ETHICS AND POLITICS: RESTORING A MORAL VOCABULARY
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I want to thank Carolyn Brown for her generous introduction, and for all that she and her colleagues do to make being a resident in the Kluge Center one of the great experiences of the scholarly life. I'm happy to be back here at the Library of Congress, where I had the privilege of occupying the Maguire Chair of Ethics and American History. And of course, I want to thank Cary Maguire for all he has done to make that possible for me and for the other Maguire Chair scholars.

It's been almost a year now, since my term in the Maguire Chair began, and it's been an eventful year here on Capitol Hill. This lecture, in fact, was originally scheduled for October 10, but Washington was at that time preoccupied with other matters. In the meantime, I've got a lot of mileage out of the story that I was scheduled to deliver a lecture on the shrinking moral vocabulary of American politics, but it was cancelled because of the government shutdown. That makes a good story, because the irony is hard to miss.

But ironies like that do not usually stand alone. This one is set in the overall dysfunction of contemporary politics, and in the larger irony that after a century in which we made the world safe for democracy, democracy now seems to have become its own worst enemy. The Cold War has ended, the economic power of Western mixed economies has been demonstrated, and it hardly seems an overstatement when Francis Fukuyama declares constitutional democracy the only global contender for political legitimacy. The only thing that doesn't quite make sense is that triumphant democracy should undermine its own legitimacy by showing itself unable to give direction to the new world that is now within its grasp.

But the irony of history is not a new thing. Already in the middle of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr, the great American theologian and political realist whose papers are here in the Library of Congress, summed up the American experience in a book he titled *The Irony of American History*. (It will not surprise you to learn that the University of Chicago Press recently found it timely to bring it out in a new edition.)

Writing in the early 1950s, Niebuhr tempered the confidence of the new American superpower by reminding us that history has often delivered the opposite of what we were expecting. Just when we are most confident that our manifest destiny is about to be realized, events put us somewhere that we do not expect to be, confronting questions that

we are not quite prepared to answer. For Niebuhr, such ironies are a permanent condition of human life. They remind us that nothing in politics is self-sustaining or self-correcting.

If we are to understand the irony of our own experience of American history, we need to take a long view of the problem, even longer than the one Niebuhr took of American destiny and American power after the Second World War. Behind the polarization of contemporary politics, we have a politics that cannot bear the weight of our historic aspirations for it.

We say that politics does not work. What we mean is that it gives us what we have come to expect, but not what we hope for. It does not provide us with a way to talk to one another about justice, rights, dignity, security, or freedom. There is a shrinking of the moral vocabulary in politics in the most developed democracies, especially here in the United States.

We still use moral terms, of course, but we use them primarily to talk to those who already agree with us about what they mean. We have lost the settings and the occasions in which we might use a moral vocabulary to explain what it is we want to others, or to seek an explanation from those whose goals seem to be opposed to our own. In place of moral language, a vocabulary of economic efficiency and national security allows us to manage the political process through a series of short-term solutions, without the need to articulate what we want over the long run or to reach even an interim agreement on our goals.

With that summary of the problem in mind, what I want to do this afternoon is to traverse the long view of it with three questions: First, why does politics need a moral vocabulary? Second, why is that moral vocabulary missing today? Third, how might we get it back? Politics is neither self-sustaining nor self-correcting, but with a sufficiently long view of our history, we might correct some of our most recent mistakes and return our politics to a more sustainable path.

I.

To answer that first question, about the need for a moral vocabulary, we must begin at the beginning of the Western political tradition, because that is where we can identify the origins of the aspirations by which we measure the politics we've got. If politics is simply about power, no one should be surprised by current events. It is only because we believe that something more is possible that we experience the present state of affairs as an ironic reversal, rather than business as usual. The belief that politics can and should be about something more is deeply rooted in the history of politics itself.

In fact, it goes all the way back to the beginning, to Athens in the middle of the 4th century BCE, when Aristotle wrote what is arguably the first systematic treatise on politics in the

Western tradition. That text has come down to us with the title *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the term Aristotle uses to introduce the subject is *politikē*. *Politikē*, he says, encompasses everything that is required to live a good human life. There are goods we seek in our personal lives, and we try to make the right decisions about what these good things are and how to obtain them, and we work on acquiring the virtues that enable us to keep them. But Aristotle then proceeds without a break to talk about goods that are social creations that require the cooperation of others, both to have them and to know them. The human being is, as he said, a "political animal." It is through *politics* that we acquire the skills and habits that enable us to recognize what a good life is, and enable us to live it.

So at the beginning of the Western tradition, politics is just ethics carried out on a larger scale. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum formulates Aristotle's point by saying that people seek lives that enable them to enjoy their human capabilities at the highest level. They come together to deliberate about the best means to that end. They create the structures of government that allow them to conduct those deliberations, and they organize institutions, practices, and systems to give practical effect to the decisions they have made. But they cannot do any of this unless they have language to talk about the goods and goals they are seeking. The reason why politics needs a moral vocabulary, Aristotle tells us, is simply that politics is a form of moral discourse. It is how we do ethics in large groups.

Now, one measure of the distance between Aristotle's aspirations and our contemporary politics is that usually, when I tell an audience that Aristotle's idea of politics is ethics carried out on a larger scale, they laugh. The audience here at the Library of Congress tends to be very well read, so you know that I am not making this up. Aristotle really says these things. But when most people hear that that Aristotle thinks politics is continuous with ethics, they conclude that Aristotle must be hopelessly idealistic, or hopelessly naive about how politics really works, or impossibly distant from the conditions of modern life, to say such a thing. If that's what Aristotle thought, we can't take him seriously.

But Aristotle is not an idealist, and he is not as distant from us as we might at first think. The late Robert Bellah, in his thought-provoking study of cultural evolution, explained our connection to Aristotle by locating both of us on the same side of an "axial transformation" that took place near the beginning of recorded history.

Perhaps because of the development of writing, perhaps because of the emergence of urban cultures, perhaps for reasons embedded in our genes, human civilizations moved beyond the repetition of traditional patterns kinship, religion, and social organization, and people began to reflect critically on their ways of living and acting. They developed rules and goals against which they could measure their mythic narratives of how things are done, and they refashioned inherited practices into deliberate choices. This tectonic cultural shift took different forms in different places—the Hebrew prophets were one example, the Chinese

sages were another—but in every case, including the rise of Greek philosophy, the transformation takes place quite recently in relation to the whole span of human history, and quite rapidly—over a few centuries at most. At the end of the axial age, which is where Aristotle stands in relation to the Greek transformation, we are in a world that is recognizably different from the traditional societies that preceded it *and* recognizably like our own. One thing that makes it like our own—especially in the case of Greece—is that it has *ethics* and *politics*.

So, my point in going back to Aristotle is not that we should all become Aristotelians—though the fact that that is even possible points up the nature of the axial transformation. We can decide to be Aristotelians. We cannot in a similar way become Homerians. My point is that when Aristotle makes politics continuous with ethics, he summarizes aspirations that are still with us today. We may laugh when someone suggests that politics is ethics on a larger scale, but it is an ironic laughter, born of a reversal of our hopes and expectations, and like all ironic laughter, the disappointment is partly with our situation, and partly with ourselves.

So Aristotle is not so distant from us that he cannot reveal something about our aspirations for politics. Neither is he an idealist. The usual narrative about the history of politics is that when it begins, everybody is an idealist seeking justice, until at some point someone realizes that politics is just about power, and we all become realists. That someone might be Machiavelli, or Thomas Hobbes, or Lenin, or Lyndon Johnson, depending on how you like to tell the story, but the plot line has ideals first and power later. In fact, however, the narrative that Robert Bellah's work suggests is quite different. The axial transformation worked the other way around.

When the Athenians began to think critically about their way of life, the first thing that people supposed was that if we are not bound to follow ancient ways and ideas, we should be able to do anything we want. The Sophists advertised their skills by saying that they could make a persuasive case for any position you wanted in the assembly or the law courts, and young people adopted the sort of relativism that has been popular ever since among late adolescents: Justice, says the young Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, is just the will of the stronger. The result in Athens was a kind of political gridlock, in which competing interests battled each other for supremacy until one or another of them overpowered the rest, at least temporarily. As I said, politics at the end of the axial age looks pretty familiar.

It was the philosophers who introduced the counter-proposal that people with different interests might *deliberate*, might create a good and stable social order by thinking together about their choices and coming to agreement on shared goals. The philosophers were *moral realists*. There are real human goods, which are frequently in opposition to the things

that people happen to want. Politics, like ethics, is about identifying these goods and securing them, and also about distributing them fairly and making sure they will continue to be available in the future.

All that was widely shared among the first political philosophers. If there was anything distinctive about Aristotle's proposal, it was that he did not think that people could learn what the human good is by showing up at 3:00PM to hear a lecture about it. Aristotle apparently gave plenty of those lectures, but he thought that we learn what the human good is, in its fine details, *by actually making choices*—choices about our personal life, of course, but also choices the life of a whole society. So politics is not only where we choose the good. It is the activity in which we figure out what the good is; and we do that primarily by acquiring the habits—the virtues—that enable us to make consistently good choices. So the aim of politics is to make us good people, because bad people can't make good choices, and without good choices, you don't have politics. All you have is the will of the stronger. At the beginning of the Western tradition, then, a politics of deliberation develops as a realistic proposal to replace a politics of power that proved unrealistic because it was unworkable.

The aspiration for that kind of politics became part of the Western idea of the human good. It survived the end of classical civilizations and was absorbed into the Augustinian and Thomistic strands of Christianity. It was carried into the modern world, and it remains with us, despite our so-called realism about self-interest and power. If it were not so, we would not be as dissatisfied as we are with the politics we've got.

So that is the first of our three steps. When we understand the aspirations that are built into the idea of politics from the beginning, we understand why politics needs a moral vocabulary. Aristotle's politics of deliberation does not require us to agree completely on what the good is, but it does require that as we make political choices, we talk about the good. What politics requires is a moral vocabulary—justice, courage, prudence, and happiness, to use some of Aristotle's terms, justice, dignity, human flourishing, and freedom, to use some that are more familiar to us. Of course, a sustainable political community has to achieve some approximation of the goods it talks about, and its citizens have to become the kind of people who are committed to those goods. But the precondition for politics is to have a useable moral vocabulary.

II.

The next step is to consider why that kind of moral vocabulary seems to be missing from politics today.

We should note at the outset that moral vocabularies do change. Aristotle describes many virtues in his account of ethics and politics that are still familiar to us, but he includes others that now seem strange. His insistence on honor seems excessive to us after centuries of Christian humility, for instance. The modern moral vocabulary puts more emphasis on freedom than Aristotle did, and justice, correspondingly, requires today an equal respect for persons that would baffle the ancient Athenians with their hierarchically ordered social interactions. The moral vocabulary that is available to politics changes constantly, and one of the things that people argue about in politics is which moral vocabulary to use.

Change in the moral vocabulary is not the problem. The problems arise when the available moral vocabulary is no longer adequate to the political choices that have to be made.

Since 2001 and even more since 2008 in the United States and in other developed democracies, public moral arguments have increasingly been confined to a vocabulary of economic efficiency and national security. Appeals to other goods and goals—justice, rights, freedom, community, choice, or the sanctity of life—have become so contested that they cannot resolve the specific, limited political choices that we have to make. They have become party labels, rather than points of discussion.

This shrinkage of the available moral vocabulary is evident in our daily newspapers, but we should not assume that it of recent origin. It is a recurrent problem of modern political life, inherent in the kind of political order that came into being with the modern state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

At the same time that modern politics was taking shape, Europe experienced the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the first colonial empires, so the kind of modern nation states that we take for granted today came into being at a time of intense political and religious conflict. Moral and religious convictions thus become politically problematic, and one of the first tasks of the modern state was to contain Aristotelian politics within the limits of order. Several ideas about how to do this developed over a period bounded roughly by the Reformation and the French Revolution, and they continue to shape political thinking today, even among people who may be quite unaware of their history.

One approach that would become particularly relevant for American politics is the idea that government is a contract between a people and their government, or among the people themselves. Thomas Hobbes proposed an authoritarian version of this contract, which required a single sovereign empowered to resolve all disputes. Subjects consent to this out of a prudent fear of their own capacity for mayhem, and probably, in Hobbes' mind at least, a suspicion that the most divisive questions have no answers anyway. The way to ensure order is to have a single sovereign, and to give that sovereign power to resolve all disputed questions, including moral ones. While Hobbes' solution has the appeal of simplicity, it more or less ends political *deliberation*. If the sovereign decides, there's no reason for the

rest of us to argue about it. Also, Hobbes' solution so clearly rests on coercive power, rather than any kind of moral or theological foundation, that in the end it proved unappealing even to the royal absolutists whose claims it was intended to support.

John Locke's later version of the political contract proved more appealing and more durable. Disputes were not decided by the arbitrary will of the sovereign, but the parties agreed to submit them to the procedures of legislation and litigation. Government had the limited role of maintaining peace, and its limited power was juxtaposed to a civil society in which all sorts of religions could be tolerated, all sorts of enterprises encouraged, and all sorts of ideas expressed, so long as the parties agreed to formulate their political claims in terms of the requirements of this contractual order. Like all contracts between equal parties, this one is of limited scope, and it requires only a limited moral vocabulary of rights and duties to formulate its requirements. Decisions about the fine details of the human good, the sort of thing that Aristotelian politics deliberates about, are beyond its reach; and for an age that was deeply troubled by moral and religious disagreements, that was a good thing. Political discussions are to be conducted within the limits of what political philosophers today call "public reason," a limited moral vocabulary constructed for the purposes of a limited government

The development of this idea of constitutional democracy based on limited and balanced power is a civilizational achievement of global significance, perhaps the most important political development in human history since the axial transformation that gave us the idea of politics in the first place. But just as we noted at the beginning the irony that this form politics threatens to become dysfunctional precisely at the moment of its greatest influence, so we must pay attention to the irony that the most successful form of politics seems designed to limit the moral aspirations that separated politics from mere power in the first place. The irony is that the most successful form of politics seems to be one that leaves us without the moral vocabulary to say what we really want from politics.

The shrinking of our moral vocabulary is not an inevitable result of Lockean democracy. One more development is required to get us from Locke to the politics with which we are familiar today. That is the emergence of market mechanisms as an alternative to political deliberation for adjudicating between conflicting interests. This development follows from Locke's understanding of politics, but the results are a case study in unintended consequences.

Locke treated the important conflicts in society as conflicts of economic interests. Much of his *Second Treatise*, which provides the political theory for constitutional democracy, was about the origins of property rights, and since his arguments for pluralism and toleration tend to remove moral and religious questions from public discussion anyway, the disputes that come to the courts or require the attention of the legislature are likely to be property

disputes. In Locke's world, the question of how things ought to be, for legal or political purposes, usually comes down to a question of who owns what.

But in the 113 years that passed between Locke's *Second Treatise* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, many came to believe that deciding who owns what by law was far less efficient than letting people decide what they want to own by declaring the price they were willing to pay for it. To put the matter in political terms, markets were supposed to provide a self-regulating social mechanism that reduced the number of political questions to a minimum and virtually eliminated the need for arguments about the good. Within broad limits established by law—it was not quite clear in 1776 that people could not buy and sell other people, for example, as it is not yet clear today whether they can sell their tissues, organs, or genes—goods are fungible. Goods of whatever sort can be exchanged for money, which can in turn be used to procure whatever other sort of good you prefer. This applies not only to goods for personal use, but also to the goods produced by social institutions. How a society values MBA degrees or symphony concerts or public libraries can be measured by the combination of tuition payments and tax revenues, of ticket sales and annual fund contributions that are required to maintain the institutional arrangements needed to produce those goods. The language of the market thus provides general terms in which a wide range of choices can be formulated, from national security policy to public education, while other values that are not so easily quantified or exchanged tend to drop out of public discussion.

This was perhaps not the intention of Adam Smith, who linked market mechanisms to a quite specific good that he called "opulence," by which he meant a level of wealth that so far exceeds the minimum requirements of survival as to provide people with real choices about how to use it. Smith, after all, was moral philosopher before he turned his attention to the study of economics, and he probably expected that once opulence had been achieved, the choices it provided would be discussed with the same moral vocabulary that had long been used for such purposes. He might even have expected a new era of moral deliberation in politics, since wealthy nations have many more choices to make than poor ones do. It was not his intention that efficiency and productivity, which characterize the good functioning of markets, should become the terms in which political choices generally would be discussed. But that has been the result, especially when the measures of the market were connected to the property-oriented politics of Lockean theory.

Hobbes thought that public discussion of the good—politics in the Aristotelian sense—was dangerous. On this reading, or misreading, of Locke and Smith, politics appears to be unnecessary. The mechanisms of the market spare us the hard task of comparing goods that are really different and deciding what combination of them is best for our wellbeing as a community. The price of so much education can now be directly compared with the price of so much health care, culture and nature each finds its place within the constraints of a

balanced budget, and even future possibilities can be compared to present ones on the basis of appropriately discounted costs. Especially inasmuch as the market promises ever-increasing wealth, inability to satisfy all preferences simultaneously requires only the postponement of some goods, not a real choice between them. The sequence can easily be decided by comparing the sum total of wealth available under each of the alternatives, future possibilities again appropriately discounted.

The dysfunction of contemporary politics, then, is hardly what the early theorists of economic life would have expected. The economists hoped that decisions about the good could be made a matter of utilitarian calculation, so that politics would become a managerial task, rather than a deliberative one. The results, however, have been that instead of becoming a managerial task, politics itself has become unmanageable. The irony of history asserts itself again.

This loss of a public moral vocabulary does not mean that people stop making choices based their ideas about human goods. It means that they only discuss those choices in private forums, with people who already agree with them. People begin to think of their ideas about the human good as beliefs to be cultivated among like-minded people. Moral and religious truths are beyond the reach of politics, just as Locke said they should be; but the result is polarization, not political consensus. Under these conditions, those who aspire to political leadership are driven to define the extremes, not the center. Leaders must convince their "base" that they uphold values and virtues that belong uniquely to them, and that are under threat from an anonymous, indifferent, or even hostile public that does not share them. Here again, we may want to see this as a recent development that we can blame on some particular party or group, but its roots run deep into the structures of modern constitutional democracy that we all value.

III.

We have seen, then, that constitutional democracy and market economics, the two great achievements of modern thought, have ironically resulted in a shrinking of the moral vocabulary of politics that now threatens politics itself. The most developed constitutional democracies seem unable to make choices about goods that they cannot discuss, and the pluralism and tolerance that were supposed to flow from public reason and limited government are instead giving way to polarization and mutual incomprehension. This gives some urgency to the third and final question that I asked at the beginning of this lecture: Where might we find the resources for returning a moral vocabulary to politics?

The most important resource, I think, is located in institutions that are organized outside the political contract, but nonetheless practice a kind of Aristotelian politics as they structure their own activities and present their purposes to a wider public. I'm thinking here of the thousands of groups, communities, and corporations, large and small, for-profit

and non-profit, voluntary, educational, therapeutic, cultural, and religious in which most of us spend most of our waking lives and our working years, and we make whatever contributions we do make to the common good.

These intermediary institutions tend, however, to disappear from our political thinking, which divides things too neatly into "public" and "private," and we are confused about how these settings relate to what we usually call "politics." Most of the time, we see what goes on there, in our workplaces and our social organizations, as a mini-version of the kind of politics that happens over there on the other side of First Street. We joke about office politics and academic politics and neighborhood politics.

But the irony is that this politics is often closer to the Aristotelian use of the word than the work of professional politicians. For it is in our offices, academic departments, congregations, clubs, and neighborhoods that we argue with each other about the best way to achieve goals that are really important to us. We "deliberate about the means" to put it in Aristotle's terms, and in the process, we educate ourselves to understand and desire the ends.

Every social institution sustains goods and virtues that are integral to its continued existence and good functioning. An academic institution, for example, develops through practices of open inquiry that result in good teaching and scholarship. A religious institution builds mutual commitment and through worship and tests its teachings and practices in relation to its texts and its durable traditions. A museum or a library understands its holdings as a public trust across generations, and that understanding has concrete implications for its operations and policies. Even a for-profit corporation that measures its successes and failures by the market has, if it lasts over time, a set of values that it tries to uphold in its workplace, a set of virtues it expects from its employees, and a quite specific understanding of goods it offers its customers that cannot be measured by price alone. Most of these institutions also subscribe to codes of ethics that present these key ideas in terms that apply not just locally, but across other institutions of the same sort. Organized health care, with its commitment to the Hippocratic Oath, traces its origins farther back in history, but it is only the first of many such institutionalized moral vocabularies.

Here in Washington, and especially here in this Library, it is important to add that many institutions that are governmental in the sense that they are publicly financed nonetheless operate as non-governmental organizations do, with goals and virtues that are specific to their institutional purposes and specific goods that they create and preserve for the wider society. A state university operates under governmental constraints of which its president and trustees will be more or less constantly aware, but in its classrooms it needs to be first of all a university. The Library of Congress has unique functions in service to the legislative

process and the laws of intellectual property, but it performs those functions best if it remembers that it is first of all a library. All up and down the Mall and around this city, there are institutions that maintain their distinctive goals and virtues in this way, and have their own moral vocabularies to talk about the human goods they create and preserve. Indeed, if your job is deemed "non-essential" during a government shutdown, there is a good chance that you work in one of those institutions.

And that is not surprising, even here in the center of our national government, because such institutions provide the places where most people earn their living, get their education, seek medical care and other therapeutic services, engage in leisure, culture, or philanthropy, and express their religious and moral commitments. Perhaps the best measure of the "opulence" that Adam Smith thought a developed economy could achieve is this incredibly rich and diverse institutional structure we have built out of the surplus above what we need for mere survival.

While some of these organizations come into being as instruments of individual purposes, those that endure over time have goals that make claims about the human good. Institutions teach us that artistry, knowledge, health, tradition, and hope are things worth having. They do not merely offer a means to things that people already want, they instruct us in what we must do to obtain goods that are worth having. They teach us how to discriminate between better and worse forms of these goods, and they enlist us in pursuit of the best, even when that pursuit is difficult and not in accord with our initial inclinations. An institution that flourishes over time must form persons in the virtues that are necessary to create and maintain those distinctive goods. The wellbeing of the institution is dependent on these virtues, but people have the virtues because the institution is organized to elicit them.

Organizing and sustaining a flourishing institution is thus a political activity in the original, Aristotelian sense of politics. While the moral vocabulary available for the politics of government may have shrunk, we are in fact surrounded by moral vocabularies, and they are essential to our lives, our livelihood, and our identity. For most of us, what we do to build those institutions is the most important political activity we will ever undertake.

There is a connection between this internal political life of institutions and the politics of government. In addition to the concerts, degree programs, research services, spiritual exercises, and therapeutic interventions that good institutions contribute to society, they also provide a vocabulary of human goods that goes beyond the rights and duties of the political contract and the metrics of the market. A good school, a good hospital, or even a good bank or bakery flourishes because it persuades individuals to order their lives by the virtues that its distinctive goods require. Those virtues may be the care and attention to detail that form the vocation of a nurse or a teacher, or they may be virtues of thrift and

taste expressed in momentary transactions, but these vocations and transactions, taken together, provide a political vocabulary that makes claims on the whole society, too. A society in which imagination and creativity are valued personal characteristics needs institutions of art and literature that elicit those virtues. A modern society requires scientific knowledge and technical skill, and it must build institutions that instill those disciplines and pass them on in new forms from generation to generation. All societies need wisdom to see the possibilities in human life and to bear its limitations; and the politics of government ultimately rests on ideas of justice and restraint that strike a balance between these competing claims and allow each institution the space to serve its own purposes.

We could reduce this vocabulary of knowledge, wisdom, imagination, and justice to market terms by saying that the institutions that supply these different goods are in competition for scarce resources from which to manufacture them, but that does not quite grasp the political problem. The decisions a society must make are about how to balance different goods and what combination of them is required for the wellbeing of the institutions that make good lives possible for its people. The answer to a question about the most efficient allocation of resources does not answer this political question, though if we miss the connection between ethics and politics, we will find that economic efficiency provides the only available political vocabulary.

When that happens, people start to lose confidence in the moral vocabulary of their institutions, and they start to imitate the pseudo-political language of efficiency and security. Education, art, and knowledge become important because they contribute to productivity. Hospitals, libraries, and public services explain themselves in terms of return on investment. The dysfunctional politics of government thus tends to invade the political discourse of other institutions. The challenge is to reverse that movement and reintroduce the Aristotelian politics that sustains a good society to the political discourse of government.

IV.

This challenge may be particularly acute for us here in the United States at this point in our history. But there is no reason to think that it is a new problem, or a temporary one. What we discover by examining the history of ethics and politics is that the ironies of history do not disappear when we see them in a larger time frame. The irony of a dysfunctional democracy at the beginning of the twenty-first century is taken up in the larger irony that the progress of constitutional democracy and market economics over almost four centuries proves in the end to undermine the moral aspirations that gave rise to politics in the first place, twenty-three centuries ago in Athens.

Such ironies are a permanent part of human history because, as Reinhold Niebuhr would remind us, nothing in politics is self-sustaining or self-correcting. We must be continually deliberating about the fine details of the human good, revisiting decisions previously made, and reconsidering what seemed to the last generation to be indisputable conclusions. Otherwise, we will lose the larger good we seek. That is why we need politics in the Aristotelian sense and the rich moral vocabulary that sustains it, and why we must reconnect that politics, which is alive and well in the wider society, to the politics of government.