

The Symbiosis of Political Form and Moral Character: Searching for Universality in Historical Particularity

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William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* provide unconventional contexts for analyzing the symbiotic relationship between forms and moral character in efforts to realize the ends of politics (order, security, justice, social harmony, happiness, and liberty). Such unconventional contexts present the challenge of realizing the ends of politics when political and social forms have been widely corrupted or eclipsed by the forces of anarchy. The muting of the role that conventions and forms play in realizing the ends of politics amplifies the role of character in the human struggle for what Aristotle calls the good.¹ Two central aspects of the symbiotic relationship between forms and character are apparent when the contexts provided by Golding, McCarthy, and Bonhoeffer are analyzed using the political theories of Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Irving Babbitt. First, political forms are more likely to contribute to the ends of politics if they are supported by moral character. Likewise, character is more likely to contribute to the ends of politics if it is shaped by forms and conventions that embody what Edmund Burke called the wisdom of experience. Second, to contribute to the ends of politics, traditional forms and conventions require adaptation and reconstitution to adjust to the demands of new and changing circumstances. These two points are the thesis of this essay.

Two corollary points that stem from the thesis are beyond its scope but are worth noting because they connect the problem of forms and character to democratic leadership and the role of imagination in the reconstitution of forms and conventions. Democracy is prone to ignore the problem of leadership. In its most egalitarian forms, it assumes that the majority will—formed and expressed in accordance with democratic process—is sufficient to promote the ends of politics without institutional and moral constraints. Yet, like all forms of government, democracy depends on aristocratic leadership to realize the ends of politics. Moreover, moral imagination plays a vital role in the formation of aristocratic character as it provides the moral dexterity to synthesize universality and particularity in original circumstances. While these corollary points are undeveloped in the following analysis, they are present as a projection of the argument's trajectory, albeit in seminal form.

In William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a group of young British boys are marooned on a deserted island during a war. Although they immediately organize and form a democratic government of sorts, things quickly slip into disorder. The boys elect a leader, Ralph, who, with the help of Piggy, creates rules intended to focus the boys' efforts on the common good as they see it: keeping a signal fire going, gathering food and fresh water, and building shelters. Before too long, the rules are largely ignored because the boys would rather play and hunt than build shelters and keep the signal fire going. One of the boys, Simon, searches for the reasons why the boys are slipping into discord and conflict. Before Simon talks to the Lord of the Flies and discovers that the source of disorder among them is "the defects of human nature," Golding gives readers an indication of why the boys lose their grip on order and social harmony. Well before the murders of Simon and Piggy, Roger, an older boy, stalks Henry, a younger boy, who is playing on the beach. With no other boys in sight, Roger, hidden behind a tree, throws stones at Henry. In a telling narration, Golding describes why Roger intended to miss his mark: "[T]here was a space round Henry, perhaps six yards in diameter, into which he dare not throw.

Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins."² Roger is on the verge of impropriety, but he has not yet lost all willingness to comply with standards of civilization. In the tension of moral duality,³ the habits of his former, civilized life are in conflict with his savage, primordial desires to harm others. His character remains loosely tethered to the mores and order of British culture but is beginning to lean toward moral anarchy.

The civilizing conventions of England fade from the memories and imaginations of the boys the longer they are on the island. Without the influence of these conventions, the boys revert to something like a Hobbesian state of nature. The degeneration is gradual. It becomes evident not only when Roger throws stones at Henry but also when Jack, the head of the hunters and rival to Ralph, questions the need for rules. Jack grows tired of their constraint on his will to do as he pleases. As the boys argue over how to respond to the threat of a mysterious beast on the island, Ralph chastises Jack for violating the rules that govern assemblies. Ralph shouts, "The rules! . . . You're breaking the rules!" Jack retorts, "Who cares?" Ralph defends his appeal to what might be construed as the rule of law by responding, "Because the rules are the only thing we've got!" Jack replies with childish expression: "Bollocks to the rules!"⁴ Ralph's admonition that the rules are all that the boys have contains an element of truth. It is too one-dimensional, however, to capture a more complete sense of what engenders and shapes order. The boys have more than the external rules to protect them from arbitrary force and prevent social conflict; they have internal ethical will, moral fortitude, what is summed up in the word *character*. Ralph is right to suggest that rules are necessary for order, but he overestimates their efficacy and ignores the primacy of ethical will, moral character, or what Claes G. Ryn terms in the context of democracy "constitutional personality."⁵

By constitutional personality, Ryn means a personality type that can function in accordance with the boundaries and limits of constitutional democracy. Such individuals are not so greedy for

power that they work to circumvent checks and balances or exceed the confines of limited government. Rather, they possess a sufficient degree of self-restraint that makes conformity to legal and constitutional limits easier to habituate. Ryn explains the connection between political forms and character:

[I]nstitutional checks . . . ultimately fail without the restraint, integrity, and high-mindedness that . . . come only from within the political actors: from moral character, circumspection, knowledge, respect for the truth, modesty, and from a recognition that in politics no side has a monopoly on right. People of statesmanlike qualities concerned about the common good [have] to check partisan demagogues and bullies.⁶

John H. Hallowell expresses a similar understanding of the personality type on which constitutional democracy depends when he explains that “[c]onstitutional government is a kind of self-restraint which the people in a democracy impose upon themselves; and, whether we have institutions of judicial review or not, its continued existence depends less upon the institutional checks provided than upon the commonly shared knowledge that there are restraints and upon willingness of individuals voluntarily to submit to those restraints.”⁷ Walter Lippmann echoes Ryn and Hallowell when he explains the relationship between the written law and the unwritten higher law.

Constitutional restraints and bills of rights, the whole apparatus of responsible government and of an independent judiciary, the conception of due process of law in courts, in legislatures, among executives, are but the rough approximations by which men have sought to exorcise the devil of arbitrariness in human relations. Among a people which does not try to obey this higher law, no constitution is worth the paper it is written on: though they have all the forms of liberty, they will not enjoy its substance. The laws

depend upon moral commitments which could never possibly be expressly stated in the laws themselves: upon a level of truthfulness in giving testimony, of reasonableness in argument, of trust, confidence, and good faith in transactions; upon a mood of disinterestedness and justice, far above anything that the letter of the law demands. It is not enough that men should be as truthful as the laws against perjury require and as reasonable as the rules of evidence compel a clever lawyer to be. To maintain a constitutional order they must be much more truthful, reasonable, just, and honorable than the letter of the laws. There must be more than legal prohibition against arbitrariness, against overreaching, deception, and oppression. There must be an habitual, confirmed, and well-nigh intuitive dislike of arbitrariness; a quick sensitiveness to its manifestations and a spontaneous disapproval and resistance. For only by adhering to this unwritten higher law can they make actual law effective or have criteria by which to reform it.⁸

With Ryn's, Hallowell's, and Lippmann's appeals to the primacy of character over form in mind, it is worth considering the reasons why the boys in Golding's novel descend into conflict and violence, why they fail to create a justly ordered society. *Lord of the Flies* is a story about the failure of character and leadership more than it is a story about the consequences of rule-breaking. The disorder on the island stems from one central reality—namely, that the boys are morally and politically immature. They have not been sufficiently enculturated; they have not internalized enough of the moral ethos of British or Judeo-Christian civilization to counteract the natural forces of their lower nature. Fallen, morally imperfect humans need to be civilized by both internal and external forces that work in tandem to restrain their selfishness and guide them to the highest aspirations of civilization. Roger, for example, is in the process of *becoming* civilized when he arrives on the island. What restraint he demonstrates can be attributed primarily to habit and self-interest. In the development of his moral character, he is far from

Aristotle's mature man, the *Spoudaios*, for whom justice and virtue are their own reward.

Liberated by circumstances from the conventions, leaders, and exemplars that socialized them in England, Roger and Jack learn that on the island there are few outer consequences to deviating from civilization's standards. Emancipated from these standards, they fail to shift the balance of veto power on human appetites from external conventions to internal ethical will. Their failure is unsurprising because their moral character is significantly undeveloped; they are, after all, children. In short, the rules created by Ralph and the boys fail because they were not sufficiently supported by moral character, including prudent leadership. Like most children and with few exceptions, the boys disregard their responsibilities because they would rather play than work. Moreover, Ralph and Piggy fail to check and restrain the bullying behavior of Jack and Roger. Although Ralph is a bigger and stronger boy than Jack, he not only puts his rival in charge of the hunters, thus empowering him, but also lectures Jack ineffectually when he neglects the signal fire. Ralph is slow to recognize the threat represented by Jack and unwilling to use force against him when necessary.

Immature, young British boys are not the only ones prone to collapse into chaos and violence. There is a reason why Golding uses global war as the backdrop for *Lord of the Flies*. All humans are, to varying degrees, morally immature. To maximize their virtue, they require the influence of conventions that check lower inclinations and form good habits. As Aristotle notes, only gods or beasts can live outside the polis because civilization's conventions—its traditions, customs, mores, and laws—that reflect its ethos restrain the lower side of human nature and evoke humans' moral conscience and ethical will. Leaders and exemplars of high character have the same effect. They provide an example worthy of imitation that orients individuals to what Lippmann terms the higher law, Burke calls moral imagination, and Irving Babbitt describes as the higher will. Without the limits of the polis, the balance between internal and external constraints is lost. Living

outside the polis means living without the guidance of conventions and relying only on inner constraint. Aristotle argues that “human beings, for the most part, do injustice when they have the capacity to do so.”⁹ Rare individuals of saintly virtue, in Aristotle’s phrase gods, may be able to live justly without conventions or to maintain virtue in a society of corrupt conventions, but the vast majority of human beings need conventions to restrain their will and appetite. When freed from conventions, most human beings are prone to behave like Gyges of Lydia when he discovers the power of a magical ring of invisibility,¹⁰ or like the boys in *Lord of the Flies*.

Most humans need to be led by moral exemplars, what Burke calls natural aristocrats,¹¹ and compelled by the force of law because they are by nature ethically dualistic and morally immature. Babbitt quotes Dante in making a similar point, that “‘men wandering wild in their bestiality,’ have a need of a twofold control: ‘that of the highest pontiff to lead them according to revelation to eternal life, and that of the emperor to lead them according to the traditions of philosophy to temporal felicity.’”¹² One tendency of modernity has been to emancipate individuals from these outer restraints, from a “tyranny of the ‘rules,’”¹³ without providing an adequate substitution in the form of inner “humanistic or religious discipline.”¹⁴ Babbitt accepts the modern affinity for self-reliance and individualism while insisting that they be tempered by religious and humanistic standards, including the kind of ethical work and humility exhibited by such great moral leaders as Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius; philosophically identified in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Burke; and artistically portrayed in the poetry and plays of Homer, Sophocles, and Shakespeare. Babbitt is not the only one to recognize the need for internal, ethical constraints on modern individuals who view democracy as liberation from both internal and external limits.

Alexis de Tocqueville suggests in *Democracy in America* that democracy breeds contempt for social and political conventions. The cause of this contempt is rooted in a perverted view of the ethical life, the belief that liberation from limits is justified by humankind’s natural goodness and the corresponding subordination of leaders to

the people's will. Like Plato, Tocqueville identifies the chief character flaw of democratic man as an inability to check and order desires, and the chief character flaw of democracy as the inability to check and order democratic impulse. While democratic man relishes the freedom to exercise desires without restraint, his liberty depends on conventions and leaders that restrain desire in individuals and power in government. Tocqueville writes that "the reign of liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without beliefs," by which he means religious faith.¹⁵

Tocqueville is here repeating a point made by George Washington in his Farewell Address, which itself echoes classical and Christian thinkers before him. Washington states that "[o]f all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."¹⁶ Tocqueville asserts that "laws and, above all, customs enable a democratic nation to remain free."¹⁷ Law, custom, and morality make liberty possible. Yet, democracies are apt to dispense with customs, such as manners, that are considered aristocratic and thus little more than unnecessary pretention and protection of privilege, what Rousseau calls "the varnish of vice"¹⁸ and Babbitt terms "artificial decorum."¹⁹ If Tocqueville is correct, then political and civil association requires decorum and duties to others that are expressed, in part, in the form of manners, rules of civility that soften human relations, and, as Burke would say, make virtue habit. "Nothing," writes Tocqueville, "does more harm to democracy than its outer forms of behavior." He adds that "the effect of democracy is not to impose certain manners on men but, in a sense, to stop them having any at all." There are, however, mitigating influences that subject individuals to moral restraint. Among these are religion and women, considered by Tocqueville as "the protectors of morals."²⁰ Babbitt adds that at its best, decorum orients humans to their true nature. He agrees with Burke that "forms and traditions" embody historical experience that conveys insights into the human condition. Decorum and tradition provide a standard "to which the individual may set bounds to the lawless expansion of his natural [or impulsive] self."²¹ It is this very standard with which the boys in *Lord of the Flies* are losing contact.

Tocqueville's observations and insights about American democracy are a starting point to consider the problem of forms/conventions and the moral foundations of American democracy. Tocqueville's sociological analysis of the spiritual foundations of democracy is enriched by Babbitt's philosophy of the ethical life. Babbitt's humanism emphasizes the vital need of aristocratic, ethical leadership to temper democratic excess. The success of democracy in America depends on the mediation of self-reliance and individualism (which require freedom), on the one hand, and ethical self-control and humility (which require order), on the other. Babbitt and Tocqueville recognize the need for a symbiosis between political and cultural forms and moral character that is augmented by the mediation of universality (first principles) and particularity (circumstances).

Overemphasis on either political forms or character can depreciate the value of one or the other and create unrealistic expectations for politics. Statesmen of high character are rare, and institutions rarely work in their ideal manner. The best hope for democracy lies in a combination, balance, and mediation of institutional forms and character. As with Ryn, Hallowell, and Lippmann, Babbitt makes clear that form and character exist in a synthesis. Political forms assume a certain character type that can function within them. Character of a certain type (Ryn's constitutional personality) makes the proper functioning of forms possible. Babbitt's writings on American constitutionalism illustrate this relationship between form and character. One has the ability to shape the other. Constitutional forms, especially a written constitution, require the interpretation and compliance of political leaders who give life to those forms when they translate them into action. George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, for example, shaped aspects of the executive branch that could never be exactly determined by constitutional parchment. Chief Justice John Marshall's Supreme Court opinions both shaped the role of the federal judiciary in the American political system and the meaning of the Constitution. Discretion and character give forms substance that are mere abstractions until they are embodied by human beings.

Human agency breathes life into institutions and gives them direction and purpose that deviates, to varying degrees, from the intention of their framers. Absolute fidelity to the intent of constitutional framers, for example, is impossible and, in some circumstances, undesirable. Edmund Burke's view of abstract rights and political practice suggests a similar relationship as that between forms and character. Metaphysical rights are refracted when exposed to the circumstances and exigencies of historical life. Burke writes:

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are, by the laws of Nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed, in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction. The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity: and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs. . . . The pretended rights of these theorists [professors of metaphysics] are all extremes; and in proportion as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. The rights of men are in a sort of *middle*, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned. The rights of men in governments are their advantages; and these are often in balances between differences of good,—in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil. Political reason is a computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally, and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations.²²

As Burke suggests about rights, democracy is an abstract form until it meets historical life. Although the form of democracy may be derived from historical experience, its foundational or original

form cannot anticipate or account for the exact changes and exigencies of future historical life. As the original form meets historical life, it refracts and reflects in ways that change its shape and meaning. Democracy, like all forms of government, can evolve in a variety of ways. It can become more or less aristocratic, or more or less influenced by a leveling desire for equality. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is, among other things, a consideration of the possible ways that democracy can evolve, some more desirable than others. If Babbitt is correct, forms can influence human conduct, but they are largely powerless to do so unless corresponding personality/character types (e.g., constitutional personality, democratic man) animate them by giving the forms substance and spirit, by giving them experiential texture and putting them into historical motion. The history of American constitutional law, for example, has been the story of how particular justices and courts interpret the meaning of constitutional clauses and apply them to cases. As the members of the court change, it is common for the court to shift its interpretation and application of the law. Those interpretations and applications of law reflect the intellectual and moral character of the justices who decide cases. If Babbitt, Burke, and Tocqueville are correct, the success of democratic forms requires ethical foundations that reshape the forms, to some degree, and animate them in accordance with the ends of politics. Burke and Babbitt are especially astute to the role that leaders play in adapting old insights and forms to the challenges of new circumstances.

The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce was especially astute to the challenges of finding universality in particularity. The relationship between them helps to explain the relationship between forms and character. In Babbitt's view, universality and particularity must be reconciled. Their reconciliation requires synthesis or mediation. In political life, human beings must use and reshape forms in order to adapt to the challenges of changing circumstances. In other words, if political leaders are attuned to the common good, they will have to treat forms in the same way Burke treats rights, as partly pliable. Knowing how to reshape forms is a

matter of prudence. In Croce's view, the path of prudence or justice is never a matter of applying a stale, reified, disembodied conception of the good to particular circumstances. Each new circumstance is original and thus incapable of being anticipated in its exactness by a priori rules. He explains that

[a]t every moment of life we find ourselves face to face with actual situations, to which the laws that we possess either do not apply at all, or apply only in the approximative way that we have seen; at every moment of life, we find ourselves without the guidance of the law, face to face with the indifferent and indifferentiated. The practical man knows well that the laws were a mere help, merely a preparatory stage to action, and that he must in each case face the actual situation as it arises, intuit and perceive it in its originality, and perform his own action with originality.²³

This process of finding the good in changing and original circumstances requires mediation, reconciling principles, laws, and rules that approximate the demands of justice with changing circumstances that conventions can never fully anticipate. Ethical work is part of mediation and necessary for the good to be realized. One cannot simply abide by the rules and escape from the difficult task of mediation, reconciling universality and particularity, which requires judgment and adaptation to the challenges of circumstance. While Babbitt acknowledges that "[w]ithout a convention of some kind it is hard to see how the experience of the past can be brought to bear on the present," he insists that conventions should be held "flexibly."²⁴

Babbitt is, in this regard, at odds with Hobbes, who would have us believe that without forms and conventions humans are incapable of ethical work, that they are incapable of mediation. In Hobbes's state of nature, humans are determined by the overwhelming desire for self-preservation and the lack of a common power. In his view, there is no ethical conscience to mitigate natural desires. Only absolute power aligned with fear and

self-interest can control the war of all against all. Ethical realists like Babbitt suggest that ethical conscience may be muted in a state of anarchy or war (as it is for the boys in *Lord of the Flies*), but it is not silent. In fact, in some instances it is possible that the voice of conscience is amplified in a state of anarchy as it is for the father in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance to Hitler.²⁵ In the person of character, the dissolution of justly constructed outer controls and forms inspires greater inner control, what Babbitt calls humanistic and religious discipline.²⁶

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* illustrates the primacy of character over form, and in doing so his work illuminates Babbitt's point about inner restraint. In *The Road*, the circumstances are anything but mundane and typical. All institutions and conventions have been destroyed. There are no political or cultural forms. Civilization has collapsed into desperate anarchy that includes widespread rape, cannibalism, and murder. Like the characters in the novel, readers are compelled to reimagine morality and moral character in light of extreme disorder. The story focuses on a father and son whose odyssey is characterized by repeated confrontation with diabolical evil that requires that they trespass, steal, kill, and treat everyone with the highest level of suspicion. At one point the boy and father discover a spit on which they see a "charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening." The boy's mother commits suicide rather than face the circumstances of deep cultural decay and lawlessness. She does not have the stomach to confront the evils of apocalyptic anarchy. The father carries a gun with his last two bullets, one to kill his son and the other to kill himself. The father anticipates employing the murder-suicide plan when trapped by rapists and cannibals from whom escape is impossible. After the father uses one of the bullets to kill a gang member who grabs the boy and puts a knife to his throat, he teaches the son how to use the gun to commit suicide: "You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard." He vows that he will not let the boy suffer the torment and indignity of the lowest human behavior. With his son in mind, he whispers to himself, "I will do

what I promised. . . . No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone."²⁷

The circumstances of the novel resemble a Hobbesian state of nature, but unlike Hobbes's natural man, the father and son are not motivated solely by self-preservation nor is leviathan rule under a social contract possible. The moral ideology that shapes social contract theory is irrelevant to the circumstances of *The Road* and incongruent with its specific demands. There are no viable moral blueprints or preexisting ethical principles at the characters' disposal. There are no courts, governments, laws, or churches to which they can appeal for justice. To survive and comply with moral universality, they will have to be resourceful and morally dexterous.

There is no escape from the apocalyptic darkness, and yet, the father and son demonstrate creative, moral intuition in realizing that the moral path must be found, and in some sense forged, as Croce suggests, in their particular circumstances. They are and are not Machiavellian. Like Niccolò Machiavelli's prince, they are forced by circumstances to be expedient, to break old moral codes for the sake of survival. To do otherwise would mean quick and ultimate demise. Yet, unlike Machiavelli's prince, they have an understanding that they are morally obligated to make the best of horrific circumstances. There are moral lines they refuse to cross even though doing so would make survival easier and more certain, some that resemble those from the civilized life the father once knew and others that they have redrawn to fit their new circumstances. Their conduct is the consequence of dialectical tension between the father's stark realism and the son's romantic sentimentalism and longing for community. The tension causes conflict that leads to synthesis. Neither the father's expedient realism nor the son's romantic idealism prevails in pure form. The synthesis develops as the story unfolds and is apparent in the story's ending.

McCarthy's *The Road* is philosophically richer than Golding's *Lord of the Flies* because the former's darkness reveals the light of higher human potentiality given the shortcomings of human character. Yet, it does more. It provides a deeper sense of the relationship between and historical texture of universality and particularity. The

boy is hopeful that he will find a friend or a dog with which to play or other families who are, like the father and son, “carrying the fire,” a phrase used to indicate that the father and son are morally distinguishable from the gangs, thieves, bandits, murderers, cannibals, and rapists who have no regard for human dignity. The father teaches the boy that good guys “keep trying,” that they “don’t give up.”²⁸ He urges the boy to not “lose heart.”²⁹ The father suggests to the boy that there are other good guys and that the father and son are not like the cannibals. The boy is not so certain about his father’s virtue. He asks, “We wouldn’t ever eat anybody, would we?” “No, of course not,” replies the father. The boy persists: “Even if we were starving?” to which the father retorts, “We’re starving now.”³⁰

The boy measures the father’s lessons and character against the circumstances of life. At one point while scavenging through a house they encounter a basement full of prisoners whose limbs are harvested for food. The prisoners cry for help, but the father and son run away when they realize they are in jeopardy. In the wake of the experience, the boy asks, “They’re going to kill those people, aren’t they?” “Yes,” replies the father. “Why do they do that?” asks the boy. The father is reluctant to reveal too much of life’s reality to his son. He replies, “I don’t know.” The boy is persistent in his search for answers. He asks, “Are they going to eat them?” to which the father responds, “I don’t know.” Again, the son persists in his questioning: “They’re going to eat them, aren’t they?” The father, then, uncovers the ugly truth: “Yes.” The boy puts the pieces together and draws the conclusion that explains the father’s decision to abandon the prisoners and run from the captors: “And we couldn’t help them because then they’d eat us too.” “Yes,” replies the father. “And that’s why we couldn’t help them,” the boy states. “Yes,” the father acknowledges. “Okay,” the boy responds, indicating that he understands and agrees with his father’s thoughts and actions.³¹ The boy is becoming less romantic as he experiences the realities of life in apocalyptic anarchy. And yet, he avoids becoming cynical.

In different circumstances when the two encounter an old man on the road who is alone and near death, the boy insists on feeding him against his father’s wishes.³² The father considers the

opportunity cost of sharing food to be too high. The son is more interested in relieving the old man's misery even for a few short moments. The father is becoming less rigid in his selfish realism and gives in to the son's wishes by sharing a bit of food with the old man. The father discovers a way to be both alert to danger, as he concentrates on the needs of survival, and kind to a dying old man.

While the circumstances portrayed in both Golding's and McCarthy's works vary in their degree of disorder, they challenge readers to search for the boundaries and spirit of moral responsibility. The behavior of the father and son in *The Road* would be well outside such boundaries if the circumstances of the story were more typical of civilized life. Yet, in the context of apocalyptic disorder, standard moral rules are of little help. The father and the boy are compelled to navigate moral ground that is, in at least one sense, new and unfamiliar. It requires what Croce terms originality. The circumstances portrayed in *Lord of the Flies* are more typical of civilized life and yet uncommon. They do not demand extraordinary unconventional effort to comply with virtue, as is the case with *The Road*, but they do require some degree of moral dexterity. Compared with the father and son in McCarthy's *The Road*, Golding's characters are more one-dimensional; they fail to morally adapt to their circumstances as the father and son do.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is another example of an individual who, when navigating extraordinarily disordered circumstances in which conventional moral forms were of little use, searches for the unconventional moral path. When he decides to resist Nazi oppression and participate in a plot to assassinate Hitler, he is forced to question the applicability of conventional Christian morality. In his unfinished work *Ethics*, he writes:

In the course of historical life there comes a point where the exact observance of the formal law of a state, of a commercial undertaking, of a family, or for that matter of a scientific discovery, suddenly finds itself in violent conflict with the ineluctable necessities of the lives of men; at this point responsible and pertinent action leaves behind it the

domain of principle and convention, the domain of the normal and regular, and is confronted by the extraordinary situation of ultimate necessities, a situation which no law can control.³³

Bonhoeffer has written law in mind here. He is aware of its limitations. Like Burke, he considers the notion of a priori, metaphysical rationalism to be too disconnected from the particularities of historical life to be relevant to the problems of the moral life. Ahistoricism reduces “the ethical . . . to a static basic formula which forcibly detaches man from the historicity of his existence and transposes him into the vacuum of the purely private and the purely ideal.”³⁴ The moral standards created by an incarnate God are not “lifeless.” “They are not intended to serve the ends of an abstract ethic” but are to “take effect in the reality of history.” Detaching morality and moral principles from historical reality “distorts them into a feeble ideology.”³⁵

Bonhoeffer recognizes that as Nazi society descends into deeper moral depravity, as it moves further and further from justice, he is obligated, like the father in *The Road*, to resist the extraordinary evil by renouncing legal and moral standards from a bygone age. Bonhoeffer suggests that “in this breaking of the law the validity of the law is acknowledged, and in this renunciation of all law, and in this alone, one’s own decision and deed are entrusted unreservedly to the divine governance of history.”³⁶ In times of deep disorder and injustice, the written law gives way to an unwritten moral law of conscience. The responsible individual is freed from the obligation to obey laws and moral rules that have lost their relevance in circumstances for which they were not made.

The topic of morality and its relationship to universality and particularity is closely related to the relationship between form and character; they are different ways of discussing the problem of the One and the Many. In 2015 Ryn published an essay, “How Desperate Should We Be?” that was part of a *Humanitas* symposium related to his novel *A Desperate Man*. The novel is another medium through which Ryn expresses the moral philosophy

articulated in his books and articles. His central point is that the Western tradition tends to intellectualize the moral life, to put form above character, by reifying its demands into stagnant, ahistorical principles and platitudes. In Ryn's view, principles and tradition (the forms of morality), including just war doctrine, can at best approximate the good, but until human beings face the actual circumstances of historical life, the demands of morality are not yet present. They are brought to life, into focus—they move from abstraction to originality—by the particular demands of circumstances in which universality and particularity are synthesized. In these moments of originality and synthesis, the form of the good and justice changes; it takes a particular shape that meets the ethical demands of the moment. Principles and traditions may help to orient individuals to the moral life, but they cannot capture its specific demands that are bound to circumstances and require mediation and judgment.

The challenge of mediation and synthesis is illustrated by highlighting one central part of *The Road* that demonstrates McCarthy's imaginative power and creativity: the interplay between the father and son. The father teaches the boy what is necessary and right in circumstances of apocalyptic anarchy. The father's sense of responsibility and love for his son is shaped, in part, by his wife's cynical desperation and suicide. The boy's mother is unwilling to do what becomes the father's purpose for living, to care for and protect his son.³⁷ In reflecting on the father's commitment to his son, the narrator explains that the father "knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke."³⁸ When the father pleads with his wife to go on living, suggesting that they are survivors, she replies, "What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film." "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it."³⁹ The father could have given in to his wife's despair, but he instead heroically takes the boy on the road scavenging for food in a land where nothing grows and protecting him from diabolical criminals who have lost all sense of virtue.

There are three main dimensions to this relationship that work in a dialectical way. (A) The father must adapt conventional morality to unconventional circumstances. He explains to the boy why it is right to trespass, steal, not help people in need, commit suicide, and kill. Yet, he draws ethical boundaries especially in regard to cannibalism and the truthfulness of communication between the father and son. (B) The son shows signs of moral maturity throughout the odyssey. He listens to and trusts his father for the most part, but he measures in his ethical conscience his father's lessons against his experiences on the road and his desire for community. In some instances he questions the father's wisdom, especially when the father refuses to share food with the old man who is near death. In other instances he accepts the father's conception of justice—for example, shooting the gang member, not helping the prisoners held in a cellar by cannibals. He also holds his father to his own standards. In one instance the father gives the boy all the remaining cocoa, leaving none for himself. The father had promised the boy that they would share. When the boy discovers the father's deceit, he chastises him: "If you break little promises you'll break big ones. That's what you said."⁴⁰ (C) The father adapts his understanding of the good to the boy's insights. As noted, the father plans to kill his son and himself if cannibals and rapists were about to capture them. As he nurses the boy when he falls ill, he vows to protect him from a diabolical death. When the father is shot with an arrow and near death, he decides to let the boy live, urging him to "keep going" and to "find the good guys." The son insists that he wants to be with his father, but the father tells him to "carry the fire" that is "inside you,"⁴¹ a plea to continue promoting the good in circumstances that make its realization nearly impossible. After the father dies, the boy is taken in by a family that carries the fire. The family's mother talked to the boy about God, but the boy found it best to talk to his father. "The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time."⁴²

The adoptive mother suggests that the boy's father was attuned to God's will (moral universality) when he cared for, educated, and

protected his son. The father's understanding of his responsibility to protect and educate his son is echoed by the adoptive mother. The obligation is a divine command. The father navigates the circumstances of postapocalyptic America not merely for the sake of his and his son's survival but to raise and educate his son in accordance with a higher purpose that transcends mere material existence. The father is a spiritual guardian, a protector of the son's body and soul.

Throughout the story the father trusts no one and has little, if any, hope that good people exist. Community is as extinct as are most living things. The boy, however, recognizes the possibility for community and its regeneration. He sees a boy about his age and runs after him.⁴³ The father scolds his son for not staying put, but the son's concern for the other boy evokes a sense of responsibility for others, a trait exhibited by the father for his son. In that instance, the father narrows the circle of responsibility. The son widens it.

There are reasons why the father's attitude makes sense. It is risky to trust others under the circumstances. Helping others may come at the price of one's life. The son senses that there is more to life than mere survival. He wants community and is willing to take risks to find it. When a thief takes their possessions and food, the father threatens to kill him but instead makes him strip naked and leaves him in the road. The boy pleads with his father, who responds, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything." The boy's growing sense of moral regard inspires him to reply, "Yes I am. . . . I am the one." The father explains that he did not kill the thief, but the boy retorts, "But we did kill him."⁴⁴ The father is, arguably, too harsh in his reaction to the thief, who is a different category of "bad guy" than the cannibals, gangs, and rapists. He is more like the father and son who are scavenging to survive. In this instance, the boy has a better sense than the father for what justice demands.

In McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Bell, a World War II veteran who has served as sheriff for decades, encounters a new breed of soulless criminal, Chigurh.⁴⁵ Sheriff Bell reflects on how things have changed. In all his years in law enforcement, he never killed anyone. Some of the sheriffs in the

previous generation did not see the need to carry a gun.⁴⁶ In previous times unruly men would challenge the sheriff when he broke up a fight. Things, however, have changed. Now the sheriff is likely to get shot in such circumstances. Bell states, "You take somebody that will actually throw down on a law enforcement officer and open fire, you have got some very serious people."⁴⁷ As Bell reflects on what he calls "a true and living prophet of destruction," he admits, "I dont want to confront him." Why? "I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would."⁴⁸ Bell refuses to do what Bonhoeffer and the father in *The Road* consider it their obligation to do—namely, violate the written law, follow the unwritten law of conscience, and use the methods that are necessary to confront evil. The soulless criminal, Chigurh, kills repeatedly, using diabolical methods. Sheriff Bell retires rather than adapt to the new state of crime and law enforcement. He is unwilling to search for moral universality in dark and difficult circumstances. He is wedded to a static, inflexible, and ineffectual notion of morality based on the assumption that meeting the soulless criminal on his own ground destroys the moral integrity of law enforcement and the human soul. Like the mother in *The Road*, he abandons the field of battle to the worst sort of human being. He rationalizes that "[i]t takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all."⁴⁹ Both characters have become hopeless and discouraged.

The father in *The Road* demonstrates a resolve and moral dexterity, a willingness to search for moral universality in the particularities of apocalyptic anarchy. He teaches his son to do what is necessary and learns from him that there is room for community even in the darkest circumstances. The father navigates extreme and original circumstances that require imaginative creativity to survive physically and with moral integrity. His character and love for his son orient him to find *alethia*, truth and light, in darkness. His wife is unwilling to face the darkness and meet the challenge of adapting to extreme circumstances. She chooses suicide. Sheriff

Bell is unwilling to adapt, to become the kind of law enforcement officer who could neutralize soulless criminals. He chooses retirement. In McCarthy's panoply of characters, the father stands out because of his ability to find the good in dire and original circumstances. He chooses not to escape from darkness but to exert his ethical will in ways that demonstrate love for his son. Like Flannery O'Connor's appeal to the grotesque, McCarthy uses extreme darkness to illuminate a forgotten truth, no matter the circumstances, the challenge of the human condition is to forge the moral path.

Cultural conditions vary. Traditions and conventions resonate in some circumstances more than others. When they have less authority, when individuals become skeptical of their utility and wisdom, when they are eclipsed by the forces of anarchy, order depends increasingly on ethical will and character. This point is illustrated by Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, McCarthy's *The Road*, and Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. The depreciation of forms and conventions is not limited to extraordinary historical circumstances or dark fiction. It has become a defining characteristic of the modern age. Babbitt identifies in modernity a tendency to revolt against tradition in the name of freeing the individual from traditional authority, thus making the individual less dependent on the outer authority of conventions and more self-reliant. Rather than argue for the revitalization of tradition and outer authority as Catholic Integralists do, Babbitt, following Burke, recognizes that modern man would have to exhibit more internal, ethical control as the authority of tradition, an outer control, waned. Becoming more self-reliant, and thus less dependent on external controls like tradition, however, requires humility and mediation as well as moral dexterity. Consequently, democratic liberty depends more on inner control inspired by religious and humanistic discipline than outer control provided by forms and conventions if it is to avoid collapsing into democratism and populism, a mere yielding to the unchecked majority will.

Two conclusions are suggested from the preceding analysis. While institutions and conventions are vital to the good society, they cannot by themselves create a just political society. The good society requires a combination of institutional arrangements/conventions

and virtue/character that reinforce each other. Their relationship is symbiotic. The character that is conducive to properly functioning conventions and forms includes flexibility, adaptation, reconstitution, and reformulation of traditional forms that preserves their vitality by adapting them to new circumstances. Yet, the task of reconstitution is not an act of mere creativity. It requires attunement to the standards and spirit that have inspired the good society for ages. However imperfect they may be, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* approximate this standard of moral universality and the moral dexterity required to abide by it. Political forms and conventions change, but the standards and spirit in which they are constituted remain largely constant. Reconstitution of forms and conventions is an act of creative renewal. It synthesizes and reconciles permanence and change.

The challenge of finding universality in particularity, Babbitt suggests, points to the need for imaginative leaders who both recognize when change is necessary and know how to envision it in ways that maintain continuity with moral universality. Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and McCarthy's *The Road* struggle with this very problem. In the unconventional circumstances addressed in each book, the centrality of character is apparent, as is the need for moral dexterity. That moral dexterity is tethered to an abiding quest to subordinate human will and appetite to what Lippmann calls the higher law. Whether we use the language of Lippmann's higher law, Burke's moral imagination, or Babbitt's higher will, what is being identified is the anchor that grounds change to moral universality that must be rediscovered in changing historical circumstances.

Notes

1. See, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. with intro. by Terence Irwin (Hackett, 1999), 1–18.
2. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (Perigee Books, 1954), 204, 62.
3. For a detailed analysis of moral dualism, see Claes G. Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*, 2nd ed. (Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 52–89.
4. Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 91.

5. Claes G. Ryn, *The Failure of American Conservatism and the Road Not Taken* (Republic Book, 2023), 38.
6. Ryn, *Failure of American Conservatism*, 96.
7. John H. Hallowell, *The Moral Foundation of Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1954; repr., 1973), 64.
8. Walter Lippmann, *The Good Society* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1943), 346–47.
9. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. with intro. and notes by C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett, 2018), 66.
10. As Plato recounts the allegory, Gyges, a shepherd, uses the ring to seduce the queen, kill the king, and assume the throne. See Plato, *Republic* 359d–61d.
11. For Burke on natural aristocracy, see “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs,” in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie (Liberty Fund, 1992), 168–69.
12. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, with intro. by Russell Kirk (Liberty Fund, 1979), 166.
13. Irving Babbitt, *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* (Houghton Mifflin, 1912), 338.
14. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 70.
15. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan, with intro. by Isaac Kramnick (Penguin Books, 2003), 21.
16. George Washington, *The Political Writings of George Washington*, ed. Carson Holloway and Bradford P. Wilson, vol. 2, 1788–1799 (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 498.
17. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 369.
18. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 74.
19. Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, with intro. by Claes G. Ryn (Houghton Mifflin, 1919; repr., Transaction, 1991), 124.
20. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 704, 705, 340.
21. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 133.
22. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Hackett, 1987), 54.
23. Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of the Practical Economic and Ethic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (MacMillan, 1913), 512–13.
24. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 327.
25. Other examples of extraordinary individuals whose virtue was amplified in dire circumstances include Maximilian Kolbe and Stanisława Leszczyńska in Auschwitz.
26. Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 70.
27. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Vintage, 2007), 198, 113, 248.

28. McCarthy, *The Road*, 129, 137, 189.
29. McCarthy, *The Road*, 177.
30. McCarthy, *The Road*, 128.
31. McCarthy, *The Road*, 127.
32. McCarthy, *The Road*, 163.
33. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (SCM Press, 1955), 165.
34. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 149.
35. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 158–60.
36. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 166.
37. McCarthy, *The Road*, 29.
38. McCarthy, *The Road*, 5.
39. McCarthy, *The Road*, 55–56.
40. McCarthy, *The Road*, 34.
41. McCarthy, *The Road*, 278–79.
42. McCarthy, *The Road*, 286.
43. McCarthy, *The Road*, 84–85.
44. McCarthy, *The Road*, 259–60.
45. Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (Vintage, 2005), 4.
46. McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 63.
47. McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 38–39.
48. McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 4.
49. McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 64.