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Machiavellian Variations, or When Moral Convictions and Political Duties Collide

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Abstract
Commenting on Michael Walzer's essay, the author adopts a perspective that traces back to Machiavelli. In this view, 'dirty hands' is a true problem faced by politicians, not a philosophical fiction or a moral quandary resulting from wrong reasoning. 'Dirty hands' results from the collision of two spheres of human action -morality and politics- which entail different duties; it concerns actions which have extremely serious public consequences and therefore applies eminently to politicians and the public sphere. The author examines different scenarios to elicit a clear view of the specificity of this problem, which is not analogous to the conventional issue of immorality in politics. 'Dirty hands' is a problem that cannot be avoided by politicians, because they have responsibility over the ultimate decisions; it follows that people who wish not to dirty their hands should thus refrain from entering the political realm.

Keywords Dirty hands · Morality · Politics · Niccolò Machiavelli · Michael Walzer

Reading Michael Walzer's *Political Action: the Problem of Dirty Hands* (1973) fifty years after its publication reminds us of the reasons why this essay has enjoyed such popularity and high standing among moral and political theorists: the balance of razor-sharp arguments and appropriate exemplification through the history of political thought is quite remarkable; the style is analytical but history is there to support every argument; the reader feels both the urgency of the topic (the Vietnam war was still on) and the eternity of the problem, which has been faced by generations of statesmen.

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In this essay I will argue that Walzer meritoriously reproposed the issue of the conflict between moral values and political ends, which I will interpret in a more restricted way, as comprising only actions which affect a large population or an entire State and which have dramatic public consequences. The problem of dirty hands is exquisitely political because politics is the realm where decisions affecting all citizens are made, their happiness and misery and, sometimes, their life or death. It arises from the collision of two spheres of human action which entail different duties and it is dramatic because the true politician realizes that saving the State, the common good of citizens, has priority over one's moral convictions. I will conclude that the problem of dirty hands reveals the dramatic side of politics because doing what is politically right does not morally exonerate the politician: it leaves us with a good statesman and a bad human being.

Walzer famously took the name of the problem he wanted to examine from Jean-Paul Sartre's 1948 play *Les mains sales* [Dirty Hands]. In the play, the Communist leader Hoerderer concludes his response to the anarchist Hugo by rhetorically asking "Do you think you can govern innocently?" This is actually a very old question, possibly as old as politics itself -witness Solon's rejection of the alluring offer of tyranny in the 6th century BCE.[1] In France, the staunch revolutionary Saint-Just had already answered it negatively, famously stating that "Nobody can rule guiltlessly".[2] Walzer sees the problem of dirty hands as a moral issue concerning all human beings and not only philosophers or politicians; for it has to do with the very possibility of living a moral life while discharging the duties of one's office. Walzer acknowledges one can get dirty hands in private life but focuses on political action as he is only interested in the dilemma as faced by politicians. He explains very well "that a particular act of government (in a political party or in the state) may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong" (Walzer: 161). On the other hand, failure to make the right but difficult decision would result in not fulfilling the duties of one's office. Walzer thus concludes that "The notion of dirty hands derives from an effort to refuse 'absolutism' without denying the reality of the moral dilemma" (162).

I find it significant, and even amusing, that Walzer begins his answer by offering "a piece of conventional wisdom to the effect that politicians are a good deal worse, morally worse, than the rest of us (it is the wisdom of the rest of us)" (162).[3] Perhaps this sounded appropriate in Richard Nixon's America and perhaps it suits people who deal with *la politique politicienne*, but I am not convinced this is a general rule. Politics, admittedly in rare and exalted moments, is also the realm of elevated ideals and of great realizations: one Martin Luther King Jr. or one Gandhi redeem thousands of petty carpetbaggers and even a Joseph McCarthy. Machiavelli, the author whose

[1] The Athenian statesman and lawgiver Solon was elected archon, one of the supreme offices in Athens, in 594 BCE. He was given the specific task of pacifying the factional strife which plagued the city and he did so while remaining within the legal boundaries of his office. Solon himself in his poems recalls that he rejected the offer to become tyrant of Athens and was derided for his choice; however, he knew that "Justice always comes in the end". See Edmonds (1982).

[2] On Louis Antoine Léon de Saint Just, 'the Archangel of the Terror', see Abensour (1990).

[3] Susan Mendus makes many interesting observations while examining the question whether politicians are morally worse than the rest of us: see Mendus (2009).

perspective I will adopt, considered politics the most important sphere of human endeavour; for it is only in politics, and through true politicians, that great changes affecting millions of people take place.

Walzer states that there have been three ways of thinking about dirty hands: Machiavelli is the first and best representative of one of these traditions. He did not question existing moral standards, but he argued that statesmen sometimes must trample upon them in order to attain power and glory -the two supreme rewards for a politician. Success is the standard by which the statesman is evaluated: if he succeeds, he is a hero and a good man -in politics we judge using a consequentialist perspective. Walzer hints at another crucial point: Machiavelli probably believed that politicians surrender salvation in exchange for glory -I will return to this point. The second tradition is exemplified by Max Weber and his view of politicians as tragic heroes, beset by anguish for the decisions they have to make. In a very Machiavellian vein (noticed by Walzer), Weber argues that the statesman should adopt the "ethics of responsibility" and make his decisions thinking about the consequences, discarding moral absolutes when these lead to political ineffectiveness or failure. Politics is a vocation and a serious matter. As representatives of the third tradition Walzer picks Albert Camus' protagonists in his 1949 play *Les Justes* [The Just Assassins]. Based on historical events of the Russian Revolution of 1905, this play is inspired by, and a reply to, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les mains sales*. The protagonists are the members of the Revolutionary Socialists who plan to kill the Grand Duke Serge and the debate between Kalyaev and Stepan mirrors the disagreement between Camus and Sartre about utilitarian morality, sparing the innocent and committing evil deeds to achieve a greater good. Walzer believes that the 'Catholic Model', as he calls this last tradition, enables the crimes of dirty hands actions to be socially recognised and punished. This is desirable since the Protestant (Weberian view) places too much emphasis on the conscience of the politician and requires that she limit her actions and sense of guilt according to her own assessments of the crimes done. The 'Catholic Model' allows some form of expiration of guilt and blame for the politician. Walzer concludes that this last description is the most convincing, for the agents know that what they are doing is morally wrong and are ready to pay the price for their actions.

I believe that a good starting point for our discussion consists in the realization that the problem of dirty hands is a true problem, not a philosophical abstruse fiction: to have dirty hands is not a good thing, and (almost) all people would prefer to abstain from actions which dirty their hands. It is simplistic to argue that certain deep moral dilemmas are simply the result of a failure of rational reasoning.[4] A quick look at biographical literature would confirm that many statesmen who had to make dramatic decisions had such dilemmas and moral qualms after the decision was made. This is due -as Walzer rightly put it- to the existence of a moral world in which actions take place; this fact leads to the necessity sometimes to override deep moral constraints.

Walzer characterizes the dilemma of dirty hands by asking: "And how can it be wrong to do what is right? Or, how can we get our hands dirty by doing what we ought to do?" I think that the question should be rephrased, allowing the problem

[4] This seems to be the opinion of Coady (1993). See also Coady and O'Neill (1990); Coady's part is on pp. 259–273.

to appear in a clearer light: "How can it be (morally) wrong to do what is (politically) right?".[5] The two spheres -morality and politics- entail different duties and those who wish to be always moral should not enter the political realm. For politics, serious politics, means placing the common good above one's preferences and even above one's moral considerations. This fact, however, is valid only in extreme circumstances. Ordinarily, we want our politicians to be moral people: they should keep their promises, they should not embezzle money, they should always think of what is advantageous to the country and not merely to their party. We chose and voted for certain people exactly because we believed them to be moral people and we trusted they could be good representatives. Walzer nicely adds the realistic consideration that we want our politicians to be good -but not too good, hinting at their willingness to dirty their hands when it is absolutely necessary.

1 Some Conceptual Distinctions and Clarifications

Walzer posed the problem of dirty hands in analytic as well as historical terms. He saw in Machiavelli the author who first identified the issue and singled out his statement that "the prince should learn how not to be good". Following Machiavelli's perspective, Walzer conceives of this as an eminently *political* problem (the title of his essay is revelatory): I think this is quite correct and I will argue too that the scope of the problem of dirty hands should be restricted to the political sphere, and more specifically to extreme circumstances. It is only in this realm that we can appreciate the dramatic quality of the problem, when decisions must be made which affect the lives of millions of citizens. In addition, I take 'dirty hands' to refer only to political circumstances in which some "supreme emergency" -to quote Walzer- is involved: the problem of dirty hands regards only these situations, when killing the innocent, or mass killing, or other gravely immoral acts are involved.[6] The trite notion that politics is 'the art of compromise', where the best is the enemy of the good, to the effect that politicians must inevitably make trade-offs, sometimes compromising even their own morality, should not concern us here: sordid transactions, petty misdemeanours, agreements with despicable people obviously 'dirty' a politician's hands but they are an inevitable outcome of the imperfection of human nature: judges and priests exist to take care of those deeds. Those actions concern the relationship between personal morality and politics; on the contrary, dirty hands should be taken to mean bloody hands and to imply a dramatic, catastrophic scenario; they refer to extreme situations, when the survival of a nation or of a political arrangement, with all that this involves especially in terms of loss of liberty and lives, is at stake. The problem of dirty hands,

[5] I am aware this is not the only possible way to interpret the problem of dirty hands. See de Wijze (2022) and the essay by Lisa Tessman in this Special Edition for an alternative view: they argue that dirty hands scenarios are possible both in the private and in the public life: in the private sphere it is more about the clash of incompossible moral oughts or the recognition of moral failure when we face values which we cannot violate without leaving some sense of tragic remorse.

[6] My perspective is therefore more in line with Walzer's later thought, as expressed in his *Just and Unjust Wars*, than with the line of argument and scenarios he depicts in the essay under consideration.

therefore, discloses why, in certain extreme circumstances which are not rare in politics, political considerations should take precedence over moral convictions.

The problem of dirty hands is inherent to politics and has thus always existed ever since human beings started living together and dealing 'politically' with public matters; and it will always be there to haunt and challenge statesmen and their conscience.[7] Politics presents alternatives to politicians and requires them to make decisions; sometimes these alternatives are dramatic, because they challenge, or even clash with, the politicians' moral beliefs and values. Aristotle described the wise person and good statesman as "the person who is capable of making the right decision" (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI 5, 1140a25-30; cf. I 1, 1094b11) but did not conceive of a possible clash between moral values and political virtue because in his view ethics is a part of politics: for only the virtuous person judges correctly the situation and makes the right decision accordingly. Machiavelli discovered, described and dramatized this clash, although it was always there. I would make here another important distinction. As I said, I take the problem of dirty hands to refer only to the political sphere and only to extreme situations.[8] This means that all circumstances which involve a clash between moral values and political action are *not* a question of dirty hands: to be so, they require a state of emergency and the possible destruction of a political arrangement or of a way of life (from democracy to tyranny, for instance, from freedom and autonomy to slavery); and the loss of many human lives. Most of the conflicts between morality and politics regard political choices in ordinary circumstances, so it is important not to confuse the choice of a (immoral) policy with a problem of dirty hands. Let's take a vivid example from an actual politician and master moralist of the past: Plutarch. In his *Life of Themistocles* 20, 1–2 Plutarch recounts that after the surprising Greek victory over the Persians at Salamis, Themistocles made an incredibly bold proposal to increase and secure Athenian power over all Greece. When the panhellenic fleet was wintering at Pagasae, Themistocles addressed the Athenians saying that "he had a certain scheme in mind which would be useful (*ophelimon*) and salutary (*soterion*) for them, but which could not be broached (*aporrheton*) in public". At this point in Plutarch's moralizing story Themistocles' long-time political opponent, Aristides, enters the scene: the former embodies shrewdness and expediency, the latter justice and fairness. The Athenians tell Themistocles to inform Aristides alone, and if he should approve of the scheme, it will be put into execution. Here is the conclusion: "Themistocles accordingly told Aristides that he purposed to burn the fleet of the Greeks where it lay; but Aristides addressed the people and said of the scheme which Themistocles purposed to carry out, that none could be either more advantageous (*lusitelesteran*) or more iniquitous (*adikoteran*). The Athenians therefore ordered Themistocles to give it up." Themistocles' proposal was most unjust

[7] Our notion of 'politics' emerges in ancient Greece with the creation of the *polis* and takes its features in its contrast with tyranny. Politics is characterized by publicity, commonality, legality, and the duty of giving account of one's actions while in office and becomes entangled with democratic politics. See the insightful Cartledge 2016 and the discussion of this work in the journal *Philosophy & Public Issues* (2019) 9(2).

[8] For a different opinion see Coady (1993). Coady argues that the issue about overriding the claims of morality in the face of some overwhelming necessity may arise in any area of life, it is not special to politics.

because it treacherously exploited the circumstances to increase Athenian power: it did not concern the survival of Athens or the freedom of her citizens; it was a matter of foreign policy not a question of dirty hands.

Likewise, I would not consider Plato's 'noble lie' (*Republic* 3, 414b-415d) an issue of dirty hands: lying to your fellow-citizens to prevent social unrest and, ultimately, to enable all to flourish according to their idea of happiness, is not a matter of life and death; it is a policy issue.[9] If we do not confine the problem to the political realm, and more specifically to extreme situations which could lead to the destruction of the State and the misery of most citizens, we cannot grasp its complexity and tragic character. Surely, ordinary human beings in their everyday life may experience dramatic moral dilemmas; but the scope of their consequences is inevitably limited because even the most powerful private individual cannot but affect only few people with their actions. If they are capable of affecting millions, then the question becomes political. Mark David Chapman's murder of John Lennon was not a political act, whereas Gavrilo Princip's killing of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie was -one simply needs to look at the consequences and the people affected.

What is unique about politics and politicians, then -one may ask? Politics is the sphere where decisions which affect thousands, sometimes millions of people, are taken. Politics concern the State, namely associated human life and hence the 'common good': a stateman's decision affects the life and well-being of an entire people; it may produce happiness or misery, life or death for millions -witness the actions of Saddam Hussein and Muhammad Ghaddafi, or more recently Vladimir Putin. While morality focusses on the behaviour of individuals; economic decisions may affect thousands of people when, for instance, a top-level banker bets on high-risk financial tools or the CEO of a big corporation causes bankruptcy for their careless behaviour. But even these financial disasters do not impact on an entire population nor, typically, entail death on a large scale. If they do, these decisions become political issues. If we apply the label 'dirty hands' to individual moral issues or minor political questions, and we can surely use the expression in an evocative way in these realms, we ultimately trivialise the problem. Carl Schmitt spoke of the "utmost degree of intensity" of "the political" and he grimly, but correctly, explained that it is the only sphere of human life where one can ask people to sacrifice their lives or can ask them to shed blood and kill other human beings.[10] Even if we do not conceive of the political as residing in the distinction/opposition between "friend and enemy", we must acknowledge the supreme importance this sphere of human action has; for, by

[9] Plato's Socrates argues that rulers should tell their fellow-citizens a "noble lie" concerning their birth and origin: they are all born from the earth and are therefore brothers; but the god moulded those who are suited to rule mixing gold in them; those who are good auxiliaries and soldiers mixing silver in them; and moulded farmers and artisans mixing bronze and silver in them. This lie is 'noble' because it serves as a foundational myth to support the established order. No need to add that all Platonic interpreters with liberal leanings found this use of lies in politics deplorable and rebarbative. See for all Popper (1945).

[10] See Schmitt (2007: 35). He accordingly added that if religious leaders are able to persuade their followers to sacrifice their lives and kill others for their cause, they have entered the sphere of 'the political'. Likewise, pacifist bleeding hearts enter the political realm the moment they can "declare a war against all wars": 36–37.

concerning the common good, it is the pre-condition of all other human endeavours -art, morality, economics and so on.

2 Democratic Politics and Dirty Hands

Returning to the story that Plutarch offers us in his *Life of Themistocles*, it is worth noting that it is interesting for two main reasons. It depicts a scene where two political options, two courses of action, are possible: one has expediency (and power politics) as the top consideration, the other justice and loyalty to allies. The immorality of the former, as well as the morality of the latter, are obvious and evident in any epoch, because loyalty has always and everywhere been praised over betrayal. The Athenian people opted for morality. And this leads to the second point of interest: how much praise or blame should the people in a democracy receive from the actions of their leaders? For, what characterises democracy is common, public decision-making, which entails sharing the merit and the responsibility for political choices. Walzer himself, and many authors afterwards, have argued that democracy entails a sort of collective responsibility; as Martin Hollis put it: "Political actors, duly appointed within a legitimate state, have an authority deriving finally from the People. […] When their hands get dirty, so do ours".[11] I will return to this question after examining in more detail the context of political decision-making.

Along the same lines, we may wonder whether a democratic leader, and especially a principled one, perceives differently the problem of dirty hands. In my view, if we understand the problem correctly, in the terms I have specified, there is no great difference. A principled democratic leader has only two additional burdens as compared to other politicians: she is accountable to the public opinion as well as to the democratic institutions;[12] and she is accountable to her conscience. But the two fundamental elements of the problem of dirty hands remain the same: it is not only a matter of choosing the *right* alternative, which implies the capacity to correctly understand the situation; it is a matter of *having the courage* to do it because, once the right option appears evident, acting requires trampling upon one's personal moral values.

Let's take two apparently similar examples which, however, lead to different conclusions. The decision of the American President Harry Truman to drop two atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is an example of the dramatic and fateful decisions that sometimes a politician is required to make. The cost in civilian lives was so high that many philosophers and political theorists (including Walzer himself) have argued that it was unacceptable and tantamount to a war crime (see e.g. Anscombe 1981a, b). Walzer forcefully maintained that this decision, like the choice to carpet-bomb German cities after 1942, was based on untenable utilitarian calculations. Truman's decision has all the elements of a tragic dilemma, meaning

[11] Hollis (1996: 146–147); see also his fine observations in Hollis (1982). Many insightful comments can be found in de Wijze (2002) and in Archard (2013).

[12] Thompson (1987) argued that accountability to the public does actually add an additional concern, because often it not only requires getting one's hands dirty in the first place, it then might also require that afterwards the public has to be deceived or lied to. As a result, the politician ends up with doubly dirty hands.

that any choice inevitably entails guilt. As we know, he was the Vice-President of the United States and replaced President Roosevelt when he died in April 1945; he found himself in the condition of having to make choices which he probably did not envisage when he campaigned alongside Roosevelt. At the same time, he knew very well what his position entailed: being the 'Commander-in-chief' means taking care of the well-being of one's fellow-countrymen, placing their lives at the top of one's priorities and bearing the ultimate responsibility for all political decisions.[13] If one visits the Truman Library in Independence (Missouri), one may observe a sign that was placed on the President's desk, stating 'The buck stops here'. Apparently, Truman liked the expression very much, which he thought to perfectly catch the role of the President: in his farewell address in January 1953, he stated that "The President–whoever he is–has to decide. He can't pass the buck to anybody. No one else can do the deciding for him. That's his job". We may imagine the agony and the pro-and-con reasoning preceding his decision but in the end one argument proved to be resolutory – the utilitarian calculation of the casualties on both sides had an invasion of Japan been tried. Behind it, in all evidence, there was Truman's sense of responsibility towards humankind (any human life is valuable), but especially towards his country and fellow-citizens: the duty of the statesman is first towards his citizens. Truman acted on this principle and had the courage to make the decision which he defended to the end.[14]

We should analyse in a similar perspective the decision of President Barack Obama to authorize the killing of American citizens suspected of terrorism. They include Anwar al-Awlaki and (apparently by mistake) his 16-year-old son Abdulrahman al-Awlaki. The father, a radical Muslim cleric, was accused of posing "an imminent threat of violent attack against the US" because of his virulent proselytising, involvement in al-Qaida terrorist plots and incitement to violence. He was killed in a drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011, together with another American citizen.[15] Many organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union, decried these killings but court rulings supported the President's decision. Obviously, the courts evaluated only the lawfulness of these acts, not their morality. We should do more than that. We should first question whether these killings can be subsumed under the

[13] Some authors, such as S.L. Sutherland, have argued that the conventional dirty hands problem lays too much emphasis on "the condition of the soul of the supra-ethical or maverick leader": Sutherland (1995).

[14] See for instance Harry Truman's *Address in Milwaukee, Wisconsin* of 14 October 1948, where he credited President Roosevelt for "the courage and foresight" to authorize the Manhattan Project and continued: "As President of the United States, I had the fateful responsibility of deciding whether or not to use this weapon for the first time. It was the hardest decision I ever had to make. But the President cannot duck hard problems–he cannot pass the buck. I made the decision after discussions with the ablest men in our Government, and after long and prayerful consideration. I decided that the bomb should be used in order to end the war quickly and save countless lives–Japanese as well as American."

[15] For an account of the controversial figure, and killing, of al-Awlaki and the details of the operation see Shane 2015. For insightful comments see de Wijze (2009) and Lenze and Bakker (2014). De Wijze has a nuanced position: he argues that targeted killings may be morally reprehensible but also morally justifiable (and sometimes even obligatory) to protect citizens from great harm; they reveal "the messy moral position of politicians and military strategists" who end up with dirty hands, for they do wrong in order to do right. Since he examines the targeted killing of a *foreign* combatant, I am in complete agreement with him. Lenze and Bakker too present the problem in a nuanced fashion; I only disagree with their conclusion that President Obama did what was necessary and therefore his act is justified from a moral perspective.

notion of the 'problem of dirty hands' since they were not carried out in a situation of emergency that put the entire nation at stake. I do not think the notion is applicable here. These actions did not occur during wartime against a legitimate, declared enemy since the notion of 'War on Terror' is merely an evocative expression. Wars have rules that have been developed over many centuries by political and legal theorists. The idea of 'imminence' in al-Awlaki's case was evidently applied very loosely and the Fifth Amendment's guarantee of 'due process' was completely neglected. These considerations would not matter if the actions had occurred in extreme circumstances which could have potentially killed many American citizens -after all, the President's first duty is towards his own fellow-citizens. But this threat did not occur in a condition of extreme and imminent danger and the US government had many other options to counter it before resorting to the targeted killing of al-Awlaki. I think that the diriment consideration here is al-Awlaki's nationality: he was an American citizen; I find morally contradictory and politically ominous the killing of one's own fellow-countrymen, for the primary role of the State is to protect one's citizens. I thus believe these killings should be subsumed under the category of 'government policy' and, as such, be considered immoral, illegal, and unwarranted. They are the beginning of a slippery slope that eventually ends in totalitarianism.

We may pose the question again: Why should political considerations trump moral, and other, considerations? Machiavelli had already understood this problem and gave an innovative answer, which horrified many of his contemporary and subsequent readers: we may call his discovery 'the pre-eminence of politics'. Machiavelli believed that without the State, without law and order, moral agency and morality are not possible nor is any other decent human activity: this is why he saw the State as the common good, which is to be preserved at all costs.[16] Aristotelian talk about 'the good life' is inane if there are no laws, institutions, government, in a word the State, to make them possible, to enable citizens to act as moral people and thrive. We need not look far for examples and demonstrations: the recent collapse of two political systems, in Albania and in Libya, vividly show what happens when the government and the enforcement of law and order are absent: there is chaos, killings and the obvious dominance of the stronger over the weak, leading to the terrible social and political ethos that 'might makes right'. Life itself, let alone the good life, is imperilled in these situations. This is why for Machiavelli it is *necessary* to maintain the State: it is the pre-condition of everything, of practicing politics, of exercising morality and living a truly human life, of pursuing one's image of happiness.[17]

[16] I think this point was well caught by Thomas Jefferson in a letter in which he defended his decision to authorize the purchase of Louisiana from Napoleon (the Constitution did not give him this power): "A strict observance of the written law is doubtless one of the high duties of a good citizen, but it is not the highest. The laws of necessity, of self-preservation, of saving our country when in danger, are of higher obligation. To lose our country by a scrupulous adherence to written law, would be to lose the law itself, with life, liberty, property and all those who are enjoying them with us; thus absurdly sacrificing the end to the means": Letter to John Monticello dated 20 September 1810.

[17] I am here arguing for a specific image of Machiavelli as the discoverer of the tragic side of politics. For he forcefully argued that morality and politics entail different duties and these may clash in certain dramatic situations: and in these circumstances, true politicians must remember that their first priority is to save the State, which equals the common good. We should therefore discard two traditional interpretations of Machiavelli's thought: the family of interpretations which argues that Machiavelli was a political realist

3 The Notion of 'Necessity' in Politics

It is at this stage that we encounter the notion of 'necessity' in politics. Some distinctions are, again, to be made. In his *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) Walzer reported the speech of Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg to the Reichstag on August 4, 1914, where he stated "Gentlemen, we are now in a state of necessity, and necessity knows no law".[18] Walzer comments, and I concur, that if one observed the situation objectively, there was no emergency or necessity and thus Bethmann Hollweg's words were mere rhetoric, a call to action -an action, to be sure, that Germany was about to initiate. However, in politics, we noticed, certain circumstances actually force the statesman to act in a way that is against justice, against morality and (for the believers) against religion, and it is thus legitimate to use the notion of 'necessity', which is connected to 'emergency' and often borders with that of 'reason of State'.

Machiavelli deserves that honour. In the sound and fury of Italian wars in the early 16th century, in a society imbued with Christian morality, he realized and dared to write that the first and supreme goal of a politician–saving the State–requires him to be ready to damn his own soul. This is a fine point, well caught by Walzer in his article. Machiavelli was not an innovator in the field of morality. He used the words 'good', 'evil', 'cruelty', in their ordinary, accepted meaning of the age; he never argued that what is evil in the sphere of morality may become good in that of politics: politics, contrary to Croce's famous statement, who attributed this discovery to Machiavelli, is not autonomous from morality. This is exactly what makes certain political choices so dramatic. Machiavelli discovered the 'seriousness of politics'-as Nicola Matteucci put it- the fact that politics has an inner dimension of duty which is sometimes in contrast with that of morality (for the notion of 'seriousness of politics' see Matteucci 1984: 31–67). Moral convictions and political duties sometimes clash, and the politician must rise to the challenge and realize that the common good, the State, must be preserved at all costs, including giving up eternal salvation. It is not that 'the end justifies the means', as the popular interpretation goes, but rather that one end justifies all means (*Prince*: 18): this end is the preservation of the State, or the creation of a new one, because without the State no moral life, no good life, indeed no bare life is possible. Building on this assumption, Machiavelli argued that the statesman should "not depart from good, if possible, but be able to enter evil, when necessitated" (*Prince*: 18). For him this choice does not entail a moral dilemma: evil remains evil, it is not redeemed by political considerations; and the statesman does not have any special moral dispensation when he acts. Machiavelli may accordingly conclude that the statesman must be ready to damn his own soul to protect his fatherland. For instance, he praised Cesare Borgia for his behaviour concerning his lieutenant Remirro dell'Orco: a "cruel and ready man", Remirro had in short time disposed of unruly aristocrats as well as highwaymen in Romagna, and thus "pacified

and therefore thought that morality has no place in politics; or the first 'political scientist' who separated the art of politics from morality; or that he was a 'teacher of evil'. We should also reject the 'republican', or 'oblique', interpretation of Machiavelli, which sees him as a supporter of republican (or even democratic) regimes; the author who secretly, or disguisedly, discloses the evil doings of princes to the people. I have argued for this interpretation of Machiavelli in Giorgini (2017).

[18] See Walzer (1977: 240).

and unified" it, making it possible for ordinary people to live well. However, since Remirro's cruelties had earned him (and Borgia) a certain amount of hatred, Cesare had him executed in a theatrical way: Remirro's body was found cut in two pieces on the piazza at Cesena and -Machiavelli comments- "the ferocity of this spectacle left the people at once satisfied and stupefied" (*Prince* 7). It is an obvious notion that using a lieutenant to serve your political purposes and then having him killed for the same purposes when this is more convenient is a disloyal, treacherous and murderous behaviour; Machiavelli, like all his contemporaries, agreed on that. In a Christian perspective, Cesare Borgia was surely destined to Hell and Machiavelli would not have objected to this fate. But here lies the drama of politics: the statesman's duty towards the common good forces him to sometimes make immoral choices and face eternal damnation (for a more complete treatment of this topic I wish to refer to Giorgini 2019).

In Machiavelli's perspective the fact that the context for the immoral action was created by someone else is not important; the immorality of the circumstances is not a requirement in his view (for a different opinion see de Wijze 2007). Machiavelli takes for granted that there are moral values on which people agree: loyalty is better than disloyalty; generosity is better than avarice; forthrightness is better than sneakiness. This is why he goes such a long way to show to his prospective prince that there are situations in politics when one must be disloyal, stingy and sneaky in order to fulfil the duty to save the State (*Prince*: 15–18). I follow Machiavelli in believing that the problem of dirty hands arises because two different spheres of action, comprising different values and ends, sometimes collide. It is not a moral dilemma or a conflict of moral values; it is an alternative between goods and ends and I believe Machiavelli was right in pointing out that saving the State (and its citizens) is the politicians' first priority. We call it the problem of 'dirty hands' because we all acknowledge that certain actions are good and others are evil; so dropping the bomb on civilians was surely evil but it was not wrong from a political perspective. And we expect the person who authorized it, because we imagine them to be moral persons, to have the same sense of deep remorse that Colonel Paul Tibbetts had after he dropped the bomb on Hiroshima as the commander of the B-29 *Enola Gay*. (Perhaps it is not just a tragic irony of history that one of the three B-29 airplanes that participated in the mission on Hiroshima was named *Necessary Evil*.)

Politics has no special exemption from the moral order for Machiavelli and this is well shown by Machiavelli's constant appeal to the notion of 'necessity' and by his ubiquitous use of the word in the infamous Chaps. 15–18, where he examines the qualities that the new prince should have. Walzer was drawn to the famous statement "the prince must learn how not to be good". Let's examine Machiavelli's exact phrasing and its context. In *Prince* 15 Machiavelli sets forth to examine "the things for which men and especially princes are praised or blamed". He prefaces his analysis by saying that "since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it". After this profession of realism, Machiavelli gives his view of the human condition: "It is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must

come to ruin among so many who are not good." And this is the human predicament: "Hence it is *necessary* to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it *according to necessity*" (Machiavelli 1998, Chap. 15, emphasis mine). It is a necessity of the human condition that a prince must learn "how not to be good", how to overcome the common morality that he himself shares in his ordinary transactions. In the subsequent chapters Machiavelli reiterates this lesson by examining the canonical virtues that a prince should have according to the *specula principis* and overthrowing their teachings. He sums up his thought in Chap. 18, where he explains that sometimes using the laws is not enough and the prince must therefore use force, which is typical of beasts; and he adds that "a prince is compelled of necessity to know well how to use the beast". This is his famous conclusion:

> This has to be understood: that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under a necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion. And so he needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him, and as I said above, not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity (*Prince*: 18).

It is barely necessary to point out the dramatic, frequent occurrence of the notion of 'necessity' in these lines. They emphasise the dimension of duty inherent in the political realm. Ordinary morality is still in place, also for the prince, but his political duty forces him to contravene it: he, and his soul, will pay the penalty personally for that, but the common good will be safe.

There is thus no specific morality appropriate to political activity. The only difference between a statesman and an ordinary citizen lies in the fact that politics concerns the common good of the citizens and therefore statesmen must have this as their first priority, accepting the fact that it may collide with moral imperatives. This is why dirty hands is a true problem: if there were a specific morality appropriate to statesmen, there would not be any clash with the moral imperatives of ordinary people; but there is not. This realization discloses the tragic side of politics: there may arise extraordinary situations in which the statesman must trample upon these moral imperatives. It is a conflict of allegiances but the statesman, by entering politics, made a choice and opted for placing the common good first.

This conflict of allegiances was known to ancient authors but for them it was a *fact* and, as such, it simply illustrated the tragic side of politics. For Machiavelli politics was a life-*choice*, and by making this choice the statesman willingly accepts the rules of the game. Consider the tragic alternative faced by Agamemnon: the success of the expedition against Troy required the sacrifice of his own daughter. His duty as the leader of the Hellenic army clashed dramatically with his duty as a father; it is a conflict of allegiances and a clash of imperatives -personal and political. No choice is obviously correct and both entail guilt -hence the tragedy. Agamemnon's fateful deci-

sion will eventually bring revenge and death at his wife's hands upon him, another dramatic turn which will set Orestes' revenge in motion in an almost endless drama.[19]

From this drama I elicit another lesson. 'Dirty hands' is not a matter of choosing the lesser evil: for morality and politics have different dimensions of duty which are incomparable. If we applied Hume's logic to Agamemnon's dilemma, the solution would be easy and immediate: the destruction of the entire Hellenic army is preferable to a scratch to Iphigenia's finger.[20] However, Agamemnon bears the responsibility of being the leader of the army that intends to avenge his brother's honour, and he feels that his public duty must trump his private affection. Machiavelli would have commented that Agamemnon made the right political choice; and that he paid the penalty for his moral outrage.

Machiavelli's addition to this picture lies in his insistence that the statesman should know all this in advance and should be prepared to rise to the occasion. Politics is the most rewarding sphere of human endeavour because a person can be the author of his fellow-countrymen's flourishing and can thus reap that eternal glory which is the reward of great statesmen (an idea Machiavelli took from Cicero's *somnium Scipionis*, another connection with the classics).[21] But in a Christian world (Machiavelli never questioned certain Christian moral imperatives), the well-being of the citizens and the salvation of the State may come at the price of the statesman's soul: for, by committing certain deeds, he will renounce eternal salvation. The statesman must thus be ready to accept to pay the penalty for his moral crimes.

4 Conclusion

The fascination that emanates from Machiavelli's works, and especially *The Prince*, stems from the exalted position he grants to the statesman combined with the responsibilities that go with it: Machiavelli could subscribe to Plato's definition of 'politics' as the most architectonic of all arts, because it directs all the others to produce the common good. Likewise, Machiavelli's statesman has this elevated position because he can accomplish deeds that are reachable uniquely in politics -this is why he writes that creators and saviours of States are always lauded. However, Machiavelli bluntly warns his prospective statesmen of the responsibility they carry -the wellbeing, and sometimes the life and death, of their fellow-countrymen. If they are not ready to do everything that this requires, they should stay out of the political arena. Once you opt in, the only honourable way out is by performing your duty. The problem of dirty hands cannot be solved; it can only be avoided by refusing to be a politician. However, subsequent politicians, and in their wake moral and political theorists, dis-

[19] See Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*: *Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*, performed in 458 BCE. Always interesting on this topic Nussbaum (1986).

[20] I am referring here to Hume's famous saying to the effect that "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger": see Hume (2007: 2.3.3.6).

[21] Stuart Hampshire rightly insisted that Machiavelli conceived of the good for man as *virtù*, exemplified by "glorious worldly achievements which will be recognised in history": see Hampshire (1989: 165). Accordingly, "the virtues that are essential to an admirable private life, such as loyal friendships and a sense of personal honour and of integrity, have their cost in political powerlessness".

covered the eternal truth of Machiavelli's insight, and sometimes they found out the hard way.

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