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# Introduction

DIRTY HANDS AND BEYOND

*Edward Hall & Andrew Sabl*

ANYONE WHO HAS TOLD others of having taught or written on “political ethics” is familiar with the rejoinder, “Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?” This joke, which may have been fresh a few millennia ago, reflects “a piece of conventional wisdom to the effect that politicians are a good deal worse, morally worse, than the rest of us” (Walzer 1973, 162). An old, long, flattering literature on the nobility of leadership and the dignity of public service runs against a tradition of cynicism also so old that the most ancient school of “democracy,” ancient Athens, institutionalized processes whereby its most prominent orators and officeholders were regularly and publicly audited, indicted, or ostracized, lest their disproportionate power go to their head and endanger the polity’s welfare.<sup>1</sup> This was so even though politics was overwhelmingly non-institutionalized and far from a professional calling or career (a *politikos* was merely someone who spoke often and influentially in the citizen assembly).

The problem is one of power and interest. In theory, and no doubt in their own heads, politicians claim to further ordinary citizens’ interests and channel public power toward common ends. In practice, ordinary citizens often suspect them of furthering their own interests and exerting power in narrow circles of private influence and secret knowledge. As polities grow in size, diversity, and social specialization, and public business becomes ever more technical and

1. Given that Athenian democracy did not include slaves, women, or resident aliens, Athens was in contemporary terms quite far from a democracy. It was arguably a tyranny whose tyrants practiced a form of egalitarianism among themselves in order to muster power against the rest. Yet the influence of its self-perception as a bastion of political equality and rule by “the people” was profound and cannot be ignored.

complex, the participatory methods of Athens—though still objects of nostalgia—become ever less relevant. We rely on politicians more than ever to reach authoritative decisions under conditions of social conflict and disagreement; to produce public goods at a level, and in a variety, that would have dazzled and bewildered the members of all past polities; to administer public business (or rather, select and oversee the specialized administrators who do so); and to regulate enterprises that employ millions and affect billions. Unlike many “professionals,” however, whose specialized training is subject to codes of ethics whose violation may be punished by suspending the right of professional practice, those who make politics their calling are often subject to no code. They are certainly responsible to public opinion, as may or may not provide comfort.

Our extreme reliance on political leaders does not, of course, entail extreme trust. On the contrary, we may feel unable, given problems of scale and complexity, to learn about even a small proportion of politicians’ incompetent or malevolent acts—let alone to do anything about them given the masses arrayed on all sides of political conflicts. To the extent that we do feel a sense of agency, it may be both small and largely illusory. Under what Max Weber ([1919] 2004, 74) called “spiritual proletarianization”—which he equated to a “loss of soul”—the average citizen may choose among partisan or ideological leaders (as well as, these days, among their ephemeral social media cousins, “influencers”), but cannot hope to have a substantial effect on their own. If, against all odds, an ordinary citizen *does* manage through engagement, activism, or internet notoriety to acquire substantial political influence, this does not solve the problem, but merely transforms that citizen into another politically influential figure whom others simultaneously admire, fear, deride, depend on, and follow (or unfollow). There is no reason to believe that amateurs will respond to such pressure better than professionals.

Political ethics is therefore a complex and paradoxical business. Even those who stress politicians’ propensity for evil must acknowledge their role in determining and guaranteeing indispensable public goods. Even those who see politicians as driven by a zeal for public service and the desire to win fame for able stewardship in difficult times must acknowledge that winning office requires compromising with the powerful as well repeating oversimplified messages to sway a mass electorate—and that holding office may produce cluelessness as well as corruption. And the details of politics in both senses, the wielding and the seeking of power, are fiendishly complex and constantly changing. Given all of that, the *second* thing that scholars of political ethics are continually told—“well, you must have a lot to talk about these days”—is predictable without being even slightly wrong.

## The Scope of This Book

This handbook is intended to provide a theoretically interesting overview of the central questions of political ethics. The envisioned audience is undergraduate students as well as more advanced scholars seeking concise, though learned, introductions to the ways these topics are addressed in political theory and political philosophy (the difference between the two need not detain us here). Our contributors are not, for the most part, in the business of directly commenting on the specific political controversies that currently exercise political commentators, activists, and engaged citizens. So the chapters that follow do not attempt to definitively outline the ethical misdeeds of the Trump administration (and not just because that would take a frighteningly long time) or pass ethical judgments on other leading politicians of the day. Instead they seek to help readers make sense of the ethical dimensions of political life at some distance from the concrete political controversies of the present, in order to vividly illustrate what is involved in theorizing about politics in an ethically demanding but clear-eyed way. Put another way, though the following chapters do not attempt to straightforwardly instruct readers what they should *do* about many specific issues of contemporary political concern, they demonstrate how we must *think* and what we must think about if we are to make responsible political judgments about such issues.<sup>2</sup>

Each chapter's author or authors offer a unique perspective on the issue they address. All noted scholars, they bring to their contributions their own theses and organizing concepts, and defend their own conclusions. Thus the chapters that follow are not intended to be "objective" or "impartial" summaries of existing work in political ethics. It may be most appropriate to regard them as careful interventions in long-standing debates in the field. The chapters share, then, two primary aims. First, to offer accurate and informative introductions to the topics at hand; second, to spur thought, debate, and discussion by defending a distinct viewpoint on that topic.

This handbook is not a manual for those seeking direct practical strategies for opposing clear political evil. The problems that we address—lies and

2. This explains why we have not included selections by politicians, activists, or civil society leaders in this handbook (though we believe that a good course on political ethics will incorporate such material). We also think that many instructors who assign this handbook will supplement the chapters with topical case studies, as both coeditors themselves do when teaching courses on political ethics.

deception in politics, political compromises, the nature of political integrity, poor representation, leadership in a democracy, excessive partisanship, the ethics of public administration, political corruption, the ethics of public whistleblowing, states of emergency, and lobbying—may be considered relatively minor compared to various “evil” political acts, from directly inciting violence to imprisoning one’s political opponents, that unfortunately are not as rare as they should be. But many of these evils are, frankly, obviously wrong, as even autocrats tend to admit in the sense that they deny doing such things rather than defending having done them. For this reason, they are *less theoretically interesting* than the issues tackled in this volume. When one reflects on the topics addressed here, it is genuinely hard to know what to think and do, and it is not clear how we might design institutions, whether in government or civil society, to make them come out right. This makes them gripping topics of normative political inquiry. While there is much to be said about obvious cases of evil political conduct from the perspective of comparative politics or civic activism, there is less of interest to be said from the perspective of scholarly political ethics.

In the remainder of the introduction, we focus on the question of whether or not good political leaders must sometimes violate moral principles and constraints in order to do the right political thing. This is known as the “problem of dirty hands.” It is the most apposite entry point into our subject because, in one way or another, it unavoidably affects one’s understanding of numerous other topics in political ethics.

## The Problem of Dirty Hands

In one of the most famous passages in *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli ([1532] 1998, 61) declares that would-be rulers must “learn to be able not to be good.” One tempting reaction, corresponding to the “contradiction in terms” quip just mentioned, is to say that Machiavelli need not have worried: most politicians seem to learn this quickly and well. A more serious and appropriate response, however, is to find disquieting—especially because they can be so seductive—Machiavelli’s bold claims about politics’ rightful enmity toward morality. Properly understood, Machiavelli does not suggest that politicians must act immorally if they are to successfully pursue their self-interest. If he had said that, those commentators who call *The Prince* simply “a handbook for gangsters” would be right; Machiavelli’s work would be simultaneously entertaining and appalling—like a gangster movie—but not worth its reputation

and our continued interest.<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli's central point is that a strict adherence to conventional moral standards would leave the prince unable to pursue a set of *worthy political ends* that we all have reason to value highly (see, e.g., Philp 2007, 37–54). It is this idea of Machiavelli's that is genuinely perturbing because it suggests that good politicians cannot be morally good people *and that we should not want them to be*.

The question of whether or not political leaders should sometimes breach significant moral principles and constraints in order to bring about valuable political ends has been known as the problem of dirty hands since Michael Walzer's (1973) article containing that phrase, borrowed from Jean-Paul Sartre's ([1948] 1989) play. According to advocates of the dirty hands thesis, addressing the demands of politics does sometimes require politicians to act "badly," that is, in ways that are *morally* wrong. And if they do, they must accept that they are *guilty*, morally speaking—even if in the end, they chose the correct thing to do, all things considered.

The view that political conduct that is rightly admired often requires moral actions that are rightly condemned generates many troubling questions. How can we be sure that politicians sometimes absolutely *have* to act badly? If these "bad" actions succeed in realizing or promoting genuinely valuable ends, up to and including the physical survival of some of the people for whose welfare the politician is responsible, in what sense does the politician do moral wrong, and why exactly should they feel *guilty*? Most centrally, the dirty hands problem demands that we think hard about the kind of people we want to govern us. How much weight do we want them to give to moral considerations when they are deciding how to act? What character traits and moral dispositions do we need our political leaders to display?

Starting with Walzer's brilliant treatment, the problem of dirty hands has cast a long shadow over the discipline of political ethics. It is not difficult to see why. It not only touches on something of great practical significance for our understanding of political conduct but also raises deep philosophical questions about the relationship between morality and politics that have fundamental implications for understanding the nature and authority of both.

Walzer employs two examples that he claims illustrate why politicians, even if they act rightly, are likely to dirty their hands. The first involves an election candidate who must make a shady deal with a corrupt ward boss who promises

3. Isaiah Berlin (1979, 35) reports Bertrand Russell as endorsing this view. Russell's (2004) *A History of Western Philosophy* reflects a similar sentiment, but lacks this precise formulation.

them votes in exchange for construction contracts. The point of this case is to show why we are right to disparage politicians who want to win elections yet refuse to get their hands dirty. “Assuming that this particular election ought to be won,” Walzer (2007, 282) claims, this kind of disparagement is apt: “If the candidate did not want to get his hands dirty, he should have stayed at home. . . . His decision to run was a commitment (to all of us who think the election important) to try to win that is, to do within rational limits whatever is necessary to win.” For Walzer, we know that the candidate acts—and crucially, feels and reflects—appropriately if they are reluctant to make the deal, but does so anyway.

Walzer’s second example concerns a newly elected politician asked to authorize the torture of a rebel leader who allegedly knows the location of a number of hidden bombs that will shortly detonate, causing great harm and suffering. Just as in the case of the candidate making a deal with a corrupt ward boss, Walzer (2007, 283) insists that in this scenario, the politician should violate the moral prohibition at hand, “convinced that he must do so for the sake of the people who might otherwise die in the explosions—even though he believes that torture is wrong, indeed abominable, not just sometimes, but always.” In both instances, Walzer stresses that it is not sufficient to say that the politician should merely feel “very badly” about their decision. Politicians who dirty their hands in these ways, Walzer (2007, 279) asserts, should feel not just badly but also *guilty*: they are “guilty of a moral wrong” and can no longer claim to govern innocently. Indeed, a politician’s “willingness to acknowledge and bear [his guilt] . . . is the only evidence he can offer us, both that he is not too good for politics and that he is good enough” (Walzer 2007, 284).

To be sure, there are grounds for holding that the torture example is extremely unhappy given the savage influence of such arguments on everyone from the French in Algeria to the US military in Iraq (Horne 1997; Mayer 2008). In particular, many have maintained that Walzer’s stylized illustration is radically untrue to the real-world case in which authorities are prone to resort to torture when they are by no means sure that the victim knows anything or the ticking bomb even exists (Scarry 2004; Shue 2004).<sup>4</sup> Still, the larger

4. In perhaps the closest real-world case to an official’s facing a decision to resort to torture to prevent mass destruction—in Algeria, where authorities felt sure that a suspect in custody had an accomplice who had planted a bomb at the gasworks—the official in question decided against torture, and there turned out to be no such bomb (Horne 1997, 203–4). As Jane Mayer (2008) documents, portrayals of torture in popular culture not only severely distorted the



point remains relevant to cases that do not entail defying the absolute prohibition that international law as well as morality has placed on torture: decisions by political, military, and security force actors regarding “the use of force”—a pleasant euphemism—that effectively concern whether maiming or killing people is necessary to achieve higher state purposes.

These two evocative examples, which have now become part of the folklore of political ethics, illustrate Walzer’s central point: that good politicians will, when necessary, dirty their hands *and accept that they have done so*. As Walzer (2007, 284) provocatively puts it, “Here is the moral politician. It is by his dirty hands that we know him. If he were a moral man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean.” On this view, if necessity demands it, the good politician may have to lie, deceive, break their promises, manipulate others, compromise with morally dishonorable adversaries, even authorize murder and violence, and so on (Williams 1981, 58; Parrish 2007, 2). Outside politics, acting in this way is maligned; in politics, it can be laudable. Indeed, Bernard Williams (1981, 60) claims that “it is a predictable and probable hazard of public life that there will be these situations in which something morally disagreeable is clearly required,” and “to refuse on moral grounds ever to do anything of that sort is more than likely to mean that one cannot seriously pursue even the moral ends of politics.”

Moving beyond, though building on, Walzer’s specific argument, *why* is politics especially likely to generate situations in which political leaders have to dirty their hands? Three reasons seem particularly relevant. First, as Weber famously said, the political state exercises a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercion and violence. Many commentators insist that this matters because it explains why politicians *can* readily dirty their hands:

Politicians command the resources of the state in pursuit of their ends. They command not only those means of securing the continuing stability of their own regime, but those means—armed forces, intelligence, counter-intelligence and anti-terrorist personnel, diplomatic staff, foreign agents, immigration officers—that are necessary to defend the integrity of its

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public’s sense of how likely ticking bomb scenarios in fact are, and how certain political actors and security agents can be that such situations are occurring in real time, but also demonstrably influenced the decisions of US policy makers, who ended up approving the torture of suspects who turned out to know nothing.

borders and its national security. In sum, politicians have the means at their disposal to do considerable wrongs both to their own citizens and to those of other states. (Archard 2013, 780; see also Parrish 2007, 13)

One might add that these considerable means of doing wrong are entrusted to a state monopoly for a reason. If state actors do not deploy them, domestic insurgents, other states, or international groups will be able to do so with impunity, and at the risk of great harm to those whom the squeamish politicians were supposed to protect.

This brings up the second major reason that politics is the distinctive realm of dirty hands: politicians have to act in a climate populated by opponents and adversaries who often act ruthlessly and deviously. In other words, to appreciate the strategic nature of politics, the competitive and resolutely grubby environment in which many politicians have to act, is to change our expectations of political ethics. To some degree, it is futile to expect politicians to adhere to the stringent demands of morality if their adversaries will not. Thus one might say that the nonideal circumstances in which a politician must act “sharply limi[t] the range of effective actions available to the serious politician” (Parrish 2007, 13).

The third reason concerns not the harm politicians can inflict but rather the collective benefits for which they are responsible, ranging from basic security to order, the provision of public goods and other forms of welfare, and retributive and distributive justice. It also matters that in acting to further such goals, politicians act as our representatives, trying—or at least claiming to try—to do well for us (Archard 2013, 779–80).<sup>5</sup> For this reason, it is frequently argued, claims of *necessity* carry a special weight in politics (Parrish 2007, 14). Unlike most of us, politicians have a responsibility to secure specific goods and prevent specific harms. They cannot avoid some blame if they fail in their responsibilities due to constraints—including moral constraints—that they could have overcome.

In focusing on these considerations, theorists of dirty hands insist on the reality of genuine moral dilemmas in public life. That is, they stress that from time to time, politicians—or at least politicians holding sufficiently high office,

5. The fact that politicians act for us has generated a fascinating debate about the extent to which members of the public might be said to have dirty hands if their leaders do—a question sometimes called that of “democratic dirty hands.” For discussions, see Archard 2013; Coady 2018; Hollis 1982; Thompson 1998.

especially executive or military—are likely to find themselves beset by situations in which there is “nothing one can do that will not qualify as morally wrong in some relevant respect, where one is literally damned if one does and damned if one doesn’t” (Parrish 2007, 4). In other words, there can be situations in which there is no straightforwardly *right* thing to do; in which, regardless of how one chooses to behave, any act will leave a moral *remainder*, an “uncancelled moral disagreeableness” that is not silenced by the fact that the agent may have acted as best as they could in an all-things-considered sense (Williams 1981, 61; on moral remainders, see also Honig 1993). Moreover, theorists of dirty hands often do not merely claim that the dirty hands thesis captures a significant fact about the reality of political life. They contend in addition that politicians’ ability to *acknowledge* that politically justified actions can generate moral remainders is likely to have practical benefits. Only those politicians who recognize that the right political decision may have serious moral costs are, on this view, likely to be “reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary.” Moreover, and at least as important, only those politicians who are attuned to the costs of so acting are said to “have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary” (Williams 1981, 62).

The dirty hands thesis is puzzling. It seems, to say the least, paradoxical to describe an action—such as authorizing deadly force—as being both the right and wrong thing to do *at the same time*. But this is precisely what the dirty hands thesis asserts. The point is not that overall, making deals with corrupt ward bosses or using threats of deadly force to combat terrorism is morally justified by the good consequences of so doing. These acts remain wrong, and this wrongness is not outweighed by the good consequences of violating moral norms. They are nonetheless taken to be politically necessary (for an admirably clear discussion of this point, see Archard 2013, 778).

This troubles many philosophers because, according to the most dominant approaches in moral philosophy, these kinds of moral dilemmas must in the end be *unreal*. In other words (posit these moral theories), politicians might feel as if they are in the grip of a genuine ethical dilemma. If they reason clearly, however, they will recognize that there is not really a conflict between what morality prescribes and how they ought to act in politics—since morality is precisely the inquiry that tells us how we ought to act. Utilitarians, for example, stress that the correctness of a course of action is fully determined by the consequences of the decision at hand. Thus if authorizing the torture of the rebel leader is expected, on the best knowledge available, to produce the best

consequences overall, it must therefore be the morally right thing to do, our scruples about torture notwithstanding. Of course, it might be *hard* for the politician asked to authorize the decision to torture the rebel leader to do so, and they may well feel bad about having done so. But when it comes down to it, this is not a genuine dilemma because it is clear that, *from the moral point of view*, the agent must act so as to bring about the best consequences overall. The hands of the agent who does so will hence be clean.

In one of the most engaging defenses of this view, Kai Nielsen (2007, 26) contends that although politicians who find themselves in difficult situations may well feel great psychological anguish and distress about their decisions, it is a philosophical error to suppose that there are *any* acts that we can say should never be done regardless of their consequences. This is because, according to Nielsen, the first responsibility of politics is to do the “lesser” evil. What this involves varies from case to case, and can require politicians to violate standard moral norms. But when it comes down to it, in doing the lesser evil they commit no wrong; they may *feel* guilty, but they are not *actually* guilty (Nielsen 2007, 20–21). Thus when discussing Walzer’s second example (torture), Nielsen is adamant that the politician has not departed from the bounds of morality or failed to reason in accordance with the moral point of view. Instead, they have done something difficult that “*everything considered*, was the right thing to do in that circumstance” (Nielsen 2007, 30).

Deontologists—those who believe that certain actions are mandatory, regardless of the consequences, and that certain others are prohibited, regardless of the costs of inaction—disbelieve the reality of dirty hands for rather different reasons. In its most stringent versions, chiefly in the work of Immanuel Kant, deontology presents moral requirements as absolute or “categorical” requirements of reason valid for all rational agents regardless of the circumstances. The moral law set forth by practical reason must always be respected, no matter how the good the consequences of transgressing that law. So if bartering with a corrupt ward boss is immoral, and torture really is wrong “not just sometimes, but always,” then no politician may ever do either. On this view, good political ends may not be brought about by doing evil. Though politicians may be *tempted* to disregard morality if they find themselves in the kinds of cases Walzer highlights, deontological approaches to ethics imply that moral politicians will not opt to dirty their hands—or put differently, that actual politicians must not do so.

Utilitarians and deontologists think in these terms because they hold that morality is both *comprehensive* and *dominant*. Morality is supposed to be

relevant to all decisions, and if moral considerations conflict with other considerations, the former trump the latter (Coady 2018). Theorists of dirty hands accept that morality is comprehensive; on their view, moral considerations not only are relevant when we assess political action but must, if actors are to retain proper scruples, be *seen* to be relevant too. This is why they hold that a “lingering sense of wrongness should be preserved in our moral judgement of the politician who violates moral principles” (Thompson 1998, 13). Yet they deny that morality is dominant, that it always trumps countervailing considerations, such as those of political necessity and responsibility, or in some cases, political expediency. This is why Walzer claims that the dirty hands thesis tries to make sense of how we can refuse moral absolutism and accept the relevance of consequentialist decision-making in politics “without denying the reality of the moral dilemma” (Walzer 2007, 279).

In this regard, dirty hands theorists argue that political necessity overrides but does not silence morality. Those who think that morality is *irrelevant* to politics, in effect denying its comprehensiveness (such as advocates of crude versions of *Realpolitik*), do not believe that genuine dilemmas of the sort we are concerned with exist. It is important to recognize that though they believe morality cannot claim to straightforwardly legislate for politics, dirty hands theorists *are not* crude realists of that sort.

The philosophical debate between advocates of dirty hands and their utilitarian and deontological opponents is nuanced, and hence too complex to summarize here. As with many other paradoxes, the dirty hands thesis is bewildering and bemusing. Utilitarians are apt to reject it on these grounds, holding that the entire setup of the problem rests on a “conceptual confusion with unfortunate moral residues” (Nielsen 2007, 26). In response, dirty hands theorists raise important questions about whether or not utilitarianism can explain *why* politicians who have violated conventional moral standards should feel anguish and regret for their actions, which seems hard to deny (for this point, see Williams 1981). Many deontologists also maintain that their view is not as stringent and unbending as it may seem, and that exceptions to moral norms can be permitted in situations where this is genuinely required (for a general summary of these moves, see Coady 2018; Parrish 2007, 9). In response, dirty hands theorists reply that although these more flexible versions of deontology reach the right view about how politicians should behave in these cases, they ironically fail to capture the perspective at the beating heart of the dirty hands thesis: that if politicians violate moral norms, they have still committed a moral wrong, even if so acting was on the whole the best thing

to do. In other words, flexible deontology, as with all forms of moral reasoning that regard morality as determinate and necessarily dominant, in cases of dirty hands yields the right decision but the wrong view of what is going on—because in such cases the right thing to do is precisely not the *morally* right thing to do.

An alternative way of trying to make sense of the dirty hands thesis in more conventional terms is by invoking the idea of a specific “role morality” for politicians. On such views, alongside a multitude of general moral principles, rules, and obligations, there exist a specific or distinctive set of moral requirements that one inherits when one occupies a particular social role. These two sets of requirements can come into conflict, “as when the lawyer’s obligation to provide her client with the best defence and preserve confidentiality can conflict with the demands of impartial justice” (Coady 2018). Thus one might contend that we can explain why political demands sometimes trump moral prescriptions by asserting that when one becomes a politician, one inherits a host of distinctive obligations and duties that override general moral principles and standards.

This route has the advantage of going a long way toward dissolving the paradox at the heart of the dirty hands thesis by explaining why political action may sometimes conflict with conventional morality without, as it were, requiring us to argue that some nonmoral set of considerations trump moral ones. Instead, according to this approach, a distinctive set of moral obligations can supersede a moral general set in some circumstances. The role morality argument also makes clear that there are some political figures who are *not* permitted or required to get their hands dirty, and why. If presidents and prime ministers have special role obligations deriving from their awesome responsibilities, the heads of subway or sanitation authorities probably do not; whatever dilemmas and hard choices they face are no different from those confronting people with substantial private responsibilities.

Yet as C. A. J. Coady perceptively remarks, the central problem with this move is that we ordinarily think that the special obligations and duties associated with different roles are underpinned “by general moral considerations[,] since it is only those roles that can be morally supported by quite general moral considerations that will have a role morality.” This explains why, even if the Mafia code may stipulate that snitches must be murdered, it stretches credulity to claim that this is, for a Mafia professional assassin, “a moral imperative of any sort” (Coady 2018). On the other hand, we may accept that lawyers have a genuine obligation to do the best they can for their clients because of the

goods that we believe adversarial legal systems promote. (When doing so, we also insist that lawyers must act within certain moral bounds that are consistent with the laudable ends that the legal system promotes; contrary to popular belief, for example, a lawyer is not permitted to tell actual lies in court or written briefs.) In other words, we may believe that there is indeed a role morality for lawyers, but this is because the ends that being a lawyer promotes are compatible with morality properly understood.

If this is the right way to conceive of role morality, then it is hard to see how it can offer a promising route for making sense of the dirty hands thesis. Either the specific obligations of political office are sanctioned in the end by more general moral principles, in which case the purported tension between responsible political decision-making and morality dissolves, or (as in the case of the Mafia assassin) the distinctive obligations associated with the political role lack normative standing altogether. Perhaps the problem of dirty hands is a paradox we cannot do without.

In many respects, these theoretical disagreements about how we should grasp our intuition that politicians should sometimes violate conventional moral standards reflect more fundamental ones about how to philosophize about ethics and politics in the first place. Walzer and Williams, for instance, share a particular view about how we should regard moral feelings and sentiments—as crucial sources for philosophical reflection that we must try to make sense of, rather than trying to reduce to determinate decisions in the name of “reason”—that set them apart from many, if not all, of their moralist opponents, who deny the reality of genuine ethical dilemmas. Walzer and Williams, who may be called “realists” in this antimoralist sense, embrace a certain view of the limits of rationalism in ethics and politics. Some philosophical moralists would argue that if the dirty hands thesis entails this kind of irrationalism, we ought to disregard it. The realists would suggest, on the contrary, that this kind of moralism provides false consolation: it is structurally engineered to obscure troubling truths about the nature of political action, from which we should not avert our eyes.

The problem of dirty hands is unquestionably a vital topic in political ethics, and one that continues to repay study and analysis. Yet the contours of that debate often presuppose various perspectives about the challenges of political ethics, and the structure and nature of political problems, that warrant more fine-grained attention. For example, advocates of the dirty hands thesis frequently observe that we cannot expect politicians to adhere to standards of veracity and truthfulness that we insist on in nonpolitical contexts. But this



suggestion regarding truth telling rests on highly involved claims about everything from history to sociology to evolutionary psychology, on what truth is, and why human beings might benefit from gathering and conveying truthful opinions (Williams 2004). Similarly, commentators remark that politicians often have to make morally shady compromises or act in ways that threaten their personal integrity, without examining how we should think about the nature of political compromise, or whether or not there might be such a thing as a distinctively political form of integrity. Likewise, as noted earlier, advocates of the dirty hands thesis repeatedly stress the significance of the idea that politicians are our representatives without delving into the complex debates about the nature and ethics of representation in political theory.

By addressing these topics and many more—including the value of partisanship in politics, the ethics of public administration, whistleblowing, emergency powers, political corruption, and the activity known as lobbying—all the chapters in this book, in one way or another, go *beyond* the problem of dirty hands in order to explore the ethical dimensions of political conduct and practice in the twenty-first century.

## Outline of the Book

In chapter 1, Richard Bellamy focuses on lying and deception in politics. After canvassing the work of a number of important thinkers in the history of philosophy—including Plato, Machiavelli, Kant, and Arendt—and showing how their diverse positions are reflected in contemporary theorists' and practitioners' views, he proceeds to scrutinize analytically the concepts of lying and deception, explaining why they are often regarded to be normatively objectionable. Following this, Bellamy discusses the extent to which lying and deception are endemic to liberal democratic politics, and how democracy might be more effective in promoting truthfulness. His analysis avoids both undue optimism and unwarranted pessimism. There are, Bellamy insists, good grounds for holding that in politics, leaders have both pragmatic and principled reasons to be truthful, at least to some degree.

In the next chapter, Alin Fumurescu examines how we should regard political compromises from a moral point of view. Fumurescu's central contention is that appreciating the forgotten history of compromise can help us to correct various inadequacies endemic to work on compromise in contemporary political theory. While the chapter's rich and subtle argument defies easy summary, Fumurescu's analysis suggests on the whole that people are



unwilling to compromise when they feel that a particular compromise threatens their group or individual identity. Moreover, he insists that we ought to be deeply suspicious of the search for a neutral or objective standpoint from which we can determine which political compromises are morally acceptable and which are beyond the moral pale.

In chapter 3, Edward Hall asks whether or not we can meaningfully evaluate political conduct by asking if politicians have acted with integrity. To do so, he problematizes common ways that integrity is invoked in popular discourse—roughly, as a synonym for basic moral decency—before arguing that most views of integrity proposed by moral philosophers unfortunately suggest that political integrity may be an oxymoron. Hall, however, offers an account of a distinctively political kind of integrity that he believes can play a useful role in our evaluations of political conduct, drawing out both the negative and positive elements of such an account. On his view, politicians who display a kind of principled commitment to political goals and ends, while avoiding various forms of malfeasance, can claim to act with political integrity even while having to engage in certain kinds of behavior that would seem to threaten one's integrity in nonpolitical contexts.

The next two chapters address issues at the nexus of democratic theory and political ethics. In chapter 4, Suzanne Dovi and Jesse McCain ask what it means to be a good representative. Addressing this question, they contend, requires thinking about what kinds of behavior help the represented to hold politicians to account. In this sense, good representatives facilitate, rather than impede, the political autonomy of the represented. At a minimum, this requires representatives to allow the represented to meaningfully reflect on and influence policy decisions, while also assessing and sanctioning the decisions that politicians make. Drawing on this discussion, Dovi and McCain highlight two nefarious tactics that bad representatives can adopt to promote a worrying kind of “ethical obliviousness”—tactics which they term “self-contradiction” and “disdainful distraction.” This is an enlightening methodological move. In accord with what Jonathan Allen (2001) has called “negative morality” (following Shklar 1990), they believe that good representation is best illuminated by examining the vices or misbehaviors that are commonly present instead of positing exalted ideals that will rarely be approached.

Following them, Eric Beerbohm addresses the fraught relationship between leadership and representation. Though many people regard leadership as a counterrepresentational force, Beerbohm shows how leadership can be reconciled with representation by offering a philosophically rich account of

how we can say that leaders and followers act together. Beerbohm criticizes agent- and follower-centered models of political leadership before offering his own account, which unifies the attractive features of these models. In making these points, Beerbohm does not shy away from the fact that leadership *can* threaten democracy, but he insists that certain forms of leadership are democratically valuable as they make possible a distinctive form of joint activity.

Nowadays complaints about the partisan nature of politics are legion. In chapter 6, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum offer a normative defense of parties and political partisanship in the face of detractors who contend that democratic political life would be improved if people refrained from experiencing or engaging in politics as partisans and instead weighed rival claims and political proposals impartially in order to secure the common good for all. They argue that parties play an indispensable role in democratic politics in three distinct ways: by fostering forms of political inclusivity; by offering comprehensive stories about the great economic, social, and moral challenges of the day; and by activating the disposition to compromise that is essential to democratic politics. Muirhead and Rosenblum contend that these three values of parties and partisanship are essential ingredients of a democratic political life, and that those who see them as merely strategic virtues operate with a naive, overly moralistic view of politics.

Most work in political ethics grapples with the conduct of politicians and elected officials. This has meant that political ethicists have had little to say about the duties of civil servants, about how they (and we) should regard the obligations they have toward elected officials and the public they serve. Joseph Heath's chapter is an excellent resource for making sense of the ethics of public administration. Heath charts three different ways in which we can think about the principles and obligations that apply to civil servants. He terms these the hierarchical model (which sees civil servants as mere implementers of policy decisions made by elected officials), the popular model (which sees civil servants as fundamentally accountable to the public), and the vocational model (which sees civil servants as being tasked with securing a set of relatively independent purposes of the state). After highlighting the problems and shortcomings with standard formulations of all three, Heath endorses a qualified account of the vocational model. He argues that although the professional ethics of civil servants must—of course—place great weight on the goals and ends of elected officials, the demands of the role are not wholly subordinate to those goals because the executive branch itself makes a distinctive contribution to the “output legitimacy” of the state—its

ability to win popular support not through consent but rather through good performance.

In chapter 8, Elizabeth David-Barrett and Mark Philp address political corruption. They express deep skepticism that the concept of political corruption can provide a clear set of universal standards that we can employ to evaluate the behavior of political agents. They argue, in fact, that seeking universalistic accounts of these matters prevents us from recognizing the diverse range of local factors and expectations that inevitably shape the conduct of political agents. In making these claims, David-Barrett and Philp criticize economic approaches to political corruption, explore the nature of conflicts of interest in neoliberal systems of government, and discuss the shortcomings of moves to build political integrity by introducing codes of conduct for elected officials. They provocatively contend that we must think about political corruption in terms of local circumstances. In so doing, their chapter—like many in this book—illustrates the potential benefits of a realist approach to this contested topic.

Michele Bocchiola and Emanuela Ceva's chapter explores the ethically fraught practice of whistleblowing, asking how whistleblowing can be justified and whether, in certain circumstances, blowing the whistle might be not merely admirable but instead a duty or obligation. They offer an analytically precise definition of whistleblowing, illustrating its relationship to and from other forms of disclosure, and explore the limitations of approaches that attempt to justify whistleblowing in terms of requirements to prevent harm or avoid certain kinds of complicity. They then offer a distinct "relational" account. This view intriguingly justifies whistleblowing as an instance of the duty of "office accountability": actors must blow the whistle if they learn that their organization has been acting in ways that contradict its legitimate mandate. In this sense, the authors derive a stringent duty for institutional organizations to secure safe channels for whistleblowing in order to uphold answerability practices between role occupants. Their challenging and unorthodox argument, while doing justice to more common approaches, promises an entirely new framework.

Nomi Claire Lazar's chapter takes on the ethics of state action in emergencies. She begins by asserting that even the gathering of basic factual information may be practically and ethically difficult in emergencies, before then probing the literature on who gets to decide when and if law applies as usual. After assessing the positions of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, Lazar proceeds to explain the problems that both deontological and consequentialist thinkers have in approaching crises, paying particular attention to flexible forms of deontological reasoning. She then inquires into the fraught relationship between

emergency decision-making and the rule of law. In conclusion, she contends that ensuring good action in emergency conditions requires the existence, before the emergency begins, of trusting relationships between citizens and their leaders.

In chapter 11, Phil Parvin offers a bracing account of the threat that lobbying currently poses to democratic politics. Drawing on a wealth of empirical work in political science, he maintains that liberal democracies have manifestly failed to ensure that lobby organizations operate in a manner consistent with fundamental liberal democratic principles. This is perhaps not a surprising claim. But Parvin also argues that it is highly likely that states are no longer in a position to implement reforms that can redress these problems. This is because they have failed to ensure that representative institutions are impartial with regard to conflicts of interest, to secure a background distribution of resources that can stop power concentrating in the hands of elites, or to sustain a diverse range of interest groups that can represent a wide array of citizens. In light of this, Parvin contends that lobbying, as currently practiced, not only inhibits states from acting in accordance with fundamental liberal democratic principles but also, much more worryingly, stops states from reforming themselves so that they can live up to their foundational principles. To this end, Parvin suggests that there are grounds for holding that lobbying is the most urgent of all problems faced by liberal states, and one that political theorists continue to ignore at their peril.

In an afterword, Andrew Sabl discusses the lessons for political ethics of quasi-authoritarian populism and the erosion of democracy that it threatens. He links political ethics to constitutional institutions and norms in that both frustrate the immediate, visceral desires of leaders and citizens alike. Populism's appeal thus reminds us that shortsightedness and partiality are natural, whereas political ethics and the constitutional sea in which it swims are artificial, conventional, and opposed to many of our gut instincts. Populism to this extent involves a deliberate rebellion against hard-won, socially learned liberal democratic institutions by those who benefit more, in the short run at least, from grabbing whatever they can. But it also involves real ethical (or antiethical) innovations: redefinitions of desert and justice, the conversion of aristocratic exclusivity into a mass version based on ethnicity, the transformation of despotism into a mass version whereby masses take vicarious joy in the leader's ability to rule by caprice. Against these reversions and innovations, Sabl argues, we can only reprise and reassert political ethics' old and enduring insight: that all of us benefit more, in the long run, from rules and norms that apply to

all than by our team's seizing momentary spoils on the expectation that the other team will someday steal them back. To this extent, the proper response to populism is not to question political ethics but instead to double down on its lessons—as the authors of this volume have done.

This book supports a particular approach to thinking about how theoretical insights are related to real-world events—an approach that can be regarded as “realist” in the best sense of that term. The majority of the chapters that follow implicitly explore how the analysis of real politics can improve our understanding of political ethics by helping us to arrive at ethical insights and normative principles that derive from the peculiar circumstances of politics, rather than trying to draw lessons from the small-scale, relatively intimate, and low-stakes circumstances of private life that may not be relevant to politics at all. The theoretical insights gained have real-world relevance not in the sense of telling us exactly what to do but more in the sense of making us wiser and less credulous concerning the threats we face. For instance, realist theory and experience alike, with the former informed by the latter, suggest that ethical standards are neither eternal nor known to all rational beings. They are best regarded as the result of mental habits that derive from past and present political action. And our attachment to those standards may, for better or worse, be weakened or undone given enough experience of their absence, and enough political action dedicated to destroying them.

Thus the prevailing tone of these chapters is one of engaged realism and/or mitigated pessimism. The authors do not shrink from documenting the ethical problems endemic to politics and do not pretend that putting forth glittering normative ideals will make those problems go away. But they also refuse to retreat into a cynicism in which power is politics' only currency and self-interest its only ethical standard. Provided that we recognize politics to be a complex and imperfect business that no theory can render fully comprehensible and no rule can render fully moral, we can reach solid (though always disputable) judgments. Such judgments can hope to distinguish better political conduct from worse, and can guide attempts to reform institutions so that they might address the problems of politics a little better than they otherwise would. It is in that sense, perhaps only in that sense, that political ethics need not be a contradiction in terms.

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