective.
an affective element in the experience which is itself the source of obligation. We find ourselves impelled to act on behalf of others in ways which lead us to speak of love, not reciprocity, as the ultimate standard of morality.

(Lovin 1995: 84)

The persistence of selfhood is hence revealed by Niebuhr at the highest of its paradox, as both the source of love and of self-overcoming, and as the privileged site of pride, power and sin. In order to change and in order to love others the self is forced to project itself upon the other, thus preserving its image by means of its recreation in difference. This differentiation which operates within the contours of human sameness is the condition of possibility of love as much as the very cause of anxiety. Niebuhr wanted to stress the inescapability of selfhood and the omnipresence of subjectivity, of pride and hence of power, even in those instances where human beings seem to abandon such pretension the most: ‘The injunction, “love thy neighbour as thyself”, is therefore properly preceded both by the commandment, “love the Lord thy God,” and by the injunction, “be not anxious”’ (NDM I: 272).

Indeed, there were, for Kierkegaard and Niebuhr, various conceivable shades of this loving affection: appetite and sexual desire; pride or self-love; care, longing or simple affection; concern for the world and hence power over it; subjugation to the world through sensuality; altruism, the love of neighbour and, ultimately, the love of God (Kierkegaard 2000: 282–283). What was important for Niebuhr was how all these types made it possible for the human subject to envisage – if only from afar – ultimate love in some ideal of absolute perfection; and then, from that transcendental point of view, regard himself as anxiously caught in an actual position permanently in love with ‘becoming what in his freedom he can become’ (Heidegger 1962: 199). Note that Niebuhr thinks that anxiety both signals the endless spectrum of existential possibilities as well as the absolute dependence of existence upon the world. More then any other thinker of his time, Niebuhr thus followed Heidegger’s detailed definition of the most central concept of his theory of human nature:

Heidegger calls attention to the significant double connotation of the word ‘Care’, Sorge, cura, that is a double connotation revealed in many languages. He writes: ‘The perfection of man, his becoming what in his freedom he can become according to his ultimate possibility, is a capacity of care or anxiety (Sorge). But just as basically care points to his being at the mercy of an anxious world, of his contingency (Geworfenheit). This double connotation of cura points to a basic structure in man of contingency and potentiality’ (geworfenen Entwurfs) (Sein und Zeit, p. 199). This double connotation, according to Heidegger, is clearly revealed if Sorgfalt is juxtaposed to Sorge, that is care as carefulness to care as anxiety. Unfortunately the English language makes the distinction between Angst and Sorge impossible. Both of them must be translated as anxiety.

(NDM I: 184)
Niebuhr hence draws from Heidegger’s description of the human condition as ‘careful’ and ‘anxious’ the conclusion that God’s love stood as their originating principle and final goal – even though remaining impossible to objectify in any easy or clear way (Gregory 2008). The ideal of love, as a ubiquitous law of creation, carried with it an understanding of godly perfection as omnipresent and yet inscrutable, lawful and yet transcending every law. For this reason, the meta-ontological character of love – as the ethical imperative standing above all moralities – could find a real manifestation in the ontological state of anxiety for the yet to be known ‘potentialitat’ of love. Anxiety was far from a mere emotional drive; it consisted instead of an ontological condition of permanent longing for perfect Love, hidden beneath even the most condemnable love pursuits. As in Kierkegaard, the moment of transgression and sin featured in Adam’s story as the culmination of a subconscious anxiety to become God and also as the final revelation of the imperfection of man’s self-love, indeed, of love as fallen (Badham 1998; Kroner 2001). Therefore, as ‘the internal precondition of sin’, anxiety appeared in Kierkegaard’s and Niebuhr’s as both revealing the possibility of love and, at the same time, corrupting it immediately by prompting sin (NDM I: 194). Anxiety bestows love to the subject, embedding it of the sinful anthropology of the ego’s worldliness; self-love thus appears as a departure from its original divine source, never to return to it by human hand, but only through God’s grace and forgiveness.

In Niebuhr’s perspective, anxiety thus consisted of a structural force or ontological disposition which sparked sinful action and hence miscarried the will to love. It thus impelled love to fall from its condition of an eternal law in which the human subject could participate, turning it instead into a desire for power over others, as we saw previously. Anxiety appeared hence as a very useful concept for explaining several Christian myths, starting with the Genesis. It revealed the incommensurability between divine love and Adam’s self-love, ultimately reduced to the size of a simple fruit when compared to the love of God. Even though, for anxious humans – and anxious communities – such a diminished form of love appeared to be as compelling as God’s commandment, Niebuhr wanted to present God’s love as meta-ethical, revealing itself in the very shortcomings of human relationships driven by self-interest and pride and which, as such, ‘ostensibly’ deny what they ‘implicitly affirm’ (ICE: 117). Between our pre-subjective, instinctive and imperfect love towards the actual world – symbolized in the classical notion of Eros which Hobbes articulated in terms of a physicalist identification of ‘love’ with ‘desire’ (Hobbes 1996: 39) – and the old Roman Catholic notion of final fulfilment – love understood as caritas – there lay a pattern of melancholic longing, of despair and fear, even of trembling:

Anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbour an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something or a something he does not even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself, so that, just as
the physician speaks of going around with an illness in the body, he walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain.

(Kierkegaard 1980: 22)

In attempting to establish anxiety as a fundamental disposition which could accommodate man’s sinfulness as much as his openness to transcendental love – and hence to the very existence of God – Niebuhr wanted to reinforce Augustine’s and Kierkegaard’s emphases on love as the ultimate norm of moral agency. But while love appeared as the highest norm, its ontology was better explained by the notion of anxiety. Anxiety appears as *the central*, albeit neglected, concept of Niebuhr’s ontological framework, highlighting the temporality and solicitude of human existence, ethically and eschatologically bounded by the law of love. Niebuhr’s understanding of anxiety as both the ontological condition of the possibility of transcendence and as the existential ground of sin led to the conclusion that only anxiety could occasion (1) the projection of love as the ultimate end of the human drive towards perfection and (2) the corruption of love by immanent and sinful impulses of pride and power. Anxiety thus explains the ambivalence of love, swinging between a worldly condition of affection *towards* the world, and a realm ‘not of this world’.

Despite the various sources which Niebuhr resorted to in order to approach love in the ways set out above, his take on the topic of anxiety was specifically indebted to Soren Kierkegaard. Indeed, Augustine’s paradigm revolution – against the Platonic holistic identification of the transcendental sphere with the immanent realm of reason and which Niebuhr counted among the philosophical sources of modern utopianism and political idolatry – would constitute the basis of Kierkegaard’s critique of the Enlightenment tradition from Kant to Hegel, a critique which Niebuhr followed suit (Kroner 2001). Niebuhr’s praise of Kierkegaard in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* – and also of Kierkegaard’s most acclaimed twentieth-century follower, Martin Heidegger – is well known, but seldom has the effort been made to approach their commonalities regarding the notion of anxiety. This is surprising given the fact that anxiety featured centrally in all three thinkers. Kierkegaard’s pioneering endeavour to establish a phenomenology of anxiety sought to pull transcendence away from the Greek legacy of ‘*nous*’ (knowledge) so as to place it again in ‘*geist*’ (spirit) (Watkin 1990).

As in Augustine’s *Confessions*, Kierkegaard’s writings sought to radicalize the subject’s immanent experience of selfhood and identity to the point where he becomes immersed in the realization of the eternal and the transcendental as *the very grounds* of his existence. Among others, the feeling of anxiety revealed, for Niebuhr, the primacy of transcendence over immanence, by unveiling the non-existent realm of transcendental love as the ground of the subject’s anxiety and, at the same time, as that ethical norm which both causes and overcomes anxiety. In this sense, only an understanding of the articulation between anxiety and love could lead the subject to adopt an ethical conduct:
It must be obvious that the triumph of faith over anxiety, which is the prerequisite of love, is no more a simple possibility than Agape itself. Such faith and such love are ultimate possibilities which cannot be claimed as actual achievements. Yet there are partial realizations of them in history, so long as they are not proudly claimed as achievements. These impossible possibilities describe the true norms of the self in its freedom over nature and history.

(FH: 1949)

In forcing existence to dive into its deepest emotional depths, Kierkegaard guided his reader through his own self-discovery, at the bottom of which lay the a priori transcendence of divine love. In almost psychiatric style, Kierkegaard wants to show how, in loving life the way one does and fearing death the way one does, the human being goes through various feelings and moods, the psychological interpretation of which can offer a more accurate perspective of existence as a whole, and also provide a more comprehensive understanding of its relation to the non-existent. In this way,

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eyes happen to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is much as in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself.

(Kierkegaard 1980: 61)

Its salience has to do with the ways in which it relates to an understanding of social agency as caught between finitude and freedom (Kroner 2001: 259). Indeed, anxiety was central because it is the ontological condition that allows for the triangulation between the theology of love and the psychology of power and pride in the human subject. In this context we can understand why Kierkegaard begins the *Concept of Anxiety* by defining it as ‘freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility’ (1980: 42).

We should perhaps deconstruct this rather cryptic definition. By referring to the actualization of freedom as ‘the possibility of possibility’ Kierkegaard wanted to root free agency in human contingency so as to find in their linkage the way into a truer knowledge of the depths of selfhood. In this context, freedom was not understood as the realization of an ideal of absolute freedom; instead freedom was already given in our ability, as humans, to foresee its mere possibility.20 Along these lines, Niebuhr would more than once seek to recast Kierkegaard’s reformulation of sin as a means to explain how freedom and contingency qualify each other.21 Indeed, the difficult balance which Niebuhr’s *liberal realism* sought to strike between human potentials and limitations was directly derived from Kierkegaard’s aim to construe an understanding of anxiety as an existential condition of ambivalence, where human agential possibilities
are revealed as possible and yet do not become, for that reason, necessarily realizable:

In short, man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved.… It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.

(NDM I: 194–195)

For Kierkegaard, as well as for Niebuhr, the condition of anxiety could certainly be experienced as an emotional paradox; but their point is that it was much more than a mere subjective feeling or passing mood. As Arne Gron has argued, what interested Kierkegaard was ‘not anxiety as an isolated state of mind but what anxiety reveals about being a human being’ (Gron 2008: 2). Anxiety was the ontological ground of an existence permanently in love with the world, in fact, so passionate about it and about what it makes possible – ideally – that it becomes unsatisfied with it and hence permanently looks forward, into the possibility of accessing some outer sphere where the means of control over existence are more readily available.

In this sense, Kierkegaard’s *Concept* performed a double role in Niebuhr’s thinking: while pointing to the contingency of the human condition, it called upon the possibilities that such contingency opens up – and without which the human condition could not be regarded as contingent in the first place. Niebuhr hence cogently stated that ‘Man is anxious not only because his life is limited and dependent and yet not so limited that he does not know of his limitations’ (NDM I: 183). Given death’s negation of our metaphysical potentiality, freedom is always, for human beings, the freedom of life and hence a contingent freedom. But just as contingency circumscribes the whole spectrum of human freedoms, our capacity to choose freely also empowers the actuality of existence to strive for something beyond itself, thus challenging any pre-given understanding of our limitations. Niebuhr thus concluded that

He [Man] is also anxious because he does not know the limits of his possibilities. He can do nothing and regard it perfectly done, because higher possibilities are revealed in each achievement. All human actions stand under seemingly limitless possibilities. There are, of course, limits but it is difficult to gauge them from any immediate perspective. There is therefore no limit of achievement in any sphere of activity in which human history can rest with equanimity.

(NDM I: 183)

This idea underpinned all of Niebuhr’s major writings – and was also present in the thought of another major realist, Hans Morgenthau, when addressing the human condition in terms of a fundamental ‘loneliness’ and innate ‘metaphysical anxieties’ from which power and love appear as escaping routes (Morgenthau
Niebuhr seconded Kierkegaard’s opinion that both anxiety and the fear of death were not simply a consequence of man’s realization of the end of life, but a condition induced by a higher metaphysical presence which attested the existence of ‘some dimension of reality on the other side of death’ (NDM II: 8):

However inexorable death may be as law of nature, the fear of death is just as inevitable an expression of that in man, which transcends nature. It proves that he does have pre-eminence above a beast; because the fear of death springs from the capacity not only to anticipate death but to imagine and to be anxious about some dimension of reality on the other side of death. Both forms of fear prove man’s transcendence over nature. His mind comprehends the point in nature at which his own existence in nature ends; and thereby proves that nature does not fully contain him. The fact that he fears extinction is a negative indication of a dimension in the human spirit, transcending nature. The fact that he is anxious about a possible realm of meaning on the other side of death, and speculates, in the words of Hamlet’s soliloquy that ‘to die, to sleep’ may mean ‘perchance to dream,’ is the positive indication of man’s freedom transcending nature.

(NDM II: 8)

Niebuhr’s Nietzschean assault on instrumental reason, was perfectly attuned to Kierkegaard’s advocacy of a transrational law of love, to be ontologically revealed in the existential condition of anxiety. This condition could occasion sin and fear as much it constituted the opportunity for the sort of self-distancing and political criticism that makes the duty to love one another a natural compliance with God’s transcendental call. We saw how this related to the theme of survival and self-preservation, a concept which Niebuhr knew had served many political, ideological and selfish purposes which had nothing to do with survival per se. In a way, the will-to-power was as important as pride in Niebuhr’s account of modern politics as a consequence of states’ inability to deal with collective existential anxieties. Niebuhr’s Nietzsche was therefore commensurate with his reading of Kierkegaard and this was what made both the existential turn to the realist tradition and the critique of Hobbes possible in one single stroke.

In light of the influence of these thinkers, Niebuhr’s Christian realism can hardly be reduced to a simple recounting of Augustine’s political thought. It is important to note that Niebuhr’s devotion to Augustine had its limitations and that these were partly due to such existentialist critical stand against the residues of Platonism in modern thought. Augustine’s understanding of the human condition still reflected, in Niebuhr’s view, a deep-seated Platonic prejudice against the characterization of transcendence by means of immanent experience. Niebuhr thought that this was due to Plato’s rationalist crystallization of transcendence – above history and nature, the emotions and the body – resulting in a generalized inability to see how reason ‘never operates in a vacuum, and that the presuppositions with which it begins – individual or social – make it the servant,
rather than the master, of the vital impulses of human life’ (MNC: 26). And while Niebuhr extolled Augustine’s acute – albeit infrequent – awareness of the perverse and pervasive complicity between reason and power, he knew that Augustine’s attempt to relate the planes of immanence and transcendence fell short of any systematic study of the human condition as being precisely that: a complex admixture of both planes, desperately calling for their overcoming.

Niebuhr’s existentialist and realist focus on the theme of Love as both determining and transcending human reason hence represented a move away from Augustine’s neoplatonic praise of the mind. In placing the law of love as the ultimate normative horizon of human existence, and also as the very source of its creation, Niebuhr opened the way for an understanding of the human condition as innately anxious: as both at the mercy of God and yet constantly attempting to overcome God’s power by inventing worldly semi-gods. Like Kierkegaard, Niebuhr did not want to free theology and philosophy from an understanding of transcendence; rather, he wanted to outstrip transcendence from its rationalistic overtones – something which Heidegger had also attempted to do (NDM I: 184). Indeed, while *transcendence* can be highlighted as ‘the key word in Niebuhr’, not many commentators have emphasized Niebuhr’s Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian reformulation of that concept (Gilkey 2001: 16). Niebuhr underlined Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of existence as the first modern systematic account of transcendence uncontaminated by instrumental Reason and indeed set against it: ‘Heidegger defines this Christian emphasis succinctly as “the idea of ‘transcendence’, namely, that man is something which reaches beyond himself – that he is more than a rational creature”’ (Heidegger quoted in NDM I: 173). In their wake, Niebuhr was led to think that only a renewed faith in the transcendental God could reinstate love as the normative source of all existence – individual and collective – standing both at the root and at the very end of all human anxieties. While not dispensing with reason, only faith could lead to a more accurate understanding of human nature and of social agency, cultivating an ethic of love against the rational ethics of production and ‘efficiency’ that had taken over American mores (‘Pious and Secular America’, GU 1956: 3). Against such moral rationalism, ‘prophetic Christianity … demands the impossible; and by that very demand emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature, wrestling from man the cry of distress and contrition’ (ICE: 113).

Niebuhr was thus convinced that no practical morality could find sustenance on the mere basis of a prudential ethics and strategic action – without having a higher meta-ethical frame in the horizon from which a ‘realism of distance’ could operate (Castellin 2014). Love represented the normative means of a God which could not sanction any political project in particular, but could, more importantly, claim a critical role in the conduct of human affairs by permanently disillusioning nations and communities from their vindication of a divine stature or an eschatological mandate. Niebuhr thus sought to reaffirm the classical and Jewish view of a transcendent love as the source of a negative political theology – in the sense that it seeks to negate the false deities of which modern nations and political communities are vested – and of a Christian realism capable of
inspiring the emancipation of civil society against the historical residues of political tyranny (Burnstein 2001).

The construction of a ‘critical God’, a God that could function as a metaphysical court of appeal against collective pride and national self-assertion was thus a key aspect of Niebuhr’s ‘theistic existentialism’ (Ramsey 2001: 145). Indeed, his Kierkegaardian understanding of existence guided his whole philosophy in the direction of a Christian understanding of existence in which the relevance of the immanent realm could only obtain by reference to a transcendental perspective, combining the naturalism of modern (and pre-modern) existentialist thought with the transcendentalism of the Christian tradition. This has led Richard Kroner to claim, in what is hitherto the most similar argument to that entertained here, that:

Niebuhr can be called a Christian existentialist on better grounds than either Jaspers or Marcel, for Jaspers explicitly rejects and denounces religious revelation as a source of truth, while Marcel, though a devout Catholic, makes little use of scripture in his philosophy. Quite independently of continental ‘crisis-theology’ Niebuhr developed his own scheme of an existential interpretation of Biblical revelation. He was however informed by Kierkegaard about the mystery of human selfhood … He finds it [Kierkegaard’s doctrine] attractive because it takes into account the dialectical status of man based upon man’s self-alienation from his divine origin and upon his longing for reconciliation with his supreme judge.

(Kroner 2001: 259)

Following Kierkegaard, Niebuhr would claim that, paradoxically, the validity and practice of everyday morality – as much as their potential ‘degeneration’ – depended precisely on the practically unreachable transcendence of love as the ultimate truth which only faith could reveal even when it appeared as ‘dangerous to morality’ (ICE: 240). Niebuhr’s stress on such concepts as love, anxiety, power and transcendence – in all their Augustinian, Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean and Heideggerian variations – was thus key to his reaffirmation of God as the only critical instance capable of transcending those drives absolutely and, as such, of keeping modern societies open to the possibility of greater forms of community. This could work by multiplying the individual’s numerous loyalties and allegiances as a means to arrest the anarchic struggles between those entities which demanded the full exclusivity of obedience (Buzan 2004: 124). Indeed:

both the idea of a trans-historical standard of criticism and the belief in the desirability of historical change suggest a theory of progress. And while Niebuhr regards history as ‘inconclusive’ and progress as a mixture of good and evil, he nonetheless regards the movement of history as a forward one. His emphasis on the mixture of good and evil only makes progress dialectic, rather than linear.

(McWilliams 1962: 880)
As I point out in the next chapter, the way through which God’s love appears to the human subject as an ‘impossible possibility’ – and hence as an ethical ‘principle of criticism’ which commends political consciousness (ICE: 119) – was for Niebuhr almost as important as love itself. Faith in such a God could then be expected to produce an ethical ideal which can never be positively affirmed – given its ‘meta-ethical’ character, beyond everyday ethics – but only ‘covertly’ infiltrated into human affairs and made to act negatively as a critique of the attempts of individuals and collectives to escape contingency and sin through power and pride (ICE: 121). That ethical ideal was what Niebuhr called the world community, a concept which more then any other is key to our understanding of Niebuhr’s IR theory. In what follows I explore that notion further as a way of understanding how Niebuhr’s Christian existentialism grounds his political realism.

Notes
1 MM: 231.
2 For an account of Nietzsche’s influence on the realist tradition of IR see Craig 2003; Diggins 1992, 1994; Molloy 2006; Petersen 1999; and Williams 2005.
3 Indeed, in spite of Niebuhr’s demarcation from Darwin, it is unsurprising that in divesting the realist tradition from its theological content, realists have become more receptive to evolutionary psychology and other strands of post-Darwinian social theory, as Campbell Craig and Robert Jervis argue (Craig 2003; Jervis 1998). In fact, not only Niebuhr’s critique of Marx was grounded in Nietzsche, but even his critique of Darwinist discourses on survival as insufficiently explanatory of human biological drives was itself profoundly indebted to Nietzsche’s demarcation from Darwin (Richardson 2009).
4 For very insightful accounts of this topic in Nietzsche’s philosophy, see Ansell-Pearson 1994; Nabais 2006; Richardson 1996; Siemens and Roodt 2010; Strong 1999.
5 For analytical purposes, Niebuhr’s conception of power was not so distinct of that which later Nietzschean thinkers such as Deleuze or Foucault would adopt (Diggins 1994: 438). As I explained in Chapter 2, this result could well be what Hobbes had referred to as that of ‘being foremost’, indicating an overall tendency of the human species and of the human self to grow and expand endlessly, without any specific aim beyond that. As a theologian, Niebuhr obviously would not agree with the nihilistic implications of such a theory even though he seemed inclined, as a realist and an existentialist thinker, to apply it to the realm of intergroup behaviour, which he deemed fundamentally anarchic and chaotic. Furthermore, his characterization of it as driven by unconscious impulses and ethically unaware, leads us to conclude that the lack of self-consciousness which, Niebuhr thought, nations and groups reveal, points to an overall absence of a sense of destiny and hence justifies Niebuhr’s sympathy for idea that there is a drive for eternal ad hoc expansion and growth of groups – and of any social unit – over the surrounding environment, akin to Nietzsche’s biological description of the protoplasm’s will-to-power.
6 I owe this terminology to Castellin’s book Il Realistadelle distanze (2014).
7 Heidegger himself had paid tribute to Kierkegaard as ‘the man who has gone furthest in analysing the concept of anxiety’ (BT, chapter VI, n. iv).
8 As Kierkegaard remarked, ‘existence is that child born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore constantly striving’, an idea which Niebuhr would fully support as we are about to see (Kierkegaard 2000: 78). Richard Kroner and Bertrand de Margerie have eloquently argued that Kierkegaard was not only one of the greatest references for Niebuhr, but he was indeed the thinker with
whom Niebuhr identified the most in the modern period, both in the content of his thinking and in the style of his writing (De Margerie 1967; Kroner 2001: 52). Indeed, Kierkegaard is duly considered the father of existentialism not in the sense that he actually coined the term, but in the sense that his focus on the concept of existence would carry a great impact upon twentieth-century existentialism, modern and post-modern theology, psychoanalysis, critical theory and post-structuralism. Indeed, it is hard to find a continental thinker who has not read Kierkegaard within these philosophical traditions and the reach of his influence beyond them is also well documented, namely his impact upon such thinkers as Wittgenstein (Mulhall 2005).

This was perhaps his most enduring contribution to the realist tradition, and one which is still to bear its fruits in IR theory, as I find that Niebuhr himself did not make the most out of his political ontology.

The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy (Ed. Protevi 2005) provides at least three entries for the concept of Anxiety. One of them refers to Heidegger’s particular coinage of the term. Miguel de Beistegui, an expert on Heidegger, offers a concise definition of the notion which is also the one Niebuhr has in mind when drawing directly on Heidegger’s Being and Time:

In Heidegger’s Being and Time and ‘What is Metaphysics?’ anxiety (Angst) is a distinct mood or ‘attunement’ in which there is no specific object that can be identified as the source of anxiety. One is afraid of spiders or of the dark, but, Heidegger claims, one is not anxious about anything, that is about anything specific. Does this mean that there is no such thing as anxiety? Not at all. It does mean, however, that in anxiety we are confronted with ‘nothing’, and that this confrontation is the very source of the feeling. But the nothing that is in question here is not simply to be dismissed as insignificant. There is a reality of ‘the nothing’, a distinct experience of the absence of any specific thing that is the cause of an extraordinary unease. Normally, our way of being in the world is the busy, ‘concerned’ and absorbed way of being, in which we are surrounded with familiar things (and other fellow human beings): things to do, things that are in the way, people to meet and so on. But in anxiety, all such beings seem to have vanished, all such familiarity seems to have dissolved, leaving us face to face with ourselves, with the uncanny experience of brute existence.

(Beistegui in Protevi 2005)

Plus, Niebuhr was attracted to the fact that, like his, their formulation of the paradox of existence was not too far apart from Augustine’s own. Hence, he read Kierkegaard as thoroughly indebted to Augustinianism and he probably also knew of the affinities between Heidegger and Augustine, even though he seemed to ignore Heidegger’s theological background (NDM I: 161).

As the young student of one of Niebuhr’s long-time correspondents, Paul Tillich, once pointed out, Kierkegaard wanted to formulate an understanding of anxiety as ‘busily distinguished from innerworldly, empirical fear’ (Adorno 2007: 27).

Augustine’s understanding of time as extension, as much as of the impossibility of being before time, logically leads to the conclusion that extension, temporal and spatial, constitutes a key feature of human existence, and one which attests to God’s love over its creation, which parts are interconnected, mutually caring, loving and, for the most part, peaceful (Augustine 2004: 328; Hefty 2005: 327).

See Chapter 4 for a more detailed account of the notion of preservation as related to survival, power and self in Niebuhrian realism.

This was indeed a thoroughly Augustinian point, according to which God’s perfect love can be perceived only through blinding ‘beams of light’, so strong that they remained indiscernible from a human perspective and hence untranslatable into secular reason (Augustine 2004: 374).
16 Even though Niebuhr never really explores this concept in light of its very rich history in Christian theology and in view of what it represented as a powerful addition to previous Greek understandings of love. I want to thank Francisco Corboz for having pointed out to me that Niebuhr’s ethics of love seems always to rely on the distinction between *eros* and *agape* – that is, between sexual desire and transcendental love – without any mention of the notion of *caritas* which, as we have seen, was exactly what connected anxiety with love in Heidegger and had also been a central notion if Augustine and medieval theology.

17 Laudable exceptions to this are the excellent works of Robin Lovin (1995), Badham (1998), Cotkin (2002) and Bertrand de Margerie (1967) which is arguably the most complete study of Niebuhr’s political thought outside the Anglophone world. But however important it is to highlight the place that such existential thinkers occupied in Niebuhr’s thought it is equally pressing to realize that Niebuhr was not of the opinion that the Christian world-view had failed to provide an accurate picture of the paradoxes and ambiguities of the human subject. Rather, he saw Kierkegaard and Heidegger as pursuing a line of enquiry set out by Christian theology since Augustine. Just like them Niebuhr sought to recount, after centuries of misinterpretation, the true social meaning of Biblical mythology, in terms that could actually be applied politically to the Modern world. He did not think that those who, like him, had come closer to a *realist* depiction of human nature were bringing any novel contribution to the Christian imaginary. He must have thought instead that they were, for the most part, following it – even in the case of ‘non-theological’ thinkers such as Heidegger (NDM I: 161).

18 I follow Michelle Kosch’s suggestion, laid out in her brilliant study of Kierkegaard (Kosch 2006), that his thinking can be described as phenomenological in the sense that it understands knowledge as an existential possibility in itself and hence as rooted in ontology – contrary to other more traditional and rationalistic understandings of philosophy that place science and epistemology above existence as a condition of its study, thus breaking the link with the ontological ground of knowledge for the sake of a blind pursuit of transcendence over things and over the world – a tendency which Niebuhr himself sought to counter by focusing on such phenomenological concepts as ‘Ursprung’ or ‘Angst’. Given Kierkegaard’s focus on ‘possibility’ as a key feature of knowledge – something which he derived from Kant – his thinking can be understood as anticipating phenomenology in various of its key features. With particular regard to the notion of anxiety, Kierkegaard’s approach can be described as phenomenological in the sense that it addresses anxiety as both the phenomenon to be known and the very ontological possibility of such knowledge. In this sense, phenomenology consists of a specific form of knowledge that depends on the reciprocal explanation of the concepts of phenomenon and possibility. To describe the facts of knowledge as an ‘obvious appearance’, that is, the complete coming about of something to one’s senses, also entails to understand the possibility of knowledge as a fact in itself.

(Nabais 1998: 9)

This points to an essential overlap between ontology and epistemology. Kierkegaard’s approach would later echo in Heidegger’s own claim, in the introduction to *Being & Time*, that ‘only as phenomenology is ontology possible’ (Heidegger 1962: 3). That is, only as a cognitive possibility can existence be said to exist, including the very existence of the possibility of knowledge. Anxiety appeared in Kierkegaard as both an object of study and the condition of possibility (and intelligibility) of that study and this justifies the use of the concept of phenomenology to describe Kierkegaard’s own method – even though, as a proper philosophical school, phenomenology would only emerge with Husserl’s investigations in the beginning of the twentieth century.
Apart from Heidegger’s hidden debt to Augustine (De Paulo 2006; De Vries 1999; Severson 1995; Sikka 1997), the most important instance of an existentialist reappraisal of Augustine, and one which also obtained via the important influence of Kierkegaard, is that of Karl Jaspers, who supervised Hannah Arendt’s PhD thesis on the topic of ‘Love’ in Augustine’s thought (Arendt 1996; Jaspers 1957; see also Wolin 2003). Niebuhr was a reader of Jaspers and this counts as one of the biggest influences of German existentialism upon his thought. Niebuhr was a close reader of Jaspers – he reviewed Jaspers’ book *The Future of Mankind* – and this counts as one of the biggest influences of German existentialism upon his thought.

Note that this kind of concern was quite predominant during the interwar period and even after the Second World War. Among others, Hannah Arendt alluded to this existential dilemma between freedom and contingency by observing that ‘the conditions of human existence – life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth can never “explain” what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely’ (Arendt 1998: 11).

The next chapter shows how Niebuhr’s political ‘ontology of possibility’ might have been what attracted Obama’s attention, even though I find Niebuhr’s influence on Obama’s foreign policy to be residual at best, serving mostly as a source of rhetorical imagination for Obama’s speeches.

With the notable exception of Bertrand de Margerie’s seminal study of Niebuhr’s political theology entitled *Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologien de la Communauté Mondiale* (1967) and Richard Kroner’s chapter ‘The Historical Roots of Niebuhr’s Thought’ included in what is probably the best collection of essays written on Niebuhr, entitled *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (Kegley (ed.) 2001).
5 The anarchical community and the impossible possibilities of a ‘fallen world’¹

God, give me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed,
Give me the courage to change what can be changed,
And the wisdom to distinguish one from the other.²

(Reinhold Niebuhr 1956)

Niebuhr’s framing of the world community in terms of an ‘impossible possibility’ was profoundly, albeit indirectly, indebted to his existentialism – which I explored in the previous chapters and which revolved around the anxious human search for the highest possibility of transcendental love in the city of men. This constitutes not only one of the core aspects of his IR theory, but also the threshold of the reception of his work by E. H. Carr (1892–1982), Hans Morgenthau (1904–1980) and, to a lesser extent but nonetheless importantly, by George Kennan (1904–2005) and Kenneth Waltz (1924–2013). To this extent, by linking Niebuhr’s formulation of the possibility of a world community with his Christian existentialism, one is able to view his contribution to IR scholarship as standing within, and at the same time beyond, the realist tradition of political thought and international relations theory. In this chapter, I argue that the problematic of the world community embodies all the challenges, paradoxes and anxieties of Niebuhr’s own intellectual trajectory – but also reveals a hidden dimension of the realist tradition which contemporary realists have overlooked and which has to do with the role that utopia plays in his political thought as well as in the realist tradition as a whole. By looking at Niebuhr’s understanding of the world community in all its implications – ontological and epistemological, ethical and political – this chapter revisits the key aspects of the book, adding to them Niebuhr’s formulation of the problematic of the world community, a theme which Augustine had championed and which would, after Niebuhr, be reshaped, transformed and redeveloped by E. H. Carr, one of his most acclaimed followers within the field.

Niebuhr’s intellectual concern for the analytical division between individuals and groups as described in the first part of this chapter would seem to shatter any belief in the possibility of order in international relations – let alone of the possibility of a world community. The period when his major writings on IR
The anarchical community appeared – between the early 1940s and the 1950s – could not have inspired a grimmer depiction of the international realm, characterized by violent intergroup clashes and by the relentless pursuit of collectivized wills-to-power, suggesting an anarchical tendency in the evolution of world politics and raising the prospect of an eternal recurrence of political tragedy. The historical expansion, densification and internal homogenization of human communities, obtained by means of the domestic balance of power and the violent exportation of its imbalances, undoubtedly led to a depiction of international relations in terms of tragedy, and to this extent, as we saw in the previous chapter, Niebuhr owed a great debt to Nietzsche.

In fact, I have argued that Niebuhr’s pessimism, and hence his realism – in the traditional understanding of a realist worldview as cynical, tragic and very suspicious of ‘the crowd’s’ self-reflective capabilities – was for the most part evident in those passages where he was pulling Kierkegaard and Nietzsche out of the bag so as to fit them into an overall Augustinian framework, structured around the metaphorical cleavage between an ideal city and the frustrated, but aspiring, earthly polity. To this extent, I concluded that Niebuhr’s cynicism – even in its self-containment – was in his existentialism and hence that his realistic deployment of a social ethic aimed at international politics was strongly indebted to Kierkegaard. At times, his depiction of international relations as anarchic seemed to erase any hope for a more peaceful and harmonious world community. And in its most acute moments of despair, especially in the 1940s, Niebuhr certainly perceived IR, together with his contemporaries, as a ‘fallen world’ (Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted in Lovin 2008: 198).

However, as one of his early titles indicates, Niebuhr also placed himself beyond tragedy (BT 1939). He did not remain caught in the Romantic pessimism of the nineteenth century nor was he an unconditional Augustinian (see Chapter 2). His liberal and pragmatic side, which he borrowed from the American liberal tradition of political thought – going back to the founding fathers – led to a demarcation from those pessimist thinkers he labelled the ‘children of darkness’ (CL 1943: 34; Lieven in Harries and Platten 2010: 192). With this in mind, this chapter suggests that Niebuhr’s methodical division between individuals and groups, whereas illuminating the need, indeed the urgency, to study the role of the will to power, of anxiety and of idolatrous pride in collective behaviour, was far from exhausting the whole of his political and international theory. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that, throughout his later writings, the analytical cleavage between interpersonal and intergroup behaviour would become more nuanced, never to appear again as incisively as it had been in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932).

This chapter demonstrates that there were several reasons for this gradual shift – even though it would be imprecise to claim that Niebuhr abandoned such views completely. Even in his last work, Man and His Communities, published in 1964, Niebuhr mildly restates his conviction that groups ought never to be studied in light of common-held assumptions regarding individuals, as the very title of that book suggests. Furthermore, we will realize how this aspect would
be a central concern of Carr’s own account of international politics due precisely to the influence that Niebuhr had upon his thought. Overall, however, this important respect did not cloud Niebuhr’s articulation of the ideal of the world community as an ‘impossible possibility’ and this chapter explains why this was the case.

Given Niebuhr’s worldview of international relations, whose axiological and methodological principles rested in this protestant and Nietzschean divide between the irresistible power drives of groups and the transcendental and moral qualities of individuals. I ask how he was to remain hopeful about, and to provide the explanatory tools for, the possibility of order in the international realm. This was, after all what characterized his moderate realism, at once liberal and ‘normative’ (Rato 2007; Sangiovanni in Bell 2009). If this realm was, par excellence, the realm of conflict and war, of incommensurability of values and clash of cultures, alas, ‘a sea of anarchy’ where power could emerge in its unmasked as well as in its ‘covert’ modes, how could one conceive of the possibility of order at a world level? If there were no self-transcendental powers that could be ascribed to groups, if communities did not, and would never, think beyond their self-assumed interests, what sort of explanation and justification could Niebuhr advance for his insistence on the importance of ethics in international relations? What sort of political ethic was this, and how successful was Niebuhr in articulating it given the problematic relation between ethics and politics which he so eagerly pointed out in other theories as much as in practice? Overall, how was the theme of the world community to frame that tense relation?

This chapter will not provide a conclusive response to all these questions for neither Niebuhr nor his successors were able to respond to them fully. However, they remain methodological doubts that can guide our reconstruction both of Niebuhr’s approach to his own challenges and of the ways in which ontological and ethical concerns can be brought into the field of IR without evading the theoretical and political remit of the realist tradition. I argue that realism’s constant oscillation between a serious concern for an anxiety-led will-to-power – in all its incarnations and guises – and the hope for the achievement of an international just order, frames all of its intellectual developments and achievements as much as the internal tensions and paradigmatic shifts of the tradition. Niebuhr’s intellectual worth was not only in his own theology or in his recasting of past philosophical traditions. For these would count less had he not entertained a very sophisticated and paradoxical version of a realist approach to international relations which could later be reused by other realists and IR scholars when accounting for problems of order and how common understandings of community are rooted in ontological assumptions regarding human selfhood and social agency. In tracing some of its key contributions back to Reinhold Niebuhr we are able to construe a more accurate depiction of Niebuhr’s ideas, of his intellectual trajectory and of his legacy.

In order to explain how Niebuhr translated the theo-ontological articulation between love and anxiety – as well as his realist concern with power and ethics
The anarchical community

into the eschatology of the world community, this chapter reconsiders this theme along two major trajectories. First, I revisit Niebuhr’s understanding of the relation of disorder to order or, more accurately, of anarchy to community as a central aspect of the relation between his understanding of human nature in terms of anxiety and his formulation of human destiny in terms of the world community. This relation was revived in Carr’s *The Twenty Year Crisis (origin. 1939)* (2010) directly affecting the birth of IR as an academic field, its scientific status, normative impetus and theoretical development. In the second part, I introduce the concept of the world community as a major characteristic of Niebuhr’s sense of American destiny and collective identity and hence as a key feature of its foreign policy and of the American and exceptionalist bias of Niebuhrian realism. I conclude by reviewing the central themes and discussions of this book in order to combine it with Niebuhr’s views on the possibility of the world community, on how it was problematized and to what effect.

**Anarchy and the normative foundations of the realist tradition**

This part argues that the realism of Reinhold Niebuhr consisted of a ‘normative realism’ and spells out the underlying ethical horizon which the notion of the world community brought to his realistic approach to international politics (Rato 2007; also see Sangiovanni in Bell 2009). As I argue later, that normativity is hardly reducible to a prescriptive method of foreign policymaking, let alone that of a predictive science of IR. This part thus follows from my previous argument, laid out in Chapters 3 and 4, that the existential underpinnings on which it stood did not compromise, but actually reinforced, the teleological and ethical scope of Niebuhrian realism. Indeed, Niebuhr’s emphasis on the anarchical character of the international realm was fed into academic IR, and specifically into the project of the constitution of the world community, as a moral horizon within which the research agenda of the field could unfold as a coherent epistemological whole and in some limited political reach. Essential to this was the reception of Niebuhr’s ideas by his major British counterpart: E. H. Carr. This chapter thus argues that the differentiation between idealism and realism was not an accurate description of a foundational stage of IR theory, even though the admixture of idealistic and realistic elements in the thought of Niebuhr certainly contributed to the birth of IR (Carlson 2008).

In this sense, this book joins other recent efforts to develop a ‘revisionist historiography of IR’ which ‘shares a crucial strand of intellectual DNA with realism itself, and it should come as no surprise that the former often serves the purpose of rediscovering the richness and complexity of the latter’ (Guilhot 2011: 4). It is widely known that Carr was very persuaded by Niebuhr’s lucidity, even though his appropriation of Niebuhr’s ideas was to leave theology behind, as well as those existentialist themes which Niebuhr had ingenuously fitted into his realism – such as fear, anxiety, sin, melancholy and death. Indeed, Carr was
perhaps the main responsible – along with Hans Morgenthau, but before him – for the secularization of Niebuhrian realism. Niebuhr himself had paved the way for this shift in arguing for the meta-ethical and hence meta-political nature of the biblical message (Cartwright 1992). We have seen how Niebuhr’s understanding of political responsibility represented as much a critique of American pacifism during the Second World War as of Wilsonian ‘crusadism’, warning against the potential use and misuse of religion for political ends and advising caution and restraint in their pursuit (Smith 2002: 620; see also Butler 1997 and Pestritto 2005). This meant that the principle of political responsibility and moral action had to be found somewhere between ultimate ethics and the harsh realities of power politics.

Niebuhr’s rhetorical strategy hence consisted of mobilizing religious myth against the emergence of ‘new religions’: he used Christian symbols to counter the manipulation of religion by collective manifestations of pride and ambition which were, in his view, the rule of anarchy of intergroup relations. As we saw in the previous chapter, Niebuhr was not alone in his intellectual activism against idolatry. Within the realist tradition, Carr would follow him in pursuing this method. He pushed further Niebuhr’s secularization of Augustinian realism with a heavy reliance on the philosophy of science of Karl Mannheim. This was probably what realism was mostly in need of in order to fit international relations into the canvas of an academically respectable discipline within British social sciences, away from the religious myths and the theological jargon that threatened to discredit what Carr saw as its scientific vocation. International relations could now be read in capitalized letters, turning IR’s inbuilt transdisciplinarity into the very ground of its scientific validity and academic repute. In spite of relinquishing theology – which, however, still remained in the background of Carr’s realism and would later resurface in Morgenthau’s writings or in the English School – Carr remained loyal to the ethical distinction between individuals and groups which Niebuhr had championed:

‘there is an increasing tendency among modern men’, writes Dr. Niebuhr, ‘to imagine themselves ethical because they have delegated their vices to larger and larger groups’. In the same way we delegate our animosities. It is easier for ‘England’ to hate ‘Germany’ than for individual Englishmen to hate individual Germans. It is easier to be anti-Semitic than to hate individual Jews. We condemn such emotions in ourselves as individuals, but indulge them without scruple in our capacity as members of a group.

(Carr 2001: 160)

And in spite of all the problems of such a stark division – the dangers of which Niebuhr had previously acknowledged – it made its way through the realist tradition culminating in the statecentric understanding of international politics of Hans Morgenthau, with its central focus on the national interest and, later on, of Kenneth Waltz himself, with the attention he paid to the system of states (Waltz 2008).
Indeed, Carr’s *Twenty Years’ Crisis* could not have been more apologetic of Niebuhr. This appropriation led to the shaping of the realist study of international relations along the lines of a descriptive science with a moral intent. On the analytical side, Carr wanted to focus on the reality of power without portraying the world of politics as hopeless. As in Niebuhr, this meant adopting a strategy where ethics and conscience could be presented as apparently unimportant for political practitioners and yet an unsurpassable aspect of politics more generally (Carlson 2008). On the more philosophical side of things, Carr did not develop an understanding of the paradoxes and dilemmas of human self-hood and modern subjectivity to the same extent Niebuhr did. But his vision of politics, grounded in traditional divisions between ethics and interests, values and facts, reality and utopia, conscience and power, led him to emphasize the political interplay of groups, a research focus which was further reinforced by the inbuilt assumption of a stark opposition between intergroup and interpersonal relations. Hence, they shared the same understanding of politics as ‘an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises’ (Carr, quoting Niebuhr 1939: 100). The image of a dark present of intergroup relations was again set in motion to open up the possibility of a better future in terms of a universal community. In this sense, Carr could claim that ethics as well as utopia remained present in, and were in fact integral to, politics – including international politics. Even if led and pressured by groups, individuals were, as social agents, still capable of envisaging a horizon of existential meaning and moral accomplishment beyond their own interests and loyalties. Naturally, the potential to transcend one’s limitations – the capacity of the statesman, the diplomat or the soldier to go beyond his ‘national duty’ – did not in itself guarantee the conditions for the realization of those ultimate aims. But that was hardly the point in question. For both Carr and Niebuhr transcendence over our more immediate allegiances was already something that shaped the form that even smaller social and political bonds took – regardless of the ways in which their actualization in a set of morally compelling norms was to take place (MM: 28).

In this sense, the study of international relations had to accommodate the study of the dynamics of power between groups in view of the role that ethics and the individual human person played in it at least since the industrial and French revolutions. The realist approach to IR could no longer afford to be exclusively concerned with power and had to reallocate its resources to the careful articulation of the emancipatory potential of values – of which only individuals could be the true bearers – and the coming about of a world community of multiple loyalties and affiliations, the nation-state being the most compelling one. Indeed, Niebuhr’s critique of a foreign policy exclusively carried out on the basis of a narrowly understood national interest is very illustrative of how his ethical division between individual and collective agency ultimately led to his positing of the problematic of the world community as central to international relations, following Augustine’s claim that
the city of man, for all the depth of its expansion throughout the world and for all the depth of its differences in this place and that, is a single community. The simple truth is that the bond of a common nature makes all human beings one. Nevertheless, each individual in this community poses as such that no one person (let alone, the world community) can ever be wholly result is that the city of man remains in a chronic condition of civil war.

(Augustine, The City of God, Book XVIII, Ch. 2, 2003, p. 131)

But the divisions between individual and group and between anarchy and community were not exhausted with the birth of the realist tradition in academic international relations (Schmidt 1998; Suganami 1989). In fact, Niebuhr’s stress on groups as morally inferior to individuals seems to have set the possibility of a world community as the guiding paradigm of IR theory at least for some time – and the extent to which it remains an important framework in the field (Bartelson 2009). For sure, the notion or the possibility of a world community resonated across the whole spectrum of IR’s schools and subfields. Niebuhr’s stress on individuality and personhood definitely seems to set the imperative of accounting for the potential rise of greater and larger communities across the globe in which the individual will seek protection especially in those periods or regions where his more immediate community is unable to secure it. Most obviously, Niebuhr never regarded the world community as a historical inevitability. As Carr also believed, its actual realization was as difficult as it remains present in our minds – as a historical hypothesis. But following Niebuhr, Carr seemed to think that it was precisely due to its hypothetical character that it could and would forever remain morally compelling:

there is in fact a widespread assumption of the existence of a world-wide community of which states are the units and that the conception of the moral obligation of states is closely bound up with this assumption. There is a world community because, as Senor de Madariaga puts it, ‘we smuggled that truth into our store of spiritual thinking without preliminary discussion’.

(2001: 162)

It is not a coincidence that this important claim appeared in his Twenty Years’ Crisis, considered by many as ‘the most enduring realist work of the century’ (Donnelly 2000: 180). In it Carr announces the birth of academic enquiry specifically addressed to IR. By doing so, he followed Niebuhr’s lead by placing mature political science in the context of the dialectic of anxiety between facts and dreams, present contingency and future hope, reality and utopia (Jones 1998). Carr referred to this balance as one that is particularly hard to strike in the ‘political sciences’ by contrast with the ‘physical sciences’ and one that he claims his book would definitely introduce in the realm of international relations theory, under the banner of ‘a science of international politics’ (2001: 8).
Even more important, however, was the fact that the conceptual dialectic of reality and utopia put forth by Carr – and by many others before him, including so-called idealists – again finds ontological correspondence in the interplay between anarchy and order, the ontological dichotomy that was to frame the research agenda of IR in its formative years (Bell 2009; Guilhot 2011). This dichotomy was used by Carr along the strategic lines that Niebuhr had set up: the chaotic imaginary which the term anarchy inspired was once again called upon to support a realist world-view, hence paving the way for the possibility of the overcoming of disorder within a horizon of ideal harmony. In order to stress the vital role of utopia in life, and in particular in political life, Carr quotes Niebuhr in saying that:

without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion, no society will have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partly realized by being resolutely believed.

(Niebuhr, quoted in Carr 2001: 91)

The dialectic of anxiety between contingency and potentiality had found in Niebuhr’s writings its political translation and in Carr its normative-scientific derivation: the dialectic between disorder and order and, more concretely, between international anarchy and the world community. Hence, the depiction of international relations as primarily one of intergroup relations – rather than relations between nation-states – led, in the case of Niebuhr and Carr, to the positing of the image of anarchy as a theoretical device, conducive to the ideal of a world community (CL: 114).6 Indeed, the Niebuhrian discourse on anarchy consisted of a powerful rhetorical strategy aimed at turning the notion of world community into the metaphysical horizon of any political construct and indeed of any political theory, thus emerging as a valid ethical framework for international relations – and hence as a legitimate theme in IR scholarship (Epp 1991: 2; see also Rato 2007).

The realist discourse of anarchy had for long strived to make particular forms of social life intelligible almost exclusively from the point of view of an aesthetics of order. In it, conflicting interests were first characterized as incommensurate and irreconcilable, only to reveal their ultimate harmonious potential by means of a system of mutual checks and balances (Murray 1997: 181; Rengger 2000: 41). This philosophical principle had been, after all, particularly successful in the political system of the United States, whose founding principle of the separation of powers had been made viable under the centralized monopoly of a constitutional State, and preceded by an overall sense of national community and shared culture. Indeed, Niebuhr thought that for any form of sovereignty to be viable it had to be preceded historically by a cultural common ground. He was convinced that social relations tend to become more harmonious when they are held by individuals that have the potential for self-consciousness and
self-restraint, and whose impulses for pride and domination are held in check under the anonymous balance of power of the State. But he was also confident that self-restraint was itself a product of education and hence a cultural input the implementation and administration of which was dependent on more organic power arrangements than those of the nation-state (NE: 33).

In that sense, Niebuhr was far from thinking that community was only possible at the national level, a belief which his analysis of UNESCO’s initiatives attests to. Niebuhr’s and Carr’s cosmological way of thinking about anarchy was therefore not limited to domestic politics (‘The theory and practice of UNESCO’, International Organization 1950; see also Schmitt 2007). They thought of anarchy as a realm of social interaction where interests are portrayed as conflicting and yet, by nature of their very shortcomings, potentially reconcilable under the banner of a more encompassing telos. Hence, they sought to extend the human potential for communal bond beyond the state, namely through the promotion of cultural interchange and religious dialogue (‘The Race Problem’ in LJ: 129). In this sense, Niebuhr’s characterization of the international realm as anarchic already seemed to point to a further reach of his theory, where the parts (regions, cultures, civilizations) acquire their specificity and meaning in the context of a larger dialogue with the wider world. In assessing their anarchical nature, one senses Niebuhr’s endeavour to set out, surreptitiously, the teleological basis for the possibility of a global morality to emerge, and hence for a general sense of the common good to be established within an increasingly larger community, regardless of the obstacles that such destiny might face:

How can we know until we have more historical perspective whether the Messianic pretensions of Anglo-Saxon imperialism (which are frequently made more extravagantly in America than in Britain) are the swan song of a dying Anglo-Saxon world, or the egoistic corruption in the creative function of this world in organizing a world community?

(NDM II: 306, fn. 9)

Hence, this chapter seriously questions the commonly held assumption that the understanding of the world community as both a universal telos and an ethical horizon serving as an appeal trial against the abuses of power by parochial and national communities can be seen as a theoretical creation or even innovation of the English School of IR theory. The thesis that ‘competition for military power and security is shaped – to a greater extent that realists recognize – by conceptions of international civility and, at times, by images of a world community’ is thus valid only to the extent that we do not consider Niebuhr and Carr as realists (added emphasis, Linklater 2011: 131). If we do include them in the realist tradition of IR theory – and there is no reason why we should not – we have every reason to suspect that all that the English school proponents have developed until now constitutes a mere reproduction, however more sophisticated, of the theoretical insights and normative aims of the forgotten realism of Niebuhr and Carr.
This is even more the case when one recalls the Kantian background to these claims, as this chapter does further below, along the lines of Linklater’s and Suganami’s argument that ‘the differences [between Kant and the English School] are less stark when it is remembered that Bull thought that progress in creating a “world community” was a value in its own right’ (Linklater and Suganami 2006: 175; see also Bull 2012).

Indeed, at the root of Niebuhr’s skilful discursive strategy, there lay a specific understanding of modern politics which regarded the legal depersonalization and technical anonymity of globalized societies as empowering the individual to act at a world scale, leaving behind the more parochial horizon of his community (CL: 43). In turn, this meant that social action and political decision were no longer mediated exclusively by what Niebuhr saw as the anarchic agents in IR: groups and collectives. The individual could act beyond them – sometimes against them (CL: 44). Niebuhr’s understanding of community was hence akin to what Barry Buzan attributes to the English school: a normative groundwork for the analysis of international relations (Buzan 2004). For Niebuhr, as much as for the English school proponents:

the necessity of development through successive aggregations from smaller to more encompassing groups means that the idea of world community amongst individuals have to be part of a set of multiple identities, something that moderated the effects of more sectional, parochial types of we-feeling, rather than replacing them.

(Buzan 2004: 124)

Hence, Niebuhr would definitely agree with Buzan’s remark that ‘it is hard to imagine an overriding identity of humankind without a large range of less-than-universal identities being embedded in it’ (2004: 124). What Niebuhr was actually proposing was something very similar to Hedley Bull’s notion of an ‘anarchical society’ (2012). However, the key difference lay in the teleological sense of the meaning of anarchy, which along Niebuhrian lines should be interpreted in light of the paradox of the world community as something ‘so impossible and yet so necessary’ (CL: 114).

The upshot from his reflections on this subject is that the very awareness of international relations as anarchic already assumes an implicit anxiety to overcome such anarchy – just like Hobbes had created the myth of a state of nature to venture an orderly commonwealth. It is therefore the anxiety to transcend what is perceived as an unaccomplished order that led Niebuhr to adopt the discourse of anarchy (Schmidt 1998). Surely, his Augustinian suspicion towards the power instincts which international norms always hide beneath the unstoppable expansion of democracy, prosperity and human rights – indeed the advent of the free world – remained a permanent concern for him. But if we adhere to Niebuhr’s sense of historical irony in this respect, as much as his attempt to balance a realist understanding of the power struggles with the hope for a better world, anarchy hides a much more complex meaning than its simple definition.
as absence of government. Indeed, the significance of anarchy only obtains within a community of meaning that can share both a sense of what anarchy is but also, and for that very reason, an existential anxiety to establish an order wider and higher than itself. This community of meaning was never a world state – for the world community is never, in Niebuhr’s thinking, institutionalized in any identifiable form and certainly not in any traditional form of sovereignty. But this community certainly stands beyond Bull’s anarchical society where states are depicted as mere partners in a negotiation. For Niebuhr, even states that hated each other form part of a community and in that sense they recognize themselves as part of a larger whole – or at least individuals within those states did. I hence venture to suggest that what Niebuhr was getting at was indeed a different theoretical model that could help us to frame relations between states in a more harmonious manner by way of the mutual recognition of the fragmented and ambiguous character of all historical virtues, of which enemies, as much as friends, were suspicious.

If we follow his reflections on the world community as an impossible possibility in parallel with those of English School theorists we then arrive at the idea of an ‘anarchical community’ as the best possible description of Niebuhr’s theoretical project in IR. Niebuhr’s ‘realist’ focus on anarchy did not stop him from defending human rights or from believing in moral progress, even if that progress remained attached to the ideal of existential fulfilment through redemption, rather than through an enduring achievement of perfection. It certainly boosted his hidden eschatology of universal love, turning his realism into a sort of ‘utopian realism’, as Ken Booth has convincingly argued (1994; see also Fitch 2001). Indeed:

prophetic eschatology became the theological concept by which Niebuhr maintained the tension between two themes, neither of which he would surrender: the requirements of political activity and the demands of Christian love. For him God and God’s Kingdom were a real – though describable only in mythological language – as the world of political, economic, and military power. He could never forget either God or God’s rebellious world.

(Shinn 1974: 421)

The depiction of international relations as primarily one of intergroup relations – rather than relations between nation-states – has led, in this case, to the positing of the image of anarchy as a teleological frame conducive to the ideal of a world community. It was not just that the notion of anarchy could be grasped from a communal perspective of existential meaning. It was also the very teleology of the term anarchy that carried a normative aspiration toward a larger community and which stood far beyond the descriptive sense used by English School theorists. Hence, As Ian Clark put it, ‘even in the action of denying its logic, Niebuhr further affirms the almost universal attraction of post-1945 utopians to the Kantian model’ (1979: 109). Indeed, in this regard, Niebuhr quoted Kant at length when claiming that:
as soon as ever the principle has taken root generally in the public mind that
the creeds of the church have gradually to pass into the universal religion of
reason, and so into a moral, that is, a Divine community on earth; although
the establishment of such a community may still be infinitely remote from us.
For this principle, because it contains the motive-force of a continual
approach to perfection, is like a seed which grows up, and scatters other
seed such as itself; and it bears within it invisibly the whole fabric which
will one day illuminate and rule the world…. Hindrances arising from polit-
cal and social causes, which may from time to time interfere with this
expansion, serve rather to draw closer the union of hearts in the good. For
the good, when once it has been clearly perceived, never abandons the mind.
This, then, though invisible to the human eye, is the constantly progressive
operation of the good principle. It works towards erecting in the human race,
as a community under moral laws, a power and a kingdom which shall
maintain the victory over evil, and secure to the world under its dominion
an eternal peace.

(Kant, quoted in FH: 158–159)

Niebuhr’s articulation between anarchy and the ‘impossible possibility’ of a
world community was indeed akin to this Kantianism, even though he was
unwilling to recognize such debt, perhaps due to his intellectual profile as a
realist, a critic of the Enlightenment and an anti-Wilsonian thinker (Donaldson
1992). But his critique of idealism as moralism, empowered him to play up
‘anarchy’ only as a means for a realistic reappraisal of the liberal and Kantian
project of a theoretical and prudential reconstitution of the world community as
the *telos* of our present *anarchical community*. Indeed, Niebuhr ‘embraced a
moral cosmopolitanism that rested on a vigorous embrace of universalistic moral
aspirations possessing some familial affinities to Kant’s’ (Scheuerman 2012:
464). If Niebuhr warned against the dangers of imperialism that never meant any
desistance on his part of that ideal:

Since all political and moral striving results in frustration as well as ful-
filment, the task of building a world community requires a faith which is not
easily destroyed by frustration. Such a faith must understand the moral
ambiguities of history and know them not merely as accidents or as the con-
sequence of the malevolence of this man or that nation; it must understand
them as permanent characteristics of man’s historic existence.

(CL: 126)

In ways that echo some of his thoughts on the issue, Andrew Linklater points to a
sense of ‘moral anxiety’ when one finds himself or herself halfway between two
political or moral loyalties leading up to a ‘clash’ which is not only political but is
also, more fundamentally, ontological. In this light, he claims that ‘totalizing pro-
jects have not been so successful as to erode the sense of moral anxiety when
duties to fellow-citizens clash with duties to the rest of humankind’ (Linklater
The anarchical community

1998: 151). Linklater thus draws a strikingly similar conclusion to that of Niebuhr, drawing important connections between political theory and an existential praxeology which seem to place Linklater halfway between Wilsonian idealism and Niebuhrian realism. Niebuhr would definitely support the view that:

one crucial question for a sociology of community which is geared to praxeological ends is to understand how citizenship might come to be separated from the sovereign state and embedded in the practices of a more powerful international society. How to develop new forms of citizenship and community which release the potential for wider universalities of discourse which is already immanent within the modern state and international society is the central praxeological question.

(Linklater 1998: 151)

In line with this, more recent historiographies of the field suggests that IR ‘is at heart a moral discourse’ (Guilhot 2011: 7). Furthermore, ‘it also rediscovers the centrality of values in postwar intellectual debates, and in particular the Christian revival in some intellectual circles, eager to find a rational ground for politics while moving away from value relativism’ (Guilhot 2011: 7). Nicolas Guilhot’s important work on the meeting of IR scholars which was hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation in New York in 1954 sheds light on an important occasion for a sort of theoretical synthesis that made IR much more than a loose collection of reflections and analyses of international affairs and foreign policy issues (2011: 8). Niebuhr, as well as Morgenthau, took part in this important meeting, while such big names as Raymond Aron or George Kennan were also invited. Its ambition was to establish a new standard of scientific IR while rejecting the scientism that had come to dominate American political science as well as international law and legal studies in the United States.

But what the meeting reveals is not just the concern for the need for having ‘theory’ at the heart of IR so to be able to place it in capitalized letters along other social sciences; but also a special concern with the normativity of such theoretical efforts given the fact that, at least for Niebuhr, ‘the moral issue’ could not be avoided when talking about international politics because ‘Nations are moral’ and ‘are following something more than just what they like’ (Niebuhr, quoted in Guilhot 2001, Appendix 1: 247). On another of Niebuhr’s intervention in the meeting, which Guilhot transcribes in his book, Niebuhr goes even further to assert the inexorability of normative concerns in IR theory, in what would certainly read as a shock to many Hobbesian realists:

You cannot let go of the problem of establishing norms. You have got to have a full statement of the norms. You must have as adequate a description of the norms as possible, but you must include the realization that normative theory cannot be universally accepted. However, theory can be changed and we get whatever peace and justice we have because there is change.

(Niebuhr, quoted in Guilhot 2001, Appendix 1: 247)
Soon after the meeting, a letter from Niebuhr to Kenneth Thompson, the organizer of the event, raises the important question as to whether ‘the problem of power’ should not itself be, in the various types we encounter in history, ‘added to the normative questions’ dealt with in the meeting. Niebuhr’s was clearly at odds with many realists of his time in insisting that normative questions were innate to any theory of international politics. The claim that there is no escape to the ‘morality’ of nations was meant to stress that they never operate in isolation from one another – and so neither does America – which was a double blow to both isolationist conservatives and hawkish supporters of unilateral interventionism. As early as 1941, Niebuhr had already made the point that ‘we are not immune to the disaster which emerges from European anarchy’ (‘Fighting Chance for a Sick Society’, Nation 152, 1941: 359). Morality was therefore not a matter of lofty ideals or ethereal values. The horizon of an interdependent world community was inevitably present in the actions of even the least powerful states.

It was in this sense that Niebuhr introduced the notion of the world community as a historical inevitability and yet also as the – always imperfect – normative constraint upon the actions of states. With respect to the formal features of the world community, Niebuhr came very close to the Kant of Perpetual Peace, even though he criticized the more substantial understandings of moral progress through the fiat of scientific reason and international law which stood at the basis of Kant’s and Wilson’s world order proposals. Indeed, Niebuhr can be placed on the very edge of the postmodern turn against Kantianism which many post-structuralist thinkers would spell out more fully. His stress on selfhood along the theme of the political community easily lends itself to the conclusion that without fundamental changes in the internal configuration of modern identities and collective selfhoods – indeed of human subjectivity as a whole – the reconstitution of political communities in view of the pursuit of an international order and of a world community would remain caught in those same identity forms which had led to their egocentric absorption and eventually to war (Diggins 1994; Klein 1994).

At the end, however, the rhetorical positioning vis-à-vis idealism served Niebuhr well in reproducing philosophically an ideal which Wilson had been too eager to realize politically. Niebuhr’s project was not that of dismissing the teleological aspirations of Wilson, but rather that of reconsidering them in terms of their ethical significance as universal telos (Shinn 1974). In this regard, it should be noted that the bridge between Kantianism and realism was not a prerogative of the English school of International Relations theory as Martin Wight and Andrew Linklater have argued at different stages of historical reflections on the subject of the world community (Linklater 2011; Linklater and Suganami 2006; Wight 1977). Indeed, the bridge between a concern for the power interplay of self-interested actors and their self-realization as ‘fallen’ and always falling short of a wider, and perhaps universal, community to come, was already present in Niebuhr. Niebuhr thus anticipated the English School as a bridge between the realist focus on recurrent geopolitical rivalry and the Kantian vision.
of a world community. Indeed, the aim of Niebuhrian realism was the same as that of the English school: ‘to understand past and present achievements in establishing order in the unpromising world of anarchy’ (Linklater 2011: 127).

Seen in this light, Niebuhr’s philosophical appropriation of the anti-Enlightenment discourses of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche did not necessarily result in a political opposition to Kant – even though his understanding of existence as ‘anxious’ seems more plural, more accommodating of potential drawbacks and historical regress, and hence more realistic than the Kantian paradigm of transcendental subjectivity based on the autonomy of reason. Richard Kroner emphasizes this point in his very elucidative discussion of Niebuhr’s Kierkegaardian dialectics:

Niebuhr also found his dialectical thinking confirmed by Kierkegaard. Whereas Hegel used dialectic in order to conceive the Absolute, Kierkegaard used it in order to demonstrate that the Absolute can never be conceived by human reason. In this respect Kierkegaard was, and Niebuhr consequently also is, though only indirectly, a successor of Kant. Hegel believed in the eventual solution of the dialectical contradictions in a rounded system. Kierkegaard derided and scorned this attempt. (2001: 260)

Indeed, on many occasions, Niebuhr seemed quite supportive of Kant’s ‘moderate rationalism’ even when he criticized some of its extreme forms in those thinkers who had inspired Kant and also in his followers. But Niebuhr’s aim was not very distinct from that of Kant’s Perpetual Peace: to reformulate the idea of a world community only with the pragmatic aim of preserving it against its potential distortion by an anxious age and to maintain it as an ‘eschatological proviso so that no human project is of absolute value’ (Doak 2002: 125).

By means of the reestablishment of the ideal of the world community as moral norm and meta-political horizon, Niebuhr was also reinforcing the sense of urgency to recall God into a position of critical transcendence of political achievements, standing against their vindication to any sacred or divine pretension. In this sense, Niebuhr’s discourse of anarchy can be seen here as progressively constituting the overall framework for the working out of theoretical and normative propositions in international relations. Indeed, such strategy could only obtain by projecting upon the future what it denied the present: the possibility of a world community. In this sense, instead of having the danger of anarchy as the assumption implicit in the projection of a world community, Niebuhr seemed to be well aware of the presupposition of order which any anarchic depiction of the world already contained. As Carr would later put it, Niebuhr deemed ‘Credo quia impossibile’ a necessary ‘category of political thinking’ (2001: 91). Therefore, Niebuhr’s own articulation between anarchy and the ‘impossible possibility’ of a world community shows how, ironically, his denunciation of Wilsonian liberal idealism as moralistic was grounded in a calculated
stress on anarchy, construed in such a way as to maintain the idealist project of a world community alive:

The world community, toward which all historical forces seem to be driving us, is mankind’s final possibility and impossibility. The task of achieving it must be interpreted from the standpoint of a faith which understands the fragmentary and broken character of all historic achievements and yet has confidence in their meaning, because it knows their completion to be in the hands of a Divine Power, whose resources are greater than those of men, and whose suffering love can overcome the corruptions of man’s achievements without negating the significance of our striving.

(CL: 128)

On the one hand, Niebuhr’s prorogation of the dream of a world community – and his violent critique of all the attempts to realize it via the creation of a world government – was precisely, albeit ironically, the mechanism that allowed for the dream to live on as a paradigmatic framing of academic IR. On the other hand, the unfolding of the theme of the world community under the banner of the realist tradition straddled the borderline between liberal idealism and realism, repositioning the realist tradition as the idea midway between cynicism and utopia. My suggestion of the model of the anarchical community as something which Niebuhr aspired to when referring to an (im)possible world community also suggests Niebuhr’s comfort when sitting on top of these ironies and paradoxes. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Niebuhr and others had insisted on this demarcation, but it was clear that it performed more of a heuristic and rhetorical role than a substantial and meaningful divide between reality and utopia – as would later be assumed by the historians of the field (Wilson 1999).

Certainly, for Niebuhr, the study of IR had been overwhelmingly dominated by idealism until the thirties. Like E. H. Carr, he warned against the cynical and destructive potential for inertia that the wholehearted adoption of a robust realism could lead to – and had in the past. By denying the immediate coming of a world community, as much as its correspondence with a world state, the ideal of the world community became even more appealing. Niebuhr’s writings emerge in the context of a century-old conversation between international theorists and the practice of foreign policymakers, diplomats, statesmen and international lawyers, permanently bridging the divide between what he referred to as ‘a too consistent realism’ – such as the one espoused in realpolitik ‘militarism’ (MM: 232) – and moralistic idealism. He finally observed that the ‘unhappy consequence of a too consistent political realism would seem to justify the interposition of the counsels of the moralist’ (MM: 232).

Niebuhr was, in a way, already beyond this debate, not at its beginning. His reflection on the possibility of a world community before the Cold War must be read in this context, and not simply as an attack against idealism. Carr’s appropriation of Niebuhr shows that at least before the Cold War, idealism and realism were actually being re-united, not set apart (Epp 1991: 2). In this sense, the field
The anarchical community seems to have developed greatly from a certain ontological underpinning which was present in both idealism and realism – even though approached differently, with different rhetorical skills and discursive strategies. The realist discourse of anarchy was anti-idealistic in style but profoundly teleological in scope, pointing to the possibility of the world community as unrealizable but, for that very reason, always present (CL: 114). This ideal has since modelled part of the field of international relations around the study of its possibility, or at least, by invariably setting international and transnational issues in reference to that ultimate horizon. The consensus around anarchy as a fundamental tenet of political theory was therefore both liberal and realist. This seemed to be the spirit of Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* (1939), usually said to have reshaped the study of international relations in such a way as to legitimize, more than any other work, its scientific status (Donnelly 2000; Haslam 2000; Jones 1998).

One could easily agree with the common-held view that this was perhaps the most important book about IR in the first half of the twentieth-century – were it not for the fact that it drew most of its conclusions from Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (MM 1932). Indeed, Niebuhr’s take on anarchy provided IR with a scientific project of its own, while giving it the moral scope which its epistemological autonomy necessitates. Leading critical theorists such as Neufeld would later conclude, following Niebuhr and Carr, that ‘the study of international relations is, and always has been, unavoidably normative’ (Neufeld 1995: 108; Guilhot 2010). The fact that the ideal of the world community gained a significant boost from Niebuhr’s teleological take on anarchy only adds to the conclusion that realism did not refute an idealist conjecture – at least as a ‘necessary’ possibility – but merely recreated it (CL: 114). The prospect of a world community has since then affected many different schools within the field – from critical theory to the English school, each one with different takes on it – and this theme is still vaguely appealing today, even though it no longer binds the field together as it once seemed to (Bartelson 2009).

Moreover, this suggests an ironical feature of the early history of the field in that realists appear as the major forbearers of idealism and as such the very guardians of IR’s epistemic legitimacy (Carlson 2008). Indeed, the kernel of its scientific intelligibility and internal contestation revolved around an object of study that was actually a non-object, the pure absence of international government, indeed, anarchy. Most obviously, the argument could be made that the historical subject matter of international relations has seldom been that of the constitution of a world community. However, it is much harder to prove that its possibility – rooted in a teleological formulation of anarchy – did not define the field, at least during its formative years, as I have just argued following Niebuhr (CL: 114). In this sense, Niebuhr seemed to point in the right direction when claiming that ‘the world community, standing thus as the final possibility and impossibility of human life, will in actuality be the perpetual problem as well as the constant fulfilment of human hopes’ (CL: 127).

It can hence be argued that IR had its more substantial disciplinary development, not with the discussion around the legal, logistic and political arrangements
that a world community would require, but rather with the realist reaffirmation of anarchy as prefiguring the prospect of a world community, no matter how problematic and contested a possibility. He seemed to confirm this view when claiming that the manifestation of existential paradoxes 'in the field of international relations is more vivid than in any other field, because all aspects of man’s historical problems appear upon that larger field in more vivid and discernible proportions' (CL: 126). In fact, the early Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr was meant precisely to keep that dream alive as it is: as a possibility and an open quest, vulnerable to the contingency of the human condition and yet constituting the horizon of any political achievement, always to be interpreted as falling short of that ultimate ideal.

In this sense, even if the central divide between interpersonal and intergroup relations was introduced as the distinctive element between Realism and idealism, their position regarding the study of international relations still relied, as shown previously, on a teleology of world community – and to that extent still betrayed idealistic elements (Weaver 2011: 107). Nonetheless, their analytical differentiation between individual conduct and collective behaviour redelivers the teleology of the world community in terms of a prudential and negative liberalism with Augustinian overtones that sees any human realization as always falling short of ultimate ideals and hence, for that very reason, always aspiring to reach them (CL: 114). For the remainder of this chapter I will summarize the major steps of this book with a view to the reconstruction of the notion of the world community in the context of Niebuhr's writings. Even though, as I have pointed out, Niebuhr attempted a bridge between the existential insights of Augustine and Nietzsche’s romanticism via Kierkegaard, it will become clear that Niebuhr's construction of a social ethics that could carry some impact upon an ‘anarchical community’, configured an idealist twist to the realist tradition itself – even though it did not affect Niebuhr’s deep suspicion towards idealists and internationalists (Guilhot 2011: 6).

The world community and ‘the kingdom not of this world’

My suggestion of the notion of the ‘anarchical community’ as the best way to summarize Niebuhr’s international thought was not meant to displace the concept of the world community as the horizon of a normative understanding of anarchy. Indeed, Niebuhr’s formulation of the possibility of a world community as both within and outside history was meant as an ethico-political equivalent of the meta-ethical notion of love, pointing to the same sort of ontological longing, despair and hope of the human subject, permanently caught in an anxious and ‘perpetual solicitude of the time to come’ (Hobbes 1996: 72). As we saw, Niebuhr’s impossible community was not so much an exercise of futurism but a careful articulation of a notion that could frame the self-fulfilment of humans in terms of the highest and broadest possibility of sociality. In this part, however, I want to make the case that in spite of Niebuhr’s attempt to detach the ideal of the world community from its debt to American culture, it remained
fairly entangled in it, projecting the transformative aspirations of America onto the world.

Niebuhr’s generation was, for obvious reasons, very open and vulnerable to this sort of existential mood expressed in a poetic and prophetic style. His pronouncement of anxiety as the key feature of a human condition overwhelmed by feelings of despair, melancholy, dread, fear, trembling, love and hope for the ultimate, spoke directly to the victims of modern political idolatry and to those who witnessed the ensuing violence. His was indeed a time of exception. It was as if human anxiety had never been more anxious. Niebuhr witnessed the spread of Wilsonian imperialism, the outbreak of two world wars, the failure of the League of Nations, the rise of Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Mussolini, the birth of the UN amidst the pains of the slow plunge into a Cold War, and a whole array of American interventions from Hiroshima to Vietnam. Nothing illustrated better the universal reach of anxiety than the pioneering endeavour to erect a world organization which, born out of the scenario of a global conflict, already intimated, in its internal hierarchical struggles and political impasses, the possibility of a unseen atomic devastation.

But all exceptional times find their prophet – and Niebuhr certainly aspired to become one. After the war, the United States were catapulted to the position of a world giant and Niebuhr was deeply suspicious of the nation’s readiness to assume such a burden, even in spite of its embodied Jewish sense of national exceptionalism which the first Puritan settlers as well as the founding fathers had so eagerly manifested (Hartz 1957; Stephanson 1995; Weaver 1995). Niebuhr was convinced that America’s sense of destiny strengthened its power to realize God’s plan as much as it installed the fear of failing to perform to His command. The responsibility of such a great power dictated an overwhelming anxiety over the possibility of collective frustration and despair: ‘Our confidence in happiness as the end of life, and in prosperity as the basis of happiness is challenged by every duty and sacrifice, every wound and anxiety which our world-wide responsibilities bring upon us’ (IAH: 58). Amidst its confrontation with the Soviet Union, Niebuhr felt that America’s ‘fortunate vagueness’ regarding the ways in which such destiny ought to be accomplished, ran the risk of being corrupted by a sort of post-Wilsonian voluntarism with its stress on moral righteousness, political self-idolatry and military intervention (IAH: 74; see also Rosenthal 1991).

Confronted with the unbreakable idolatrous strength of Wilsonianism – which, Niebuhr felt, had outlived Wilson – Niebuhr became the major bearer of the philosophical discourse of anxiety in the cultural and intellectual milieus of post-war America, along with his friends Paul Tillich and W. H. Auden. His delivery of the Gifford lectures right at the beginning of the Second World War provided a good opportunity for this (Bullert 2002). By establishing anxiety as the ontological core of human agency Niebuhr had shifted it from a sentimental connotation and turned it into a proper object of collective psychoanalysis, indeed of a national self-reflection with important implications for foreign policy (Thompson 2007). In doing this, Niebuhr was also boosting the analogy between
the condition of individual anxiety and that of a national and collective anxiety. Only by regarding themselves as anxious, could Western nations – and exceptionally the United States – create the conditions for the fulfilment of a destiny which only God could disclose. In turn, God’s final revelation – whose ethical and political translation was to be found in the notion of the world community – dependent on the capacity of human beings to reckon with the anxiety of having to yearn for a coming which they could not willingly determine.

In this sense, Niebuhr prophesized America’s destiny whose very condition as an anxious world power had to be interpreted in a non-deterministic manner. Niebuhr’s views on American foreign policy were guided by a sense of a national ‘fortunate vagueness’ regarding the ways in America’s righteousness could ensue in a new era of international peace and universal love (IAH: 74; Thompson 2007). In his view, America’s righteousness had to be turned upon itself as a critical means of self-reproach conducive to the containment of imperial hubris which the escape from anxiety made historically imperative (Tjalve 2008). Only by regarding itself as anxious could the United States look upon other nations as also anxious, egoistic and powerful and hence endeavour to establish a balance of power capable of preserving order and peace on those realistic grounds – and not on some idealized self-image of the sort I presented in Chapter 1.

In this way, Niebuhr sought to implement, politically and publically, Kierkegaard’s personal and untimely lesson that ‘whoever has learnt to be anxious in the right way has learnt the ultimate’ (1980: 13). He derived from Kierkegaard a sense of how the self-awareness of anxiety signified the first step towards the accomplishment of the final gathering with God, under the banner of perfect love and ultimate fulfilment. Kierkegaard’s lesson meant that the answer to all our anxieties ought to be found in anxiety itself, in its problematization in view of what it reveals about the capacity of humans for pride and power as much as for faith and love. In questioning and reflecting upon America’s deepest anxieties, Niebuhr did not fall prey to the illusion of attempting to dissuade fear or annul despair; nor was his intent to embody America’s self-reflection as the anxious nation a means to find an alternative trajectory of flight from its imperial condition – as seemed to be the practice of modern psychiatry or of social sciences more generally in their prescriptive hunger. Instead, by addressing anxiety in such a way, the United States might find in its contingency the very source of its powers to transform its national self in ways conducive to the increase of international cooperation and to more universal forms of togetherness.

As a critic of political idolatry and of America’s self-image, Niebuhr was not saying that in becoming conscious of anxiety, Americans ought to expect God’s love, or his favour over other peoples. Instead, the meta-ethics of love – which was God’s highest moral norm – commanded the self-recognition of anxiety as the ultimate knowledge of the ontological ground of being and hence of the essential selfless love which was God’s exclusive preserve. By learning to be anxious by means of a critical faith, the human being could discover inwardly the definite truth of the immanence of transcendence, and hence the presence of God in each single individual. It was also in this light that Kierkegaard’s praise
of ‘the concrete’ can be understood when claiming that ‘the individual is the universal’ (1980). Niebuhr’s personal appeal for resistance against the occasional tyrannies within American society – from Ford’s capitalistic enterprise to McCarthyism – thus represented a way of turning Kierkegaard’s praise for the role of the concrete individual into a form of resistance that could appeal to God as a means of mobilizing civil society to influence political decision and collective destiny (MNC: 85).

Niebuhr’s overlap between political ontology and Christian ethics hence becomes clearer when read in parallel with Kierkegaard’s philosophical system. The ethical ideal of love ought not to be pursued as something external to the human being – nor was God a strictly metaphysical entity in this sense. Instead, both the ideal of love and the existence of God had to be found within the subject’s own sense of its Self – as anxious – and of the possibility of its very denial through self-giving. Niebuhr’s understanding of the ‘integral self’ pointed to his redemptive power to see in anxiety the precedent of sin. As the ‘internal precondition of sin’, anxiety pointed to an original state of innocence where the human being was yet to fall prey to a prideful sense of selfhood (NDM I: 194). Niebuhr did not believe in the possibility of an actual return to that state – and he criticized those Christian idealists and ascetics who claimed that such ethical prerogative could ever command political conduct (see ‘Why the Christian Church Is not Pacifist’ in Brown 1986: 102). But, as Kierkegaard had shown, the original condition of a self-nullifying and purely altruistic innocence – which suggested a pantheistic love towards the world and towards others – did indeed appear to his eyes as the highest ethical principle, in fact as high as to remain ethically and morally impossible – that is, from the point of view of a continuous and everyday social morality.

Naturally, this view carried important problems, even a certain impasse. As the next chapter shows, Niebuhr found many obstacles when attempting to translate such insights into a prescriptive ethical system capable of governing collective behaviour and hence of grounding an international ethics. Power struggles were simply too abrasive and overwhelming to accommodate the ethic of love which single individuals found desirable (MM: 6). In light of this impossibility, Niebuhr endeavoured to construct a sustained meta-theoretical reflection that could search for an ethical via media capable of regulating behaviour and instilling a critical sense of human limitations without having to appeal, at least directly, to the demanding requirements of universal love or self-denying altruism. Anxiety provided a conceptual ground for the characterization of collective and national subconscious behavioural patterns as innocently driven by instincts and hence totally open to the constraints of the power structures that constitute the ‘international jungle’. And yet, Niebuhr seemed to think that the power logic of international relations was embedded in a hidden sense of destiny or at least of a higher possibility, revealing in each self-interested pursuit the latent potential of a larger form of community. By pointing out the unsurpassable anxiety of nations and groups, Niebuhr sought to construct a conceptual framework that could accommodate both the reality of power politics and the possibility of
establishing a minimal universal ethic – or what he designated as a ‘political morality’ (MM: 234).

Despite Niebuhr’s critique of America’s self-image, Christian realism was neither dismissive of a certain Kantian eschatology as Ian Clark suggested, nor of the exceptional role of America in the coming of a ‘Kingdom not of this world’ (BT: 271–286; Clark 1979). I show that Niebuhr’s existentialism – grounded in what I called an ontology of possibility – allows us to link his understanding of love and anxiety with the political destiny of America, as the privileged and exceptional architect of the impossible possibilities of human flourishing. Anxious love of God, not fear of death, was all that such ontology was about, especially in IR. On a few occasions he seems to prioritize ontological anxiety over the law of love as the key constituent of human nature (NDM I: 87). In this context, Niebuhr described Love either a means to, or an offshoot of, something else – for instance, a means to security or a consequence of anxiety. Hence, love appears as an offspring of an anxious human nature, constantly placing itself ahead of itself (destiny) and hence primarily defined by an uncaused anxiety towards the future and care about the world. Niebuhr was quite adamant in claiming that ontology always points to an existence constantly striving to self-regard itself in opposition to the non-existent or the yet-to-exist – a meta-ethical ‘ought’.

For him, this was what being a human being meant – and Niebuhr did think that politics was caught up in the same ambivalence: the search for meaning outside of existence and the presupposition of meaning, or at least of its search, in any existence (or community), making it necessarily anxious. But just as the human condition is a condition of anxiety, it is also a condition looking to escape from anxiety and hence from itself through the establishment of an ideal of inner safety (God) and outward security (an ordered community). In this sense, I have attempted to characterize Niebuhr’s God as an intrinsic and critical part of politics and order, the symbol of its ultimate ethical possibility and its most radical presupposition, making the attempt of man to become God the core characteristic of its subjectivity and sociability and hence the central object of its despair and anxiety. Indeed, Morgenthau had called attention to this very fact by insisting on man’s ‘metaphysical anxieties’ as a constant concern in human history (1946: 1–2). More importantly, however, he added – in a rare theological allusion – that the anxiety pointed to man’s loss of ‘innocence’ as much as the escape from anxiety pointed to his attempt to ‘recapture’ the ‘security’ of its innocence by ordering the world morally and religiously, so as to rewind the subject’s estrangement from the world:

the intellectual and moral history of mankind is the story of inner insecurity, of the anticipation of impending doom, of metaphysical anxieties. These are rooted in the situation of man as a creature which, being conscious of itself, has lost its animal innocence and security and is now forever striving to recapture this innocence and security in religious, moral and social worlds of its own.

(Morgenthau 1946: 1)
Niebuhr’s and Morgenthau’s shared concern with anxiety presented a deep existential affinity with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard who used the term constantly to refer to the modern condition of human beings (as shown in Chapter 4). In turn, I have also shown how Niebuhr in particular was very convinced that power could be read as the internal structure of the escape from the foundational anxiety, as the leap ahead of a human subject *anxiously trying to avoid anxiety* or at least the ‘uneasy conscience’ of its awareness. This meant that the securing of the self through pride, and against the fundamental insecurity of anxiety, had as its internal structure the will-to-power. And so did the collective self of political communities pointing to an important axiological principle of Niebuhrian realism according to which identity is shaped by power, even though this power ought to be understood metaphysically and beyond any materialist understanding of it as a ‘capability’, suggesting a sort of structuralist, or even post-structuralist, perspective on the issue (see Chapter 4).

Having summarized the key steps taken so far in previous chapters it is important to stress that Niebuhr’s theological and existentialist ontology was not without a political translation: just as the human being strives for the ideal of perfection by seeking to make himself God by means of an uncorrupted, free-willing and autonomous Self, he also seeks to project this principle of internal order onto the political sphere. As I had also mentioned, anxiety refers here to an overall condition of existence and not just a mere individual feeling. In this sense, Niebuhr thought that the absence of self-awareness of groups only increased their anxiety and the escape through power and pride which anxiety prompts. Therefore, anxiety was not a psychological feature of human persons; it was above all a problematic characteristic of groups and hence a central concern in international relations and American foreign policy (Thompson 2007). So how was Niebuhr to bring anxiety to his study of politics and how could he accommodate it in the ethical system which he wanted to construct based on the world community? And, more concretely, how could America’s own anxiety relate to the ideal of a world community?

Regarding the first question, it is fairly easy to see how the world community was directly related to human anxiety and God’s love in Niebuhr’s realism. It operated as a bridge between human nature and human destiny – and hence between the anxious world of power relations and the love of God as the ultimate ethical possibility (De Margerie 1967: 253–261). Anxiety meant simply the ontology of ultimate possibilities, and hence the way through which the impossible is revealed in the human condition of a permanent longing. Historically, the nation-state appeared in Niebuhr’s eyes as just another instance of an inescapable and immanent impulse for order through power. Since it was territorially and culturally limited, the national community could hardly be the ultimate manifestation of the human aspiration to order its social environment morally and politically. Niebuhr described European imperialism as the most representative endeavour of human communities to project the geometrical ideal of order across territory and through time. However, just as with nation-states, Niebuhr thought that, given the terrestrial bond of the human condition –
its worldliness – the ultimate scope of moral and social order both in the challenges it posed and in the possibilities it opened, was the world itself. Niebuhr had derived this political ideal from Augustine’s *City of God* in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

this ‘city’ [the city of God in Augustine] is not some little city-state, as it is conceived in classical thought. It is the whole human community on its three levels of the family, the commonwealth and the world. A potential world community is therefore envisaged in Augustine’s thought. But, unlike the stoic and modern ‘idealists’, he does not believe that a common humanity or a common reason give promise of an easy actualization of community on the global level. The world community, declares Augustine ‘is fuller of dangers as the greater sea is more dangerous’. Augustine is a consistent realist in calling attention to the fact that the potential world community may have a common human reason but it speaks in different languages and ‘Two men, each ignorant of each other’s language will find that dumb animals, though of a different species, could more easily hold intercourse than they, human beings though they be’. This realistic reminder that common linguistic and ethnic cultural forces, which bind the community together on one level, are divisive on the ultimate level, is a lesson which our modern proponents of world government have not yet learned.  

(‘Augustine’s Political Realism’, CRPP: 125)

Niebuhr thus pointed to the notion of the world community as a core tenet of the realist tradition – a claim that would certainly seem embarrassing for many contemporary realists. More importantly, his Augustinian pessimism towards the world of politics required a transcendental a priori. The world ‘of men’ could only be described as anarchical, sinful and power-led from the viewpoint of a higher stance: ‘the kingdom of God always impinges upon history and reminds us of the indeterminate possibilities of a more perfect brotherhood in every historic community’ (‘God’s Design and the Present Disorder of Civilization’, FP 1968: 117). In this sense, Niebuhr was attempting to establish an ontology of possibility, in which the being in the world is constantly liaised, ontologically and ethically, with becoming something which lies, ideally, outside of his or her self – hence his stress on the Kingdom of God as ‘not of this world’ (BT: 271–286). Hence, Niebuhr’s insistence on the paradoxical character of a universal community as an ‘impossible possibility’ was related with his definition of the ‘world’ community as ‘unworldly’. He thought that any understanding of universality – ontological or ethical – had to presuppose a transcendental capacity which ultimately reported back to an entity *not of this world*, that is, to God. Let us now focus on what Niebuhr meant by ‘world community’ and how this idea was to become Niebuhr’s privileged site of existential critique, as much as of liberal reappraisal of both idealism and realism.

In the first chapter I have highlighted Niebuhr’s political views and how they were set out against the background of the idealization of the nation-state and of
the idolatry of parochial and national communities. Moreover, we have also observed how Niebuhr’s Protestantism lay in this opposition of individual personhood against its potential alienation by the group. Therefore, in spite of his realism – and indeed, as the logical follow-up of its Augustinianism – Niebuhr’s understanding of the world community necessarily points to a future horizon of post-sovereign political arrangements where the democratic order – already present, in its embryonic form, in the domestic realms of America and Britain – will eventually overcome the very existence of the state (CL: 128).

Irrespective of the eternal necessity of power balances, of incommensurable interests, of sin and of pride, Niebuhr was convinced – especially after the appearance of the atomic bomb – that the dynamics of power would lead to such devastating consequences as to force human beings to procure moral solutions of increased transnational scope. The attention paid to the United Nations, European integration and especially to the democratizing impulse of the Anglo-American axis in the world attested to this view (‘Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility’, in LJ 1957: 184).

Therefore, Niebuhr did not seek to formulate the world community – nor any ideal of order for that matter – in concrete ways; he was more concerned with establishing an ethical-teleological framework from which the principle of sovereignty, the nation-state or any future form of community could realistically be judged, critiqued and again made the object of self-overcoming and moral and political improvement (Dorrien 2003: 435–521). The possibility of the world community must be understood as an ethical ideal or, to put it even better, as an hypothetical necessity, constantly being applied politically in the man-made moral order as the guiding telos of legitimate political transgression, transcendence and resistance (CL: 114). In one of the first books to be published on Niebuhr, G. H. C. McGregor argued the world community was an ideal contrived to inspire a sort of action that is taken under the assumption of its own imperfection, and yet is still bold enough to strive for it (McGregor 1941). This sort of ethics, based on what McGregor referred to in his title as ‘the relevance of the impossible’, was about the pursuit of an ideal that immediately signals its impossible achievement, but in doing so is already conveying an ethical message: that all actions deemed ethical pursue ends that are higher than their limits. Niebuhr called this the ‘gateway to grace’ (ICE: 49):

‘Thus the ideal of perfect love gives a perspective upon every human action which prompts the confession, Are we not all unprofitable servants?’ Men are saved not by achieving perfection, but by the recognition of their inability to do so.

(McGregor, quoting Niebuhr (in italic) 1941: 22)

Surely, Niebuhr was aware that the ideal of the world community needed to be rescued from becoming yet another suspicious ideal, after the failure of the League of Nations to constitute (even a semblance of) a world government. Niebuhr’s disillusionment with both Wilsonianism and Fordism led him to think that
human nature was as dynamic as to be impossible to judge with certainty whether a certain action would be an act of love or an act of power and to this extent he wanted to rescue the world community from being corrupted by egomaniac nations and empires – political or economic. But in spite of his consistent critiques of American foreign policy and lifestyle, Niebuhr relied greatly on the assumption of American exceptionalism – and even on some measure of Anglo-American righteousness – when claiming that ‘the democratic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon world are actually the potential basis of a just world order’ (‘Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility’, in LJ 1957: 186; see also Hartz 1957; Stephanson 1995; and Weaver 1995). Albeit qualifiedly, he believed that a balanced and carefully thought admixture of democracy and faith could humble both nations in their prideful pursuit of self-interest while strengthening the cause of universal democracy, global justice and world peace:

Thus a contrite recognition of our own sins destroys the illusion of eminence through virtue and lays the foundation for the apprehension of ‘grace’ in our national life. We know that we have the position that we hold in the world today partly by reason of factors and forces in the complex pattern of history that we did not create and from which we do not deserve to benefit. If we apprehend this religiously, the sense of destiny ceases to be a vehicle of pride and becomes the occasion for a new sense of responsibility.


This was what Niebuhr meant by responsibility: any sense of belonging or adherence to a cause or value must be valued negatively, that is, for the sake of resistance to power and oppression rather than as a positive defense of any specific form of community or group.15 It is also in this sense that Schou Tjalve has characterized Niebuhr’s constant mobilization of Americans for social struggles as a strategic form of patriotism aimed at a Christian universalism, a plural understanding of the national self akin to a ‘patriotism of dissent’ (2003: 3). Indeed, Niebuhr was among those who supported certain patriotic causes only with the ironical purpose of critiquing the deification of worldly aims paving the way for more and more pluralism and hence for what he regarded as the only viable and sustainable form of liberal internationalism (Wilson 1999). To this extent Niebuhr’s realism can also be read in light of what Maurizio Viroli described as ‘negative republicanism’ where political language ‘cannot be assessed in absolute terms’ but must instead be evaluated for what it ‘can do against other languages that sustain different or alternative political projects’ (1995: 14).

The real role that the world community was to play was that of an ideal. This means that the critique of collective selfhood entertained by Niebuhr was neither a state-centric defense of some form of communitarianism, nor of national sovereignty – at least not as values in themselves as it is usually imputed to classical realists (Linklater 2011). Instead, the state ought to be defended only in those circumstances where it embodied an instance of resistance to tyranny and oppression. The traditional realist principle of the balance of power – according
to which power centers must be as distributed as to guarantee the stability of the system of states – had, at least in Niebuhr, a liberal underpinning and an ultimate moral aim. As such, Niebuhr’s notion of the world community can actually be seen as a prudent form of cosmopolitanism – a sort of *cosmopolitan realism* – grounded in a vivid defense of democratic pluralism which his existentialism only deepened and projected further into the future (Tjalve 2006).

In the context of Niebuhr’s social ethics, the fact that all of humanity’s highest aspirations could not be achieved pointed to the urgency of the human willingness to reckon with that limitation and to redeem itself. However, social ethics and the need to keep the possibility of love alive by means of a stable political order whose subjects could rise up to God so as to realize their very transcendence required more than redemption (Bennett 2001). It demanded an ethical sense – indeed the *political duty* – of critique of contemporary forms of selfhood in ways that could lead the human subject to a return to its primary communal condition of absolute responsibility to *all communities* (Ahn 2009; Flescher 2000). In this sense, any commitment to a social cause or a political loyalty could only be justified temporarily as the means of resistance to higher and more tyrannical forms of authority which directly compromised the possibility of international ethics of duty and obligation towards humankind in general and towards God. The world community stood as an impossibility because man’s infinite need of completion through others points to his infinite incompleteness; but, just as equally, it is a possibility because the freedom of love necessarily places in human minds and hearts its ultimate horizon as a normative guide according to which human beings can critique those forms of community which fall short of that meta-ethical ideal (Bennett 2001).

The question as to how America’s own national sentiment of anxiety related to the ideal of a world community was however much harder to approach as Niebuhr was indeed not very consistent in accounting for the role of American foreign policy in the pursuit of larger forms of governance. If on the one hand, he was adamant about the need to preserve the ideal of a world community, he was equally determined to resist any plans for a world government as we saw. He wrote against both the possibility of a world state and the American temptation to become one on several occasions. In doing so he did not manifest the same ambivalence which Morgenthau would later show in his *Politics Among Nations*. To delineate a theory of American foreign policy based on Niebuhr’s writings is thus a highly tricky task which I will pursue with caution before highlighting its flaws.

Given the centrality that democracy played in resisting totalitarianism, Niebuhr was convinced that America had to embrace its ‘special mission’ in this regard, which he inscribed in a tradition of transcendental critique of political idolatry (‘The Idolatry of America’, *in* LJ 1957: 94). Domestically, this meant that Niebuhr wanted Americans ‘to learn to live responsibly with finitude, enabling the creative dimensions of human vitality to thrive, while limiting its potential for destruction’ (Tjalve 2008: 67). The pedagogy of democracy was therefore essentially addressing the individual. As Vibeke Tjalve puts it,
The anarchical community

The question was intimately connected with the kind of semantic and existential anarchy that Niebuhr’s epistemological skepticism had placed the human being within. If human beings have no access to objective knowledge of the world … yet have the capacity of reflection upon the nature of that situation, then the human condition is one confronted by constant chaos and disorder. Unless collective narratives that help the individual deal with such chaos are offered violent projections of order are bound to come forth from the individual itself.

(2008: 67–68)

Niebuhr thus concluded that only the imperative of love could determine the criteria of a just ‘engagement with the world’ that made human beings anxious but also prevented the sort of atomistic individualism which was itself the product of the flight from existential anxiety. In reproaching American society for its excessive pluralism, Niebuhr sided even with American Catholic theologians like John Courtney Murray, in thinking that the state should promote the practice of religion so as to infuse interpersonal relationships with the communal values that could prevent social fragmentation and political indifference (1964: 597).

But from the viewpoint of collective action, the imperative of love and its translation in virtuous behaviour was much harder to formulate. Surely, one can see such projection of violence in the sort of crusadism of the recent American intervention in Iraq or even in much earlier American interventions – of which Niebuhr was very critical of (Smith 2002: 620). America’s responsibility was one of setting the example of contrition by developing a doctrine of foreign policy capable of defining the key components of the exercise of self-control in decision-making. This exercise had to be aware of its own frailties but at the same placed in the teleological path towards a wider community, to which the United States would eventually belong and in the construction of which they inexorably participated.16

The question was how. As he put it,

For our sense of responsibility to a world community beyond our own borders is a virtue, even though it is partly derived from the prudent understanding of our own interests. But this virtue does not guarantee our ease, comfort, or prosperity. We are the poorer for the global responsibilities which we bear. And the fulfillments of our desires are mixed with frustrations and vexations.

(IAH: 7)

Niebuhr’s view that America ‘was the poorer’ in face of its historical responsibility is an acute depiction of the necessary limits of any American foreign policy doctrine. And yet, given the morally necessary pursuit of a world community and of the imperative of love, America had to engage with the world. He thought that American isolationism:
was compounded of a selfish flight from the perplexities of world politics and a moralistic desire to protect our innocence from the guilt which attends the exercise of power and responsibility. We know now that there is no escape from the responsibility, which is the inevitable concomitant of power, and from the guilt which is the inevitable concomitant of responsibility. We required more than a century to learn the lesson…. Gradually we must adjust ourselves to the idea that powerful nations, even if democratic, are not as just and virtuous in the esteem of their weaker neighbours as they are of their own esteem; but that this fact is no good reason for not exercising the power we have.

(A Study of American Character, Congressional Record, 81st Congress, Session 1, 1941: 6)

Isolationism was therefore never an option for Niebuhr. His own intellectual engagement attests to it. He had been the cofounder of the only relevant journal in American theology that stood firmly against the *Christian Century*, ‘the mouthpiece of liberal Protestantism, which held out for neutrality’ after Poland was conquered by the Nazis in September 1939 (Warren 1997: 97). The journal was named *Christianity and Crisis* and, in Niebuhr’s own words, was a call against ‘false interpretations’ of Christianity and ‘false analyses’ of international relations. Needless to say that the central concern of the journal was that the tradition of American isolationism going back to the Monroe doctrine could no longer withstand the challenges of such an interdependent world order and that, as such, Hitler’s threat to peace in Europe would soon impact the United States negatively. Niebuhr definitely had a role – together with the rest of the board of the journal – in pushing for action of important religious institutions such as the Federal Council of Churches so as to pressure the Roosevelt administration to intervene and to make the situation of occupied nations as well as that of war refugees in Europe as public as possible.17 The principle that no nation could claim sovereignty over God guided Niebuhr in his engagement with pacifists and isolationists that had come to form a consensus that went from right-wing conservatives to left-wing liberals (Warren 1997: 99).

Niebuhr’s theological liberalism – a liberalism grounded on the realistic assessment of power relations that, in turn, was normatively grounded on the need to maintain their mutual equilibrium – served him well during wartime but the question remains as to what is left of his IR theory that a philosophy of American foreign policy can profit from in times of peace. Surely, international cooperation, foreign diplomacy and military intervention seem more than justified when grounded in the idea that national survival might be ultimately at risk if certain threats are not confronted. And Niebuhr’s depiction of America’s role in the world immediately tells us that foreign policy was not a matter to be left to the whims of each administration, even though only the individual scrutiny of American citizens over their leaders could reassure noble pursuits in his view, given the capacity for self-reflection and criticism which only individuals – not states or collectives – could exercise.18 But in spite of the moral necessity
of a coherent foreign policy that could cross generations and embody the gigan-
tic responsibility of the most powerful state on earth, the fundamental tension
which Niebuhr found at the core of American foreign policy ultimately com-
promised his capacity to formulate such doctrine. He could only advise against
the dangers of having a theory of American foreign policy that was neglectful
of the dangers of pride – either in its isolationist rendition or in its intervention-
itist one – at a time when other powers were actually jeopardizing the power
balance and threatening peace. But what lessons can be drawn from him for
foreign policy at the end of an administration whose president has invoked
Niebuhr the most?

Niebuhr was essentially a critical prophet of the need for caution as the
United States assumed the role of a world power, followed by that of a nuclear
superpower. His words were important to listen to by a Roosevelt probably as
much as by a Clinton. But if American power is declining – as many seem to
think it is – then the recourse to Niebuhrian realism would seem futile, especially
for Americans. The more the liberal empire declines, the more calls there are to
focus on domestic affairs rather then international ones:

Obama’s first priority is not foreign policy, but domestic. To a greater extent
than most presidents since World War II, he simply devotes less time, polit-
cal capital, and intellectual energy to international priorities as opposed to
domestic ones. This is hardly to say that Obama has no deeply held beliefs
regarding world politics…. But for him, at the end of the day, international
strategies are subordinate to domestic considerations – specifically, to his
domestic policy agenda. That agenda, as we have just indicated, is not
simply to win elections – which he would view as rather unambitious – but
to safeguard and advance significant liberal or progressive policy lega-
cies…. Under Obama, foreign policy is viewed very much in the light of
whether it furthers, protects, or risks key components of his domestic
agenda.

(Dueck 2015: 33)

Hence, foreign policy strategies become highly dependent on domestic affairs.
The former seem like a mere capricious policy choice that sees its way through
to the presidential agenda when everything domestic has been dealt with. And
this is even more the case when the United States has not been able to deal with
some of its historical domestic issues which Niebuhr called attention to –
poverty, inequality or racism to name just a few – even as it grew to become the
greatest power in world history. Now that that global role is receding – and that
a great many of those who lost their jobs and houses because of globalization
continue to be American citizens in spite of everything – one wonders if iso-
lationism is not just an option, but the manifest destiny of America.

Niebuhr was essentially a key author in understanding how American foreign
policy can never be judged in isolation from its domestic affairs, both before and
after the Second World War (Fox 1985: 264). He knew that the success of
American foreign policy depends on the ability of American presidents and of the Congress to deal with the issues that affect its own population. But Niebuhr’s point was that domestic peace is to a great extent dependent on what goes on abroad; Obama, on the other hand, takes the opposite approach, making intervention abroad contingent upon the political conditions at home. Undoubtedly, at a time when Obama’s administration is drawing to a close, the foreign policy doctrine of the first black American president seems indeed to owe some of its directives to Niebuhr’s general prognosis. But Obama was also a very important president in rehearsing the sort of isolationism that was already in the mind of his predecessor, had he not been taken by surprise at the World Trade Center. To that extent, Obama can indeed be seen as the first isolationist president of this new age of imperial retreat – a tendency which the upcoming administration will merely further, but of which it is not a pioneer. He inaugurates a new presidential function which is that of negotiating a strategy of indirect roll-back and accommodation of everyone’s interests to the maximum extent, while promoting an image of leadership which presupposes a great faith in its capacity to influence others ‘by example’ (Dueck 2015: 36). In this regard, Obama was surely not the ‘Niebuhrian president’ that he seemed to promise during his campaign.

When Obama came to office expectations were high – and not only domestically. After what had been considered by many as a disastrous foreign policy undertaken by the Bush administration, Obama called upon him some of the most ambitious hopes with regard to world peace and prosperity. Many saw in him a return to the Clinton years after September 11 had clouded American society. ‘The tide of war is receding’, he claimed, a banner under which he hastily began the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. But what seemed to be a sign of progress in world peace and stabilization soon revealed its tragic outcomes. Obama’s vision for America’s role in the world hardly embodies that of an empire with the responsibility to protect the most vulnerable, nor does it offer any consistent depiction of the role of the United States in international politics. Obama’s success was definitely at home – even if the Democratic party has failed to profit from it in the recent elections. The sort of paternalism that Wilsonianism, and even, to some extent, Niebuhrian realist interventionism during the Second World War, had gathered around America’s role in the world was already fading as the most ‘Niebuhrian president’ took office – and disappeared completely at the end of this administration.

Surely, Obama scored some points in international affairs and one could refer to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba or the negotiation of Iran’s nuclear capacity as important milestones in the relation with those countries. But Obama’s juvenile enthusiasm with the killing of Osama Bin Laden as well as, more generally, the attitude of contempt towards those in Iraq or Afghanistan who were left behind with few resources to protect against the spread of terrorism, are also important marks of his administration. Adding to this was his rather blind support for the politics of economic austerity that dominated Europe since the 2008 crisis, the political consequences of which – namely that of the rise of populism in the United Kingdom or in France or the
fragmentation of the European Union – he failed to anticipate. These failures had something to do with the lack of consistency and purpose which characterizes Obama’s doctrine of foreign policy; but, once again, the *speech-act* of realism served Obama well in attempting to justify what now comes to light as a blunt disregard for international order as a whole and which was clearly superseded by the almost exclusive attention he paid to domestic affairs.

On the one hand, Obama’s realism was not just about political prudence or the self-restraint of imperial anxieties; it was also totally informed by the sort of pragmatism that the economics of austerity dictated all over the world, but especially in the US and in Europe. His was a classic doctrine of retrenchment based on military withdrawals in countries which the Americans had sworn to protect (for they had themselves invaded them unilaterally), cutting military spending and diplomatic assets, reducing all expenditures abroad and scaling back on strategic military deployments (Dueck 2015: 15). As Robert Gilpin points out, ‘retrenchment by its very nature is an indication of relative weakness and declining power’ and ‘can have a deteriorating effect on relations with allies and rivals … Rivals are stimulated to close in and frequently they precipitate a conflict in the process’ (Gilpin 2008: 191–192). There are obviously a few exceptions to this. America’s intervention in Libya exemplified the sort of uninterested global policing that is expected from a great power, one in which ‘national safety’ of the United States ‘is not directly threatened’ as Obama himself remarked (Owens 2012: 101). On this occasion Obama’s Niebuhrian inspiration was at its highest as he certainly learned from Niebuhr that ‘a properly conceived religiosity was a potentially powerful philosophic and social resource for realist rhetoric and politics’ (Tjalve and Williams 2015: 53):

> Sometimes, the course of history poses challenges that threaten our common humanity and common security…. These may not be America’s problems alone, but they are important to us, and they are problems worth solving. And in these circumstances we know that the United States, as the world’s most powerful nation, will often be called upon to help. In such cases we should not be afraid to act.

(Obama’s speech to the Nation, March 2011, quoted in Owens 2012: 101)

Indeed, many contemporary analysts have succeeded in locating the Niebuhrian legacy in Obama’s doctrine. The religious overtones of his rhetoric, and the self-awareness of his oratory talents, remind us of Niebuhr’s writing style and eloquence. But Obama’s Niebuhrianism was not only in the spectacle of his speeches. On the occasion of the attribution of the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama claimed that ‘adhering to the law of love has always been the core struggle of human nature’ to which he added the following:

> we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better
place…. For if we lose that faith – if we dismiss it as silly or naive; if we divorce it from the decisions that we make on issues of war and peace – then we lose what’s best about humanity. *We lose our sense of possibility*. We lose our moral compass.

(Barack Obama, Remarks at the acceptance of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize)

Obama’s appeal to love, justice and the ‘hope of all the world’ are certainly reminiscent of his ‘favourite philosopher’. But there is an obvious downside to Obama’s admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr. While invoking his legacy – with a particular emphasis on Christian realism and the Social Gospel tradition – Obama seemed unexpectedly inconsistent about the general principles that should sustain his foreign policy strategy. Surprisingly enough, the Obama administration was as vague as the interwar theologian when it came to actually specifying the role of America in the world in terms of concrete policy guidelines. And while this might be tolerable in a philosopher whose multifaceted intellectual endeavours went far beyond American politics, it is quite diminishing of the president of ‘the most powerful nation in the world’ as Obama himself claimed. The gap it creates between eloquence and action is unbearable and the claim that it partly justified the rise of Donald Trump is not altogether misled.

It is indeed the case that Obama’s foreign policy, when scrutinized in detail, seems as tautological and casuistic as Niebuhr’s own policy analysis. This is mostly related to the priority given to domestic affairs as many analysts claim; but by stripping the liberal tradition out of its idealist element, Niebuhrian realism had transformed liberalism into a simplistic calculus of lesser evils (Tjalve and Williams 2015). As Niebuhr’s biographer notes, in a comment that would seem to refer to Obama’s administration, ‘“Realism” in foreign policy meant not expecting true democracy to flower where it had no roots’ (Fox 1985: 274). In this context, prudence easily turns, in both the writings of Niebuhr and the policies of Obama, into a symptom of an overzealous America, intervening only in those cases where it was sure it could earn strategic victories so to show some work was being done. The rationale for acting or abstaining from acting seems to be, in both cases, a matter to be decided case by case and in the heat of the moment. To be sure, some of Obama’s victories seem taken directly from the advice of the theologian, as when he claimed in the 1960s that the ‘embargo on Castro is as mistaken as the original invasion’ (in *New Leader*, quoted by Fox 1985: 276).

But in much the same way, realism revealed the worst of the liberal tradition, its most cynical and hypocritical side. Niebuhr did not hold the same unhesitant position on Vietnam as he did on the Bay of Pigs – even though he ended up criticizing the former invasion a posteriori. These practical hesitations were a direct consequence of inherent tensions in his IR theory and of its inability to yield a more sustained foreign policy doctrine. In claiming that ‘our cause is the cause of freedom in a wider sense than that of democratic political institutions’ Niebuhr sounded like many freedom fighters who turned into dictators, as was the case of many independentist leaders of the 1960s all over the world. This was the liberal-realist consensus at its worst, the poverty of which consisted after
all in developing a foreign policy of complacency towards the worse atrocities, as long as they did not pinch the international status quo.

The danger of his own doctrine – which adumbrated a later generation’s distinction between ‘authoritarian’ and ‘totalitarian’ states – was the ease with which it could be invoked to justify America’s support for dictators of its choice. Such leaders could be tolerated, however vicious or corrupt in the present, because their societies had potential for freedom in some abstract future. Niebuhr might genuinely inveigh against ‘complacent’ acceptance of dictatorship, but in other mouths the same warning could itself become complacent, rhetorical.

Understanding the label of realism along the Skinnerian lines of a speech-act surely allows us to see how realism is able to mobilize support around certain causes and even, arguably, around a certain idea of American identity (Tjalve and Williams 2015). But, at least in the case of Niebuhr – if not of later realists – the ‘vigilant’ nature of realism invited at times the sort of paralysis that Niebuhr accused in Christian pacifism; while on other occasions it catalyzed the ideology of liberalism to pursue anti-democratic aims by tolerating tyranny and hesitating as to what ideal to pursue (Stulerova 2012: 112).

Whether or not America is confronted today with imperial erosion, it is certainly the case that some of its practices indulge the expansion of despotic regime for the sake of avoiding that of its geopolitical rivals. Niebuhr’s insistence on moderation and sobriety were very useful for the Obama administration, after years in which the Powell doctrine had shown a complete loss of moral – and even geopolitical – orientation. But Obama’s apparent ‘reasonableness’, allied with his ‘pragmatism’, easily bred inaction. Obama’s complacency with Israel’s prime minister, with the Syrian regime or with the growing influence of Russia or Iran in the region show an extreme form of resignation about the unchangeable nature of the world. It is as if Obama read Niebuhr’s acclaimed Serenity Prayer identifying the first verse – about ‘the serenity to accept the things I cannot change’ – with foreign policy and the second with domestic affairs – ‘courage to change the things I can’. This goes to show how Obama, but also Niebuhr himself, were walking on very thin ice when invoking an ontology of possibility while deciding that change can only happen when exposure to risk is minimal. As in Heidegger’s own reflections on the notion of anxiety, for both Niebuhr and Obama the overall existential balance of America seems to lean more toward contingency than toward possibility. In this sense, Obama’s (non-)doctrine of foreign policy – as many of his critics like to call it – are a clear sign of America’s reckoning with the generalized perception of its decline abroad, whether or not such decline is actually underway.

Indeed, in spite of Niebuhr’s frequent calls for the need to understand the responsibilities of a great power – and even more of a superpower – he only went as far as to suggest that some efforts should be made to establish the necessary
frameworks of interstate cooperation at the world level. His liberal realism, caught in between existential prudence and the Christian hope in the common destiny of humanity, suggested an articulation between the foreign policy of individual countries and the achievement of an order which was beyond national interest. Nonetheless, Niebuhr thought that this interest had to be accommodated and that America, more then anyone else, had the historical duty to create the conditions and the international environment conducive to the self-realization of each national community in ways that could not harm others. In claiming that it was in the interest of America to let every other state pursue its national interest—under basic rules of balance of power and peaceful coexistence—Niebuhr was sure to save the world against the expansionist temptations of many dictatorships:

Among the various important elements in the current situation of the cold war between two international alliances, the character of the hegemonous nations achieves peculiar significance, because there are no constitutional or legal forms of cohesion for a great international force…. The communist bloc has the cohesive power of a common religion of peculiarly fanatic force. The non-communist alliance has no common bond, except as the democratic creed is the common possession of the inner core of European nations. In such a loose international force the morale of the bloc depends greatly on the morale of the hegemonous nation; and its morale is supported by its loyalty to a common cause and the coincidence between its national interests and the interests of the cause.


More difficult, however, was to ensure that in doing this, America would not end up identifying its own national interest with the interests of all nations, thus ending up in the sort of unilateralism that he criticized at the start. On the one hand, Niebuhr’s ‘epistemological skepticism’ against any form of idolatry—which he had borrowed from Augustine—seemed to be a solid theoretical platform for a sustained critique of American imperialism, catalyzing biblical myth around the popular call for self-disciplined action (Tjalve 2008: 67). But unlike other realists, Niebuhr was also an anti-positivist, that is, he was perfectly aware the very idea of checks-and-balances was already a normative statement in favour of a peaceful coexistence which only a democratic order could foster. The discourse of the world community was therefore inherently democratic, even when its implementation might operate by non-democratic means. This led Niebuhr into the slippery path of justifying just about any action that could promote democracy abroad, for in an interdependent world covered by the threat of nuclear catastrophe, democracies could not resolve their existential conflict with non-democratic regimes by democratic means:

Niebuhr’s willingness to justify American actions also became stretched to the point of apologetics. If international politics had moved from a struggle
between evil and slightly less evil egotistical states to a battle between defensive democracy and aggressive totalitarianism, a battle in which the Children of Light would ‘have to play hardball’ if they were to survive, then it becomes difficult to see how Niebuhr could plausibly oppose anything the United States might do to prevail over the Soviet Union. Evil action in the international realm invariably is for Niebuhr ‘tragic’, something he must ‘reluctantly’ accept at a time of maximum danger.

(Craig 2003: 78–79)

Surely, it is always hard, even unfair, to compare Obama’s views with Niebuhr’s theory. The United States did not occupy the same position in world politics as they do since the 1990s, nor could Niebuhr ever be expected to anticipate America’s decline as early as the twenty-first century – which again raises the question as to what costs is America willing to incur, and the crimes it might be willing to commit, in order to ‘save democracy again’ as Obama steps down from office. But Niebuhr did anticipate the rise of the United States to a superpower during the first half of the twentieth century. And yet, his penchant for the sort of wisdom that is the duty of any public intellectual, made him retreat from too open or blunt positions regarding American foreign policy, in spite of his courageous advocacy of American interventionism against Hitler. His fervent criticisms of American atrocities in Vietnam did not cohere with his polemical support for the British bombardment of German and Japanese civilian populations during the Second World War.21 What seems to be the case, nonetheless, is that Niebuhr’s realism could accommodate too many options from the array of possible foreign policies and grand strategies that America could adopt, which attests to Campbell Craig’s critique of his IR theory as somewhat ‘tautological’, and ‘apologetic’ of just any foreign policy decision (Craig 2003).

For the analysts and students of international politics of the late 1960s, Niebuhr’s realism would turn into a catalogue of interesting quotes and loose thoughts about American identity and its existential quest. Niebuhr’s eloquence had certainly favoured him and his views during a significant period of its history – arguably the most significant of the twentieth century – but the scientific approach to the field in the second half of the century determined that his books would have to wait very long to be picked up from under the dust of American libraries. This did not obviously demerit his achievements as both a very proactive public intellectual and an intellect of the highest caliber. But his realism is hardly amenable to the intricacies usually involved in American foreign policy prescriptions. His was a realism of distance, and his ‘epistemological skepticism’ was also in his distrust in the possibility of a science of foreign policy analysis (Tjalve 2008: 67). Just as with Obama, it became easier at the end to derive concrete political solutions – even if unsuccessful – at the level of domestic politics, then a clear foreign policy agenda from Niebuhrian realism. Paradoxically enough, it was the theological and existential content of his thinking, so unique among foreign policy analysts and journalists, that allowed his thinking to become a benchmark of IR theory, that is, of a political theory of international
relations and of America’s place within it – rather then an analytical science of political behaviour and decision-making.

Nonetheless, the plasticity of Niebuhr’s theological imagination makes him highly quotable for any President – with the possible exception of the current one. Obama’s so-called ‘pragmatism’ was very reminiscent of Niebuhr’s realism, in its ability to convey a simple message about the overall direction of American foreign policy and especially the president’s personal attitude towards the challenges abroad. For all the talk of responsibility, of its unbearable weight for a country as powerful as the United States, very little was done in terms of settling down for a consistent and coherent grand strategy. The critique one could address to the most Niebuhrian president of American history was hence not very different from the sort of criticisms Niebuhr addressed to the pacifists of his time: overzealous of American values, and yet unable to anticipate the reactionary movements besetting American apathy toward the rest of the world. The trail of frustration that Obama leaves behind – especially visible in his ineptitude in dealing with the Middle-East – certainly anticipates a conservative reaction of the next administration when it realizes that, in international politics, imperial retreat – as much as imperial overstretch – makes the United States more vulnerable and less in control of its own destiny, let alone the destiny of the world. Primarily, it also allows for the next administration to follow in its footsteps, and give continuity to what was already a rather isolationist tendency in Obama’s foreign policy.

Niebuhr knew that American isolationism had deep historical roots in American history and his departure from Christian pacifism recognized that the politics of retrenchment was, as the contemporary realist Robert Gilpin averred, a ‘hazardous course’ (2008: 194). America’s identity as an immigrant nation was ironically combined with its geography, turning it into an important basis of imperial expansion but also the hardest country to invade by conventional means. Isolationism ran hand-in-hand with the expansionism of America’s ‘manifest destiny’ in Niebuhr’s view.22 This is also reflected in culture. American Puritan exceptionalism often oscillated between closure to the outside world – especially in many religious communities – and a generalized sense of universal messianism capable of taking the American dream to the most inhospitable places on Earth. Niebuhr saw through this and remarked that:

> isolationism and ‘imperialism’ are but two versions of the same pride and self-centeredness. Isolationism is the selfishness of the weak and imperialism is the selfishness of the strong. We were some decades in discovering that we were not weak but very strong. Having discovered that, we entered the world community in full force. But we announce that we will stay in it only if our will is obeyed.


Therein lay the strength, but also the exposure, of American exceptionalism. The comparison with Israel immediately comes to mind in this context. Indeed, we
saw how Niebuhr’s understanding of political idolatry as something abominable could be traced back to the thought of the Jewish prophet Amos (Fox 1985: viii). Jewish exceptionalism had travelled to America through the Puritanism of the first settlers and was thus foundational not only of American patriotism but of its self-awareness as a patriotism in constant pilgrimage (Stephanson 1995; Tjalve 2008: 23–60). But in spite of Niebuhr’s advocacy of national self-critique and of his sense of how love often hid the most hideous power instincts and imperial ambitions, he seemed nonetheless unembarrassed when embracing the vision of an American-born world community wholeheartedly:

the real fact is that we are placed in a precarious moral and historical position by our special mission. It can be justified only if it results in good for the whole of the community of mankind. Woe unto us if we fail. For our failure will bring judgment upon both us and the world. That is the meaning of the prophetic word ‘Therefore will I visit you with your iniquities’.


Niebuhr’s understanding of love as ultimate possibility was certainly a possibility at the individual level but remained, finally, as an inspiring horizon of the real ethic which the autonomy of the political necessarily imposes. Much like his contemporary Levinas, the overwhelming power of love stood for Niebuhr as a critical tool against the absolutization of certain communities over others (Flescher 2000) – even though his defense of America’s ‘special mission’ seems to cast some shadows over his advocacy of an anti-imperialistic pluralism, which Niebuhr seemed so eager about. Naturally, as a Christian, Niebuhr thought that the human subject is not a social being only in terms of his immediate community, but also in terms of his absolute gregarious propensity and his radical sociability, which only the highest ideal of community can express:

the highest reach of individual consciousness and awareness are rooted in social experience and find their ultimate meaning in relation to the community. The individual is the product of the whole socio-historical process, though he may reach a height of uniqueness which seems to transcend his social history completely. His individual decisions and achievements grow into, as well as out of, the community and find their final meaning in the community.

(CL: 41)

In this sense, any political adherence to a community could only prove meaningful if by adhering to it one opened up – instead of closing down – the possibility of a community as universal as to be able to give full scope to his uniqueness. This justified Niebuhr’s support for the US intervention in the Second World War against the possibility of a world empire (‘The Conflict Between Nations and God’, in LJ 1953: 162), as much as his opposition to the Vietnam war – against that same possibility (Vietnam: Study in Ironies, New Republic, Reinhold
Domestically, his support for the labour cause against Fordism in Detroit during the 1920s and for the struggle for the civil rights of minorities in the context of the ADA (Americans for Democratic Action) can also be read in this light (Fox 1985).

However, Niebuhr was also very convinced of the fact that in international relations, this activism was particularly difficult to enact and that hence one had to act against tyranny with whatever instruments – including national sovereignty itself. The fact that the realm of intergroup behaviour – vis-à-vis interpersonal behaviour – was profoundly corrupted by self-love and by national ‘self-regard’ necessarily impacted upon the possibility of a pure ethics uncontaminated by politics. This is why Niebuhr rejected any defense of the world community through a planned initiative or a political program, preferring instead to think of it as a guiding possibility the ‘impossibility’ of which made it even more relevant ethically and politically. Niebuhr’s formulation of the world community in this way seems to bring him to the side of the children of Light as Niebuhr himself was willing to recognize when claiming that ‘it has become necessary for the children of light to borrow some of the wisdom of the children of darkness; and yet be careful not to borrow too much’ (CL: 119).

Notes

1 I have borrowed the formulation by a famous twentieth-century theologian and lifetime correspondent of Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who referred to international relations as ‘fallen world’ (Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted in Lovin 2008: 198).
2 Letter to the Reverend Harold Wilson where Niebuhr acknowledges the authorship of the Serenity Prayer, Box 13, 1956, Box Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress
3 I want to thank Sean Molloy for having pointed out this aspect to me.
4 For a detailed study of the influence of Christian realism on the English School see Jones 2003.
5 Carr’s reliance on a fairly strict separation between individual and collective agency turned him into the target of sociologists such as Norbert Elias, whose writings demonstrated the complexity of the monopolization of power by the state in terms of the co-constitution of individual and collective subjectivity and behaviour. Seen in this light, Elias’ critique of Carr, which appears in The Established and the Outsiders (1994), can actually be read as a sociological critique of Niebuhr’s blunt ontological dichotomies, whose explanatory power was to remain forever trapped in a certain archetypical understanding of social realities and in a biased essentialization of ontological units such as the individual and the group, intelligently informed by a particular reading of the Bible, and serving as a regulative hermeneutic method of social analysis. According to Elias these ontological units or essences were poorly sustained on both historical and sociological grounds.
6 Indeed, there have been some attempts to develop a genealogy of the field of IR from the point of view of the history of the discourse of anarchy and these have succeeded in pinpointing anarchy as the distinctive object of both scientific enquiry and political reform which, at least for a limited period, granted IR with its epistemological autonomy and academic legitimacy within the social sciences (see Milner 1991 and Schmidt 1998).
7 Following Niebuhr, Carr referred to important differences between ‘face-to-face’ social encounters and intergroup socialization (Carr 2001: 162).
8 Hence, as an Augustinian theme, the world community was brought back to the research agenda of IR scholarship by Reinhold Niebuhr and then pursued further by E. H. Carr and Martin Wight. Before Niebuhr, it can clearly be traced back to the sort of Christian eschatological thinking of which Augustine and Kant appear as the most distinct and representative instances. Also, the theological grounds on which it stands strongly suggest a hidden theological agenda beneath the English school, which its major proponents seem to willingly neglect (Jones 2003).

9 Indeed, the English School appeal to the natural law tradition operated through a re-reading of Kant without, however, losing sight of the Christian background of Kantianism (Jones 2003).


11 In turn, this also means that in spite of his overall totalizing critique of the Enlightenment, Niebuhr was fairly aware of the nuances between different thinkers and even of the fact that there had indeed been different Enlightenments in spite of Niebuhr’s tendency for overgeneralizations when it came to philosophical systems or specific intellectual movements.

12 Indeed, it was as if, like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard had anticipated his reception in the future. No other work expressed this generalized mood in a better way than W. H. Auden’s *The Age of Anxiety*, published in 1947 (Auden 2011). Auden’s poems – many of them part of his lasting correspondence with Reinhold Niebuhr – epitomized the mixed collective mood of threat and hope of inter and post-war Western societies. Auden’s sense that history had never seen such a gap between present tragedy and future hope led him to characterize the mid-century as the Age of Anxiety. With the devastation of the Second World War and the total re-shift of the power configuration of world politics, collective expectations were again shrinking, and the scenario of collective destruction plunged into the daily lives of every single person, shaping the memories, habits and hopes of entire populations, affecting the aesthetical and intellectual manifestations (Cotkin 2002; Finstuen 2009).

13 For a study of the influence of Auden and Niebuhr, and vice-versa, see Conniff 1993. For an analysis of Tillich’s opinions on Niebuhr see his own essay entitled ‘Reinhold Niebuhr’s doctrine of knowledge’ in Kegley 2001: 89–98.

14 McGregor’s book was not only the first about Reinhold Niebuhr but also the first critique to appear in a book format. Among other things, it is worth reading because it sets out to break down Niebuhrian ethics into three types which summarily capture the meaning the ideal of the world community as the expression of divine love and hence of the need to see justice as its translation in the earthly city. The relevance of an impossible ideal signals (1) ‘the measure of our failure’ – to which I have just alluded; (2) ‘the ultimate criterion of our achievements … by which every attempt to create a new and better world must be judged’ (McGregor 1941: 23); and (3) a ‘principle of discriminate criticism’ where the ideal of love serves the purpose of distinguishing not only between love and justice but also among different forms of justice. However, it is important to say at this stage that Niebuhr never went as far as his readers in attempting to detail the intricacies of his ethical thought in ways that could avoid the sort of vagueness and confusion that I accuse him of at the end of this book, especially as far as American foreign policy is concerned, as I claim in Chapter 5.

15 For a study of Niebuhr’s understanding of responsibility, ethical and political, see Ahn 2009 and Flescher 2000.

16 A very difficult claim to make indeed, and one which seems to fall prey to the sort of ambiguity of motives (universal love or imperial power?) which Niebuhr was trying to avoid and critique. Niebuhr remained until the end a fairly ambiguous critic of American interventionism and hence more of a symbol of the very ambiguities which lie at the core of American foreign policy – rather than a distanced observer and problem-solver. The fact that he was never able to provide a clear criterion for
distinguishing between those interventions that ought to be supported for the sake of a higher universal good – namely the possibility of keeping the hope of a universal community alive – and those which ought to be condemned for being derived from a strict concern for American national interest, have turned him into a privileged target of another major public intellectual, Noam Chomsky, as well as of Britain’s most renowned contemporary theologian, John Milbank (Chomsky 1987; Milbank 1997: 233–254). Despite the exaggerated critiques of both of these figures, the claim might surely be made that Niebuhr’s message appeared as compelling and stark in theory as it was the source of ambiguous advice, prescriptive confusion and fallacious propaganda for policy makers. For a more balanced critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s realism, and of the tradition more generally, see Rosenthal 1991.

17 The theologian Samuel McCrea Cavert was even sent to Europe to report back on wartime conditions and the treatment of prisoners of war (Warren 1997: 101).

18 A thought that Niebuhr would have abandoned today, were he to witness the last presidential election.

19 Erik Owens’ article ‘Searching for an Obama Doctrine: Christian Realism and the Idealist/Realist Tension in Obama’s Foreign Policy’ (2012), is by far the best account of Niebuhr’s influence on the foreign policy of the Obama Administration, even though his account of both Niebuhrian realism and of Obama’s doctrine is highly optimistic. The fact that Obama loved Niebuhr as he said he did, and that Obama does rely on Niebuhr for inspiration does not lead to the conclusion that the Obama doctrine is substantially grounded on any sort of Niebuhrian realism.

20 I find Kamila Stulerova’s synthesis of Morgenthau’s and Lebow’s realism as a ‘vigilant realism’ very useful, even though I would argue that most of the ingredients of it were already in Niebuhr. Nonetheless, as a normative theory of international relations, it inspires the same concerns that I raise against Niebuhrian realism further below (Stulerova 2012).

21 See Letter to James Conant, March 12, 1946, Box 3, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress


23 For an excellent historical account of the Jewish origins of New England Puritanism and of its sense of America’s ‘manifest destiny’ see Stephanson 1995.
Epilogue: Jusnaturalism for postmodern times?

The poverty of IR’s liberal–realist consensus

Whoever has learnt to be anxious in the right way has learnt the ultimate.¹  
(Soren Kierkegaard 1844)

I concluded our journey through the international political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr by developing an account of his realist approach to American foreign policy and imperial governance, which is now followed by an overall critical view of his thinking. Niebuhr’s contribution to the debates revolving around foreign policy issues was mostly in his articles and correspondence, even though his latest books show a concern for this particular field that had been latent in all his earlier writings, including the most philosophical or theological ones. Even though I have so far highlighted some of Niebuhr’s criticisms of Wilsonianism, I have also noted that Niebuhr was far from adopting any stand that could even resemble some form of isolationism. Instead, Niebuhr’s incursions into the analysis of America’s role in the international scene showed an acute awareness of the paradoxes of global responsibility and the dangers of a power position that America had often reluctantly come to assume. In what follows I want to claim that the most enlightening aspect of Reinhold Niebuhr’s reflections on American foreign policy, which were grounded on his IR theory – and on the emphasis on existential anxiety rather than Hobbesian fear – was in how he anticipated the challenges confronting the United States as a great power – and, later on, as the only superpower in international politics.

The poverty of IR’s liberal–realist consensus

Niebuhr’s ability to characterize the paradoxical nature of America’s position in the world as a stranded nation that is at the same time the one capable of bringing change more than any other and yet, for that very reason, unable to resist the systemic pressures of an international system that it has in part created. This might be due to the fact that Niebuhr lived through that crucial period when America rose from its status as a primus inter pares in the 1930s to become a superpower after the Second World War, perhaps only matched by the Soviet Union. Niebuhr was clear-sighted about the possibility that the growth of the
United States to the high rank of a global empire could undermine its ability to control its own ambitious impulses; but, more importantly, he saw that power of this kind could be as enabling of transformative action and reform as it could, just as easily, block any possibility of acting. Niebuhr was plainly aware that there was no turning back from the canonization of America as the leading power of the Western world without it carrying some consequences for liberal democracy – both at home and in the rest of the world. In short, Niebuhr knew American imperialism to be as inevitable as the return to isolationism was no longer possible; and yet, he also knew the world to be much larger then any empire – of whatever sort, economic or military, soft or hard, benevolent or dictatorial – could ever hope to take on. And that sort of farsightedness still places Niebuhr at the forefront of all American political thinkers, at least as far as foreign policy is concerned.

This book has sought to introduce Niebuhr’s political thought as directly relevant to contemporary IR theory, both in the ontological presuppositions it assumes and in the ethical and political horizons it projects. Indeed, even though every expert on Niebuhr seems to acknowledge that Niebuhr was not an IR scholar, only a few risk a specific definition of who he really was – or what sort of academic label applies to him. The generalized interest in his public profile, as much as in his life path as a social activist, a political commentator, a preacher and a prophet, explains why most of the literature devoted to him is densely biographical and usually originates from theological and religious circles. Recent attempts to approach him as an influential figure in IR scholarship seldom present him as an IR theorist, preferring instead to introduce him as a theorist with indirect bearings upon IR theory, and usually mediated by more central figures which feature as the historical bastions of intellectual reference and reverence such as Hans Morgenthau (Craig 2003; Tjalve 2008).

Without forgetting the necessary emphasis upon Niebuhr’s theological and ethical concerns, this book has attempted to draw from them the necessary implications for his political thought in ways that directly affect his approach to international relations and can hence cast some light upon contemporary debates in the field on the nature of theory, on the main themes of the realist tradition and on American foreign policy. By reassembling some of Niebuhr’s remarks on particular themes and on the sources of his Christian realism, I have sought to reconstruct his intellectual trajectory in relation to those trends in continental philosophy that sought to question common-held images of the modern self and human subjectivity. Indeed, Niebuhr was adamant in stressing how the human subject, human existence, selfhood or, more simply, ‘Man’, was the core problematic of the philosophical discourse of modernity and hence of political and international theory as well (NDM I: 1). In this way, I have shown Niebuhr’s direct relevance for contemporary brands of IR theory which seek not only to destitute instrumental reason from its epistemological predominance within the field, but also mobilize those same sources which Niebuhr used to address the themes of power, tragedy, war, national interest or imperial hubris.
In Niebuhr’s view, it was due to the underlying anxiety of selfhood – as much as to its penchant for a transcendental norm of love – that the human being was led to pursue power and pride in ways which deny him full access to the sort of historical fulfilment imaginable only in a god. Modern selfhood in particular was at the threshold of the existential paradox which Niebuhr sought to address and place at the centre of his concern for the safeguard of democracy against a danger which remained hidden beneath the political arrangements and economic dynamics of modern history: the danger of political idolatry. After having explored such notions as love, the will-to-power or anxiety, we are now in a position to comprehend the existential, ethical and political paradoxes of ‘modern man’ as too anxious to be able to reach out for pure love, and yet too ‘loving’ and transcendental to remain trapped in the vicious circle of power struggles which anxiety prompts. Niebuhr thus wanted to stress the features of love and anxiety with a view to reconstitute political ontology from the theological and ethical *apriori* of transcendental love. He thought that an anxious human nature revealed both an eschatology of love – understood as moral progress towards a world community – but also a God of love – whose loving ability manifested as the principle of creation and hence as preceding the very constitution of human subjectivity.

Niebuhr thus wanted to criticize liberal modernity’s idealized self-image as it mistakenly assumed the responsibility to achieve salvation unaided by God. With that in mind, he had to excavate further the realist assumptions about human nature that informed modern political philosophy since Hobbes. In the meantime, the covert forms of power and disciplined violence which reason was set to contain through democratic procedure and statistical and scientific governance had contributed even more to the reproduction of injustice and inequality. Politically, Wilsonian liberalism showed that the false mirror of a ‘rational man’ had led to the sort of *self-righteous* voluntarism which permeated the actions and decisions of many actors in the domestic and in the international scenes. Niebuhr was enough of a cynic to spot, in the mobilization of ‘multitudes’ around specific political and religious leaderships, a sign of a generalized lack of self-reflective agency regarding their underlying fears and anxieties. His realism was hence opposed to idealism only to the extent that certain forms of liberal utopianism had embraced rationalism as a new disguise for collective alienation and national idolatry.

At this final juncture of our journey into Niebuhr’s thinking, I wish to reintroduce the concern with the ‘false polarities’ which according to many contemporary IR scholars have spread throughout IR and, this book argues, have now become an intrinsic part of a fairly stable narratives of the origin, development and expansion of the field. Indeed, if on the one hand Niebuhr was one of the major protagonists in setting up the divide between liberalism and realism as a core theoretical binary that frames and shapes the research agenda of IR scholarship, his understanding of power and of love seems to move us astray from (1) too strict an association between liberalism and rationalism and (2) the rationalist direction which later realism appears to have taken within IR (Williams 2005).
In particular, Niebuhr’s departure from the Hobbesian model of a fearful subject allows for the characterization of human nature as a much more complex, dynamic and unstable reality. This revealed Niebuhr’s deep awareness of the alienating influence of power struggles upon agency – be that individual or collective – which in turn places his realist approach within the camp of those who have more recently accused realism of reifying and naturalizing an understanding of human subjectivity which was normative from the start. Niebuhr’s characterization of human existence – and his focus on groups, rather than individuals – as limited in its capacity to transcend the structural conditions of fear and sin, love and anxiety, power and pride, redirects us back to those theoretical approaches within IR which have been traditionally set in (false) opposition to realism (Epp 1991: 2; Williams 2005). In recasting Niebuhr’s realist thinking by connecting it with existentialism and Christian theology, this book sought to criticize the generalized ‘myopia toward the realist tradition’ which assumes that realism can be reduced ‘to a naïve form of “modernism” associated with rationalism (logocentrism, positivism, etc.) in both politics and method’ (Williams 2005: 162). Michael Williams’ view that ‘the idea that there are unbreakable chasms between post-structuralism and realism is simply fallacious’ is confirmed by Niebuhr’s Kierkegaardian and Nietzschean doubts about the ‘Enlightened’ self-confidence to provide a solution to all political problems (2005: 162).

Much before Leo Strauss’s and Eric Voegelin’s anti positivism – and Hans Morgenthau’s Scientific Man – Niebuhr strongly reacted against the scientific certainties and ontological determinism which, paradoxically enough, now seem to pervade contemporary realism (Williams 2005). His realism can hence be couched as a sort of negative liberalism, that is, a defense of liberalism not by reason of its inherent virtues but rather in view of its immense potential to act as the antidote of the dangers and threats confronting modern societies (Tjalve and Williams 2015b). Niebuhr’s deployed an Augustinian understanding of the conditional allegiance to democratic government as a form of lesser evil, the condition being that such allegiance should always serve the struggle against greater evils. I concluded the second chapter by claiming that this negative liberalism was realistic in the sense that it sought to defend democracy not for the sake of any positive attachment to any sense of a common good, but given its capacity to resist political tyranny and oppression (Fox 1985: 275–277). Following Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Niebuhr thought that anxiety and power had to be brought to the core of political and international theorization in ways which were, however, far from the traditional Hobbesian approach. A ‘realistic’ analysis of politics had to contribute normatively to the construction of a liberal order capable of grounding a democratic regime and of constituting mutually responsible selves, critical of the final ends, as much as the immediate means used by, the sovereign state.

This negative liberalism was at odds with the positive liberals who proactively designed with great attention to detail the sumnum bonum that liberal democracies ought to pursue (welfare security and economic prosperity,
self-determination and human rights, social equality and justice, and so on). In the fortunate portrayal of his biographer, Niebuhr personified the paradoxes and tensions of the liberal tradition as well as of its *reductio ad* realism: he was arguably the greatest ‘liberal crusader against liberalism’ (Fox 1985: 291). Surely, Niebuhr went further than his fellow realists with regard to the normative commitments of his IR theory, which justifies the *Christian* predicate to his *realism*. He attempted permanently:

to justify American involvement in international politics by postulating a positive moral good: the preservation of democratic civilization. The American role in the world is to confront the Children of Darkness … Niebuhr does come to recognize … that the objective of defending civilization must be folded within a policy of national security – that a transnational political aim cannot exist independently in a world governed by nation states. But Niebuhr stops short of articulating a ‘national interest’, as Morgenthau, and other Realists, had done.

(Craig 2003: 75)

To be sure, Niebuhr’s democratic credentials were never at stake domestically. Internationally, however, his emphasis on the Law of Love or on the world community were never followed by any plan specifying how to pursue such ideals in concrete terms. This highly reluctant and sceptical form of liberalism – sometimes even cynical – was not ‘positive’ at all (Fox 1985: 277). If his wartime writings emphasized the need to foster mechanisms of checks and balances without which democracy could not work, the early cold war saw Niebuhr ‘contending that the mere absence of Communist rule was a significant form of freedom’. This synthesis of realism with liberalism was based on a simple ‘lesser-evil argument’ that was nonetheless very hard to carry out in practice and hence a slippery ground for a doctrine of foreign policy (Fox 1985: 275). Niebuhr thought that

right-wing despotism did not destroy all the roots of the open society, while communism did. But his argument operated at such a level of abstraction that it did not meet the most obvious objection: in concrete cases right-wing despots might well equal their Communist peers in undermining freedom ‘in a wider sense’.

(Fox 1985: 275)

This was after all a logical follow-up of the Nietzschean critique of the Enlightenment tradition and of the ways in which both Wilsonian (positive) liberalism and American protestant theology had surrendered to modern rationalism, blind progressivism and to the idolatrous view of human subjectivity that underpinned them (Molloy 2006). Niebuhr was redeploying a Christian transcendental God of love in such a strategic fashion as to avoid being captured by the sort of political idolatrous trends of the interwar period, whose earthly gods had made hostage
the modern ideal of emancipation for their own sake. The trembling 1940s certainly demanded such careful affirmation of a protestant cult of intellectual austerity. Kierkegaard’s nineteenth-century understanding of ontological anxiety really suited the redeployment of a sense of collective redemption and personal contrition, politically translated into the principles of social dissent and emancipatory pluralism (Tjalve 2003: 3).

Two world wars and the Holocaust did away with philosophical optimism and appeared to many to confirm Nietzsche’s pessimistic view of history. Poststructuralists such as Foucault and Derrida not only reject the Enlightenment ‘project’ but condemn progressive narratives of history as particularly dangerous falsehoods. (Lebow 2008: 36)

Niebuhr’s construction of what Castellin has described as a ‘realism of distance’ is hence directly related to his theological and ontological reflections on politics and ethics and hence on the possibility of relating moral values and political practice in the context of an international political theory (Castellin 2014). It is important to underline that the important connections between realism and postmodernism – including those Derridian, Foucaultian and Deleuzian strands of post-structuralist thinking that have been inspired by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – go well beyond the critique of modern rationalism, ‘particularly as they apply to attempts by post-structural thinking to reopen questions of responsibility and ethics’ (Williams 2005: 165). Indeed, as John Patrick Diggins has argued:

the parallels between Niebuhr and the contemporary sages Foucault and Derrida, as well as the older Frankfurt scholars Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, are striking. Not only do all such thinkers interrogate the Enlightenment to expose the illusions of reason and progress, but Niebuhr even sees the same alienation from nature as humankind assaults the environment in an effort to wrest value from it. (1994: 438; see also Diggins 1992)

This was Niebuhr’s aim as well. Having set out Niebuhr’s Christian realism as a form of anti-utopian and anti-rationalist liberalism, the common bipolarization between liberalism and realism has been seriously jolted in these chapters. Plus, I also sought to highlight some of Niebuhr’s similarities with many critics of realism, and even with the critical approaches that have sought to debunk the realist approach to international relations throughout the 1980s and 1990s. We can hence draw some conclusions regarding Niebuhr’s critical contribution to contemporary IR theory, concerning its disciplinary history, the role which realism has played in it, and the connections with critical, constructivist and especially poststructuralist approaches (Diggins 1992).

Much like later constructivists, Niebuhr wanted his realism to safeguard liberalism from some of those features which, he sensed, were jeopardizing its
potential to keep the world aloof from political tyranny. This meant the critique— not the support—of those rationalist features which critical theorists have sought to deconstruct with the same vigour of Niebuhr’s reproach to what he saw as the political ramifications of Cartesian metaphysics which the Enlightenment had championed. Indeed, our recasting of Niebuhr has shown that ‘what is at stake in powerful aspects of the (skeptical) realist tradition is precisely the status of modernity in its own terms and a rejection of the liberal-rationalist claims to solve the question or exhaust its possibilities’ (Williams 2005: 160).

The dichotomy realism–liberalism is therefore hardly the only ‘false polarity’ that Niebuhr can help us to disentangle as I have shown how what was really at stake in his case was the very feasibility of a synthesis between realism and liberalism by means of a negative defence of democracy and of the ideals of security and freedom.

This book thus follows Michael Williams’ suggestion ‘that (what has often been termed “classical”) Realism and postmodern approaches have strong affinities’ (2005: 160). By exploring Niebuhr’s understanding of agency in terms of the Nietzschean concept of the will-to-power we were able to thrust his views across a significant part of the theoretical spectrum of contemporary IR theory, focusing specifically on those schools which have claimed the same philosophical sources and critical background which we have alluded to in Chapter 4, and namely that of Nietzsche. In general, our engagement with Niebuhr’s writings so far confirms Michael Williams’ point that the ‘realist tradition places questions of modernity/postmodernity at the heart of this theoretical lineage in International Relations theory, not at its margins’ (2005: 160–161). Indeed, Niebuhr critically shook the ontological rigidity of post-Enlightenment political theory by highlighting the fluidity, the ambivalence and the complexity of the human condition and by emphasizing the inherent temporality, solicitude and hence the liability to social change and radical transformation of political communities.

This structuralism was obviously very different from that of Waltzian realism. Indeed, it seemed more akin to the sort of French structuralism which inspired the post-structuralist turn in continental philosophy, inspired as it was by Nietzsche and his revolutionary genealogy of moral systems as consisting of macro-structural power arrangements. In fact, as Diggins concludes,

the criticism of the Enlightenment levelled by contemporary post-structuralists had its predecessor in Niebuhr’s writings a half-century earlier as well as in the religious writers who voiced their doubts at the dawn of the ‘Age of Reason’. Niebuhr’s indictment of the ‘children of light’ contains the following ingredients: the exposure of reason as hubris and the refusal to see reason and justification as tainted with rationalization; … the darkness of finitude felt as primordial mystery; the inner discordance within the human spirit reflecting the disharmony in man’s relation to the universe; the acceptance of inevitable defeat and the imperative to continue the struggle with no victory in sight; the irony of intentions and consequences and the
tragedy inherent in all situations when decisions must be made with no assurance of the right, good, and just; … the importance of anxiety as the precondition of both sin and freedom, guilt and human creativity; and the self-deceptions of philosophy, science and religion in pretending to resolve the problems of modernity.

(1994: 437)

Niebuhr’s structuralist account of power as spelled out in Chapter 4 suggests a vision of international relations in which structural forces operate in ways that are not only beyond human knowledge and values, but are themselves productive of knowledge and morality. Indeed, his suggestion of the ‘covert’ ways in which power operates seems to have led him into the sort of position which characterizes so many critical theorists today, halfway between Marxism and Nietzscheanism (IAH: 41). This approach definitely brings Niebuhr closer to the sort of constructivist and even post-structuralist strands of IR theory, not only because of his assault on the Enlightened illusions about modern subjectivity as Diggins suggests but also, more substantially, because of his understanding of how ethics, identity and power are so inextricably intertwined. In this perspective, power, love, anxiety, sin or pride – and even reason – were not qualities or capacities which could materially be ascribed to individual agents in any simple manner. They were not agential ‘capabilities’ in that way – even though they could be used or interpreted as such on some occasions.

Definitely, in Niebuhr’s view, some level of incorporation or embodiment of these features in human agency was necessary for their social and political performance to take place. But in characterizing them as key features of a general human condition, Niebuhr wanted above all to point out their structural and pre-subjective nature. As worldly constraints – that is as part of the world’s ‘fallen’ tendency to twist and mould human behaviour in the ways which Adam’s historical example elucidates – they formatted social actors before they arrive at any self-images of themselves as agents capable of following rules or transgressing them, and hence as living entities which are ‘both free and bound’ (NDM I: 194). To put it clearly, agents are not ‘capable’ or ‘incapable’ of exercising power, pride or of loving and caring as if they can actually choose to do so – even though Niebuhr thought that the possibility that choices by agents can be relatively free from constraints must not be neglected. For the most part, however, Niebuhr suggested that precisely because free choice appears to the human being as an existential possibility, the ways in which agents pursue freedom is never totally free from constraints.

Following this, I have characterized Niebuhr’s focus on ideal possibilities as possibilities rather than taken-for-granted properties of the human being, in what I have described as an ‘ontology of possibility’. Unlike that of Thomas Hobbes, Niebuhr’s account of human nature as anxious about the endless possibilities of human creativity allowed transcendence to become an inexorable element of the human condition. Niebuhr acknowledges that, as earthly creatures, we fear death both individually and politically. But what we fear even more is the likelihood of
not partaking in humanity’s achievements, or of failing when trying. Human contingency is hence not merely earthly nor is it determined by death alone; in Niebuhr is rather stretched to the maximum of its potential, as well as of its danger, due to the inspiring image of an unbounded God. The horizon of transcendence which God is means that the possibility of seizing that horizon collectively will always be there for us - and yet will never belong to us entirely. It was in this sense that I speculated that Niebuhr’s ontology of possibility might have made its way through to Obama’s vision of the world. Niebuhr’s realism represented a way of negotiating between the privileged position of theological and ethical transcendence in his philosophical system and the need to consider the overwhelming immanence of anxiety and power in their capacity to divert, deviate and corrupt love and freedom, rendering these as instrumental to the pursuit of the selfish interests of human beings and especially of human groups. As ‘fallen’, freedom and self-love operated in nature by means of a process of transmutation of natural desires and instincts, in which biological processes were not overcome, but were simply transmuted into more complex systems of obedience to metaphysical impulses and drives. In turn these were fed not only into the political machinery of modern states but also into the whole economy of knowledge and of truth-production of social scientists, lawmakers and political philosophers, making the dominant understandings of suffering, violence and harm ‘reflect the fears and anxieties, as well as the ideas and hopes, of particular groups in distinctive spatio-temporal locations’ (Linklater 2011: 41).

Therefore, the understanding of the ‘transmutations’ and ‘transvaluations’ to which Niebuhr referred, could not be obtained by means of the rationalist and scientific explanation of a physicist or of a biologist – as Hobbes attempted – whose interpretive grid was, as Nietzsche argued, still waiting to become depoliticized from the taken-for-granted political assumptions which posed survival and preservation as natural imperatives of any organic life form. Instead, political theory should rely upon the cosmological viewpoint of a metaphysician or of a theologian, capable of seeing in the rational motifs of individual agents the hidden and structural inculcations of systemic rationalities. The very triumph of rationalism within liberalism – akin to what Nicholas Rengger has described as ‘cognitive liberalism’ – lay precisely in the naturalization of rational freedom, according to which the most determining effects of social structures upon the agent paradoxically emerged as a sign of individual freedom, rather than of its subsumption in any given system (2000: 106). In rationalist approaches, the ‘capacity’ of the human being to act freely and to transcend social and cultural constraints was not only presented as a life-aim or a possibility which liberalism, more than any other regime, could secure and manage in less conflicting ways; instead, it represented the very precondition of a human fulfilment the final truth of which could only be obtained by rational means.

This begs the question, however, as to what is left of the liberal tradition after the undermining of its rationalist assumptions. At the very least, one should wonder if some alternative form of reason could be found that could ground either an alternative view of liberalism or a completely distinct political form
that could still be deemed democratic in a non-liberal way. But Niebuhr’s monolithic take on reason – and the total absence in his writings of any other intelligible yardstick that could actually measure human success in pursuing the law of Love – was not the only limitation his political thought was confronted with. For the remainder of this book I develop a critique of Niebuhr’s existential realism as an implicit awareness of liberalism’s own faults. It was this awareness that led Niebuhr to adopt a form of negative liberalism which, in my view, ends up defeating Niebuhr’s purpose of reforming liberalism with the aid of a very persuasive, but politically unimaginative, protestant existentialism.

I have referred to Niebuhr’s teleological understanding of international anarchy as making sense only from the cosmological viewpoints of a world community – a difficult balance which I have described as an ‘Anarchical Community’. Against the current trend to ‘materialize’ the universal community of humankind in some particular community or institution that could claim God’s perceived meta-ethical superiority, Niebuhr’s endeavoured to elaborate the opposite strategy: to construct a transcendental understanding of love that could be remitted to the impossible eschatology of a world community and hence carry with it the whole of God’s cathartic, critical and normative power. As the title of the first chapter of Beyond Tragedy indicated, culminating Niebuhr’s synthesis between realism and idealism, he wanted to deceive us by making us believe in a kingdom not of this world, a community belonging to us and yet resistant to all forms of concrete belonging. Only in that way could human behaviour be influenced by values which were not realistically possible, but remained relevant guides for collective self-fulfilment. As deceiver, yet true, Niebuhr saw in the trans-historical status of the Christian God the root to the affirmation of its historical impact, as the key intermediate between an ultimate love and a social ethic capable of moderately constraining the power drives and selfish impulses which were out in the open in international relations.

The demarcation between transcendence and immanence, theology and naturalism, idealism and realism, thus served the purpose of reinvigorating the Augustinian ideal of the world community standing between this world and the next and hence as the legitimate critical-normative ground of Christian realism. Niebuhr’s formulation of the world community in such terms was hence not meant to signify that all human possibilities are impossible, but rather that all impossibilities are the necessary frame of what is indeed possible, and that even the darkest of all realities cannot do away with dreams, as long as we maintain those minimal power balances which allow us to keep dreaming. I have therefore argued that Niebuhr’s depiction of international relations as fraught with anarchy functioned as a teleological device: the very recognition of a community as anarchical already presupposed the existence, however imperfect and unachieved, of such community, whose purpose was present in its very nature (CL: 114). This was after all an insight which he shared with the Aristotelian jusnaturalism he rejected: the acknowledgement of the incompleteness of something immediately calls for its completion. As one of the major American natural law theorists observed:
nature is a teleological concept in which the form of a thing, its order, tells us about its proper purpose and end. In the case of humans, there is a natural inclination to become what in nature and destination he is – to achieve the fullness of his own being.

(Murray 2005: 327–328)

Niebuhr could not agree more. He quoted Heidegger in a passage where the German philosopher was clearly also drawing an understanding of natural perfection from his medieval sources: ‘the perfection of man, his becoming what in his freedom he can become according to his ultimate possibility, is a capacity of care or anxiety’ (Sorge) (Sein und Zeit, p. 199 in NDM I: 184). Just as in the case of Heidegger, the reliance on the natural law tradition remained superficial and unacknowledged. As did many existentialists, Niebuhr stood away from the trouble of harnessing a more systematic worldview that would require a more careful and rigorous engagement with the thought of an Aristotle or an Aquinas. Anyway, Niebuhr’s commitment to the ontological priority of individuals over groups, as well as his hasty analogy between states in international relations and individuals in the Hobbesian state of nature, forced him into the sort of Cartesian position of a scientific observer which was altogether incommensurate with a Christian worldview. Niebuhr simply supposes ‘that there is some neutral “reality” to which Christians bring their insights’ (Milbank 1997: 250). As John Milbank3 eloquently argues, however, Niebuhr could never assume as a Christian that ‘“reality” can be empirically and neutrally assessed’ (1997: 250). Instead, Christians:

start reading reality (and remember that this is in itself a blank page before our act of engaging with it and speaking of it) under the sign of the Cross…. Of course, this must include political reality. The Cross was a political event and the ‘apolitical’ character of the New Testament signals the ultimate replacement of the coercive polis and imperium, the structures of ancient society, by the persuasive Church, rather than any withdrawing from a realm of self-sufficient political life.

(Milbank 1997: 251)

This seems to curtail the persuasive power of Niebuhr’s appeal to the cross as the powerful symbol of the Christian worldview and of Christ’s example as a worthy reference of ethical behaviour, which I revisited in Chapter 1. At the domestic level, without explaining how the cross could inspire the sort of political action that could materialize the fundamental link between love and justice, between God and the ‘city of men’, we are left wondering how Niebuhr’s ‘crisis theology’ could be the grounds for the sort of ‘new monasticism’ that could be brought to bear upon American politics so as to resist ‘both the moral laxity and the political apathy of twenties America’ (Fox 1985: 66). At the level of his IR theory, it also begs the question as to whether Niebuhr’s teleological take on anarchy – which could perfectly be framed as a piece of jusnaturalist
reasoning – was sufficiently worked out as a normative theory of international relations which his ‘social ethic’ necessarily implied. In my view, it was not. In spite of Niebuhr’s intelligent strategy contained in the teleological reading of anarchy, the expectation of its overcoming by means of a world community that oppressed individuals could appeal to so to resist tyranny and force open the boundaries of present political communities, could only work if the myth of the state of nature was not, in itself, the preparatory stage of a Leviathan. But in setting up the world community as the ultimate horizon of fulfilment of pre-given moral individualities, Niebuhr undermined the cosmological strength of that ideal which lay in the organic relation of community with God of which the human singularity, symbolized in the cross, was the consequence and not the cause (Milbank 1997: 251).

Hence, from a theoretical viewpoint, the strength of Niebuhr’s ‘negative’ realism was also the greatest weakness of his liberalism (Fox 1985: 277). Niebuhr’s agile critique of Wilson had certainly made a statement against political self-aggrandizement and imperial hubris. But after that, Niebuhr never went to the trouble of attempting to establish a concrete ethical system or a theory of international government. ‘It did not ordain specific positions on political issues. It demanded only that its adherents follow a middle path between the twin pitfalls of utopianism and resignation, sentimentality and cynicism’ (Fox 1985: 277). Indeed, Niebuhr evaded every opportunity he had to provide any categorial definition of some of his most central concepts. Nor did he ever explain how his much appraised ideal of justice could operate in practice or how it related to the more abstract law of love – except when saying that the latter was higher than the former. Surely, both justice and anxiety consisted of secularizations of divine love: while justice was the positive actualization of that ideal form, anxiety appeared as an immanent, imperfect, loving solicitude which was productive of the highest possibilities as much as of the highest forms of sinful action. But the ways in which these secular realities relate to the highest law was left open and Niebuhr showed no intention of running that extra mile.

One thus questions the political relevance of the sort of negative liberalism that Niebuhrian realism led to. He succeeded in laying out the limitations that the Hobbesian view of nature imposed upon the normative potential of our modern political imagination. Moreover, he was able to cut Realism from those roots and lay out a theory of international relations on new ontological grounds. But it remains unclear how both his renewed depiction of human nature, as well as his insistence on the law of love are to be translated into a concrete political model of international order – or even the most minimal ethical system. We are hence left in the dark as to the normative strength of Niebuhr’s ‘realistic liberalism’. Indeed, Niebuhr’s rejection of medieval universalism, Kantian federalism, Wilsonian internationalism or indeed any form of world state goes to show that he was unwilling to take any concrete steps to theorize a political form consonant with his Christian realism. And even if his was a politically engaged existentialism, its systematics seem to reveal the same sort of normative impotence that his continental sources were so known for. Niebuhr’s inability to pursue an
open normative agenda cleared the ground for what seems to be a return to the sort of Hobbesian fear which he had departed from in his major writings, given what he saw as the limitations of a ‘too consistent political realism’. For the remainder of this book I want to argue that the limitations of Niebuhrian realism forced him to return to the pristine Hobbesianism which he had rejected and to definitely compromise the normative and political potential of his reformulation of human nature in terms of anxiety, which grounded his ontology of possibility.

When did this happen? In this book, I chose not to develop an analysis of the evolution of Niebuhr’s IR theory, presenting it instead as a more or less coherent whole since his first writings to his final articles. The holistic approach to Niebuhrian realism as a system of thought carries its dangers. But a result of my overall picture – from his major books to his unpublished papers sitting at the Library of Congress in Washington – is that Niebuhr did not change his views significantly throughout the years regarding both American society and international politics. Contrary to other realists, ‘Niebuhr … had developed the elements of his philosophical understanding of international politics gradually over the period 1932–44. For him, the Cold War fit in to a pre-existing view; it did not facilitate a new way of thinking’ (Craig 2003: 74). One exception is, however, worth mentioning. ‘Niebuhr’s position on the use of force’ had ‘evolved’ greatly since his reproach to American pacifists the 1930s, culminating in his ‘full endorsement of American military involvement’ in the Second World War (Inboden 2013: 57). Later on, ‘the discovery of nuclear fission’ as Niebuhr phrased it himself, brought an important nuance to his view of the role of America in the world (Craig 2003: 74). In a new foreword written in 1959 to his *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr confessed:

> without undue shame that I was not sufficiently prescient fifteen years ago to anticipate the creative and destructive possibilities inherent in the nuclear stalemate, which prevents a shooting war but which also offers no easy path to world community. If we escape disaster it will only be by the slow growth of mutual trust and tissues of community over the awful chasm of the present international tension.

(CL: xxix, foreword to the 1960 edition)

It transformed in his view the balance of power among nations and the very configuration of international order ‘given the destructive possibilities greater scope than the creative possibilities’. What I have referred to as Niebuhr’s political ontology of possibility seemed to turn into an *ontology of impossibility* during the 1950s. He thought that the atomic bomb was unprecedented in its capacity to shatter all previous categories of political thought, thus placing international politics under what he called ‘the sword of Damocles’. ‘The degree of destructiveness of nuclear weapons’, Niebuhr claimed, ‘has created an international situation which may well refute both the pessimists and the optimists, both the idealists and the realists’. He then goes on to explain why:
There is a possibility that a new era of international relations will develop in
which national rivalries will not be abolished, as the utopians of all ages
have dreamed, but in which a sense of common predicament, a common
fear of catastrophe, will so overarch the rivalries that a sense of common
destiny may well gradually create a sense of community.

(‘International Politics under the Sword of Damocles’ 1952: 3)

Note how Niebuhr goes on to account for the concept of the world community in
a radically different way than he had so far. With the nuclear dilemma determin-
ing the possible total destruction of both ‘victors’ and ‘vanquished’, Niebuhr
introduces the world community as an ideal corrupted by the fear of total war. In
this context, he moves away from the discourse of an ‘impossible possibility’ –
which he used to frame the moral necessity of the world community as an unach-
ievable idea and yet necessary – to that of a historical inevitability. As an actual
political reality, he claims, ‘there can be no world community without a strong
sense of cohesion, but also not without a strong governing power’. Contrary to
everything that Niebuhr had stood for throughout his writings, he was now
forced to admit the possibility of a ‘world government’. He now saw the world
state as ‘the only long-term solution to the problem of war in the twentieth
century’ (Bartel 2015: 276). Even the defence of democratic ideals would have
to surrender to the logic of fear that nuclear monopoly would eventually bring –
even in a ‘world government under American hegemony’. In his view:

we must be prepared to admit that an oligarchic rule under conditions of
vast destruction would seem a more probable outcome of the conflict than
the universalization of democratic rule. The conditions of Western demo-
cratization which make democracy possible in our culture might be ser-
iously impaired in the West, and would not yet have achieved maturity in
non-western cultures.

(‘International Politics under the Sword of Damocles, (unidentified book
chapter), Box 42, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress, 1962: 3)

Towards the end of his life Niebuhr was thus surrendering to Hobbesian fear as
the principle of political organization. His flirtation with some liberal ideals and
especially with existentialism now read as a mere interlude in his overall pessim-
istic view of politics which at the end had to return to the disavowal of political
possibilities higher than fear of death could determine. In this, Niebuhr was
merely giving testimony to what I call the realist–liberal consensus that has,
since the beginning, pervaded IR and which has to do with the Hobbesian con-
tractarian exchange between security and freedom. Niebuhr’s strong defence of
American interventionism in European affairs during the Second World War
meant that democracy had to be protected with the same means required by the
most cruel totalitarian regimes. Especially due to the nuclear weapon, Niebuhr
thus concluded that the degree of securitization that the protection of freedom –
anywhere in the world – now required eventually compromised freedom itself.
This was the tragedy of the nuclear age and one in which Niebuhr was caught up in. Hence, we cannot but read with irony his observation, ‘For was not pessimism related to political absolutism in the thought of Thomas Hobbes?’ (‘The Politics of the 1930s’: 14).

Indeed, it was. And so was realism deeply steeped in liberalism in the case of Reinhold Niebuhr. He was never able to undermine the Hobbesian metaphysics of security that grounds liberal individualism. These connections were after all integral to the liberal–realist consensus that was the condition of possibility of IR as a theoretical field and from which Niebuhr never wished to depart. As John Milbank argues, even Niebuhr’s appeal to a certain organicism as crucial to the formation of a political community already buys into the Hobbesian division between the biological realm of the ‘instinctive’ – with reference to the natural communities such as the ‘family’ – and the artificiality of imagination and reason:

Moreover, Niebuhr’s idea of organic unities is a pluralist one in the sense that it envisages different, competing natural units. This is simply liberalism to a higher power in which groups are thought to multiply and concentrate individual egotism. There is no route, (as say in a more ‘medievalist’ model of pluralism like that of the pre-war Maritain) from particular to universal loyalty, because the latter descends, like a deus ex machina, from the heaven of reason.

(Milbank 1997: 240)

This explains why his liberalizing take on the realist tradition by way of an existentialist ontology of possibility did not succeed in resisting the apocalyptic overtones of his final years. In conceiving politics as the realm of possibilities as well as of the anxious realization of the limits of human action, Niebuhr was not just putting forward a view of human nature distinct from that of Hobbes in its ability to inspire hope for a politics that could abandon the fear of death as the only grounds of communion. He was also, perhaps unconsciously, making an ideological statement about the sort of political regime that would be better suited for furthering such possibilities. Niebuhr’s realist understanding of human nature in terms of anxiety thus favoured his liberal understanding of politics. More importantly, it fuelled his advocacy of democracy as the regime best suited to contain the idolatrous tendencies of history. But this also meant that Niebuhr had to choose his own idols – and the coming of the nuclear bomb definitely forced him to choose sides. At the end, his understanding, ahead of its time, that any IR theory presupposes normative commitments ended up compromising his ability to distance himself from indulging in the self-justification of any foreign policy strategy that could promote America’s interests. And his was not the only intellectual project to die at the hands of the nuclear bomb:

The politics of the early Cold War led Niebuhr and Morgenthau to dilute their political philosophies. Their respective conceptions of international
politics as derived from universal human nature could not withstand the moral distinctions each of them felt compelled to draw between the United States and the Soviet Union; their portrayal of scientific man out of control, channeling the ‘technics of civilization’ away from human betterment and toward humanity’s destruction, could not withstand their conclusion that the United States was justified in building larger and more destructive forces to wield against its adversary. Like many prominent scholars, Niebuhr and Morgenthau faced a choice between ongoing policy relevance and scholarly consistency. That was an easy choice for them to make in the early Cold war years, but their inconsistencies would come to catch up with them.

(Craig 2003: 79)

Even though I consider Niebuhr’s cold war writings as less representative of his early novelty and intellectual genius, they do cast a shadow of theoretical and normative impotence upon his previous writings. Anxiety had again surrendered to sheer fear of death, subverting that which was, in the view of this book, one of the most creative intellectual shifts in IR theory. It is as if the realist tradition had failed to overcome its innate Hobbesianism and had now to return to Hobbes to understand the inexorability of a world Leviathan in the nuclear age. Later realists – and, apparently, Niebuhr himself – will certainly follow suit and abandon his interwar theoretical proposals in favour of the obsession for the nuclear dilemma in the second half of the century.

Twentieth-century realism had made its choice in favour of the Hobbesian strand of realism where the pursuit of power defined nations as a matter of fact, rather than as a normative pursuit in itself, the insufficiencies of which could reveal the higher and deeper moral horizon of a world community. Niebuhr would have had preferred the latter to the former, but the ‘thermonuclear dilemma’ and the spectre of the ‘total war’ seemed to give credit instead to the Weberian view of international relations as ‘a struggle among major powers to determine whose national culture would prevail over the rest’ (Craig 2003: 6). This also explains why Niebuhr seldom engaged with Max Weber’s thought, and only refers to him in his later writings, contrary to what Campbell Craig and others assume. Niebuhr’s Christian realism was the alternative to the sort of secular and disenchanted realism offered by the German thinker – even though, as I claim, that did not amount to much when we consider the real potential of Niebuhrian realism in laying out a regulative framework that could be the basis of a realist normative IR theory or of a prescriptive doctrine of American foreign policy.

After deconstructing most of the normative philosophical systems that Western political thought had erected, Niebuhr was unable to establish any rules or norms that could guide us through the progressive path towards the realization of the ultimate law of love, or indeed toward any approximation of it. His Nietzschean suspicion towards such endeavors was after all what had inspired his critique of the natural law tradition which in his view had throughout history attributed to particular circumstances ‘the sanctity of universality’, thus falling into what Niebuhr denounced as one of modernity’s greatest dangers: the
absolutization of the part into the whole. Having warned us against the real dangers of universalizing the particular, and the tragic outcomes of nationalism and imperialism, his readers were left with the fundamental question as to what ideals, discourses or practices could be considered valid. What exactly were the criteria for distinguishing a universal truth as it is made manifest through experience, from the idolatrous upgrading of experience to a universal truth? How were transcendental values such as love to be reckoned with through living if the only way to realize the transcendence of love was, according to Niebuhr, by living? If the standard of God’s universal love was to be discovered through social interaction and personal redemption how were we to avoid lifting ourselves to the position of gods on Earth? What sort of axioms or norms could be guised in order to strike the balance he thought adequate between an excessive naturalism – in which human existence is reduced to animality – and the abusive deifying temptation of all forms of normativity?

To this Niebuhr offered no satisfactory answer. Pursued to the extreme, any moral ideal or political project could, if we take his word for it, lead to the adoration of false idols. One wonders how his own categorical statements could not themselves be seen as the sort of dangerous immanentizations he denounced in others. Even the natural law tradition, which, in spite of a much more concrete ethical dogmatics, bore strong similarities with Niebuhrian realism, was attacked by Niebuhr for ‘conveying sin’ by positing a normative middle ground between divine law and human laws. But if any instantiation of moral rules from a higher norm was seen as a symptom of sinful pride, the rule of law (indeed of any law) would as such be altogether impossible – a consequence which Niebuhr was certainly not willing to accept and yet did not seem to anticipate.

But Niebuhr’s line of fire in this regard did not stop here. He levelled the same sort of criticism against most philosophers and social theorists. Basically, all efforts – including his own? – to transcend the world analytically remained unaware of how even the most distant observer of society is always a participant in it too (DT: 25). Indeed, if observing is a means of participation in social and human affairs – something akin to the Heideggerian view of understanding as a way of being in itself – there is no reason to think that philosophers can ever remain immune to the power relations they are trying to dissect from an analytical viewpoint. In this sense, Niebuhr warned that:

we cannot disavow our responsibilities in the struggles of life; and every effort to find a vantage point of pure objectivity and impartiality in such struggles tend to a disavowal of responsibilities. But we must school ourselves to realize that we are participants, and not detached observers, so that we will not regard our judgment of the foe as a purely disinterested judgment. The root of forgiveness toward the foe lies not in the supposition that he did right in his own sight, as Epictetus suggests; but rather in the recognition of the mutuality of guilt which finally produced the explicit evil against which our anger is aroused.

(DT: 25)
Niebuhr thus seemed quite convinced that in analyzing power by presupposing the sort of rational transcendence or scientific distance which social scientists had borrowed from physicists they were contributing to the rise of new political establishments and subconsciously aspired to occupy the privileged power positions from which they had been previously cut off. But Niebuhr never thought of himself as being trapped in the same sort of paradox. And if he was ever able to solve it or stand beyond it, he never made any effort to show us how. As Thomas Berg has poignantly shown, Niebuhr’s jusnaturalist opponents are in this respect fully entitled to criticize Niebuhr for thinking that he did not had to solve any of the ambiguities whose very paradoxical nature he saw as strengths:

Christian realism tended toward ‘situationism’. Niebuhr habitually analyzed individual moral-political problems by recourse to the most general of considerations, such as the law of sacrificial love and the realities of sinfulness, without the mediation of rules…. This method could brilliantly reveal the dynamics at work in a situation, but it raised the risk of collapsing into pure consequentialism and utilitarian calculation – a full readiness to commit a lesser evil whenever it would prevent a greater one – as when Niebuhr refused to renounce in principle the fire-bombing of German cities near the end of World War II.

(Berg 2007: 16; see also Brennan 2007)

Perhaps Niebuhr thought that by merely acknowledging obstacles he was already instantiating some form of solution. John Courtney Murray was, among his contemporaries, perhaps the first to disentangle what many have seen as a sort of ‘tautological’ view of human nature (Craig 2003: 78). As I mentioned previously, privileging contingency over ‘potentiality’ when characterizing the human condition, Niebuhrian realism became trapped in the sort of casuistry that his comprehensive account of human nature was set to prevent in the first place:

Against the absolutism of the old morality, in which the contingent facts got lost under insistence on the absolute precept, the new morality moves toward a situationalism, in which the absoluteness of principle tends to get lost amid the contingencies of fact…. Whereas the old morality saw things as so simple that moral judgment was always easy, the new morality sees things as so complicated that moral judgment becomes practically impossible.

(Murray 2005: 278)

This made Niebuhr’s realist defence of a negative liberalism significantly harder. For how could any political theory mobilize support when it was unable to attach to a particular ideal for fear that such ideal would again constitute the seeds of political idolatry? How was a political project to affirm a sense of common good or ultimate end while attempting to disguise all proclamations of ‘good’ as manipulative falsities and power strategies? How were we, in that case, to differentiate the Children of Light from the children of Darkness? Was not Niebuhr following Hobbes in this self-defeating strategy by affirming that the security of
individuals was at the end the only thing that mattered in modern political theory and no higher ideal could actually inspire the construction of an ethical system and political institution that could stand beyond individual interest?

Above all, Niebuhr’s vagueness ended up disarming him in the face of the normative potential of the Christian worldview – and of that specific tradition which directly rivalled Christian realism: the classic law tradition. Unable to translate the law of love morally and politically, begged the question as to why such law was at all relevant or how it could reliably guide human conduct and avoid the sort of behaviour that it abstractly condemned. This theoretical void opened the door for most systematic criticisms of Niebuhr’s political thought that are known today and contributed to some, albeit not all, of the neglect that Niebuhrian realism still faces. In attempting to avoid the critique that natural lawyers had been targeted with, Niebuhr found himself constantly swinging between a moral realism and a postmodern pragmatism from which he was unable to derive any political consequence. In the meantime, he was armed with neither the solidity of the classic law tradition nor the boldness of the postmodern rejection of transcendental truths or metaphysical foundations. As John Courtney Murray rightly pointed out, his realism was at the end reduced to a mere ‘situationism’, no matter how useful it had been in dismantling alternative traditions or theories (1964).

Niebuhr’s context partly explains this situationism. His critique of Wilsonianism suggests that, just as Stalinism or Nazism were inspired by modern ideals of social emancipation, he was afraid that liberal democracies would soon also mobilize the masses around what where initially democratic ideals but could soon be corrupted into tyrannical forms by populist parties. Eventually, this would turn even the most stable democratic regimes into dictatorial ones, a thought in which Niebuhr was not alone. Such diverse thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno or Eric Voegelin had warned against the apparently democratic ‘origins of totalitarianism’. At this juncture, Niebuhr retreated. He saw in the characterization of political dreams as an ‘impossible possibility’ a vantage point at a time when all political ideals were so easily turned against themselves. Maybe in doing this he was schooling himself to be anxious without surrendering to anxiety, as Kierkegaard had famously put it. This attitude did commend the sort of normative impotence one witnesses in many postmodern theoretical traditions which he had on more than one occasion criticized as apolitical.

But the same criticism could be levelled against him. After all, it was precisely Niebuhr’s Nietzschean suspicion to translate moral principles into a concrete set of norms and rules that could be pursued in order to achieve higher ideals – which he saw as the static and rigid tendency of classic natural law – that left such pursuit to the free interpretation of potential tyrants. In this, Niebuhr’s liberal realism or realist liberalism appears self-defeating at best. His fear of positing a hierarchical and clearly delineated ethical system that could ground an identifiable ideal of political order, one that could go beyond the protestant and prudential imperative to immunize liberal democracies against totalitarian temptations, ended up dismantling the moral and political feasibility of the
law of love and its potential to mobilize positive action. It is not surprising therefore that the ideal of a world community that undergirded his approach to international relations as the telos of anarchy would not survive the next generation.

Niebuhr’s international relations theory also allows for some conclusions about the disciplinary history of the field. When we read Niebuhr, IR seems more like the product of a generalized consensus that some form of community existed in the international realm or was at least necessary as an ideal, rather than the outcome of a fundamental and incommensurable divide between liberals and realists. What Carr first called a ‘science’ was the direct result of the interweaving of the liberal–realist synthesis between anarchy and community – indeed a sort of ‘Anarchical Community’ – in which the focus on the former allowed for a careful but more sustained progress towards the latter. In this sense, Carr was poignant in arguing that ‘those elegant superstructures must wait until some progress has been made in digging the foundations’ (2001: 239). He saw this ‘digging’ as the task of IR scholarship, demanding the sort of ontological research which Niebuhr had also carried out. As Carr himself put it:

the teleological aspect of the science of international politics has been conspicuous from the outset. It took its rise from a great and disastrous war; and the overwhelming purpose which dominated and inspired the pioneers of the new science was to obviate a recurrence of this disease of the international body politic.

(2001: 8)

In this sense, Carr assumed that the recognition of international relations as a realm of disorder and clash of wills and interests ought therefore to be the starting point for any analysis of international relations and, above all, for any serious consideration about the possibility of countering the incommensurability of moral values and political interests. But that possibility was never dismissed:

the exposure by realist criticism of the hollowness of the utopian edifice is the first task of the political thinker. It is only when the sham has been demolished that there can be any hope of raising a more solid structure in its place.

(Carr 2001: 89)

The hidden universalist grounds of the realist tradition would remain alive still in Hans Morgenthau’s very shy proposition of a world state (Scheuerman 2011, 2012). But the realist proposal of a world community would fall prey to the very tradition that had first suggested it. Its implicit suggestion that political actors are never given and that ‘history has no natural balances of power’ (Niebuhr, ‘A Faith for History Greatest Crisis’, Fortune, v1, 26, July 1942, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress, 1952: 3). Kenneth Waltz’s later reification of anarchy as the permanent ontological structure of international relations basically killed off all of its normative potential. Niebuhr’s own constitution of anarchy as an important, if not the, object of analysis of
international relations was hence symptomatic of both his achievement and his failure. The subject of IR would soon shift from world order to international disorder, imbuing realism with the sort of statecentric focus that most IR theorists now criticise. The inner normativity of international political thought – and of the field of IR as such – would, by the hand of realists themselves, be replaced by the social-scientific positivist approach to anarchy as the neutral ground of state relations, the very ‘natural’ structure given in the ‘real world’. Naturally, in defining the object of IR as a non-object – the lack of world government – realists ended up abandoning what was for Niebuhr the very raison d’être of the discourse of anarchy: the setting up of a world community as a possibility that, however impossible in reality, could be used as a transcendental ideal to gradually mobilize the sort of criticism and reform which interstate relations so desperately needed in his view.

In spite of these criticisms, Niebuhrian realism can claim for itself two important achievements that this book attempted to spell out and which remain open to further contributions in IR theory. On the one hand, a sustained realist criticism of liberal utopianism. On the other, a liberalizing existentialist departure from Hobbesian realism. I have shown that even though the former has been granted to Niebuhr much more regularly than the second, the latter actually constitutes a much more original aspect of his theory of international politics. Overall, however, both critical pursuits were carried out by Niebuhr from within a liberal framework. Hence, I have also portrayed both the theological and the existentialist aspects of Niebuhr’s thought as complementing his realism whose specificity lies in it being a sort of negative liberalism. Niebuhr’s was never a full-flung assault on the liberal tradition as a whole. Nor would that be compatible with his Augustinian portrayal of democracy as the least evil of all political regimes in comparison to what constituted, at his time, highly probable alternatives.

However – and this is something I would like to suggest, might be the case for the whole of the liberal tradition – there is a fundamental tension within Niebuhr’s realist thought which indeed confirms John Milbank’s violent attack on the ‘poverty of niebuhrianism’ (1997). This tension is his attempt to balance a highly critical enterprise with a normative horizon which, Niebuhr thought, could survive his own criticism. This book argues that it does not, and that in attempting to provide an alternative liberal idealism, realism merely succeeded in pushing further for the establishment of a liberal international order that remains vulnerable to the threats of capitalism and populism which Niebuhr denounced. He was hence unable to erect a systematic political thought grounded on a theory of ultimate ends and of their relation to secular means and achievements, given his own suspicion of any such attempts. His account of the world community as a kingdom of ends does not have either the efficient result of producing a sustainable source of critique of contemporary and always transitory forms of political community, nor is it able to inspire the sort of hope and faith in a better and more just world which he thought, was possible to rescue from realism’s innate pessimism.
I have explained this difficulty by reference to Niebuhr’s own critique of the classic natural law tradition. Indeed, he remained faithful, like jusnaturalists, in some form of ultimate common good and in the possibility of pursuing it in some way. But because he is realistically reluctant to tease out what that way should be, or to give any indication of what the divine law of love and the midway of secular justice actually consisted of, there is no reason for his readers to believe that such ethical and meta-ethical imperatives actually carry any impact upon how we should organize our collective life, both nationally and internationally. This problem was further aggravated by the fact that Niebuhr’s loose attachment to some form of jusnaturalist reasoning – where the secular order is derived from a transcendental one and the latter is then used as a critical-normative horizon of the former – still tried to accommodate what had been one of the most destructive philosophical assaults upon Catholic thought: the Kierkegaardian-Nietzschean immanent critique of all forms of transcendental rationalism, including that of the natural law tradition.

The value of Niebuhrian realism lies therefore in the spectacular assault it launched against both Wilsonian idealism and Hobbesian realism, while remaining significantly attached to both the liberal and the realist traditions. But this was a hard game to play and I have followed with John Courtney Murray that it resulted in an unsolvable ambiguity, a political theory that was neither here nor there. Niebuhr’s strengths revealed the major fault of his theory, and it disarmed him of any capacity to propose a more concrete theorization of the common good or higher end that any political community should pursue – and of how it should pursue it. He remained trapped in an anxious insistence to remind us that all such attempts would eventually give in to some form of idolatry and sin – excluding his own attempt of course. What I have described as Niebuhr’s normative impotence meant that Niebuhr was unable to fully escape the realist metaphysics of security – grounded on Hobbes’ deterministic account of the fear of death – which revolved around the idea that any higher end that any political project construes must first surrender to the individual search for physical security. His view that democracy ought to be defended as an ideal regime in the sense that it was the only one able to protect us from tyrannical forms of government paid lip service to the belief that security provision was, in the contractual exchange with individual liberties, all that was needed for a regime to be politically legitimate and endure the test of history and of globalization.

Niebuhr’s own difficulty in bringing forth a more tangible understanding of either love or justice as prescriptive horizons and moral norms of democracy was a direct outcome of the realist–liberal consensus around the moral sufficiency of security as the sumnum bonum of any legitimate political order. Even more so when the international order was characterized as anarchical and hence in a state of nature. One could hardly picture a more obvious case in which the parts of a whole take on the form of the universal or the absolute – which Niebuhr thought was what characterized the idolatrous trends of the modern age. If this is what modernity was about then certainly the sort of
securitarian individualism that one ends up with if taking Niebuhr’s defense of democracy for its word, surely featured among the most prominent instances of political idolatry. Seldom did this form of individualism – where the individual thinks himself as a self-contained, self-willing and self-created god – deserved the critical attention of Niebuhr, in spite of his quasi-Marxist qualms against the self-alienating implications of consumerism, capitalism and modern technology.

His reluctance to endorse, or engage in, any materialization of his ideal of a world community for fear of a tragic corruption via institutionalization seems to reflect the sort of American isolationism that was, at the end, a form of macro-political individualism. My take on Obama’s Niebuhrian foreign policy – with all its internal tensions and ambivalences – suggests precisely the sort of prudential action that might result in inaction and self-limitation in face of the challenges that confront the responsibility that any great power has vis-à-vis other international actors. Niebuhr’s normative theorization of the world community as a necessary ideal for inspiring change directly clashed with his predicament that any such attempts were rendered futile by interstate power struggles. One wonders if political ideals are not precisely made to inspire action – and if they can still be valid when they fail in such aim. If anything, the ‘unachievableness’ of the world community seems to instil desistance when presented as independent from the human hand, a product of destiny as it were. Given the despairing outcome of a theory that seemed too eager to advise against the dangers of despair, it is not surprising that the notion of anarchy would soon regain its Hobbesian deterministic sense in IR scholarship, becoming reified as the actual and ‘timeless’ structure of the international system, an image which post-Niebuhrian realism would reaffirm.

My aim here has been to elaborate on what I deemed a teleological definition of anarchy, one that related directly to his positing of the world community. This was an essential utopian dimension that any realist theory should have in order to be realistic about human nature as permanently caught between reality and what lies beyond. I hence portrayed Niebuhrian anarchy as a normative and highly disputed concept which is never settled and seldom is what it seems. Instead, his vision of anarchy was that of a situation permanently caught in a state of longing, constantly begging for an ordering principle. But repeating the paradox over and over again was clearly insufficient to clear out the way for more rich understandings of how political realities relate to political ideals. This relationship had been the main concern of Niebuhr’s IR theory, a concern which he was not able to respond to in any sustained or systematic manner.

But what John Courtney Murray saw as an unsolvable ‘ambiguity’ and John Milbank characterized as sheer ‘intellectual poverty’ were not only to be found in the political thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Given what he shares with the whole of the realist tradition, and even more with liberal internationalism, the most problematic aspects of Niebuhrian realism sit at the very core of the liberal-realist consensus which founded modern IR in the first place. Indeed, the tensions at the heart of Niebuhr’s thinking remain the fundamental tensions of
liberal democracy and of its ability to resist populist and dictatorial trends which, as the recent presidential elections have shown, are no longer external. Niebuhr would never have anticipated that the story of Christian realism as the story of a death foretold would actually feature as one of the ironies of history: as many critical theorists in contemporary IR theory, the praise of critique *qua* critique intimates the total neutralization of normative thinking and makes democracy more pervious to antidemocratic tendencies. Contemporary IR scholars on all sides of the spectrum will probably find it difficult to accept that the postpositivist assault on the ontological assumptions of IR was actually what founded the field. But the autonomy of IR and its later scientification was indeed made possible through Niebuhr’s own hesitation to couple his critical undertaking with a prescriptive dimension. As a result, he was both the most imaginative critic and the most unimaginative normative political theorist of his generation. Perhaps Niebuhrian ‘intellectual poverty’ was at the end, the greatest proof we needed of the power of realism as a critical theory of international politics – and the final wake-up call for the renewal of the normative imagination of IR theory.

**Notes**

1 Kierkegaard 1980: 155.
2 I want to thank my colleague Francisco Corboz for having pointed out to me that security is precisely one of the possible modern translations of the medieval understanding of salvation. As a central concept of the liberal tradition – and of realism as well – security, understood in the Hobbesian way as the capacity of individuals to safeguard themselves against harm in the state of nature and by their own hands actually can actually be read as the secularized version of medieval salvation, that is, as ‘safety’.
3 For an account of that which is perhaps the most critical take on Niebuhr’s Christian realism, John Milbank’s chapter ‘The Poverty of Niebuhrianism’ (1997) see Burk 2009.
5 There is no evidence to support Campbell Craig’s claim that Niebuhr’s ‘political philosophy’ was ‘deeply influenced by Max Weber’ (2003: 33). Niebuhr seldom quoted Weber, and when he did it was with reference to his sociological or historical writings. Surely, Craig is right is stressing the overwhelming influence of Weberian thinking in the political science of the first half of the twentieth century, but it seems that Hans Morgenthau was, like Carl Schmitt, much more familiar with Weber’s *machtpolitik*, then Niebuhr. Also, it is the case that, as I also claim, Niebuhr’s confrontation with the ‘thermonuclear dilemma’ positioned him closer to Weber’s Hobbesian view of international relations. But that only goes as far as to characterize the last stage of Niebuhr’s international thought, which takes place during the cold war. In my view, many readings of Niebuhr coming from IR or foreign policy analysis, portray Niebuhrian realism in a much gloomier light than it deserves, usually because of the parallel with Hans Morgenthau (Tjalve 2008). This book has attempted to place Niebuhr in intellectual and political contexts which go beyond realism, resulting in a less darker image of Niebuhr and his realism of hope.
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