In 2007, Simon Critchley suggested that “we are living through a chronic re-theologization of politics” (Critchely 2007, p. 5). This “re-theologization” is occurring, he contends, because people are trying desperately to find some sort of meaning in a world threatened by “nihilism.” “In a word”, he provocatively states, “the institutions of secular liberal democracy simply do not sufficiently motivate their citizenry” (Critchely 2007, p. 7). He continues on to propose that “this motivational deficit is also a moral deficit, a lack at the heart of democratic life that is intimately bound up with the felt inadequacy of official secular conceptions of morality” (Critchely 2007, p. 8). In his own positive proposal, Critchley turns to Alain Badiou, Knud Ejler Logstrup, and Emmanuel Levinas for support in articulating a “conception of ethics that begins by accepting the motivational deficit in the institutions of liberal democracy, but without embracing … nihilism” (Critchely 2007, p. 8).

A lot has changed since 2007 and yet, if anything, the situation seems worse than when Critchley was writing. The temptations toward nihilism, on the one hand, and the need for a radical rethinking of the moral and religious dimensions of social life, on the other hand, press even more strongly in light of the spread of right-wing populism across the globe over the past few years. In brief, we live in a time of increasing political nihilism, or we might say, cynicism, within global democratic societies. As a result, the seemingly low-bar of civil deliberative engagement with others is ever diminishing as a realistic possibility for social life. Indeed, disagreement tends to count as immediate evidence of the irrationality or immorality of others. The idea of surrounding oneself with critics in order to ensure that truth is more important than one’s being viewed as “right” is almost a quaint hangover from a prior time. Though there are plenty of social, economic, and even epistemic causes for such a dire situation, the causes are in some ways less important than attempts to find solutions. And yet, in many directions, what seems no longer possible is the one thing that is most urgently needed: hope.

The guiding motivation of this paper is that when cynicism is taken as the only possible response to social life, we should begin to look more seriously at what is impossible. Rather than dismissing impossible ideas as irrelevant to the “real world” in which we live, we think that appreciating the importance of impossible ideals can give us the hope that is required to change what world is taken as
“real.” Admittedly, any such call for impossibility will likely be subject to scorn, derision, and dismissal from those who see possibility as a limit for action. In his own attempt to articulate the promise of an “infinitely demanding” conception of ethics and politics, Critchley rightly turns to Levinas’s new phenomenological ethics as a resource. Although we will also propose Levinas as profoundly important for where we find ourselves, we think that Critchley does not go far enough to explore the specifically religious dimensions of Levinas’s thought as relevant to political life. It sometimes seems as if Critchley’s apt description of the “re-theologization of politics” is expressed as a kind of lament for a robustly secular moral account that is capable of filling in the motivational gaps left by liberalism. That is certainly an important strategy, and one that is well worth pursuing, but in this paper we will go in something of the opposite direction. Namely, rather than attempting to turn from theology to politics, we will explore the promise of postmodern religious ethics and political theology for responding to our current situation. In order, then, to articulate the practical political importance of impossible ideals, we will enact a dialogue between Levinas and another thinker who is rarely considered alongside him: Reinhold Niebuhr.

In the mid-twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Christian moral theologian influenced by pragmatism, and Emanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian born French, Jewish philosopher and student of phenomenology, both came to believe that moral and political life is best understood in terms of impossible ideals fostered by relational love of multiple neighbors. Given the ontological presuppositions of modern ethics and politics, it is not surprising that many contemporary theorists have not known what to do with scholars like Niebuhr and Levinas. For example, Niebuhr has been dismissed as an amoral realist and a consequentialist leaning intuitionist (see Ramsey 1961, pp. 4–6), and Levinas has been called everything from a utopian visionary and a radical revolutionary political thinker, to a quietist whose account of ethics is “gawky, awkward, and unenlightening” (Rorty 1996, p. 41).

The difficulties that Niebuhr and Levinas jointly present to easy categorization results from their shared starting point: both begin by challenging the ontological presuppositions of modern ethics while affirming the centrality of moral responsibility as the central category for human existence. In this way, both thinkers reject the traditional idea that ought implies can, because justice, they suggest, is only just insofar as it is never just enough. By rethinking personhood as relationally constituted, morality as a matter of responsibility prior to freedom, and justice as always related to embodied love for multiple others, they provide the critical resources for rethinking not only postmodern moral existence, but any political structure that would attempt to account for it. Ultimately, they both argue that ethical and political life are best undertaken as impossible ideals that serve as practically framed social necessities. In this way, they jointly refuse to allow cynicism to be the final word on political life.

In this paper, we are interested in extending out the dialectical models of religious ethics and political theology that Niebuhr and Levinas began by enacting a dialogue between these two theorists. Even though there has not been much work bringing these thinkers together, we want to be clear that our goal is not to produce a synthesis of their thought. To do so would be to betray divergent concerns that ground their own perspectives. But, by jointly exploring the impossible moral and political ideals that are proposed by Niebuhr and Levinas, we hope that there might be mutual enlightenment such that shortcomings in each thinker’s perspective might be productively supplemented by the strengths of the other thinker. Hence, we do not see this as a conclusive study, but simply an incipient proposal that traces possible lines for further thought in postmodern religious ethics and political theology. We will do this by presenting and critically comparing Niebuhr’s and Levinas’s thought as concerns

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1 By “postmodern,” here, we simply mean to indicate that the context in which such thinking would occur is marked by the legacy of modernity and its critics. Such a legacy is crucial not only for understanding the liberal framework in which Levinas and Niebuhr both begin to reflect on ethics and religion, but also for the specific challenges that they each variously offer to such a framework.

2 Considerations of Levinas and politics, both critical and affirmative, are extremely numerous. For just a few examples, see (Caygill 2002; Critchely 2007; Hansel 2009; Horowitz and Horowitz 2006a; Minister 2012; Morgan 2016; Simmons 2019).

3 One notable exception is Flescher (2000) who considers them together in relation to the question of just war/pacifism.
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three key issues in moral and political theory: (1) the nature of persons, (2) the source and content of the moral ideal of love and the political ideal of justice, and (3) the impossibility and yet continued practical relevance of ideals for social life. In a time of political disfunction due to what might be viewed as a limited moral and religious imagination, reading Niebuhr and Levinas together can yield potentially profound results. They mutually reject the framework of “possibility” as a limitation for life in a liberal democracy. As such, reading Niebuhr and Levinas together allows us to interrogate our own assumptions about liberalism, broadly considered, and about how to respond to our contemporary social situation, more narrowly. By enacting this dialogue between them, we will find that because they suggest that liberalism is never going to be enough for what it takes to navigate social life (even within a liberal democracy), they offer us an invitation to hope in the face of a time characterized by political cynicism.

1. Persons: Divine and Human

Central to both Niebuhr’s and Levinas’s thought is the depth/transcendence of personality. In an age when Anglo-American philosophy was dominated by the radical empiricism of logical positivism, Niebuhr and Levinas both tilted against the reduction of persons, but they did so in subtly different ways.

Following in a long Augustinian tradition, Niebuhr conceived of the self as unique in its internal depth and capacity for self-contradiction. As Niebuhr writes:

Human personality has a depth and uniqueness which escapes the ordinary processes of knowledge. Those processes always tend to reduce the fellowman to a thing or an object. Human as well as divine personality is obscured when the self seeks to understand the other merely as object of observation. The creative initiative of the other, the unique depth of personality in the other, is veiled by an approach which touches the surface of his life but does not penetrate to the secret of his being. (Niebuhr 1941, pp. 294–95)

For Niebuhr, a person is, by definition, constitutionally never completely knowable. One is always partially constituted by the particularities of social, cultural, and familial contexts (what Niebuhr calls the “forms and unities of nature” or “organic unities”) (Niebuhr 1941, pp. 26–30). These are not simply limitations upon the self, but rather nature contains its own vitalities (drives, instincts, etc.) which vivify the forms of a culture, or nation, etc. But the self is also more than its location, even in its full vitality. “It has the spiritual capacity”, Niebuhr writes, “of transcending both the natural process in which it is immersed and its own consciousness” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 75). The self is always able to transcend itself, look back on its own parochialism and find itself wanting (Crouter 2010, pp. 30–31). The self cannot, however, escape from its own particularity. It exists in the space between finitude and transcendence, between particularity and universality. This means that persons cannot be accounted for in terms of either a monistic or dualistic system of thought. The “ordinary process of knowledge” works quite well when dealing with resting states—the abstractions of Platonic forms or with the particularities of scientific objects—but the person is an activity, a running dialogue between finitude and infinitude.

Standing in the Augustinian tradition, Niebuhr’s account of human personality could never be shorn from divine personality. The transcendence and freedom of human persons are made possible by the creative activity of the divine person. All of creation is caught up in the dialectic of God’s personality. Again, it is the dynamism of personality that is key here. Consider Niebuhr’s account:

Christianity does not believe that the natural temporal and historical world is self-derived or self-explanatory. It believes that the ground and the fulfillment of existence lie outside of existence, in an eternal and divine will. But it does not hold, as do many forms of dualism, that there is an eternal world separate and distinct from the temporal world. The relation between the temporal and the eternal is dialectical. The eternal is revealed and expressed in the temporal but not exhausted in it. (Niebuhr 1937, pp. 3–4)
Notice that here we find the dialectic tension of personality. God is not finite (not even the sum of finitude), but the finite is never separable from God. This is most clear in the incarnation. “The message of the Son of God who dies upon the cross”, Niebuhr writes, “of a God who transcends history and is yet in history, who condemns and judges sin and yet suffers with and for the sinner, this message is the truth about life” (Niebuhr 1937, pp. 20–21). In ways that resonate with Marion’s (1991) notion of “God without Being”, God is not presented by Niebuhr as merely a person. Instead, Niebuhr makes clear that God is at least a person, as marked by the dialectic relationality that characterizes all persons, human or divine (see Lovin 1995, pp. 33–71).

Niebuhr’s treatment of theological language can thus be read as developing directly from his understanding of personality. The problem with literalism, in particular, is that it claims to have grasped the divine person, to have pinned it down in a stable form (Gilkey 2001, pp. 53–77). In this way, Niebuhr might be said to agree with Caputo (2006, p. 16) in seeing a “deadening literalism” as deeply troubling in a postmodern framework. Alternatively, however, the problem with dualistic mysticism is that it reduces the divine person to an ideal form outside of contact with the creation itself. In denying both of these alternatives, Niebuhr resonates with Ludwig Feuerbach’s dual worry about the kataphatic excesses of anthropomorphism and also about the apophatic excesses of mystical theologies—as Feuerbach notes “a God who is injured by determinate qualities has not the courage and the strength to exist” (Feuerbach 1957, p. 15; see also Simmons and Sanders 2015). For Niebuhr, however, the upshot is moral and theological. Those who obscure the dynamism of personality are not, on Niebuhr’s account, just in error, but rather they are idolaters.

Levinas is similarly concerned about attempts to “grasp” at personality such that the other could be fully comprehended by human cognition. As he will often say, the other “overflows comprehension” (Levinas 1996, p. 6). But Levinas’s approach to personality is quite different from Niebuhr’s. For Levinas, the core of personality is found in the utter uniqueness, and “noninterchangability” of each person which is discovered in the encounter with the other. For Levinas, this “encounter” with the other is not something that happens at a time in history (on a Tuesday right after lunch, say), but is instead the pre-originary call/command that constitutes oneself as responsible to/for each and every other. As such, Levinas understands this encounter with the other to be something that happens in “a past more ancient than every representable origin” (Levinas 1996, p. 116). This account of the ethical “lapse” of time as a suggestion that the ethical relation becomes the very condition for subjectivity, now understood as a response to the moral call, rather than the condition of such a call being issued.4 Levinas’s account is, hence, a radical departure from all liberal understandings of ontological freedom: the other is not someone that I happen to meet as an object in the world, but rather the one who calls me to selfhood in the first place.

Drawing heavily on the Biblical accounts of Adam and Abraham, Levinas sees selfhood as an originary response to a call that precedes me such that ontology is no longer fundamental—ethics is now first philosophy (see Levinas 1987, chps. 2 and 3; 1996, chp. 1). As Levinas will say, quoting Dostoevsky, “every one of us is guilty before all, for everyone and everything, and I more than others . . . ” (Levinas 1996, p. 102). This response/responsibility/guilt is, hence, never something that is chosen, but precedes all decision. In this way, responsibility both precedes freedom and makes it possible (Levinas 1997, p. 124).

Because the absolutely other is never entirely available for comprehension, and thus, irreducible to the categories of “the same”, the modern emphasis on the priority of epistemology (e.g., in Descartes and Kant), which gave way to the late modern and early postmodern emphasis on the priority of ontology (e.g., in Hegel and Heidegger), now gives way to the Levinasian emphasis on the priority of ethics. Accordingly, Levinas works hard to avoid treating the other as an instance of certain categories or “genus”. As he explains:

4 For more on temporality in Levinas, see (Mensch 2019).
By genus, I mean every genus to which the individual human belongs: nation, profession, race, place and date of birth, etc. Consequently, a principle of individuation is necessary to identify a specific—or more exactly, an individual—difference. Humanity comprises exactly a principle of individuation, as do tables, chairs, or stones. (Levinas 2001, p. 110)

To conceive of humans in this way is inevitably to violate their true personality, which human reason cannot domesticate and cordon off. Yet, such a conception is all too common within the history of philosophy. The underlying problem is that prior philosophy, Levinas contends, has nearly exclusively conceived of the other as another person “like me”, rather than appreciating the radical alterity of the other, as other. Whether in Descartes, Kant, Husserl, or Heidegger, one’s similarity to others is more fundamental than one’s difference from them. Indeed, in both modern and also early postmodern social and political philosophies the similarities between persons is what counts in favor of something like “human rights”, or “existential freedom”, or “moral respect”, or even the possibility of “authenticity.” In many ways, it is this conception of the similarity of persons that underwrites liberal approaches to political life. Indeed, the very possibility of a Rawlsian original position as any sort of procedural check for justice depends on such a notion.

In contrast, true personality, for Levinas, is not known through comparison in relation to a “genus”, but rather through the living encounter with the radical singularity of the “face” of the other. It is in the “face-to-face” engagement with the other that one finds the personality of the self and the personality of the other as irreducibly unique and asymmetrically related (i.e., the other is always first) (see Perpich 2019). As such, in direct rejection of all liberal ontologies, and modernist conceptions of agency-based ethics, Levinas contends that “the ‘face to face’ position is not a modification of the ‘along side of …’” (Levinas 1969, p. 80). The “face” that is encountered here is not, and cannot be, the face as it is known in terms of skin color, age lines, etc. “The face”, writes Levinas, “is signification, and signification without context!” (Levinas 1985, p. 86). The “face” is, thereby, a marker for the person’s infinite depth in the midst of the concretion expressed in living precariously and finally in dying. In “seeing” face of the other, the self comes to relate to the contingent, fragile ongoing process of life in the other, who is utterly unique. In response to this face, the self comes to be constituted by its own uniqueness in obligation to the other. “The self”, Levinas writes, “is the one who is called as irreplaceable. I am concerned by the face of the other, by the mortality which his nudity exposes and expresses” (Levinas 2001, p. 110). Interestingly, despite Levinas’s rejection of the ontology underlying political liberalism, in many ways he might be read as offering a practical account of what it might look like for a society (liberal or otherwise) to reject non-moral identity markers as relevant to social status (see Morgan 2016, chps. 5 and 6; Simmons 2019).

Niebuhr’s and Levinas’s approaches to personality overlap and diverge in fascinating ways. Both Niebuhr and Levinas find that personality is marked by at least some mode of ineffability. For Niebuhr the person can only be adequately understood in terms of paradoxical symbols. Theological language is central to this project, as it is the language in which we speak of divine and human persons (see Carnahan 2016). It is here that Niebuhr must deploy the often frustrating claims that we must be “as deceivers yet true”, speaking literal falsehoods in order to reflect truth in mythological statements (Gilkey 2001, pp. 53–77). Levinas too finds that the other and the self are constituted in ways that we can only approach indirectly, with metaphorical deployments of terms like “face” and “seeing”, while stressing the problems with traditional philosophical notions of visual metaphors (e.g., Plato’s cave, Husserlian eidetics, etc.) (see Simmons 2009). Interestingly, Levinas often draws on language from theological archives in order to interrupt the philosophical terminology that can so quickly fall back into the very ontological categories he hopes to rupture. So, in Totality and Infinity, he will talk about ethics as an eschatological optics (Levinas 1969, p. 23), and in Otherwise than Being, he will refer to ethics as involving testimony, prophecy, and witness (Levinas 1997, pp. 140–50). These linguistic gymnastics are required because both Niebuhr and Levinas take it that reason and human language are insufficiently subtle to grasp the full dynamism of persons who are constituted by responsibility/relationality. Moreover, as constituted by the call/command of the other (Levinas) and
God (Niebuhr), even one’s own selfhood is dynamic to such a degree that self-understanding is never a final achievement, but merely a constant epistemic and ethico-religious task. It is in light of this task that political theology is never simply a matter of how best to conceive of social life and organization, but of how to live with other persons defined by a singularly infinite dignity.

We should not, however, too quickly collapse Levinas’s and Niebuhr’s approaches to personality at any level (religious, ethical, or political). From the beginning, Niebuhr’s conception of personality is relatively more social than is Levinas’s. Niebuhr locates the person in the dialectic between the particular and the universal. This leaves more potential space for the relative goodness of organic forms of life. Levinas’s conception of the person seeks to break down all categorization, including universalizability. This can lead to interpretations of Levinas as committed to a more individualistic conception of personhood than is present in Niebuhr (ethics as what gives rise to politics). On such readings, it can seem as if Niebuhr starts with a notion of multiple others and Levinas only gets there as an afterthought (politics as an interruption of ethics).5

This effect is strengthened by the different theological vocabularies deployed by Niebuhr and Levinas. As previously noted, for Niebuhr, human persons are always already caught up in their relationship with the divine person (though, see Mathewes 1999, pp. 69–94). It is the transcendence made possible by the divine person that allows humans to transcend their own natural particularities. As Niebuhr goes on to say:

Insofar as human love is a possibility therefore, it is always partly a relation between the soul and soul via their common relation to God. Insofar as it is not a possibility it points to God as the final realization of the possibility. Where the love of God does not undergird and complete the relation of man to man, the differences which nature creates and sin accentuates, differences of geography, race, time, place and history, separate men from one another; and the similarities of nature and of reason may indeed unite men but not on the level of spirit and freedom. (Niebuhr 1941, pp. 294–95)

As we have noted regarding Levinas’s turn to religious terminology, he is certainly comfortable speaking of the divine:

I think that the truly new moment in the whole of modern philosophy is the recognition that the human is not the knowledge of God, but rather the place where God works, where “God lives.” Hence, an immanent transcendence. . . . The human being is the being of beings, or belongs, in any event, to the being of beings—not as a place of viewing, but as a place of action. In the sense that creation cannot come all at once into the head of God, there is the “life of God” [Lebens Gottes]. (Levinas 2001, p. 148)

This is, however, quite a different position from Niebuhr’s. With Niebuhr, Levinas rejects a view that posits God as an unchanging being understood according to the categories of onto-theology, but their motivations are importantly different. Niebuhr rejects this view of God in part because he sees God as a person. Alternatively, Levinas rejects this ontotheological notion because God’s transcendence is “immanent” in the ethical encounter. As Levinas explains, God is “neither an object nor an interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility” (Levinas 1996, p. 141). Even though we think that Levinas might have need of a more robust notion of divine personalism if his religious vocabulary is to do the philosophical work he intends (see Simmons 2011), he is repeatedly clear about his own notion of God as not being an interlocutor in a dialogue, but rather the “glorious”

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5 That said, there is significant scholarly debate on the degree to which Levinas’s thought is restricted (or not) in such ways. For considerations of the role that the “third party” plays in Levinas, see (Minister 2012; Morgan 2016, pp. 48–60; Simmons 1999; and Simmons 2019). For critical engagements with potential opportunities and limitations in Levinas’s thought for engaging an expansive social relation in light of colonialism and related social challenges, see (Eaglestone 2010; Bernasconi 2006; and Morgan 2016, chp. 10). Alternatively, for essays considering the potentially speciesist bias in Levinas, see the essays in (Morgan 2019a, Part V; and in Edelglass et al. 2012).
trace that shows up in the face of the other (see Levinas 1998). As such, for Levinas, God is often presented not as a person, but “as a relation to another person” (Levinas 2001, p. 171). It would seem, then, that on Levinas’s account, God shows up only in the face of the other. For Niebuhr, God is the person who requires and enables our service to our neighbors as others. Yet, for both Niebuhr and Levinas, and in this sense they are consistent with dominant trends in much of Christianity and Judaism more broadly, there is no sustainable way to keep the relation to God and the relation to others radically separate. The face of God and the face of the other are always facing us—whether we face up to it or not.

In the end, Niebuhr and Levinas both offer robust resources for religious ethics and political theology as concerns their notion of relational personhood, but given the specifics of their variant accounts, it is crucial that we avoid thinking that they would align at the level of social theory and public policy. Their work is more of a resource for how to conceive of the basic categories according to which political philosophy could be undertaken as a theological task, on the one hand, and according to which theology (whether Jewish or Christian) could be undertaken as a political activity.

2. Meaning: Origins and Outcomes

If persons are constituted by relation and not individual essence; by dynamism and not an ideal state, to what do they aspire? From where do they derive meaning? Again, Niebuhr and Levinas converge and diverge on these questions in ways that are productively considered by contemporary political theology. For both, meaning is found in the bonds of dynamic relationship, but they conceive of these bonds differently. For Niebuhr, meaning is found in participation in an ongoing story of relationship with God and neighbor. For Levinas, meaning is found in the pre-philosophical encounter with the face of the other through which all other experience is then understood—ethics is *prima philosophia*. Indeed, the attempt to understand the world as meaningful (and not simply as used) is one of the ways early on that distinguishes Levinas’s phenomenology from Heidegger’s (see Levinas 1969, pp. 110ff). For Niebuhr “meaning” is central to human life (see Gilkey 2001, pp. 53–54). Meaningful lives are lived in the context of an ordered cosmos. “It is difficult if not impossible”, Niebuhr avers, “to live without presupposing some system of order and coherence which gives significance to one’s life and actions” (Niebuhr 1949, p. 54). Further, meaningfulness, for Niebuhr, is inherently teleological. To have meaning in one’s life was to have an orienting purpose. The frustration of purpose is the frustration of meaning.

So, what is the “purpose” of humanity, both as individuals and as social beings, and how do humans come to know this meaning? The answer to both of these questions is the same: *relationship*. Humanity is never outside of relationship with God, but rather is grounded in God. The transcendence, the freedom of the person, is made possible by this relationship. It is in this transcendence that the human first gains a glimmer of the meaning of her or his life in “general revelation” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 127). The law of love”, Niebuhr states, “is the final law for man in his condition of finiteness and freedom because man in his freedom is unable to make himself in his finiteness his own end. The self is too great to be contained within itself in its smallness” (Niebuhr 1949, p. 174). The self is, therefore, sent beyond itself by its own nature. This is, Niebuhr writes, the “universal human experience” of “being placed under obligation and judged” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 129).

It is noteworthy that the content that has already been established in general revelation: the standard for human life is fundamentally relational. Because humans are persons, they cannot be

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6 There is, of course, a significant existing literature on Levinas and religion. For just a few considerations that show some of the diversity of approaches, see (Kosky 2001; Putnam 2008, chp. 4; Morgan 2019b); and the essays in (Morgan 2019a, Part III). For considerations of Levinas and (Christian) theology, more specifically, see (Purcell 2006; Zimmerman 2013).

7 As Niebuhr explains: “Private revelation is, in a sense, synonymous with ‘general’ revelation, without the presuppositions of which there could be no ‘special’ revelation. It is no less universal for being private. Private revelation is the testimony in the consciousness of every person that his life touches a reality beyond himself, a reality deeper and higher than the system of nature in which he stands” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 127).
primarily oriented toward some state of rest, but instead are called to lives of devotion. The question, according to Niebuhr, is how such devotion ought to be oriented. General revelation is, however, primarily negative. It is a displacement of orientation toward the finite in itself, and thus displacement of the self. But, general revelation is a question waiting to be answered. To what shall the person turn?

It is here that one needs special revelation in order to encounter God as “the Other’ at final limit of our own consciousness” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 130). Again, God’s personality is central here. One needs special revelation because the transcendence of God’s personality cannot be adequately understood via observation of the finite social sphere in and through which God acts. God’s self-revelation is, at the same time, a revelation of the nature of humanity because human persons are similar to God in their personality. “Christian faith affirms”, Niebuhr writes, “that the same Christ who discloses the sovereignty of God over history is also the perfect norm of human nature” (Niebuhr 1943, p. 68; see also Niebuhr 1967, p. 282). Like each human, God is fulfilled in loving relationship. This is exemplified in Christ’s self-sacrificial act of love on the cross, wherein God takes upon God’s self the suffering of the world in order to make possible its fulfillment.

The human person, then, finds meaning in loving activities as definitive of individual and social engagement (Niebuhr 1941, pp. 265–300; 1943, pp. 68–97) The telos and meaning of human life are found fundamentally in activity—the activity of giving of oneself to fulfill all of one’s neighbors. Love is utterly oriented toward the other (see Carnahan 2010, pp. 43–70). It consists in “self-sacrifice”, a complete heedlessness for the interests of the self. Agapic love is contrasted with “mutual” love which presupposes reciprocal feelings or actions from the other. Agapic love is “disinterested” in the sense that it refuses to participate in the rivalries of history; it has no part in the comparison of persons or the rationing of goods necessary to distribute scarce goods. Love is an all or nothing proposition, its realization presupposes the possibility of fulfilling all neighbors. It is this infinite obligation that the human glimpses in moments of transcendence, and it is the judgment of failure to live up to this obligation that humans stand under perpetually in this life.

Importantly, Levinas’s account of meaning in life also depends upon relational disclosure. As in Niebuhr’s account of general revelation, Levinas’s account of meaning appeals to an account of universal human experience. For Levinas, the meaning of human life is revealed especially in relation to the death of the other (as distinguished from Heidegger’s concern with one’s own death). Further paralleling Niebuhr, Levinas can speak of the meaning of human life in terms of love of and infinite obligation to one’s neighbor: “Love is possible only through the idea of the Infinite—through the Infinite put in me” (Levinas 1996, p. 139). At the same time, Levinas’s account of the source and content of meaning in human life differs markedly from Niebuhr’s. Even though they agree about the fundamental social end of individual existence, their reasons for the priority of such sociality are quite divergent.

For Levinas, one cannot “learn” about the meaning of human life in the standard way in which one “learns” about objects in the world. As unmediated by ontological categories, meaning precedes knowing and overflows the categories of worldly knowing. In particular, Levinas insists upon “the primordial intellectual role of alterity” (Levinas 2001, p. 105) as the foundation upon which everything else rests. As he explains:

My philosophy rests upon a pre-philosophical experience, upon a ground that does not pertain solely to philosophy. . . . Every experience opens the world of meaningful things, of other men, to one’s relation with the other. The other is always there, no matter what one’s perception of him might be. What is meaningful depends upon the lights of the experience of the other, and thinking always contains more than it can effectively obtain . . . From the outset, we think more than we can think. For me this is exemplary. The things that we have within our horizon always overflow their content. (Levinas 2001, p. 159)

It is in this “pre-philosophical” space that the self encounters the other, and the other discloses itself to the self. What is disclosed in this space is not a proposition about the other, but rather an obligation
to the other that springs from the face of the other. “The face”, Levinas states, “is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consist in saying: ‘thou shalt not kill’” (Levinas 1985, p. 87). This meaning arises from the very fragility of the other. It is because the world is a shared world (the other is always “there”) that the world is meaningful—i.e., it is the context in which one lives out the immediately meaningful ethical relationship. The encounter with the other is what conditions meaning prior to our comprehension of it. Ethics opens semantics.

Both Niebuhr and Levinas are able to speak of the disinterestedness of true love. Both see the ideal of morality as entailing a radical orientation away from the self; as entailing a heedlessness of the interests and even the needs of the self. Without dismissing the importance of debates in distributive justice, both see love as excluding the prudential calculations necessary for distributing scarce resources. As we shall see, however, this sets the two up for another significant overlap in claiming that the realization of these ideals is impossible, but should still call for our constant striving. Justice, we might say, in an almost eschatological vein, is always only just when it remains yet-to-come.8

Despite these possible points of contact, the differences between the ideals articulated by Niebuhr and Levinas are also striking. For Niebuhr, the ideal of love is fundamentally teleological. It depends upon consequential success. Humans cannot find meaningful life without the fulfillment of all of their neighbors. Thus, the meaningfulness of purportedly loving activity itself is threatened by the potential (and in this world actual) cutting short of human life. Hence, Niebuhr’s need of the eschatological promise of God’s kingdom. Levinas has no such need—indeed, he will even suggest that the only way to be worthy of a Messiah is to live as if the Messiah were never going to come (see Kavka 2019). Accordingly, in the attempt to resist any temptation toward a “good-conscience” that one has done enough for the other, Levinas explicitly denies that the kind of ethical meaning he seeks depends upon any success conditions:

I have been struck by Vassily Grossman’s book Life and Fate, which describes all the horrors of the inhuman, of Stalinism and Hitlerism. In this extraordinary book the essential teaching is articulated by a strange, socially marginal person who has lived through it all. Halfway between simplemindedness and holiness, between madness and wisdom, he doesn’t believe in God anymore, nor in the Good which would organize an ideology. And if he does not see any system capable of vanquishing evil, he does claim that evil cannot vanquish the senseless, incidental goodness in the human, the compassion proceeding from one private man to another, but outside all redemptive institutions, political or religious. And in the highest and purest manifestation of this goodness, stronger than the Good, he still distrusts the moment it becomes preaching and when, in this ideological beginning, already it ceaselessly risks betraying itself. (Levinas 2001, p. 120)

Here, Levinas provocatively locates “preaching” as an error. Preaching, Levinas tells us, tends to conclude with a “happy ending”, “I am providing”, Levinas writes, “a theology without a theodicy … a religion without preaching” (Levinas 2001, p. 146). In order to highlight the Jewish/Christian distinction, we might go on to say that Levinas is offering a scripture without the “gospel.” Or as Merold Westphal has said, Levinas has a doctrine of sin, but not a doctrine of salvation (Westphal 2008, p. 41). The revelation of the face of the other, the meaning available in the relationship to the other, consists in obligation and not in fulfillment—the good conscience is impossible. The ethical demand will always outstrip the political structure designed to fulfill it.

This difference between Niebuhr and Levinas at this point is tied to their accounts of the origin of the ideals with which they are working. Both emerge from encounter with the other, but the other

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8 This has led some critics to suggest that Levinas’s thought is too utopian to be of much practical use. For a good consideration of such objections, see (Critchley 2004.) Alternatively, though, Davenport (2008) suggests that Levinas (or, better, Levinasian readings of Kierkegaard) tend to miss the importance of the “eschatological dimension” of religious life itself. For other considerations of the political possibilities that emerge when Levinas and Kierkgaard are viewed as resources, see (Minister 2008).
is conceived for each of them quite differently. For Niebuhr the other is primarily represented in God manifest historically in Jesus Christ. Here, the encounter with the other is both revelatory and exemplary. In suffering and dying, Christ is dying for something. In Christ’s self-sacrifice, others are being given an opportunity.

Levinas has quite a different kind of other in mind. The paradigmatic face of the other can be found in the face of the victim of the Holocaust, but this extreme paradigm extends to mundane encounters as well:

For me, for example—and this will not astonish you—the Holocaust is an event whose meaning remains inexhaustible. But in every death to which one attends, and in each approach of someone who is mortal, the resonances of this extraordinary unknown are heard. We apprehend this unknown irresistibly in the other man’s encounter with death. An event the significance of which is infinite, and the emotion of which is thoroughly ethical. (Levinas 2001, p. 126)

It is the face of this victim, dying not for some cause, but rather at the hands of a tyrannical force that piques a moral response: “In starting from the Holocaust, I think about the death of the other man; I think of the other man for whom one may already feel—I don’t know why—like a guilty survivor” (Levinas 2001, p. 127). One’s obligation to this face, to this person, does not depend upon a happy ending. It cannot. There is no happy ending, yet the obligation endures. As Levinas so vividly explains:

After Auschwitz, one can no longer preach in this way, because the traditional European, and also Christian, sermon expects a happy ending . . . after Auschwitz, even though it doesn’t “pay” to be good, one cannot deduce from that one should not be good. Hence, to stop preaching for the good would not suffice. Stop preaching, but accept the obligation to say the good, to do the good. This is to call on what is human, the human as precisely the place where humanity has become a difficult matter. Such calling on the human is no longer a sermon because the sermon always has a happy ending. (Levinas 2001, p. 134)

As Bernstein (2002) suggests, Levinas’s philosophy amounts to a theory of the “end of theodicies.” What would a political theology without theodicy involve? It will require that justice be reconceived as less a goal to be achieved, and more a task to be perpetually lived.

3. Love, Justice, and Liberalism

It is usually assumed that the goal of morality is the exhaustion of morality itself; obligations are carried out, goals are achieved, desires are satiated. Moral relationships, it seems, are always supposed to end once the obligation has been fulfilled. Hence, as Wolf (1982) will propose, moral saints are not only unnecessary, but problematic. On this reading, all of us, if living properly, can be moral. On such a model, making it seem like morality is only something available for a few, and maybe not even for them, leads either to immoralism or nihilism. Niebuhr and Levinas reject these assumptions about the ubiquity of moral ability. Love, to quote St. Paul, does not end. Love is never exhausted, one’s obligation to the other is never finished. But Niebuhr and Levinas go farther than this: love is also, at least as fully embodied in historical acts of justice, impossible. As we shall see, this rejection has different upshots for the political theologies of Niebuhr and Levinas, but it also leads them to overlapping views of the dynamic, paradoxical ongoing demands of moral relationships within social history.

For Niebuhr, within history love is an “impossible possibility”. The impossibility of love does not, however, simply follow from the nature of history. As is typical in the Christian tradition, Niebuhr rejects the idea that there are necessary structural flaws in the world. “This world is not God”, Niebuhr insists, “but it is not evil because it is not God. Being God’s creation, it is good” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 12). It is not finitude in itself that renders love impossible. Rather, the origin of the impossibility of love springs from the very freedom that marks human personality (Gilkey 2001, pp. 102–41). Explaining this connection, Niebuhr suggests that “the essence of man is his freedom. Sin is committed in that freedom. Therefore, sin cannot be attributed to a defect in his essence. It can only be understood as
a self-contradiction, made possible by the fact of his freedom but not following necessarily from it” (Niebuhr 1941, p. 17).

As we have seen, the self, for Niebuhr, is fulfilled in self-giving, devoted service to all of its neighbors. The self then, is always constituted by social activity, and correlatively by the anxiety that moves the self to help the other (Niebuhr 1941, pp. 178–207). This anxiety is beneficial so long as it is held within a context of faithfulness and other-orientation. The self must have faith in God that God will provide what is necessary to her or his service. Problems arise when the self questions the power of God and turns to focus directly upon its own fulfillment as found within some finite (socio-political) structure. Such vicious turning is possible because of the freedom of the self. Held in the tension between nature and transcendence, the human is able to “see” more than the human is able to control. Looking out upon the potential roadblocks and threats to the project of love, the human being grasps at power to secure itself. The anxiety of the self of now becomes the driving force of a sinful grasping for power. Sin is, then, a form of idolatry. It is a turning away from God toward the finite in the self (pride) or toward some other finite person or institution (sensuality) (see Lovin 1995, pp. 142–51).

Though humans do not fall into sin necessarily (this would imply that sin is a problem inherent in the creation) they do fall into sin inevitably. This leads to the corruption of the creation itself. Sin-stained history is a zero-sum-game, and here perfect love cannot endure:

The final majesty, the ultimate freedom, and the perfect disinterestedness of the divine love can have a counterpart in history only in a life which ends tragically, because it refuses to participate in the claims and counterclaims of historical existence. It portrays a love “which seeketh not its own”. But a love which seeketh not its own is not able to maintain itself in historical society. Not only may it fall victim to excessive forms of the self-assertion of others; but even the most perfectly balanced system of justice in history is a balance of competing wills and interests, and must therefore worst anyone who does not participate in the balance. (Niebuhr 1943, p. 72)

So what role can love continue to play, if it is not a “simple possibility”? Here Niebuhr speaks in terms of the “relevance” of love, of love’s “approximation” within history, and of the paradoxical relation between love and justice.

For Niebuhr, love plays both a negative and a positive role in promoting justice. Positively, love vivifies the search for justice, negatively, love represents the goal perpetually beyond our own reach, thus prompting humility in moral and political life. The problem of sin is sparked when the self reaches out in its anxiety to take control of that which is beyond its control. The impossibility of love, the frustration of human meaning within history functions to remind humans of their finitude and their sinfulness. Correlatively, it prompts them to remain humble in their search for goodness. No human project is ultimate. No human politics is perfect. No justice is ever just enough (see Lovin 1995, pp. 191–234).

As such, liberalism will never be liberal enough because justice for all would need somehow to be justice for each—or as Levinas will say, the notion of human rights is first and foremost a question of how to understand “the rights of the other” as foundational to any rights I would claim for myself (Levinas 1999, p. 149). Accordingly, every time we are tempted to utopianism in pushing for our position or triumphalism in reflecting upon it, the impossibility of love reminds us that our fulfillment is beyond our own power. It is only in realizing our limitations that we can avoid overstepping and, in our delusion, bringing about greater calamity. This does not mean that we stop working for justice and engaging in political theology, but simply that we avoid thinking that political theology could be perfected such that the need to continue working for justice could stop.

9 Quite a bit of scholarly energy has been spent trying to think through what options remain for the notion of “human rights” after Levinas. For just a few examples, see (Burggraeve 2002; Stauffer 2010; Morgan 2016, pp. 16–17; Bell 2018; Davidson 2012).
Structurally, the ideal of love is tied in Niebuhr’s thinking to a vision of the community of brotherly love, a community that is composed of people who in their freedom do not fall into sin, but rather accept the ordering of the will of God in loving relation to one another. This society is a society in which love could be realized in ongoing relationships of self-sacrificial service (Burroughs 2019, pp. 3–32). This vision of society stands in paradoxical relation to every particular instantiation of justice in historical human community. To whatever extent that the human community reflects the ordering of this community, it approximates loving community. To whatever extent it falls short of reflecting this community, love stands in judgment over the community. But love will always stand in judgment over every historical community, as even the efforts to order the society themselves participate in the failure to realize love. Reliance on violent force, for instance, is necessary for every approximation of love, but violent force is at the same time a contradiction of the demand of love. The standard of love vivifies the search for justice even as it also stands over against every claim that justice has been (finally) achieved.

But how can love continue to function within history in this way, if, according to Niebuhr, the meaningfulness of loving relations depends upon teleological fulfillment? It is here that Niebuhr’s theology is necessary to his ethics, and both are required for his social theory. While the realization of love is impossible for mere humans, it is not impossible for God. In Christ, God participates in the brokenness of history, takes up that brokenness and perfects it. This reveals what God can do with the imperfections of human striving (Crouter 2010, pp. 35–40). What is impossible for the human is possible for God, and so God allows for a return of humanity to its proper place of faithfulness in what God can do. This is not meant to quash human striving; the imperfect historical strivings of humanity are exactly what God takes up and perfects. Indeed, it is only, Niebuhr believes in the light of the possibility of God’s eschatological act of perfecting that the partial attainments of justice in history take on meaning. It is because of God’s activity that human striving can be linked to its own telos in the eschaton, and thus rendered meaningful. Without this possibility, Niebuhr contends, the search for relative justice will collapse into cynicism in the face of impossibility.

Like Niebuhr, Levinas’s account of the impossibility of the moral ideal as enacted in political life is multifaceted. In one respect, the evil in the world is a product of the false consciousness of ontological thought. For Levinas, the will-to-power is associated primarily with the belief that the self and the other are distinct beings. “Being”, Levinas writes, “always has to be, being is conatus essendi. In life being is immediately war” (Levinas 2001, p. 145). Caught focusing on being, the self is thus ontologically conceived as a monad over against the other, the Other is categorized by its genus and lines of battle are established. As Levinas writes, Cain’s question “Am I my brother’s keeper” depends upon this view of the world. “Cain’s answer”, he continues, “is sincere. Ethics is the only thing lacking in his answer; it consists solely of ontology: I am I, and he is he. We are separate ontological beings” (Levinas 2001, p. 172).

As we have seen, Levinas suggests that this mode of false consciousness can be overcome only in the encounter of the face of the other, in all of its uniqueness and all of its fragility. Importantly, therefore, Levinas is absolutely not affirming a Hobbesian ontological vision (as some readers have suggested; see Wood 2005, chp. 3). Rather, Levinas’s goal is to provide an alternative to such a vision: “By starting with the relation to the death of the other”, Levinas states, “I am trying to imagine an anthropology different from that which starts from the conatus essendi” (Levinas 2001, p. 129). It is the encounter with the face of the other that overthrows the false self of egoistic (and we might say, classically liberal) ontology: “This deposition of sovereignty by the ego is the social relationship with the Other, the dis-inter-ested relation” (Levinas 1985, p. 52). Levinas’s approach is, thus, a fundamental revision to liberal ontology. Rather than being defined by powers inherent in one’s status as free, equal, independent, mutually disinterested—regardless of whether these are understood as metaphysical properties or merely attached to a “political conception” of a citizen—we are defined by the primacy of sociality such that selfhood then emerges (regardless of the political structure in which we find ourselves).
Precisely due to this ethical revision of the basis of political life, the self is never allowed to stay in a purely ethical relationship. The moral relation to the other (ethics) is always compromised by the multiplicity of others (politics):

But we are never, me and the other, alone in the world. There is always a third; the men who surround me. And this third is also my neighbor. Who is the nearest to me? Inevitable questions of justice which arise from the depth of responsibility to the unique, in which ethics begins in the face of that which is incomparable. Here is the necessity of comparing what is incomparable—of knowing men. (Levinas 2001, pp. 115–16)

The existence of multiple others necessitates participation in the exact game of comparison and distribution of goods that led to the misconception of the fundamentality of the Spinozistic conatus essendi, on the one hand, and the Rawlsian modus vivendi on the other hand. Politics matters because we are irreducible to political categories. Justice is our moral task because of our relational selfhood:

Justice, which comprises comparison between men and judgment upon men, and consequently the return of the unique to the individual, the return of the unique to the community of genus and therefore the genesis of the political, of the State and its institutions, all of this at the same time presupposes the for-the-other of responsibility which was our starting point. (Levinas 2001, p. 108)

Were ontology to be primary (and Hobbesian war essential to subjectivity), then justice would only arise as the limitation of the violation of the other for the purposes of the self (as expressed in negative rights). But from the perspective of the relational, obligated self, justice arises as the limit of the extent to which it is possible to be in service to the other. Again, contra liberal ontology, it is ethics that motivates political life, not political life that gives rise to the possibility of moral commitment. Accordingly, Levinas is not at all opposed to the importance of political rules, legal structures, and civil authorities. Indeed, despite his opposition to liberal selfhood, along with Niebuhr, Levinas defends a strikingly liberal conception of democratic polity:

There is a certain measure of violence necessary starting from justice, but if one speaks of justice, it is necessary to admit judges: it is necessary to admit institutions and the State, to live in a world of citizens and not only in the order of the face-to-face. But on the other hand, it is starting from the relation to the face, from me before the face of the other, that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the State. A State in which the interpersonal relation is impossible, in which it is directed in advance by the determinism proper to the State, is a totalitarian State. So there is a limit to the state. Whereas, in Hobbes’s vision—in which the State emerges not from the limitation of charity but from the limitation of violence—one cannot set a limit on the State. (Levinas 2001, p. 167)

Justice cannot be trusted unto itself because it can quickly forget the infinite obligation to the other than originally gave rise to the necessity of such institutions, decisions, and calculations. Without the interruption of justice that comes from the repeated infusions of morality, justice could, again, easily collapse back into the (metaphysical) conatus essendi or (political) modus vivendi. “Justice comes from love”, Levinas states. But, he quickly clarifies, “that definitely doesn’t mean to say that the rigor of justice can’t be turned against love understood from the starting point of responsibility. Politics, left to itself, has its own determinism. Love must always watch over justice” (Levinas 2001, p. 169). As Levinas puts it, there must be “charity after justice” if justice itself is not to quickly become unjust. Yet, this requires constant hermeneutic diligence. No determinate political structure will ensure justice. Justice is only something that continues to stand as the aspirational task of political structures (when ethically conceived). Yet, such structures will only “be” just to the extent that they remain aware of their injustice (see Perpich 1998). Success is not just something that is difficult, it is impossible. But it may turn out that it was a mistake to have thought that it was a goal worth seeking in the first place.
Ultimately, liberalism is not enough due to the fact that it is always tempted by its own excellence. Accordingly, it is democratic institutions themselves that help to protect against liberal complacency (see Simmons 2019).

Regarding the impossibility of justice and yet necessity of political attempts to enact it, one is struck by the significant overlap between these two thinkers. Both locate evil in the fixation of the self with the self, either in terms of idolatry or ontology. Both see that the ideals of moral relationships are frustrated by the world as it currently exists. Both place love and justice in dialectical, paradoxical relationship, where love is the ground and the measure of justice which always stands as a challenge to all concrete claims to have been perfectly just.

The distinctions between the thinkers, though, remain striking. Despite both agreeing about the impossibility of justice being morally perfectible, Levinas is clearer than Niebuhr about the structural nature of this impossibility. It is the nature of social existence, the existence of the multiplicity of others, which renders the ideal impossible. Though one can find statements on the structural limitations of love in Niebuhr’s work, they are rare, and certainly not foregrounded. This occasionally leads to a reading of Niebuhr where the subjective manifestation of sin is the only limit on love, and prompts critics to an overly simple critique of Niebuhr as not providing enough room for grace (see Hauerwas 2001).

There are reasons, however, why Niebuhr does not foreground these structural obstacles. While it is sometimes suggested that Levinas has produced an account of original sin without an account of salvation, the Niebuhrian will protest that Levinas has only produced an account of the wages of sin, without an account of sin itself. As noted, Niebuhr could not locate the origins of sin and evil in the structure of the creation. Instead, his Augustinian theological commitments are overriding such that it cannot simply be the multiplicity of others that makes working for justice necessary. For Niebuhr, the origins of love’s frustration must be found in the will. The structural limitations of love, found in the conflict between the multiplicity of others, must be located as a product of sin, not finitude per se.

The moral function of the two thinkers is also subtly different. For Levinas, the obligation to the other is a perpetual spur to expand the robustness of justice to the full limits possible under conditions of multiplicity. Although Niebuhr also allows the ideal of love to function in this way, he emphasizes that the full reach of love is beyond human power. There is, thus, a theological tempering of the search for justice that arises from Niebuhr’s articulation that is not similarly present in Levinas’s.

Finally, the ways they respectively approach eschatology lead to divergences in their approach to political theology. For Niebuhr, the power of God is necessary in completing the partial and imperfect efforts that humanity expends in realizing relative justice. This, Niebuhr contends, protects against a loss of morale when one runs up against the impossibility of the fullness of loving relationship. Levinas’s account provides no such direct mechanism. One’s striving remains meaningful, even while no mere human can realize its full meaning. The obligation to the other, hence, stands in defiance of the threat to meaning posed by impossibility.

This makes Levinas’s approach relatively more amenable to deontic moral and political standards than Niebuhr’s. Indeed, Levinas will occasionally claim that Kant’s moral philosophy is one to which he feels quite close. Alternatively, Niebuhr was sometimes insufficiently careful about the dangers of sliding into an unabashed consequentialism, and the teleological structure of his ideal occasionally obscured this mistake. Levinas’s emphasis upon the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of the other allows for talk about the inviolability of the other that is harder to produce in Niebuhr’s scheme.

At the same time, Levinas’s approach does not as easily provide the same resources for the improvement of social morale as Niebuhr’s does. Since the impossibility of love is built into the structure of social life, and since there is no reason to think that the obligation to love will ever be realizable,

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10 Famously, Levinas invites us critically to ask whether liberalism is “all we need” (see Horowitz and Horowitz 2006b; and Herzog 2002).
the follower of Levinas is perhaps exposed to some dangers that Niebuhr’s system is structured to avoid—though there may be resources that enable Levinas to overcome such worries (see Simmons 2010).

4. Conclusions: On the Continued Relevance of Impossible Ideals

Before ending, let us return to Critchley’s original suggestion that the contemporary “re-theologization of politics” and the “moral and motivational deficits” of contemporary liberalism require a robust reconsideration of ethical and political life. In light of this framing, and having enacted a dialogue between Levinas and Niebuhr, we should now ask: Does this joint consideration of Niebuhrian and Levinasian political theology and notions of impossible ideals actually get us a renewed hope in the face of increasing political cynicism? We expect that this will be a matter of debate, and we hope that it is a vigorous one. As something of a conversation starter, then, we want to suggest three practical results for moral and political life that follow from reading Levinas and Niebuhr together.

First, reading Niebuhr and Levinas together helps to avoid the sense that impossibility is simply an obvious notion to be overcome in some sort of pragmatic compromise. That is, impossible possibilities are not merely impossible, but importantly remain possibilities nonetheless. Further, the structures of impossible ideals are constructed to make sense out of morality after the collapse of the modern self, as well as the problems facing liberal political theories dependent on such a notion of selfhood. Impossible ideals maintain moral pressure in the midst of situations where events and persons are evolving in relation to one another. Reading Niebuhr and Levinas together can serve as a corrective to the notion that it is impossibility, as such, that is problematic for moral and political life. Indeed, it might be that impossible demands are relevant to the continued possibility of ethical existence because they are constant no matter what political situation we face. If this is the case, then there is no need to give in to cynicism because, even though historically particular, our current situation is not logically distinctive in ways that overcome the basic responsibilities that define our social selfhood in the first place. In other words, no matter how bad things get, the task remains the same. Rather than merely seeking to be successful in this or that political strategy, and thus being defeated if failure threatens, we are constituted by the call to faithfulness (to God and the other) regardless of how things play out. Jointly Niebuhr and Levinas help us to remember that it is important to run the race well, whether or not winning ends up being “possible.” Rather than a nihilistic resignation, this should instill a constant commitment to continuing onward and upward.

Yet, secondly, Levinas and Niebuhr also jointly demonstrate the two temptations that must be avoided in our attempt to live responsibly in the face of such legitimate reasons to be cynical. The idea here is that the very contributions that Niebuhr and Levinas offer can end up being misunderstood as reinforcing the very thing that they were meant to overcome.

On the one hand, Levinas’s conception of infinite responsibility can seemingly give rise to the quietism and nihilism that we have suggested it offers tools to resist. In particular, if there is nothing that I can do to meet my moral obligations (i.e., if I cannot ultimately be politically successful), then why even try in the first place? If this is the case, then failure seems inevitable in light of impossibility. Rather than stimulating continued striving and aspirational orientation, impossibility might just mean that moving forward productively is no longer possible and so we are stuck where we are.

On the other hand, Niebuhr’s conception of pragmatic correctives to all moral excess can seem to invite a type of moral complacency rather than motivation to overcome the cynicism of the status quo. Specifically, if I ultimately need to adjust my moral life in order to achieve practical results, then why set the bar so high that it makes such results difficult? If the way things are is unavoidable, then why not just embrace it as the best that we can do?

In the face of both of these temptations, we admit that it might seem like Richard Rorty was right to contend that any infitizing or absolutizing or embracing the impossibility of political life just leads to exhaustion and does very little to help the others about whom we originally cared. Yet, that reading would be a weak appropriation of Niebuhr and Levinas indeed. Just because things are difficult
does not mean that they are not worth seeking. In the face of the moral and motivational deficit of contemporary liberalism, we think that a heightened aspirational vision is needed more than ever. Accordingly, we think it is important to appreciate that with the embrace of impossibility comes the constant threat of it being more than we are able to live up to. Niebuhr and Levinas offer the hope that aspirational visions are still relevant in a time when appeals to “the real world” are too often offered as reinforcements of the currently existing power structures. Rather than simply acquiescing to “the real world”, these thinkers offer us a shared invitation to rethink what world should be made real.

That said, and thirdly, when read together, each thinker can help to overcome potential shortcomings that the other faces. This is where we think that the engagement between the two thinkers is able to offer resources unavailable by Critchley’s different appropriation of Levinas more singularly. In particular, Levinas can help to overcome the theologically motivated political triumphalism that still might linger in a Niebuhrian account (even if eschatologically situated), while alternatively Niebuhr’s practical sensibilities can help to resist the potentially “angelic” or saintly conceptions of Levinasian selfhood about which Critchley himself rightly worries (see Critchley 2004). The key take-away here is that we should be wary of thinking that any one thinker is able to do everything for us. This is an important political realization as well. No political leader or democratic institution, as important as both are!, can ultimately serve as the final “savior”, as it were, for human moral and social life. Again, as Levinas (following Dostoevsky) reminds us: we are all responsible, but I more than all the others. The task we face might indeed be more than we can handle, but only when we realize that it requires all of us to find ways to link arms together can any of us do what each of us must.

We will conclude, then, by raising one concern that may face all postmodern frameworks for religious ethics and political theology, and one to which we think that Niebuhr and Levinas are especially susceptible. Is a religious ethics that focuses on dynamism and relationality sufficient to prompt the formation of social institutions and movements for justice, or is their function primarily prophetic in calling unjust institutions into question in light of some “theological” ideal? This question is not one that we believe is meant to be answered once and for all, but rather should continue as a critical check on anyone who would too quickly turn to theological resources to address social problems. In this way, we want to end by realizing that there are good reasons for why Critchley might continue to prefer his more secular strategy. Nonetheless, with Niebuhr and Levinas, we see a place for such gestures in political theology so long as we constantly keep an eye turned toward the practical relevance of impossible ideals. Far from crushing us under the weight of how much needs done, impossibility should humble us such that we do what we can with what we have where we are. Rather than leading to triumphalism, we should remember that none of us are God and so even though we should continue to hope, we should never give in to arrogance. Ultimately, though serious challenges remain, Levinas and Niebuhr both offer reasons for redoubling our commitment to justice in liberal democracies precisely because they have shown us that, on its own and according to its egoistic ontology, liberalism is never going to be enough.

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