"Neither Angel Nor Maggot:
Adam Michnik on the Ethics of Resistance and Compromise[1]

A frequent criticism of liberal political theory[2] is that it deals with idealized abstractions, operating at a far remove from the realities of politics and the demands of political activity.[3] A frequent criticism of liberal politics is that, if it is in inspiration naïve, it is in attitude complacent, and in practical effect conservative. However far liberal ideals point away from the status quo, liberalism, as a political tendency based on a theory of limited government, aspiring in theory to tolerance or "neutrality", and most comfortable with a practice of compromise, simply cannot support, or even allow for, a transformational politics. And, even if this is not true of all forms of liberal politics, it is certainly a feature of that defensive, pessimistic tendency in liberal thought, which has been evident and intermittently prominent since liberalism's emergence in the reaction against the excesses of the French Revolution (in the work of Benjamin Constant and his fellow-travelers), and which re-emerged in the mid-twentieth century out of an encounter with radical political ideology.[4]

If these criticisms are to be believed, then liberal political theory has little of use to say about the ethical and strategic difficulties of political action in real, non-ideal situations; and to the extent that it does have something to say about these subjects, what it has to say is generally detrimental; and the insights of the defensive "liberalism of fear" is particularly detrimental to any politics that aims at far-reaching change..

In this paper I want to show that these criticisms lose whatever force they may have if we turn our attention to a very different body of liberal theory than that familiar among Anglophone normative political philosophers – but one which is significantly in line with the tradition of "negative" or

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1   Paper, prepared for presentation at the Canadian Political Science Association's meeting in June 2010. This is an early draft of a part of a larger project (and should, accordingly, not be cited or circulated at this stage without the author's permission). It has however already benefited from the advice of colleagues at the Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics at Harvard; I am grateful to them all, and particularly to Sean Ingham, Nataliya Palatnik, and Frances Kamm.

2   In the following discussion I refer repeatedly to "liberalism" (and to "liberal politics", "liberal [political] theory", etc.) I must therefore begin by explaining what this much used (and abused), elastic and contested term means here. A liberal *politics* is characterised simply by political institutions and practices that are constrained by certain liberal principles – commitment to *individual rights*, and the protection of those rights through the placing of limits on human power by *constitutional* safeguards and respect for the regular and impartial process of the *rule of law*. A person may be described as politically a liberal on the simple condition that she favors such a politics. But liberalism also refers to a family of political theories which, while they vary quite widely in many respects, also go beyond a bare-bones commitment to liberal institutions. A theoretical liberal is one who, first, regards certain features of individual well-being (often identified as "rights" – though liberals may subscribe to vastly different theories about the foundations and nature of rights, ranging from natural rights theory, to utilitarianism, to perfectionism, to contractarianism) as the most important things of value for politics. This means that the furtherance, or protection, of individual rights – and, particularly, of the liberty of individuals to live their lives as they see fit, insofar as doing so is compatible with the ability of others to do so – is for liberals the first priority of (normal) politics, and that any political order or program is to be approved or disapproved of based on whether it respects or furthers, or neglects or violates, these claims of individuals. Related to this tendency of liberal theory, we may also identify a liberal political temperament, which tends to be particularly concerned about, and sensitive to, threats to individual freedom, from wherever these come.

3   This charge often, though not always, rests on equating liberal theory with the work of Rawls and his adherents (and some of his critics working in a more or less "Rawlsian" register). It has been made, with particular force, by Raymond Guess, in a series of papers and books; see Geuss *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, 2005); *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008); . See also Glen Newey, *After Politics:The Rejection of Politics in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy* (Palgrave 2001).

4   See e.g. Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford, 2004), which, among other things, seeks to critique a Shklarian "liberalism of fear", and its precursors; and David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*, (Harvard, 2007) which traces what Ciepley sees as (American) liberalism's turn to an enervating embrace of neutrality to the (over-)reaction to European totalitarianism.

defensive liberalism running from Constant to (e.g.) Isaiah Berlin and Judith Shklar. If liberal theory – that is, the theoretical defense of liberal ideals and institutions – seems deficient to us, it is because we have conceived of liberalism narrowly – and, frankly, provincially. There is much to be learned from the body of political theory produced by intellectuals involved in the opposition to Communism in Eastern Europe from the late 1960s on. But few political theorists have turned to this body of work; and when they have, it has generally been to draw on it to revise and revive the traditions of Marxism/Critical Theory, and what one might call civic-democratic theory. This is appropriate, since the Eastern European opposition intelligentsia grew out of revisionist Marxism and came to focus its hopes and its theories on democracy. Yet their views have deep and striking affinities with traditions of liberalism, and particularly with the anti-totalitarian liberalism of the mid-twentieth century; their political ideals and goals are those of liberalism; and the problems that defined their thinking are problems which liberals in the West had faced often, but seldom simultaneously. First, how to respond, as liberals, to *anti-liberal* political forces[5] – of how to remain true to liberal political principles without condemning themselves to an irresponsible political impotence, and how to combat anti-liberalism without falling prey to its evils; and second, of how to engage in a politics that would be guided by moral ideals and directed to the far-reaching transformation of society, but which would also be stringently self-restraining and allow for pluralism and compromise (we may call these the problems of liberal defense and liberal transformation)

These were problems that the Eastern European dissidents could not help but face – for in their situation, living under comprehensively anti-liberal regimes, to be committed to anything resembling liberalism was to be committed to a revolutionary change. But both are also problems with which liberals living in societies that live up to the demands of liberal principles imperfectly and sporadically – and those living in a world shared with fierce and uncompromising enemies of liberal principles and goals – should be concerned.

In pursuing these themes I will here focus on the Polish dissident intellectual and publicist Adam Michnik, who articulated the problems of dissident political ethics with particular clarity and acuity (and who is better known, and far more widely translated, than any of his fellow dissidents, with the notable exception of Vaclav Havel). Michnik's writings are interventions in immediate political debates, starting in the early-mid 1970s, when the opposition movement was first starting to stir, on through the late 1970s when its characteristic identity and approach were being shaped through argument, the hopeful eruption and brutal suppression of Solidarity in 1980, the years of illegal activity that followed, the negotiated overthrow of Communism in Poland in 1989, and the early years of Polish democracy. These writings display a consistent, if multifaceted, political and ethical vision; they also reflect the exigencies and variety of political conditions, the shifting moods and demands arising from dramatic shifts in fortune. I will first, briefly, outline the general principles and commitments of Michnik's politics. I will then look at Michnik's normative arguments about political strategy and ethics, first by way of his critique of those political tendencies he regarded as particularly dangerous, and then in his prescription of the practices and ethos appropriate to a liberal-democratic – and, more broadly, a morally acceptable – politics.

1. Values, Aims, and Institutional Commitments

Michnik was born to a family of partly Jewish descent (which meant that, in the eyes of some of his countrymen, he was not Polish at all). But the "religion" in which he was brought up was not Judaism, but Marxism. His parents were Communist activists. Indeed, spending time in prison – which Michnik began doing at the ripe age of eighteen – was something of a family tradition, as his father had

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5   By "anti-liberal(ism)" I mean theories and movements that in their theory reject, and in their practice violate, the
     principles by which liberals judge, and the limits by which they constrain, political practice.

been jailed for political activism between the wars – activism on behalf of Polish Marxism.[6] Michnik and his generation of dissident intellectuals grew out of the traditional values and ethos of the Left – "a rationalist and universalist perspective, a sensitivity to social injustice, opposition to xenophobia, spiritual nonconformism;"[7] and, at least until the suppression of reformist Polish Marxists in the 1960s, they regarded themselves as acting on behalf of the true interests and principles of Communism, and not against it.[8]

The liberalism of the opposition remained true to its Marxist roots in being, concerned with the provision and just distribution of basic material goods – as well as immaterial goods such as dignity – among all members of society; and in being particularly tied to the cause of the workers. In Poland, the opposition was nourished by KOR – the *Workers*' Defense Committee (with its publication, *Robotnik* [The Worker]) – and gave rise to Solidarity, the first independent trades union movement, "a mighty and independent organization of the working people", which represented "a revolt of the hungry and the poor".[9] Solidarity's primary demands were for free labor unions, better working conditions and pay, and greater economic – and political – equality (that is, an end to the special economic status as well as political power of the *nomenklatura*).[10]

Some might, indeed, contest my identification of Michnik and his comrades' position(s) with liberalism.[11] Yet when one looks at Michnik's political program, at the sort of society at which Michnik aimed, one finds the basic hallmarks of liberalism.[12] Michnik located himself within "a specifically Polish democratic tradition", which held that "democracy is not based on exclusively political principles", but rather concerns "the human condition and human rights" – and that these latter must be protected, even if this sets limits on democracy itself. The politics of liberal democracy (or, as Michnik sometimes calls it – invoking the originally derogatory term of interwar anti-liberals – "demo-liberalism") are characterized by ever-present conflict, balance, and limitation; "demo-liberalism" recognizes that "messiness is preferable to perfection, disorderly freedom in a state bounded by law to the orderly strong hand of a populist leader who ignores the law". A "democratic world" is a "chronically imperfect one", marked by "a permanent debate"; it depends for its survival on the ability of different sides to compromise, and accept imperfection; this, alone, allows for freedom, plurality and creativity, and for the correction of its own mistakes.[13]

If this vision of democracy is far from utopian, so is the impulse that inspires it – the conviction that, as Witold Gombrowicz said, the most important thing was "that the other man not bite me, spit on me, or torture me to death." This is a vision very much in the tradition of what Shklar termed the "liberalism of fear" - a fear inspired by "an acute sense of hell", and of the dark side of "man's excessive dynamism".This affinity is visible in Michnik praise of Andrei Sakharov for being "the defender of the man enslaved and humiliated bu totalitarian dictatorship, of the free man who is capped

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6   As Michnik noted he "never caught up with" his father, who had been tortured while in prison; Michnik was only "punched in the face" a couple of times during his many detentions. *Letters from Freedom* [LF] 263.

7   LF 145.

8   On Michnik's background see "Anti-Authoritarian Revolt", LF; Elzbieta Matynia, *Performative Democracy* (Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 73.

9   *Letters from Prison* [LP], 120; LF 267

10 Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity* (Princeton, 1991), 155-68

11 See for instance Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* (Central European University Press, 2003), 334-48.

12 Falk admits this, too casually, noting that the dissidents "certainly advocated liberalism" when it came to institutional arrangements (ibid.,338).

13 LF 105, 320, 323, 325-6; Matthew Kaminski, "The Weekend Interview: From Solidarity to Democracy"; *The Wall Street Journal* Nov 6, 2009, accessed online at
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704795604574519463075074956.html

into prison, of the healthy man who is thrown in a mental hospital, of the man hungry for truth who is fed only the lies of official propaganda".[14] The defense of the humiliated, imprisoned, terrified individual was the raison d'etre of the opposition movement, the justification for the institution of human rights – and the primary goal of liberalism throughout its history.

Michnik's vision of liberalism went beyond the protection of individuals against cruelty and coercion that characterizes a "liberalism of fear", and beyond the concern with the material well-being and collective political empowerment of the working class inherited from Marxism. Central, as well, was an assertion of individual human agency (and thus, responsibility) against the deterministic language and mentality, and the initiative-repressing practices, of totalitarian Communism, which denied "the possibility of average people" to exert "any real influence on social matters".[15] Central to Michnik's work was the idea of "subjectivity" (*podmiotowosc*), which was closely linked to the capacity for agency, the ability of people to act as authors of their own lives (both individual and social), and thus to be subjects rather than objects. This, in turn, was closely tied to a sense of dignity, of inherent worth and claims to respect on the part of each individual; such a sense of dignity, in turn, enabled action, providing both a motivating goal – action was called for to assert and uphold the individual's and society's dignity – and the resolve necessary to undertake such action in the face of intimidation and despair.[16] Dignity was both a right in itself, and a good at which rights – both individual liberties, and civic status – aimed: "Impotence in the face of armed evil is probably the worst of human humiliations", for it the individual's "natural right to dignity". Thus, the most important part of Solidarity's victories in 1980-81 was in bringing about "a revolution for dignity, a celebration of the rights of the vertebrae, a permanent victory for the straightened spine".[17]

Michnik's liberalism is thus inflected by an anti-paternalism reminiscent both of Western liberals such as Berlin, and civic republicans such as Arendt. As Michnik wrote, "In the totalitarian order, the state is the teacher and society is the pupil in the classroom, which is sometimes converted into a prison or a military camp. In a civil society, by contrast, the people do not want to be pupils, soldiers, or slaves: they act as citizens … as citizens, we in the democratic opposition don't want to be treated any longer as children or slaves. The basic principle of the anti-feudal movement was human rights, the idea that everyone has rights equal to those of the monarch. That's what we also want".[18] Here Michnik states two central elements of his liberalism. One is a matter of ultimate values; the other, of the institutional prescriptions that follow from commitment to those values. The first is a commitment to dignity; the second, to a liberal, pluralist democracy, defined by a central commitment to the institutionalization of peaceful conflict and the institution of individual rights. Michnik repeatedly stressed civil rights and individual freedom, along with material goods, and the recognition of a certain moral status for individuals. Thus he declared that Solidarity's "basic goals" were "to create an authentic society, a free Poland, and individual freedom", and that those who supported Solidarity "wanted to live better, to have less poverty, less fear, and more rights".[19]

Both the emphasis on dignity and the insistence on legal rights reflects the underlying (moral) individualism of Michnik's outlook. He invoked Karol Irzykowski's work "The Philosophy of Coral Reef", which argued that Communism and Fascism both treated human beings "as the moral equivalent of coral, which have no significance in their own right and acquire significance only when they join

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14 LF 85, 143
15 Michnik, *From the History of Honor in Poland*, quoted in Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, 56.
16 Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, 57.
17 LP 5, LF 101.
18   LF 105.
19 LP 55; LF 267.

together to form a larger entity" – whether that entity was a class or a nation.[20] Despite his invocation of the ideas of civil society and citizenship, Michnik places a central emphasis on the value of individual liberty, which he defines (in the manner of minimalist and individualist liberals such as Isaiah Berlin) as an individual's "right to do what he wants."[21] One should not collaborate with evil or betray or oppress one's fellows; but beyond this, one has a claim to one's own life, which should be respected by others.

Yet Michnik's individualism involves more than an assertion of negative liberty or rights. In the wake of the moral devastation of Communism, Polish society needed more than individual rights and free trades unions: it also needed a renewal of "cultural values", and longed for "a pinch of dignity, a pinch of fraternity … a daily breath of truth." The struggle for freedom was also a quest for meaning. Holding that "European culture's most fundamental debate is the antagonism between the man who holds the knout and the man being flogged with it,"Michnik added that this struggle between the jailer and the jailed is a struggle "about giving meaning to every human life", a struggle in which "the value of your participation cannot be gauged in terms of your chances of victory but rather by the value of your idea … you score a victory not when you win power but when you remain faithful to yourself". The defense of this moralized notion of individualism, and the particular invocation of dignity, was the major part of the contribution of the Catholic Church to the Polish opposition: while totalitarianism regarded individuals as the property of the state, the Church taught that the individual is a "child of God", endowed with natural liberty and a "God-given dignity" that is above the state. While this view was the contribution of the Church, it also constituted the common ground that allowed Catholics and secular intellectuals to form a more than pragmatic alliance: for the ethos of the secular intellectuals was that of the individual "who fights for freedom and is on the side of the weak", as against the tendency of both fascists and Bolsheviks to side with, and worship, power and hierarchy..[22]

. This identification with the powerless against the powerful, central to the moral identity of the opposition as presented by Michnik, also informed Michnik's approach to the ethics and strategy of political action. Before going on to consider his writings on these issues, however, a word about Michnik's approach is in order. This approach is, of course, practical – whether as dissident leader or leading journalist in Poland's young democracy, Michnik has always been spurred to write by engagement with contemporary political struggles. It is also marked by a focus on what we might call the *ethos* of political action – with the sort of self-understanding cultivated, the sort of attitudes applied, and the sort of character exhibited by individuals in thinking and acting politically. Michnik's concern has always been not just or primarily about political institutions, or the status of society as a whole. He recognizes the importance of character and conscience, of the values and self-perceptions of individuals, the way that they live and view themselves. The quality of a country's public life is defined not only by its institutions, but also by the values that predominate in the political culture, and the character of the individuals who engage in political action; and to the extent that institutions do define a country's public life, the functioning of such institutions depends on the way in which those who act within them behave, on what they value and what they reject, on how they think of themselves and determine their conduct.

Michnik's approach is distinctive in another way: it is heavily historical, evoking Poland's past, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, as a means to reflecting on the moral choices of politics. The study of history is, for Michnik, an effective means of political education. Different historical events are never identical – but the central features of human *moral* experience remain familiar: "the world is

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20 LF 202-3.
21 LP 20.
22 LP 62, 9, 7; LF 108, 302.

still full of inquisitors and heretics, liars and those lied to, terrorists and the terrorized. There is still someone dying at Thermopylae, someone drinking a glass of hemlock, someone crossing the Rubicon, someone drawing up a proscription list. And nothing suggests that these things will stop repeating themselves."[23] At the same time, it is often easier to see these things clearly when we are less caught up (and personally interested or invested) in them: thus turning to history allows us to "overcome emotion and reflect calmly".[24] Michnik therefore turns to reflection on the political choices and ethics of the past as aids in thinking about the present, and divining the possible courses the future might take. More specifically, he has sought to expose errors in political and moral thinking of the past "not so that the language of that reign of terror may never repeat itself, but because I'm convinced it will inevitably do so".[25]

2. The Problem with Angels: The Moral Perils and Promise of Political Conduct

In setting out the nature of Michnik's approach, we have already encountered a central feature of its substance. Michnik's work is largely "prophylactic",concerned with warning against the evils that predictably (based on introspection and past experience) arise at different moments of political action, and trying to inculcate in his readers ways of thinking and plans and principles for action that will allow them to recognize and withstand these pathologies. And there is one evil with which Michnik has been particularly concerned throughout his writings: the ethos of political and moral Manicheanism, and of fanaticism or extremism – what Michnik has in a recent essay referred to as the "Ultra" approach to politics (or, as I will sometimes call it, "Ultrism"). Michnik's thinking on this issue was oriented by reflection on past experiences of political extremism – and particularly by the example of the French Revolution, and the reaction against it; by the history of the Russian and Polish revolutionary undergrounds; and by the actions of totalitarian movements and regimes, both during the 1930s and in post-World War II Eastern Europe.[26] Like Western liberal critics of totalitarianism, Michnik sees this outlook as one force behind totalitarianism. But Michnik is also sharply aware of "ultrism" as dangerous tendencies within the anti-totalitarian movement as well.

"Ultrism," it should be stressed, is not the same as "radicalism", if radicalism is associated (as it often is) with Left-wing movements aiming at far-reaching, even revolutionary, change. Both revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries can be "Ultras". Yet it is the revolutionaries who preoccupy Michnik more, since he identifies with them more – both as an heir to the Enlightenment, rationalist tradition on which the Jacobins and (more problematically) Communists also drew, and as someone whose political identity was formed in a revolutionary milieu.[27] And, characteristically, Michnik is more interested in exploring the errors of those with whom he most identifies – the errors to which he, himself, is most prone (although, at the same time, he is anxious to empathize with, and learn from, the Catholic, legitimist reactionaries with whom he would seem to have little in common[28]).

"Ultrism" has several, closely related, features. The first is what we might call *extremism* in their political outlook and approach – a preference for "extreme solutions" and "upheavals" that "turn

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23   Michnik, "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", trans. Elzbieta Matynia, *Daedalus* Winter 2007, 68.

24   LP 176

25   "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 68.

26 Michnik has,furthermore, emphasized the similarities and connections between these moments of "Ultrism": "in the rhetoric and mentality of the Red Ultras we can recognize … the early outlines of the rhetoric and mentality of the Bolsheviks; in the icon of Robespierre we can see Lenin and Stalin; and in the terror of the Jacobin guillotine we can see a preview of the platoons of CheKa death squads". Ibid., 81.

27 Indeed, Michnik identified himself as a revolutionary twice over: first, as a young Communist, he first identified with the Communist revolutionary mission – and then, later, with the anti-Communist "self-limiting revolution".

28 This is reflected both in "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", and in Michnik's earlier essay "Conversation in the Citadel" (published in LP), where he seeks to sympathetically treat earlier exponents of right-wing Polish nationalism.

the world upside down". This penchant for a politics of radical upheaval is based on a conviction that there is a need for a "moral revolution", a "cleansing" of a corrupt or unjust world. "Ultras" are extremists, first, about *ends*: they seek to "end all evil", and did not wish to make "any concessions" (as Lenin said) to their enemies, or to the old order. Thus, the Jacobins attacked imperfection in the name of perfection – "the constitution in the name of utopia, and the republic in the name of a perfect republic." This view of how to think ethically about goals and the pursuit of goals led the Jacobins to adopt an extremism about practice: to be a Jacobin was to "transcend limits" on political action. In the matter of practice and ethos, therefore, the Jacobins banished indulgence from the character of their adherents and the policy of their government. The Jacobin spirit – whether exemplified by Robespierre or Lenin – took "the aspiration to pluralism and compromise with opponents" as "abandonment of moral principles."[29]

This last feature reflects a more general attitude that Michnik had earlier labeled "fundamentalism": "the conviction that one possesses a prescription for the organization of the world, a world free of conflicts other than the conflict between good and evil; free, for example, of the conflicts between interests or different points of view". Fundamentalism also involves, as the name implies, the tendency to subordinate all considerations, all aspects of life, to some one ultimate principle . Michnik's own examples of this are *national* fundamentalism, in which all spheres of public life are subordinated to the "national interest" (which, in turn, is identified with the triumph of some *one* political program or perspective); religious fundamentalism, which blurs the line between the standards and realms of the sacred and the profane (the latter of which includes the political realm); and *moralistic* fundamentalism, which blurs the distinction between "moral norms and the rules of political struggle".[30] Fundamentalism need not be based on explicitly and intrinsically illiberal principles. Thus Michnik (under the influence of Hannah Arendt) portrays the Jacobins as initially inspired by a desire to put an end to human suffering and injustice. But, overwhelmed by the mass scale of suffering, they lost a sense for the singularity of individuals, and came to disregard considerations – of friendship, truthfulness, and loyalty to principle – other than service to the greater goal of ending the social order that gave rise to such suffering. It was for this reason – paradoxically, as a consequence of the force of their compassion – that, once in power, the Jacobins became "perfectly indifferent to the fate of individuals who had been victimized or humiliated", who could be "sacrificed without scruples in the name of Revolutionary Cleansing".[31]

In addition, and linked, to their fundamentalism and extremism, "Ultrism" reflects a *Manicheanism*, which consisted of the belief that "'He who is not with us is against us,'" and the identification of one's own cause with the commands of morality, and one's opponents with the forces of evil. The "service of virtue manifested itself in only one way: hatred of the enemies of virtue". And not just hatred, but a sort of moral assassination: for before the Jacobin exterminated his enemy, "he has to dehumanize him, defile him. If the absolutism of Jacobin Virtue was was to justify absolute terror, then their enemies – the victims of terror – had also to be absolutely evil, the embodiment of total treason and perfect degradation". This outlook made it "very difficult to distinguish an error from a crime". Desiring tolerance for different views therefore comes to seem tantamount to supporting the enemies of liberty and virtue, and advocating amnesty was tantamount to willing counter-revolution.[32]

One of Michnik's earliest and most striking anatomies of Manicheanism (and of the extremist and fundamentalist politics to which it is linked) is the essay "Maggots and Angels" (1979). Provoked

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29 "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 72, 74, 82.
30 LF 179-81.
31 "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 75; cf. Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin, 2006), 49-105.
32 LP 60; "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 73-75

by Piotr Wierzbicki's "Treatise on Maggots", an attack on conformity, collaboration and dishonesty among Polish intellectuals, Michnik's essay turns to Polish history in order to consider the tension between an approach of intransigent resistance and moral witness, and an approach of compromise and accommodation which seeks to "save 'what could be saved'", to "rescue whatever they could from the new reality, paying for it with compromise". Michnik acknowledged that full acceptance of this "formula" of compromise would result in "moral and spiritual capitulation". But he also warned that full rejection would lead to "isolation" of the opposition movement – a position which would doom to failure the dissidents' goal of establishing a truly *democratic* opposition, with roots in and support throughout society. Thus "both sides were right in some respects", and both "included people of great merit".[33]

Despite this ecumenical pronouncement – made early in the essay – Michnik is particularly concerned with the vices of the virtuous – the dangers in the anti-compromise position (the contributions of which he also acknowledged[34]), as well as the easily neglected merits of those who compromised. Writing from within and for the opposition, he is particularly conscious of, and worried by, the pathological tendencies of an opposition movement. Foremost among these was Manicheanism, "the faith of saints and inquisitors", "the curse of captive peoples." The Manichean, the political fanatic, sees the world in simple terms. There was a social order – for the opposition, Communism; for the Communists, the capitalist system; for the Polish national resistance, Russian occupation; for the Jacobins, monarchy and the *ancien regime* – which is "the number one enemy of mankind's happiness", and anyone who chooses "the slightest compromise" with this "rotten" system is, necessarily, an "enemy" of what is right.[35]

As this comparison of Communism and anti-Communism makes clear, such tendencies were, in part, the opposition's inheritance from that which it opposed – Communism: "As if in reply to the Stalinist primers which we were once force-fed", the opposition was inclined to produce its own primers, in which "the colors are equally dense and bright and the worldview equally infantile." The tendency toward moral simplicity was also a predictable, all but unavoidable outgrowth of the experience of opposition (and particularly of clandestine resistance under martial law), which tended to foster "the spirit of a sect", with its characteristic, isolating jargon, "instrumental attitude toward truth", "disregard for any values that are not political", and subordination of everything to tactics.[36]

In order to reassure themselves of their own rightness, the sectarians of the opposition – like the Jacobins before them – had to attribute ignoble motivations (particularly greed) to those with whom they disagreed. But, while understandable in the context of the struggle against Communism, to "throw all those who think and act differently [from oneself] into that capacious sack labeled 'maggots'" was nevertheless just "sectarian nonsense". One can only engage in such judgment if one believes that one has "discovered the sole moral and correct road to sovereignty and democracy. I well know this type of 'truth bearer' from history. And that is why I am afraid."[37]

One feature of Manicheanism is the vilification of opponents. But there is another danger, in the other term of the Manichean equation: the "angelization" of one's own side and self. Michnik worried that the "beautiful but dangerous" "ethos" arising from the "cult of martyrdom, of heroic sacrifice," which was such a marked feature of the Polish revolutionary tradition, would encourage "self-idealization"; this, in turn, might lead the revolutionary to "assign himself special rights". The "angel"

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33 LP 171, 183, 170, 172.
34 See ibid., 173-4.
35 Ibid. 195, 186.
36 Ibid., 178, 60.
37 Ibid., 173, 191.

is "granted the right to act in this way by his own self-sacrifice and his sacred goal: the radiant future". On this view, whatever serves this goal is good; whatever obstructs it, evil. The combination of moral extremism – the refusal to accept compromise or limits on the pursuit of morally desirable goals – and a conviction of their own righteousness and correctness made political "angels" dangerous, because it meant that they "had no brakes: their Manichean view of human obligations would not allow them to abandon these actions [the use of violence, manipulation, blackmail, lying, the sacrifice of others to the greater goal, etc.]" While this inspired "extreme courage", it also fostered "utter disregard for the safety of other people".[38]

The self-righteousness of the "angel" was linked to the tendency of revolutionary fundamentalists toward *contempt* for others. This meant, first, contempt for those "to whom convictions, temperament, or merely fear dictate another life-style and a different way of serving the common cause" than illegal opposition. There was thus a danger that the opposition would ultimately come to have "contempt for those whose happiness they would serve", the "ordinary people" of their society. Being isolated from potential supporters and allies could hinder the opposition's political project; but more than this, coming to have contempt for ordinary people in general would be disastrous if it ever did come to power: then the opposition would quickly become tyrannical, for they would believe that they, and they alone, had a right and a duty to rule over a people who were too sunk in corruption to rule themselves. The democratic revolution would become anti-democratic.[39]

This was another version of a phenomenon identified by Constant and denounced, again, by Berlin – the sacrifice of the people as individuals for the (supposed) sake of the people *en masse*.[40] Where Constant attributed this to a desire for power, and both Constant and Berlin to a passion for uniformity and simplicity, a hatred of difference and recalcitrance, Michnik – finding the tendency not in his opponents, but on his own side, and indeed, in himself – attributed it to the need for moral self-confidence, and tendency toward disappointment in and disapproval of others – and, ultimately, contempt for them – which so often accompanies, and may even be necessary for, the attempt to live a consistently moral life in the face of high prices.

Manichean political actors were prone to fall prey to "deceit and self-deceit", to engage in the worst forms of political repression, manipulation, and cheating, out of the belief and with the justification that in order to fight the forces of evil, one must be ready to use their means, for only such means will be effective. And thus in fighting evil, the Manichean comes to act evilly. Thus the idealistic Jacobins, in order to pursue their noble goals, crushed freedom, and instituted a system of suspicion which led France to be "taken over by fear": they became "idealists of cruelty and apostles of terror". Because they regarded themselves as the "guarantors of … the rule of Freedom and Virtue", they "defended their power without scruples", and branded any critics as traitors to the Revolution: and thus "Freedom and Virtue entered into a marriage with the guillotine". While willing to give their lives for their ideals, they more willingly put others to death. Indeed, while the Jacobins were "strong people" who were initially honest and idealistic, on being "blinded by the drug of revolution" they were transformed into "skillful manipulators, cynics of political game, demagogues of fluent speech and dried-up heart": they were like "people of a religious sect transformed into a gang of bandits". The "godlike warriors" were "cruel people, hungry for power, armed with hypocrisy" - hypocrisy both in the sense that they used cruelty while professing mercy and sought to advance their own power while

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38 Ibid., 195. Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 80-81.

39 LP 194-6.

40 *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*, Part I Chapter 13, in Constant, *Political Writings* ed. and trans Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge, 1988) 77; quoted in Berlin, "Introduction" to *Four Essays on Liberty*, in *Liberty,* ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002), 3n1.

professing altruism, and in portraying themselves as the victims even as they massacred others. They, like all fundamentalists who seek to exercise power over others in the name of moral purity, were prone to fall prey to moral corruption, which grew out of the self-righteousness, ruthlessness and contempt for others of a Manichean view political morality. For "the angel who demands heroism not only of himself but of others, who denies the value of compromise, who perceives the world with a Manichean simplicity and despises those who have a different concept of obligations toward others – this angel, loving heaven as he may, has already started on the path that leads to hell … he is already sowing the seeds of future hatred"; "the angel who is not criticized, the angel who is convinced of his angelic character may metamorphose into the devil."[41]

Michnik's characterization of the "angel" is largely psychological – indeed, the psychological vividness and richness of his account is one of its main appeals. But Michnik is describing, not just an affective syndrome, or a way of viewing oneself and others, but a particular sort of moral reasoning. This was the view that one could – and must, and was justified in and indeed obligated to – bring about just ends through means that, when viewed apart from those ends, appeared plainly unjust or inhumane. Against this view, Michnik insisted that even if those engaging in revolution through ruthless means were "doing it all in the name of the best and noblest cause they would be destroying that cause with their misdeeds". While Michnik's critique here encompassed various means that were contrary to "ordinary" morality, he treated violence as a special case. Michnik became convinced that "the genesis of the totalitarian system is traceable to the use of revolutionary violence": "Whoever uses violence to gain power uses violence to maintain power. Whoever is taught to use violence cannot relinquish it." Therefore, even if they employed violence (or, indeed, deceit, intimidation, or manipulation) for the sake of "the best and noblest cause", such revolutionary "ultras" "would be destroying that cause with their misdeeds".[42]

Michnik seems to offer two arguments for this conclusion, though they are not distinguished, and neither is stated with precision, in his works. The first of these looks like a morally absolutist view: certain means are so abhorrent that they can never be justified. Michnik seems to express this view when he writes that "there are no honest values that would justify reaching for such peculiarly dishonest means and methods: "one cannot put people down in the name of lifting them up … one cannot spread the poison of fear in the name of Virtue and Moral Revolution … one cannot push the drug of suspicion in the name of Truth and Cleansing", because "God did not give any person power over any other person".[43]

This is noble, but unsatisfying, to the extent that Michnik does not offer a full account of what means are absolutely prohibited, or why they are prohibited (other than the cursory reference to God, which, while rhetorically effective in a Polish context, must be taken with a grain of salt coming from a self-confessed "pagan"). The second, and I think more interesting, argument is that the use of such means should be eschewed because they undermine the ends at which they aim: first, by causing moral corruption, or a loss of moral sensitivity and proportion, in the actors who use them; and second, in creating a political culture that is antithetical to the creation of a morally acceptable public life. In expressing this view, Michnik again reached for religious language, warning his readers that "no one should give up caring about one's own salvation in caring about someone else's salvation … one cannot force anyone into faith either through force or blackmail … the cross is the symbol of the Lord's suffering, not a baseball bat for clubbing adversaries."[44] Salvation cannot be achieved through coercion,

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41 "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 71-2, 74, 75; LP 196-7.
42 LP 5; LF 106-7
43 "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 82
44 Ibid. 82

because the moral effects of coercion – on both perpetrator and victim – are antithetical to the sort of character and commitments that can, on any plausible account, be associated with "salvation".

Michnik's point here is not merely negative, however. It is linked to a positive assertion of "the creative power of our actions" to shape personal character and political culture, a belief that the those involved in the opposition were each "capable of enhancing or diminishing the amount of hatred and intolerance in our public life" through "daily action". The basis for Polish democracy lay in "the moral sphere", in the conduct and character of those struggling to establish it: the opposition must therefore strive to "teach freedom and democracy" through its practice.[45]

3. From Self-Limiting Revolution to Eternally Incomplete Democracy: Morality, Strategy, Ethos

This brings us to Michnik's formulation and prescription of a set of strategies, standards of conduct, habits of mind and qualities of character appropriate to both democratic, and what we might call proto-democratic, politics. Michnik, as a dissident, sought to act in a way consistent with the role and status of a member of a normal democratic state – the state he was seeking to bring about; and, under democracy, he has sought to develop a position of democratic dissent.[46] While the lline between anti-totalitarian dissident and democratic citizen is not absolute, Michnik has also shown himself sensitive to the very different ethical demands of dissident and democratic politics, and his prescriptions are distinguished by the requirements of two distinct political projects– a politics of resistance to totalitarian rule, and a politics of democratic consolidation and compromise.

The opposition under Communism faced the following predicament. By Michnik's own argument, in seeking to overturn a totalitarian order for the purpose of creating a liberal, democratic society, the opposition must adopt a political and moral stance consistent with the values of such a society, lest it undermine its own goals. Yet the reality was that the opposition was operating in a context in which the moral reality was starkly different from that of a "normal" liberal democracy. In such circumstances, "comportment based on models of democratic culture" was both imperative, and "suicide".[47] On the one hand, there was a lack of the "normal" distance between politics and personal morality: engaging in political action involved a personal moral choice, and demanded high virtues not generally called for in ordinary democratic politics. On the other hand, when compromise and sacrifice were required – as they invariably were – the sacrifice was greater, and the compromise, being with the reality of totalitarian power, of a more challenging, potentially hand-dirtying, sort. The moral world of liberal democracy is "gray", that of totalitarianism is "black and white". But it would be wrong to conclude that the latter is simpler. The struggle between good and evil can be as fraught with ambiguity and the risk of corruption as the endless negotiations of democracy. Nor is the latter morally undemanding – on the contrary, it requires its own forms of integrity and fortitude. The needs to "testify to values", and to act responsibly and realistically in pursuing public goals, are both important, and can only be reconciled (if at all) in a 'golden mean' under political conditions that allow for flexibility and decency, "when pluralism and the principle of dialogue are the natural environment of human words and gestures. The essence of totalitarianism is the destruction of this environment. When pluralism dies, the rules and criteria of normal existence die with it." Whoever tries to live under totalitarianism according to the principles appropriate to a pluralistic society "is either a saint ripe for martyrdom or a hypocritical conformist ready for betrayal".[48] Thus both resistance to evil, and the negotiation of imperfection, require a mix of moral integrity and prudent flexibility, of "idealism" and "realism".

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45 LP 55, 60, 197.

46 Matynia, *Performative Democracy*, 55.

47   LF 19-20.

48 Ibid. 12.

Moral idealism played a crucial role in inspiring resistance to Communism in the first place. The people of the opposition had rebelled against Communism, Michnik insisted, because "it was a lie, and we were searching for truth; communism meant conformity and we desired authenticity; communism was enslavement, fear, and censorship, and we desired freedom; it was an ongoing attack on tradition and national identity that we held to be ours; it was inequality and injustice, and we believed in equality and justice; communism was a grotesquely deficient economy, and we sought rationality, efficiency, and affluence; communism meant the suppression of religion, and we held freedom of conscience to be a fundamental human right".[49]

In resisting totalitarian rule, which sought to corrupt and co-opt its subjects, making it impossible for them to communicate honestly, think independently, and act with integrity, the opposition needed to "distinguish good from evil, because only then can we salvage the moral norms of our culture". This meant, on the level of thought, "decisively rejecting the kind of relativism that renders one's moral judgment of the real world dependent on the political interests of a party, class, nation, or whatever" On the level of conduct, it meant striving to be on the side of truth, rather than that of force, of resisting the temptation to abandon "the elementary notion of truth in favor of political tactics."[50]In these respects, the opposition's political struggle was "inseparably linked with morality".[51] Yet there were many cases when morality and politics came into conflict. Political activism itself has its dangers – and part of true political realism may involve resisting the lure and influence of politics, the "poison" of the desire for and exercise of power, even as one engages in politics. At the same time, as noted above, to uncompromisingly adhere to a rigid notion of moral conduct could be suicidal – and thus harmful to the cause of freedom.

Political action under a totalitarian dictatorship, therefore, "always oscillates between two human motivations, the needs of moral testimony and of political calculation." If either one of these is lost, political engagement turns into "either ineffective moralizing or immoral manipulation. Both are dangerous, but both are, to a certain extent, unavoidable." The underground needed both hard-headed, realistic tacticians, and "people for whom moral testimony is more valuable than political efficacy". For such people, the achievement of a decent way of life was important, not the acquisition of power: they did not seek to make a living in politics, and recognized that "normal" times will mean the end to the thrilling politics of the underground, and the need for a new set of leaders with qualities, characters, and talents different from their own.[52]

Michnik's contribution to the opposition was twofold: he both helped to formulate a strategy, and articulated a vision of character and code of conduct to guide personal and collective action. On the level of strategy, Michnik was an advocate of a "self-limiting revolution" (a phrase coined, and a strategy largely pioneered, by Jacek Kuron) – a movement for far-reaching change which would however act within limits it set for itself. These included a policy of acting in the open, a refusal to use violence under any circumstances – and, indeed, a decision not to seek political power at all, but to instead to act on and through society, to change minds and behavior rather than to seize control of the state. For Solidarity, it was not possession of power that was at stake, but rather "the range of power" (that is, the limits placed on the party's *nomenklatura*), the "style of power" (the rule of law, rather than lawlessness), the "nature of the compromise to be reached by the government and the governed (the degree of pluralism allowed in public life", and the form of workers' institutions."The most important question" for Solidarity was not "'how should the system of government be changed?' but 'how should

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49 LF 322.
50 LF 89, 90.
51 LP 23.
52 LP 62.

we defend ourselves against this system?"[53]

KOR and Solidarity did not seek political power; they also largely eschewed utopia – that is, the aspiration to a perfect, wholly harmonious society. Solidarity represented "the primacy of practical thought over utopian thought"; it was an "anti-utopian movement", which "fought for a civil society that is imperfect by nature … Everything I wrote in prison … was written to defend that idea. We shouldn't fight for a free society that's free of conflicts, but for a conflictual society in which conflicts can be resolved within the rules of the democratic game."[54] The goal of achieving perfection through politics was both futile – for "One pays for everything in politics. There's no such thing as total justice"[55] – and dangerous: "I always believed that a perfect society could be created only in a concentration camp".[56]

The "self-limiting revolution", then, was limited, from the start, in its ends. It was also limited in the means it used. Some means were regarded as impermissible; others, as imperative – not absolutely obligatory, but only to be dispensed with in cases of drastic emergency when the existence of the opposition itself was at stake. The chief prohibition, as noted above, was on the use of violence. In addition to Michnik's larger objection to the evils and corrupting effects of violence, there was a more immediate, prudential reason for his strenuously urging his comrades to eschew violent tactics. The only alternative to non-violent evolution toward democracy would involve "violent confrontations between the government and the people", which would likely result in the whole nation paying "an inordinately high price" for the opposition's "lack of responsibility" – namely, a Soviet invasion.[57] Non-violence was therefore a strategic, geo-political necessity; it reflected not pure-hearted Gandhian idealism, but a hard-headed calculation of the consequences of using violence.

Michnik thus presented his program of non-violent, self-limiting revolution as a strategic decision, based on the diagnosis that any course other than "compromise, self-limitation and harmony" would provoke a Soviet occupation of Poland. If such an invasion occurred, the time for compromise would be over, and intransigent resistance must take its place.[58] At the same time, even this aspect of Michnik's thought reflected an ethical principle: the belief that the opposition had a *responsibility* to protect their society against such a cataclysm, and therefore to forgo the satisfactions of heroic intransigence and the possibility of quick victory.

This mixture of moral and prudential concerns was reflected in KOR's policy of openness, and Michnik's explanation of that policy.[59] Openness was adopted for strategic reasons – "The chances for success lay in openness, not in conspiracy".[60] But this did not mean that openness was not adopted because of its intrinsic moral value. Rather, the leaders of the opposition realized that morality not only provided the reason for their opposition; it also was the opposition's great (indeed, only) source of the strength. The opposition couldn't hope to be politically effective in any traditional sense: but it could hope to win the moral battle against the government. In doing so, it would win trust and authority in the

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53 LP 26-7.
54 LF 64.
55 LF 280.
56 Ibid. 265.
57 LP 190.
58 LF 62.
59 KOR was founded to provide support for workers imprisoned after the government suppression of labor unrest in 1976 by providing legal aid (and financial aid for the imprisoned workers' families). It also sought to publicize the plight of workers in the People's Republic of Poland, through investigation and publicity (including the production and smuggling of *samizdat* books and journals). One of its policies was to publish the names and addresses of all of its members in all of its statements – an unprecedented move for the opposition in a Communist country.
60 LP 49.

eyes of the people. But the purpose of doing this, in turn, was not to gain power. Nor was it to bring down the Communist regime. It was, instead, to create a society in which moral considerations were more powerful than violence and fear. Morality – in the sense of acting morally, acting in accordance with moral principles one could honestly accept and advocate – was thus both the means and the end of the opposition: they adopted a policy of openness in order to win trust and moral authority – and in so doing, spread a commitment to and habit of acting morally.

The policy of openness is one example of Michnik's central maxim of political conduct under Communism: to act "as if" one were already living in the sort of society one was seeking to bring about – that is, to put the values and norms of such a society into practice now. As Jonathan Schell has written, this approach was to "start doing the things you think should be done, and to start being what you think society should become. Do you believe in freedom of speech? Then speak freely. Do you love the truth? Then tell it. Do you believe in an open society? Then act in the open. Do you believe in a decent and humane society? Then behave decently and humanely".[61] What the underground needed was, therefore, not the "moral principles and organizational structures of an army or a party of the Leninist kind", but "a bond of shared aims and solidarity in action. And respect for individuality. And consent for plurality." It should aim at "social self-defense" and "participation in authentic civic and intellectual life", and not the seizure of power or a world free of conflict: for, while "every compromise is temporary … every political solution is illusory."[62]

Such imperatives, while non-utopian, were extremely demanding. The model of "self-limiting revolution" required a character capable of both resistance and compromise – one marked by integrity and flexibility, fortitude and openness, independence and loyalty, humility and a pride that refused to be bowed, hard-headed and clear-eyed "realism" and a hopeful belief in the power of human ideals. Pursuing the "long march strategy" of the opposition, which involved "arduous, risky, and often infective activity", demanded "consistence, realism and patience", which would allow the opposition to work in the social sphere in the face of "repression and suffering."[63] KOR represented such a model of political behavior, a "combination of relentless struggle for human rights and a refusal of violence"; it was "founded on the search for compromise, and rejects the revolutionary rhetoric of all or nothing."[64]

This brings us to one of the central leitmotifs of Michnik's writings and career: his defense of compromise. Since the fall of Communism Michnik has insistently sought to remind his countrymen that compromise is the essential feature, and indeed the necessary condition, of democratic politics (a "climate of tolerance and compromise … provides the only basis for a democratic order").[65]. But compromise is, on Michnik's account, necessary not only in democracy, but also – indeed especially – under totalitarianism, where "a price must always be paid for public presence."[66]

Compromise takes "realism" as a "starting point"; but it has, on Michnik's account, another starting point, the conviction that a "pluralist democracy necessitates compromises in the face of complex realities" and "quandaries", which should be recognized and addressed in political action – in contrast to "the philosophy of radicalism, revolution, demagogy, and violence", which by contrast "takes an easier" – but bloodier – path.[67] We can therefore identify two reasons for making compromise a central strategy, and principle, of political action: let us call them the "prudential" and the "ethical" rationales for compromise. (The distinction should not be carried too far, however: for Michnik

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61 Jonathan Schell "Introduction", LP xxx.
62 LP 62.
63 Ibid., 57; cf LP 29
64 LF 5.
65 LF 89.
66 LP 184.
67   LF 110.

suggests that the "prudential" rationale itself has purchase on us for ethical reasons: to engage in political action is to take responsibility for oneself and others, and this in turn requires that one act prudently rather than rashly. I return to this point below).

The "ethical" part of Michnik's case for compromise is based on his commitment to "the principles of pluralism and inalienable human rights".[68] Pluralism is another crucial and recurring word in Michnik's political and moral vocabulary. For Michnik, pluralism refers to two things (which, he suggests, are linked): a perception of human moral experience, and a model of political institutions and behavior. In the former sense, pluralism means the position holding that goods come into conflict, and often one has to choose between them. "Our world is full of contradictory values, and I cannot imagine a social order in which all of them were equally and harmoniously realized. But conflicts are genuine only when they are genuinely expressed. This is what our society is fighting for: to name things by their proper names, to articulate conflicts as conflicts". It was the "the ambivalence of human destiny" that "every right has its counterright … every conclusion is an oversimplification … a natural and splendid feature of human existence is openness, ambiguity, and the multiplicity of values." To appreciate this requires "irony and friendly appraisal of all the formulated positions".It also requires admitting, as Michnik has, that one has "no easy formula for such choices".[69] The plurality of values is linked to a plurality of perspectives. Reality is viewed one way, for instance, by "the active oppositionist", in another by the intellectual who seeks to understand it, and in still another by the "moralist" who wishes to judge it. Each of these perspectives has "its light and dark side". The first is "tainted by one-sidedness", which is necessary to effectively reshaping the world, but mars the perception of that world in its full many-sidedness. The spectatorial view of the intellectual allows one to comprehend "the complexity of the human condition", but "clouds the search for solutions" to pressing questions, leading to indecisiveness and lack of commitment. And "moralism" allows the individual to "notice ethical traps", but also "favors an exaggerated cult of 'clean hands'", and an over-readiness to judge without understanding or accepting the complexity of individual cases. One cannot help but adopt one or another of these perspectives, depending on what tasks one commits oneself to. But to give oneself over wholly to any of these perspectives is to "lose sight of an important segment of reality", and so fall into potentially dangerous error.[70]

Political systems – and political movements – should therefore embrace pluralism as an institutional norm: they should incorporate different perspectives, temperaments, values and ideologies, so as to avoid one-sidedness.[71] This is true of democracy; it was also true of the opposition. Michnik thus spoke out both for compromise between the opposition and the authorities, in order to preserve civic peace – and for compromise within the movement, for the sake of internal pluralism. This was partly a matter of applying his view on the proper relationship between ends and means: "I thought that since I was fighting for democracy, I ought to deal with them [those in Solidarity Michnik "couldn't stand"] using democratic methods".[72] It was also important to respect internal pluralism for the sake of the movement's success: individuals with very different characters, and who acted very differently, made equally important contributions to the movement for democracy against totalitarianism. There

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68 LF 89.

69 LF 100, 15, LP 191. This position will be familiar to many readers from its articulation by Isaiah Berlin, and those influenced by him. Michnik himself probably derived this view from his teacher Kolakowski, who appears to have arrived at it around roughly the same time as, and independently of, Berlin. See e.g. Kolakowski, "In Praise of Inconsistency", in *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, trans Jane Zielonko Peel (1968), 211-220.

70 LP 176-7.

71 See e.g. Michnik's assertion that "The human world should be constructed from a permanent conflict between conservatism and contestation; if either is absent from society, pluralism is destroyed". LF 109.

72 LF 267.

was a need for "different types of activity, different temperaments, and different models of concern for our motherland."[73] It was therefore vital that the opposition maintain an internal pluralism of belief, of political strategy, and of character be tolerant and indeed appreciative of those who react to Communism in different ways, lest their justified anger descend not on those in power, but on their allies in the cause of opposition.[74]

Despite the passion and consistency of his calls for compromise, there is a certain doubleness in Michnik's position as an oppositionist, in which he counseled both compromise, and intransigence.[75] Compromise, he acknowledged, was difficult "because it constantly poses the question of its own limits". There could be "no precise [general] answer" to this question, since "every answer is situational." However, there is one general limit that Michnik asserts: "the boundary lies in the realm of language": compromise in this realm "transforms a conciliation into a lie and leads to betrayal".[76] True to these observations, Michnik's views on compromise both shifted in response to changing situations, and were always combined with and expressed through forthright declarations of what Michnik believed and the way that he saw things.

Making "compromises" in the perception, and expression of one's perception, of the truth is one way of compromising. There are others, to which other standards apply. There was a difference, for example, between compromising one's basic *principles*, as opposed to making compromise over particular issues as a condition to maintaining a dialogue with others. So, too, there was a difference between compromising *about* reality (that is, abandoning one's own perceptions, both moral and strategic), and compromising *with* reality; in the latter case – the case of making accommodations to existing conditions of power – the only compromises that the young Michnik thought clearly impermissible were those involving "the proven and conscious harming of other persons"; any other criterion seemed to Michnik "shaky".[77] His experiences of trying to reach compromises with intransigent authorities, however, led him to a adopt further – albeit situational, rather than absolute – limits on compromise. From these experiences, he concluded that "A compromise must take into account the realities of power"; but in any context in which compromise was necessary, there would also be "a line that must not be crossed": thus, compromise with the authorities was necessary to avert the possibility of Soviet occupation – but the autonomy of Solidarity itself could not be compromised; if it were, the whole process of compromise would become meaningless, because it would not be a compromise between two genuinely distinct entities, one of which represented society.[78] There was also an important difference between compromise which kept lines of dialogue open, and capitulation which brought effective dialogue to an end: "We are ready for compromise, but we shall never agree to capitulation. We shall continue to call for solutions by compromise, but in a wholly uncompromising way."[79] For compromise only contributes to a "healthy public life" if it is "real compromise, both in substance and in the public eye. When a compromise is seen by the public as renunciation of conviction or as flagrant treason, it is no longer a compromise. It becomes a falsehood or a misunderstanding."[80]

Discriminating between real and false, healthy and unhealthy compromises – or, between compromises and capitulation, falsehood and misunderstanding – depended on assessing the characters of one's partners in compromise, and the true nature of the "partnership" and its context, as well as the

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73 LP 54-5, 59, 60.
74 LP 19-21
75 Matynia, *Performative Democracy* 63.
76 Michnik quoted in ibid.
77 LP 184.
78 LP 56.
79 LF 112.
80 LP 14.

substance of the compromise itself. For there to be compromise, there must be the possibility of open, licit conflict, the outcome of which is not predetermined; where these are absent, genuine, two-sided compromise is not possible.[81] Those who are "subject to the pressure of terror and totalitarian propaganda" – or those who are wholly committed to maintaining the existing, inhumane order out of self-interest – lose "the capacity to distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood … the elementary power of recognizing the contours if reality". One to whom this has happened "cannot be a partner in dialogue, for dialogue is by its very nature the privilege of people who are free": "reasoned persuasion" is ineffective in the face of "self-stupefication and self-imposed blindness". "People are not obliged to be loyal to gangsters … There can be no talk of compromise with Nazis. A compromise is possible only as a result of a clearly delineated field of understanding".[82] Where compromise is not possible, one must still try to act so as to avoid outright violence; otherwise, one must refuse collaboration and capitulation.

The politics of resistance, then, required both an ethos of integrity, and an ethos of compromise. Forged by oppression, the ethos of resistance involved both "honor and self-irony, the stubbornness to stand by values, and the courage to believe in romantic ideals."[83] Central to Michnik's vocabulary, and to the ethos of resistance, were the concepts of *honor* and *dignity.* Even as he inveighed against the purism of the "angels", he called on his fellow dissidents to to "confront totalitarian pressure with dignity."[84] Restoring this sense of dignity was a fundamental part of the opposition's program: and doing so involved cultivating a sense of honor in individuals. This meant bringing individuals living under Communist rule to realize, as Michnik did, that "the person who pledges his loyalty to this system of coercion and lies is forsaking hope for a Poland in which lies and coercion will be rejected. These declarations [of loyalty] are supposed to make us into lowly and servile people, who will not rise up to fight for freedom and dignity." To thus betray one's principles was "to negate yourself, to wipe out the meaning of your life; to betray the people who have faith in you"; and that to thus "forsake your dignity" was "not a price worth paying to have the prison gates opened for you." There are lives that are "shattered by one moment of moral inattention or weakness of spirit"; and so "if you want to respect yourself, your inner voice tells you, don't enter into any agreement with the policemen" Therefore, "it is not courage that makes me choose prison instead of banishment. If anything, I am making this choice out of fear. Out of the fear that by saving my neck I may lose my honor." Addressing his fellow dissidents – and, most of all, perhaps, himself – he wrote that "You know that you are no hero and that you never wanted to be one. You have never wanted to die for your nation, or for freedom, or for anything else, for that matter … You have always wanted to be alive, to live like a normal person, to have respect for yourself and for your friends."[85]

In such passages, and throughout his oppositional work, Michnik modeled what appears to be heroic behavior, while insisting that he was not acting particularly heroically. This was based on the conviction that "Poland needs ordinary, decent, rational people" (and furthermore, that "even if I'm not very good at pretending to be such a person, I think there's some value in such a person"). Michnik agreed with Jan Jozef Szczepanski's remark that "[t]he modern secular world needs probably needs sainthood more than at any other time in history. I suspect, however, that what it needs less than at any other time is hagiography."[86] Thus he always insisted that resistance to the authorities "is not heroism.

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81 Ibid 14.
82 LF 16, 20.
83 LF 319
84 LP 190.
85   LP 10, 6-7, 24, 11.
86 Cf. George Orwell's famous declaration that "Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent". "Reflections on Gandhi", accessed online at http://www.readprint.com/work-1260/Reflections-On-Gandhi-George-

It is mere common sense … Heroism presupposes exceptionality. Today, Poles need normalcy and ordinariness." Rather than insisting on extraordinary excellence, Michnik called for "ordinary human decency and elementary loyalty."[87]

Yet, while he argued against the demands for moral perfection of the "angels" and denied the mantle of hero, Michnik advocated his own brand of heroism – in his writings, and even more through his example, which in itself served as a form of ethical advocacy.[88] He insisted that "I don't like the words *inflexibility* and *martyr*. I'm not comfortable in that role." However, "If you are defending an idea, you first have to show, by your own behavior, that you believe in it … you have to bear witness." And, he further acknowledged, in the opposition "One professed humanistic values but lived within heroic values, with their fundamental principle of loyalty to one's own identity and loyalty to one's friends from the democratic opposition; loyalty to values that were betrayed and mocked; loyalty to the nation, to the Church, and to tradition."[89]

This was a very particular sort of heroism, however. It was a heroism of resistance rather than of insurrection, a a *protective* rather than aggressive heroism. It was the heroism, not of Achilles, but of Don Quixote: a heroism that consisted in identification with weakness rather than strength, with the victims rather than the victors; a heroism founded on a willingness to engage in losing battles, and to persist in "Quixotic truth telling" in the face of lies. And it was a heroism based not on a conviction of one's own excellence, but, to the contrary, on awareness of one's limitations – and on the conviction that, nevertheless "a person should always try to be better than he is" – a heroism, that is, of striving and not perfection.[90] Michnik's heroism was a heroism both of and for ordinariness. Sometimes heroism is necessary to make society safe for the un-heroic – to create the conditions of a society that does not require heroism. And, given the costs of heroism to those who practice it, and the dangers of heroism to those around them, creating such a society is a worthy goal.

The need for heroism, for individuals who will be guided by conscience and assert their moral individuality, also figures into Michnik's distinction between democracy narrowly conceived as a majoritarian political order, and "democracy" conceived more broadly as a social ethos committed to freedom, pluralism and dignity. This distinction becomes particularly important when a majority of people have succumbed to the values of a totalitarian system,so that an individual committed to democracy in Michnik's sense must "go it alone", remaining true to a commitment to freedom, tolerance, cultural tradition and human dignity, even if this means being set in opposition to the majority. Michnik stressed individualism, not only as a matter of moral and political principle, but as part of a political ethic. He also practiced it. This meant speaking clearly in his own voice, insisting that "I am an intellectual, and I speak for myself." It also meant speaking *to* himself, enacting in his writings – particularly those of the martial law period – a dialogue with himself, through which he modeled, and so sought to foster, that human capacity which totalitarianism had sought to stifle: the power of the individual conscience to serve as a guide, and a spur, to action. "Human virtues", he insisted, should be guarded, not by the state, but by "the human conscience" – particularly under regimes where the state, and social authority more broadly, would lead the individual astray. Following the promptings of conscience meant fulfilling Thomas Mann's injunction that one must "be one's own signpost when there are no other signposts": this requires the honesty, the courage and the patience to

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Orwell

87 LF 293, 91; LP 11, 23.

88 This is a central theme of Matynia's discussion of Michnik in *Performative Democracy*, chapter 4.

89 LF 64-5, 323. Note that in speaking of such "heroic values", Michnik speaks of an anonymous "one", rather than making any claims on behalf of a specific "I".

90 LF 93, 24, 293.

"call 'baseness, base.'"[91]

Where does conscience come from? And how does it manifest itself? On Michnik's account it often seems to have an almost sensory quality, manifesting itself in "instinctive revulsion" or "disgust". But it is not a matter of instinct. Living according to conscience seems to require practice: but it also appeals to something deep and sensual or appetitive: "life lived in truth and dignity, though difficult and full of complications, has something truly addictive about it. Whoever has once tasted it has a hard time getting rid of such fatal addictions". An awareness of the urgings of conscience, and of its power, also comes from the discovery of one's own agency – and the need to make choices that one's capacity to act as an agent imposes on one; and from the realization of what these choices can mean: "The choice is always up to the individual – to the voice of his or her conscience and reason". Michnik sought not only to show his readers how the dialogue with one's conscience works, but also to make them realize that "your own future … is an open question. The choice is yours … No one is born an informer; you forge your fate daily, at the price of your life." Indeed, Michnik presented the choice to take part in opposition as itself a heroic assertion of agency against theories of historical inevitability, however hopeless such assertions seemed.[92]

Recognizing oneself as an agent, awakening to the force of conscience, and entering into social action meant recognizing – and taking on or affirming – responsibility. Responsibility is another central concept in Michnik's thought; and it, too, has several dimensions. First, it was important to recognize responsibility as a basic feature of all individuals as agents, to accept that "Everyone is responsible for himself, and everyone should be either proud or ashamed of himself."[93] Part of the Jacobin, and later totalitarian, tendency, on Michnik's analysis, was an evasion of such individual responsibility – as reflected in the fact that the Jacobins avoided speaking in their own name, but rather spoke on behalf of such abstract values as Freedom, Virtue, Nation (just as Communists would invoke History and the Proletariat).[94] Second, being responsible, as an agent, meant having a responsibility to act morally – and, particularly, to respond to moral wrongdoing. Thus, Michnik urged his fellow intellectuals to live up to their responsibility to not "retreat into theorizing while a crime is being committed; nor may he content himself with a display of basic high-mindedness." Finally, there was the particular responsibility that is not inherent in being an individual, but that is assumed when one voluntarily enters into political activity. To engage in politics is to assume responsibility toward others: for one's public actions effect others as well as oneself, and "it is important to keep in mind the existence of those other people", to be aware of the responsibility to them that one has come to acquire through one's choices. These effects include the influence that the example of one's actions will have on others: one has a responsibility not to betray, not to disappoint, those who have put their trust in you and whom you have moved to act.[95]

Part of acting responsibly was to avoid engaging in ostentatious heroism, and falling prey to an unrealistic impression of circumstances. The opposition needed to be wary of becoming "*slaves to gesture*": in the struggle for freedom, grand gestures were ultimately less important than intellectual work and practical social action.[96] But resisting self-importance and self-righteousness, the priggishness of political virtue that could easily develop into either self-defeating purity or destructive fanaticism, depended on personal qualities beyond a solemn sense of responsibility and scrupulous cultivation of

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91 LF 106, 6, 327, 25 (the last quote is from an uncited passages from Thomas Mann).
92 LF 26, 27; LP 5, 8.
93 LF 85; see also ibid., 88.
94 "The Ultras of Moral Revolution", 74.
95 LF 91, LP 23.
96 LP 193.

conscience. There were other crucial safeguards, also praised and exhibited by Michnik: irony, skepticism, and a sense of humor. This did not mean mocking others: it meant cultivating an attitude of "critical distance toward oneself", which stands opposed, and is an antidote, to "totalitarian dogma"[97] Michnik advocated the ethos, not of the "priest", but of the "jester" (to adopt the terms used by his teacher Kolakowski); not of the saint, but of the ironist:

> "skepticism and irony can lead either to base capitulation or to a heroic duel with the world. Deaf to the appeal of God, the ironic skeptic may find within himself the Kantian imperative and make of it a weapon against the might of totalitarian civilization. Such skepticism is born both of pride and humility … So be pious and humble, you proud intellectual, but do not renounce skepticism, at least not in the world of political involvement. Bring the clear simplicity of the commands of the Gospel (where yes means yes and no means no) into a world of unstable moral terms, but fill the bland world of officially codified values with the laughter of the jester and the doubts of the skeptic. For your destiny does not lie in celebration political victories or in flattering your own nation. You are to remain faithful to lost causes, to speak unpleasant truths, and to arouse opposition.[98]

An ethos of irony and skepticism, then, was for Michnik connected to another vital quality of character for both oppositional and democratic politics: modesty. On the one hand, modesty and irony or skepticism balanced one another – modesty prevented a smug dismissal of the weak, the wavering and the confused, while an implacable sense of irony and skepticism kept modesty from degenerating into credulous acceptance of any claim by others. At the same time, modesty and skepticism or irony were mutually supporting. "[M]odesty and humility" about one's righteousness and knowledge were fostered both by Catholic piety and by secular irreverence (the two great intellectual sources of the opposition movement). A proper skepticism would lead one to recognize that "Reason tells us to put down a question mark" when judging others – and ourselves. Intellectuals should remember the many instances of the "treason of the clerks" during the twentieth century – the many intellectuals who succumbed to the temptations of both Communism and Fascism (whether they did so "out of ideological fascination or pragmatic reasoning").The intellectual's values of skepticism and irony, in other words, must be turned inwards, to protect against the dangers of moral arrogance and consequent political folly.[99]

As indicated above, Michnik's claims on behalf of democracy were themselves modest (as opposed to utopian); and modesty was a virtue he identified as important for citizens in a pluralistic democracy. But some degree of modesty, self-doubt, and willingness to compromise was as necessary to the activity of resistance and insurgency as to "normal" democratic politics. Indeed, the need to be forgiving – within limits – and to recognize one's own need for forgiveness may be even greater when living under totalitarianism, even if the basic moral universe one inhabits is more "black and white" than the "gray", morally ambiguous world of democracy. Under totalitarianism, there is nearly no way to act wholly blamelessly. If silence and inaction in the face of totalitarian coercion is a crime – and Michnik seems inclined to agree on this point – then nearly everyone is guilty. Michnik reminds us of Aleksander Wat's judgment that the only answer to the question of how intellectuals should behave under Stalinism was that "They should die". But, Michnik is quick to add, if correct, this is "an answer that one can apply only to oneself, a sacrifice one can ask only of oneself. Anyone who demands such an answer to this question from others is arbitrarily giving himself the right to determine the fates of

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97 LF 146.
98 LF 94-5.
99 LF 94-5, 26, 93.

others. This usually ends badly".[100] And so modesty, as well as a commitment to pluralism, requires the practice of forgiveness.

Modesty is perhaps too vague and soft a word for what Michnik advocates. It may be better to speak of humility – and, as part of humility, even a sense of guilt or shame, of past failing and present inadequacy and the danger of greater failure in the future: for a certain shame "allows the guilty to approach the dilemmas of this world more honestly". And most of us have reason to feel, if not guilty, at least sharply aware of how far we fall short of our ideals. Michnik, again, sought to exemplify this in his advice and his practice regarding his own actions. Thus, in advising Russian dissidents to seek compromise with Gorbachev "at all costs", he urged them to "stop thinking in terms of how right you are and how determined you are to defend your position … my side shared responsibility for the imposition of martial law in Poland, because we had failed to create a language of dialogue. If there is a compromise that breaks down, everyone is responsible" – though not everyone is equally responsible, or bears equal blame (a greater onus is generally on those in power).[101] And, in a remarkable passage – again, speaking both for and to himself, after having cautioned his fellow dissidents against sectarianism – he reflected that "I too will forget all this [when again out of prison and in the underground], I will become blind to these perils. I will not have the energy, time, and courage to be aware of them, to analyze and describe them. That is why I am writing about them today, as I sit safely behind bars on Bialoleka."[102]

This sort of humility is a crucial part of the ethos of a political activist – one that should limit and modulate, though not undermine or drown out, the activist's commitment to bringing change to society. It is no more than that – a quality of character, and one that will never be exemplified by every – and never consistently maintained by any – political actor. But recognizing its importance, in addition to motivating us to strive toward it, also reinforces a commitment to a political process and political institutions that can, as it were, artificially achieve some of the same effects as the cultivation of such an ethos. An implication of an ethos of compromise, toleration, and humility, of irony and skepticism, is the recognition that there are "inescapable limits of the human condition" – and that there must therefore also be limits on what what individuals should be willing or should allow themselves to do;[103] and the acceptance not only of the limits on one's fitness to wield power, but on one's ability to do so. This emphasis on limits brings us full circle – from an embrace of liberal principles and practices, to the development of a strategy and an ethos appropriate to the pursuit of a liberal politics, back to a moral argument for the importance of liberalism, as a political theory that insists on the importance of limits on, and limits to protect, individuals.

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100 LP 184.
101 LF 177, 279; see also ibid. 267.
102 LP 61.
103 LF 73.