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‘Learning how not to be good’: Machiavelli and the Standard Dirty Hands Thesis.

Abstract

‘It is necessary to a Prince to learn how not to be good’. This quotation from Machiavelli’s *The Prince* has become the mantra of the standard dirty hands (DH) thesis. Despite its infamy, it features proudly in most conventional expositions of the dirty hands (DH) problem, including Michael Walzer’s original analysis. In this paper, I wish to cast a doubt as to whether the standard conception of the problem of DH—the recognition that, in certain inescapable and tragic circumstances an innocent course of action is unfeasible—fully captures Machiavelli’s message and its terrifying implications. In particular, I argue that the standard DH thesis is inadequately ‘static’: it conceives the conflict between ordinary morality and political morality as a stark, momentary and rare paradox of action—an anomaly disrupting the normality of harmony. As such it misconceives both the extent and the nature of the rupture between morality and politics. In this sense, the argument I shall advance does not just involve an exercise in the history of political thought. Rather, I want to suggest that, by virtue of its failure to take Machiavelli’s insights seriously, the standard DH thesis fails to live up to its purported capacity to capture the complexity and fragmentation of our moral cosmos and that, consequently, it is nothing more than a thinly veiled version of the idealism and monism it purports to reject.

Keywords Machiavelli; Dirty hands; Moral conflict; Political virtue; Moral vice; Innocence

Introduction

Cynicism about politics is ubiquitous and not without reason. In his famous essay *Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands*, Michael Walzer (1973: 163) remarks that, it is the “‘conventional wisdom’” that “‘politicians are a good deal worse, morally worse, than the rest of us’”. This attitude, he maintains, should not be explained with reference to cases of mere sleaze but should be traced to a different, more unsettling, concern: the dirty hands (DH) problem.

Reduced to its essentials, the Walzerian vogue of the DH problem holds that, in certain tragic circumstances, politicians may be required from a normative and prudential perspective to do or tolerate things that are immoral. For instance, they might have to torture terrorists in order to divulge life-saving information or deceive for the sake of political success. The DH thesis suggests that, in such instances, there exists a disharmony between ordinary morality - which is, as claimed, deontological - and the demands of successful political action - which are thought to be consequentialist¹. And whilst the

¹ Several DH theorists suggest that Walzer’s (1973) original conception of DH is too narrow: they argue that, like Machiavelli, Walzer unsatisfactorily restricts DH to politicians; whilst politics is somehow special, the DH dilemma

politician should opt for the requirements of politics, the overridden action-guiding demands of morality do not evaporate altogether. The politician's choice, whilst being the 'lesser evil', is not without moral loss: as a result of her actions, the innocent politician unavoidably becomes morally polluted. Moreover, the appropriate way of responding to this problem, which is definitive of the moral politician - the official who is "good for politics" but not "good enough" (Walzer, 1973: 168) - is twofold: i) the dirty politician experiences anguish or, what Stephen de Wijze (2005) terms, 'tragic remorse' and ii) publically reveals her suffering and dirt to the community, which should inflict cathartic punishment and thereby enable her to regain her innocence².

The core insights of the standard DH thesis seem quite perspicuous³. That thesis acknowledges the existence of a paradox of action, certain inescapable circumstances whereby an innocent course of action is unfeasible. This recognition poses a challenge to a vision shared by our most influential ethical frameworks: the belief that, at least in theory, values form a harmonious whole; that moral conflicts are perfectly resolvable. As Walzer (1973: 161) explains, DH relates "not only to the coherence and harmony of the moral universe but also to the relative ease of living a moral life". The DH thesis suggests that the Kantian and Utilitarian vision of harmony and innocence is unsatisfactorily idealistic: its value monism misrepresents our fragmented morality and, in particular, the messy realities of politics.

On the face of it, the DH thesis takes the complexity of political ethics seriously: it acknowledges that ordinary and political morality are uneasy bedfellows. In Stephen de Wijze's words:

A DH analysis [in political philosophy] provides a more plausible characterization of our moral reality ... The existence of genuine moral conflict, the incommensurability of cherished values, the conflicting personal and role-based moral claims, give rise to moral conflict situations where those who strive to act morally unavoidably get DH (2009: 309).

might be confronted by non-political agents and might involve a tragic dilemma within morality (Gowans, 2001; Stocker, 2000; Shugarman, 2000; Coady, 2008; 2009). In connection to this, I should first highlight that I do not wish to deny the possibility or the philosophical coherence of tragic dilemmas in ordinary life. My focus is different. I contend that because politics is somehow special as DH theorists seem to acknowledge, Walzer's orthodox conception of DH in politics does not suffice. Second, whilst such theorists take issue with Walzer's restriction of DH to politics, they overlook crucial conceptual differences between Walzer's and Machiavelli's thought. They also take for granted the validity of Walzer's account in politics (despite its narrowness). Hence, the broader accounts of DH which emerge from their critiques tend to be, in terms of their conceptual structure, Walzerian still. It is this conceptual structure, I argue, which, from Machiavelli's standpoint, is unsatisfactorily idealistic in certain ongoing practices, most notably politics.

² This point, which I elaborate on later on, is recently defended by de Wijze (2012).

³ I use the term standard DH thesis as a representative of a number of expositions of DH (i.e. Walzer, 1973; 1977; de Wijze, 1994; de Wijze and Goodwin, 2009; Cunningham, 1992; Stocker, 1990; Gowans, 2001).

These are well-worn claims in the DH literature and, its infancy aside, are far from novel. The DH thesis, de Wijze and Goodwin (2009: 531) stress, captures the “lesson we ought to take from Machiavelli”: that politicians need “to learn to not be good”. Machiavelli’s message in *The Prince* has become the mantra of DH theorists (c.f. Gowans, 2001; de Wijze, 2005; de Wijze & Goodwin, 2009; Stocker, 1990). Despite its infamy, it features proudly in most expositions of DH, including Walzer’s (1973) seminal article.

But I am not convinced that it should. In this essay, I wish to question the extent to which the standard DH thesis takes Machiavelli’s message seriously. The argument I shall advance does not involve just an exercise in the history of political thought. Nor do I wish to deny that that the general insight of the DH thesis - Machiavelli’s recognition that politics and morality are difficult to harmonize - better captures the fragmented nature of morality and the complexity of politics than the Kantian and Utilitarian vision of harmony and innocence. But it is precisely because this insight seems to be more sophisticated vis-à-vis the monistic vision of harmony that the argument I pursue here is striking: that, despite its purported Machiavellian affiliations, the DH thesis fails to take Machiavelli’s insights on moral conflict and pluralism seriously and, as such, it collapses into the idealism it seeks to evade. In short, the DH thesis fails to live up to its purported capacity to capture the fragmentation of morality and the complexity of politics.

The essay is divided into two sections, each of which contributes to the general worry I shall register about the DH thesis. First, I suggest that the orthodox conception of DH is inadequately ‘static’: it conceives the conflict between morality and politics as a mere surmountable anomaly and, as such, it misconceives the extent of the conflict between morality and politics. I then argue that conceptualizing DH as a paradox of action is not enough. For, the static account also mischaracterizes the precise nature of the conflict between morality and politics: it neglects how moral character enters politics and jeopardizes political existence. Differently put, the disharmony between ordinary and political morality cuts deeper than the ‘static’ perspective allows: it does not merely involve an incongruence of action but also an incompatibility of character. In connection to this, I scrutinize Walzer’s conception of an *ex ante* innocent, yet *ex post* dirty moral politician. I surmise that the politician we are presented with may not be as good for politics as DH theorists assume.

Before proceeding further, I should emphasize that whilst my primary purpose here is to suggest that we need to reconsider what it means to have DH in relation to certain on-going practices such as politics, the discussion I shall advance also reveals that there exists a neglected rift within the DH tradition. In contrast to the static DH thesis, philosophers who can be labelled as DH theorists (i.e. Stuart Hampshire, Bernard

Williams, Sue Mendus, Martin Hollis and Peter Johnson) have a different, more nuanced understanding of DH - one which is alive to Machiavelli's insights.

The Standard DH Thesis as 'Static'

In *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Isaiah Berlin observes that most utopian political thought against which Machiavelli sounded the clarion call, is characterized by a vulgar theme:

Once upon a time there was a perfect state, then some enormous disaster took place ... the pristine unity is shattered and the rest of human history is a continuous attempt to piece together the fragments in order to restore serenity, so that the perfect state can be realized again (1990: 23)

Needless to say, the sting of Berlin's charge was not directed against the DH thesis. Yet, the orthodox conception of DH - Walzer's encapsulation of the conflict between morality and politics as a tension between 'the consequentialism of extremity' and 'the deontology of normality' - suggests that this theme runs formidably through its veins. So do the allusions, popular amongst DH theorists, to 'innocence lost': the departing assumption of the DH thesis is an innocent man who, once confronted with a paradox of action is no longer innocent. Even more telling, is Walzer's hopeful, albeit puzzling, conviction that:

It is not the case that when [the politician] does bad in order to do good he surrenders himself forever to the demon of politics ... he commits a determinate crime, and he must pay a determinate penalty. When he has done so, his hands will be clean again (1973: 178).

The standard DH thesis assumes that politics and morality are in harmony until a stark paradox of action is presented to the agent. A correlative of this is that, whilst the tension between ordinary and political morality is *prima facie* acknowledged - hence the DH problem - such an acknowledgement is ingrained with a 'static' quality which is also evident in the scenarios DH theorists discuss⁴. In Walzer's original analysis for instance, a political candidate (let us call him Ned) is confronted with two undesirable options: a) make a deal with a dishonest ward boss, "involving the granting of school contracts for the next four years", thereby getting DH for the sake of political success; or b) keep them clean, at the cost of staying out of politics (1973: 165). Similarly, in the Ticking Bomb Scenario (TBS), the politician is faced

⁴ To be clear, it is not just the scenarios DH theorists discuss that are 'static'. Rather, these scenarios are symptoms and indications of the problem I register here: DH theorists unsatisfactorily conceive the conflict between morality and politics as a surmountable anomaly.

with the prospect of either: a) issuing torture and betraying his principles, or b) refusing to torture the terrorist - let the ticking-bomb explode - and violate his political responsibilities. Standard DH theorists scrutinize the conflict between morality and politics from a 'static' perspective: they focus on a single, stark and shaking conflict that confronts an ex-ante innocent agent. The crucial question pertinent to the static framework is whether, given some unfortunate circumstances, it is philosophically conceivable for an action to be simultaneously right and wrong. To be sure, DH theorists also stress that the DH politician should publically reveal his dirt so as to regain his innocence through some form of expiatory punishment. Regardless of its adequacy though, this proviso constitutes another testament of the 'static' flavour of the orthodox conception of DH: the conflict between morality and politics involves a momentary and relatively rare paradox of action - a mere anomaly which disrupts the normality of past and future harmony.

This, however, is Walzer's interpretation of DH, not Machiavelli's. To be sure, Machiavelli does not deny that there exists a rupture between moral and political action. Quite the contrary; he cautions that inflexibility, the adoption of "safe courses" in politics, is bound to be politically disastrous and irresponsible (Machiavelli, 1998: 91). But, Machiavelli, Berlin suggests, does not say that whilst "in normal situations current morality - that is the Christian ... should prevail, yet abnormal conditions can occur, in which emergencies of this kind, acts which are regarded as wicked and rightly forbidden, are justified" (1981: 69). Rather, Machiavelli advances a much more discomfiting, indeed terrifying (*erschreckend*), thought: there exists an intractable and perpetual conflict between at least two different moral worlds - that of ordinary (Christian) morality and that of politics - each of which corresponds to two exhaustive and incompatible practices and ways of life, each with its own ends and values. What is *erschreckend* about politics then is that its practitioners subscribe to standards of excellence which are at odds with those of an admirable moral life but which are ultimate. Simply put, leading a political life is incongruent with leading a moral life: conducive to a virtuous political life is the cultivation and continuous exhibition of certain ordinary vices.

Hence, at the core of Machiavelli's thought lies the recognition that conceptualizing DH requires us to conceive political morality as a whole and in dynamic terms. Differently put, we should approach politics as a practice and a way of life. And, this involves approaching political morality on its own terms: by considering the dispositions and agency of those aspiring to lead a virtuous political life as well as certain distinct goods and ends which are conducive to political excellence (i.e. power, the provision of security and a modicum of order to the political community). The general point here is that the standards of political excellence arise from within politics as opposed to any external moral standpoint. Conceiving

politics in terms of abstract action-guiding rules and principles as deontologists, consequentialists and standard DH theorists do, is neither philosophically astute nor conducive to the concrete moral realities of politics. Instead, we should shift our attention to the qualities of character necessary for participating in politics and meeting its distinct demands. It is precisely this dynamic perspective - approaching the politician's life with its distinctive ends and virtues as a whole - that the static approach, by virtue of its very nature, fails to capture.

Before I elaborate on this, I should register a crucial point - a contradiction perhaps - which looms large. Standard DH theorists do seem to conceive politics as a practice, with certain distinctive ends - not just in terms of consequentialist action-guiding prescriptions. In Ned's dilemma for example, Walzer does seem to acknowledge that Ned, by virtue of the role he occupies, should get dirty so as to satisfy its demands: "If the candidate didn't want to get his hands dirty, he should have stayed at home ... His decision to run was a commitment to try to win, that is, to do within rational limits whatever is necessary to win" (1973: 165). Moreover, DH theorists do seem to appreciate the non-static nature of political life. Differently put, they seem to acknowledge the enduring nature of the conflict between morality and politics. For instance, Walzer, de Wijze and Goodwin note that "the dilemma of dirty hands is a central feature of political life that arises not merely as an occasional crisis ... but systematically and frequently" (Walzer, 1973: 162; de Wijze & Goodwin, 2009: 531; my emphasis). The latter, following Williams (1978), even stress that DH "is a predictable and probable hazard of public life" (de Wijze & Goodwin, 2009: 531; my emphasis). But, whilst such remarks do suggest that DH theorists are not oblivious to some of the issues I raise here, these are neither sufficiently acknowledged nor incorporated in the way they portray DH in politics. In what follows, I shall suggest that the DH thesis neither captures the essence of Machiavelli's insights nor does it suffice. I argue that the DH thesis is, in fact, static; and, by virtue of its static nature, it misrepresents the extent of the rupture between morality and politics. In so doing, I shall highlight a set of interrelated 'symptoms' which metastasize from the static account and which are indicative of this.

An Ad Hoc Sociological Fantasy

Confusion, Wittgenstein (1958) tells us, arises when we are seduced by a picture. Whilst simplicity in philosophy is often seen as a virtue, the complexity of moral life is such that we are often bewitched by examples that seem compelling but mischaracterize our messy moral cosmos. And, whilst 'static' scenarios typically point to how messy morality is, they tend to oversimplify our complex moral reality. As Henry Shue argues the TBS, the paradigm case of DH, assumes that:

Whilst torture is rare because restricted to such appropriate cases, the torture is perfectly successful: suddenly someone with no experience or training, who has never tortured anyone before, quickly extracts vital information from someone dedicated to withholding such information (2009: 314).

This, however, is a 'sociological fantasy'. The example we are presented with - a single, ad hoc choice about whether to torture by officials who would resort to a thing only in desperate emergencies - is underpinned by an impoverished and romanticized conception of the real world of interrogations. The point here is not just that the conceptual structure of the DH dilemma does not sit well with real politics but is, at least in theory, conceivable. Rather, just as Kantians and Utilitarians are philosophically oblivious to our messy morality as DH theorists suggest, so too is the DH thesis: its underlying assumptions are practically implausible because they are philosophically inconceivable. Torture, Shue explains, is a practice, not an ad hoc emergency measure: "practitioners who do not practice will not be very good at what they do" (2006: 237-238). In short, DH theorists emphasize the politician's decision in abstraction from the political context within which that decision - to issue torture or not - should be taken.

Needless to say, this recognition does not eliminate the possibility of TBS. Nor does it have to deny that a moral remainder in such instances does exist. It does, however, suggest that the 'static' account is oblivious to Machiavelli's infamous message when it comes to torture - that because morality is practice-based, virtuous engagement in certain on-going practices necessitates not just the exhibition of certain vices but also the cultivation of these. I reserve extending this insight to political practice for now; what I wish to emphasize here is that Shue's acknowledgement that "torture takes skill, disposition and knowledge gained only from experience" (2009: 314) alters the structure of the DH dilemma. If "the legalisation of torture is a bad mistake" - due to the dangers of instilling an official "culture of torture" - as de Wijze (2006: 26) stresses, but the possibility of the TBS remains, then maintaining the argument for DH in this scenario requires this much: a covert cadre of trained torturers to ensure that the possibility of 'doing wrong in order to do right' remains open when, and if, needed. This already suggests that conceptualizing DH as a momentary dilemma does not suffice. It reveals the existence of a second-order DH dilemma unaccounted for: if a cadre of professional torturers is necessary but must remain secret, then the requirement of secrecy implies that the politician must get DH (at least) once more.

An Ad Hoc Melodrama

This point brings to the fore an aspect of Machiavelli's dynamic approach that 'static' analyses struggle to confront: politics is a career for relatively long periods. And, throughout her career, the politician faces more than just one DH dilemma. But, if DH is not a momentary episode, it is bound to have implications that inescapably unfold over time but are distorted by 'static' analyses. One such an implication concerns the contention that politicians should be crushed by 'tragic remorse' which, for de Wijze and Goodwin, constitutes the appropriate "moral emotion that arises from getting DHs" (2009: 537).

This emphasis on anguish, I should note here, originates in Walzer's seminal essay as a by-product of his dissatisfaction with Machiavelli's failure to "specify the state of mind appropriate to a man with [DH]" (1973: 176). Our abhorrence with Machiavelli's insights aside though, it should not strike us as odd that the Florentine has little to say about the politician's 'inwardness'. Whilst the image of politicians tormented by anguish, Judith Shklar suggests, appeals "to those engaged intellectuals who like to think of "dirty hands" as a peculiarly shaking, personal, and spectacular crisis" it "is a fantasy quite appropriate to the imaginary world" (1984: 243-244). This point need not emerge only from the cracks of the TBS; it can be illustrated by examining less drastic scenarios, such as Ned's dilemma.

Now, in Ned's case, the purportedly universally experienced emotion of 'tragic remorse' already seems to be extravagant. If this case is scrutinized only through the 'static' perspective though, we have no particular reason to dispute its plausibility. Or, so it seems. But, in Ned's case we might well want to ask this: suppose that Ned wins the election. Then what? Walzer does not say. In the context of real political life though, it is almost certain that Ned will face new hard questions, most of which could be represented as second-order 'static' DH dilemmas. Should he honour his promise to grant the contracts to the ward boss? Should he make a similar deal when the next election approaches? But, as the adage goes, the same thing repeated many times is not the same thing. Assuming that it is unproblematic for an ex-ante innocent politician to enter politics in the first place, the first dirty act frustrates a history of clean hands. The distance between Ned's clean moral record before and after he strikes the deal is immense. But, the distance between his record before and after he gets DH for a second time diminishes significantly. Besides, Ned lost his innocence before this second-order DH dilemma obtained. As time goes by the marginal loss caused by successive acts of DH diminishes and "the politician moves farther from what he was before the first one" (Kis, 2008: 198). On the other hand, the costs of refusing to get dirty are likely to increase with time. For, in his first electoral campaign, Ned has no office to lose. Next time he has.

This marginal cost would rise even if Ned were to seek power for the sake of promoting the public good, rather than anything else (I elaborate on this in the next sub-section).

Given that DH is far from a discrete episode, to think of the politician as a tragic hero who suffers more and more as he sinks deeper into the dreary arena of politics would be melodramatic to say the least. It is more plausible to see him as becoming more accustomed towards his dirt. And, we have no reason to expect this pathos even after the first DH dilemma obtains; this would be the reaction of a good or innocent individual, thrown into politics, not of an experienced politician who takes Machiavelli's message into an earnest consideration. I expand on this later on but, what is worth mentioning here is that, this is the lesson Sartre's Hoerderer forces upon us (*Le Mains Sales* is the play which the DH thesis borrows its name from and yet, like Machiavelli's, Sartre's insights seem to be superficially acknowledged). Hoerderer, the embodiment of political experience, is comfortable with his dirt. In politics, he explains to the innocent Hugo, the best is the enemy of the good: "one lies when one must" (Sartre, 1989: 224).

These issues, one may retort, do not obtain. Besides, the DH thesis resists these: the politician, soon after the first dilemma is posed, should publically reveal his dirt so as to regain his innocence through some form of cathartic punishment. This, Walzer maintains, is "what the Catholic Church has always taught" (1973: 178). This proviso nonetheless succumbs to further difficulties.

Innocence Restored? From Pluralism and Conflict to Monism and Harmony

Central to the DH thesis is a paradoxical flavour of optimism, which is sustained by Walzer's (1973: 177) conviction that "we don't want to be ruled by men who have lost their souls": the hope of salvation. The 'static' account, whilst prima face acknowledging tragedy and conflict - hence all the melodrama - enables the politician to move beyond these. This puzzling conviction brings to mind Berlin's remark on Marxist political thought, and its view of conflict: "some nineteenth-century thinkers thought that [the quest for harmony] is not so simple ... Yet, after inevitable setbacks, failures, relapses, returns to barbarism ... the drama would have a happy ending" (1990: 13). The similarities between the DH thesis and the Marxist view of conflict are profound: after all the drama has taken place, once the acts of revelation and punishment are instilled, the DH politician washes his hands clean. Innocence need not be irretrievably lost: a happy ending for the momentarily dirty politician does exist.

What paradoxically emerges from Walzer's attempt to find a space where a politician can be virtuous but also remain morally good is a reinstatement (in a slightly different guise) of the 'order' against which Machiavelli conveyed the idea that politicians 'must learn how not to be good'. For, as noted, Machiavelli is adamant that there exist "at least two worlds" each of with its own set of values and ends which are "not combinable in any final synthesis" (Berlin, 1990: 10). Simply put, one can either save one's soul or engage in politics, but not both at once. Hence, the static account, whilst initially embracing Machiavelli's recognition of intractable conflict, lapses back to the very vision it seeks to evade. In Walzer's final synthesis, harmony is re-established: ordinary and political morality despite being momentarily disrupted, are ultimately combinable. The DH thesis rapidly oscillates from a prima facie value-pluralist perspective to a value-monist one. The transition from temporal conflict to final harmony, from dirt to innocence is, as assumed, smooth and unproblematic. This might seem a striking claim but it is hardly surprising. Walzer's choice of the term 'Catholic' to characterize his account is not insignificant. For, the disavowal of tragedy and conflict is a core tenet of Christian providence: the doctrine of salvation opposes tragic knowledge. In Karl Jaspers' words, "the chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without escape" (1953: 38). Like most accounts of religious faith then, Walzer's account disavows its acknowledgement of conflict and tragedy.

But it is not just that the DH thesis negates the Machiavellian insight it advances. The final harmony between politics and morality it envisions is hardly conceivable. "Conflict", Stuart Hampshire tells us, "is perpetual, why then should we be deceived" (2000: 51)? Our discussion in the previous subsection already grants some validity to Hampshire's claim; our consideration of Ned's case revealed that DH is far from a momentary 'episode'. The point I wish to register here builds on this recognition, but its focus is different: it emphasizes the issue of revelation of one's dirt. For, even if the abovementioned dilemmas do not obtain, Ned's decision of whether to reveal his DH and subject himself to expiatory punishment cannot be that simple.

Pace Walzer, Ned's decision to compete for office is not merely "a commitment to try to win" (1973: 165). Gaining office is not the end of politics. "What must count as a political activity, anywhere", Williams notes, "is trying to stay in office". Williams' remarks on resignation are suggestive here: "to view resignation as the mere equivalent of saying 'I agree' or 'I disagree' in a private and uncoerced conversation would be an elementary misunderstanding" (1978: 58). Granted that standard DH theorists do not talk about removal from office - they do not discuss what such a punishment might be at all - but, if punishment is to be meaningful, it is difficult to imagine any other sanction for the DH politician to pay. If this is the case though, Ned's decision to publically reveal his dirt runs counter to one of the ends

of politics: the demand to rule. At the very minimum then, the DH politician is confronted with a second-order DH dilemma: a) either to publically reveal his DH so as to regain his innocence, at the cost of political ostracism or b) soldier on and fulfil his political commitment, at the cost of betraying our demand for innocent politicians again. This point is glimpsed by Martin Hollis, who highlights that “once a dilemma has been posed for a person in office, integrity does not demand that he keep his hands clean by stepping aside”. For, “it is too late for clean hands, whatever he does” (1982: 394). Therefore, Ned’s choice is not devoid from a moral loss; the conflict between ordinary and political morality does not evaporate as standard DH theorists assume.

To suggest otherwise, Williams tells us, is to neglect the difference “between commitment to on-going political activity and a one-off example of political expression”. It would be also to neglect that, for a politician, that decision is, in a substantial sense, “part of his life” (1978: 58). Williams’ remark does not merely entail that standard DH theorists fail to capture Ned’s choice as a second-order DH dilemma. It also reveals the existence of an odd contradiction at the heart of the DH thesis - a by-product of its one-off conception of the conflict between morality and politics and its failure to conceive the politician’s life as a whole: why should Ned - just after he enters politics by becoming dirty - decide to revert to the mode of ordinary morality - by subjecting himself to the risk of political ostracism - so as to restore his forgone innocence? Put bluntly, if Ned’s objective was to stay away from the enduring dirt of politics, he should not have bothered becoming dirty in the first place. Hence, if Ned’s choice is situated within the context of real political life, the action-guiding prescription Walzer advocates makes little sense. It also gives rise to a peculiar view of certain vices.

Innocence Restored? A Peculiar view of the Vices

The DH thesis, whilst purportedly advancing an argument for the necessity of immoral acts (or the practice of the vices), grants the permission to behave immorally only in the first-order DH dilemma. Once hands are dirtied, the politician should refrain from engaging in further immoralities. He should not, Walzer emphasizes, publically “pretend that his hands are clean” and conceal his dirt from us (1973: 168). This, however, seems awkward. The ‘static’ account, if somehow translated into a virtue and vice framework, suddenly appears to be censorious over the practice of hypocrisy and dissimulation - or, at least, of some manifestations of these: the pretence of clean hands and the concealment of one’s vices. To be sure, DH theorists are not alone at abhorring hypocrisy or dissimulation. But a Kantian’s (or a moralist’s) opposition towards such vices would not strike us as odd - this is to be expected. For those modern Machiavellians who endorse the practise of almost every vice - including the advocacy of cruelty

in scenarios such as the TBS -this seems to be inconsistent. One might well wonder whether, for an account which purportedly advances a 'lesser evil' argument, cruelty constitutes a 'lesser evil' vis-à-vis hypocrisy and dissimulation.

And, irrespective of whether hypocrisy is a lesser vice vis-à-vis cruelty, the contradiction I previously highlighted remains: honestly revealing one's dirt may jeopardize one's on-going political commitment. Democratic politics, Janos Kis reminds us, involves a continuous struggle for power: politicians are aware that "their public statements are used in that context". A sincere revelation of their dirt "may be misused against them" (2008: 199). Thus, Martin Hollis adds, it is not a surprise that in politics, the extent of the dirt "is hard for us to gauge". For, "our agent's [political] duty is to conceal it from us" ... if we know" he "has failed" (1982: 396). Hence: "a wise prince ... preserves a moral front by seeming to keep faith and seeming to act with honour, while secretly breaking faith and ignoring honour when occasion demands" (Hollis, 1982: 389). Machiavelli's message is clear: the politician must get DH once more -he must conceal his dirt and appear before us as an innocent man. He must wear clean gloves. Pace Walzer, no serious politician who wants to stay in power can allow himself to speak about his DH without paying attention to the strategic aspect of his statements. The DH thesis underestimates the enduring necessity of these vices (or dirty acts) and overlooks how the uncritical pursuit of honesty interferes with on-going political commitment.

To illustrate this point, it might be worth considering a case discussed by Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars*, which supposedly demonstrates the practical currency of the Catholic account: the Allied terror-bombings during WWII and the subsequent dishonouring of Harris, the British Commander who led these. To cut a long story short, the first-order DH dilemma which confronted the British involved a choice of either: a) terror-bombing the German cities at the cost of annihilating non-combatants or b) refuse to do so at the risk of defeat. The decision to opt for (a), Walzer suggests, was justified but, since terror-bombing is a criminal activity, it was also wrongful. Yet, he maintains, whilst the British got DH, their refusal to honour Harris constituted a form of atonement, a public admission of guilt.

Now, two questions merit more scrutiny here: Was Harris the only actor with DH in this case? And, if not, why was only he dishonoured? In relation to the first question, Walzer does acknowledge the dirt of the British government: "if blame is to be distributed", he says, "Churchill deserves full share" (1977: 324). But his answer to the second question is less than satisfactory: "Churchill's success in disassociating himself from the policy of terror bombing is not of great importance" (1977: 324). Pace Walzer, Churchill's dissociation from this policy is important in this much: it constitutes a testament for the

inadequacy of the 'static' account. For, in one of the most putative cases of DH, the British government, whilst authorizing the killing of non-combatants, publically denied doing so. "The reason why they did this", Alex Bellamy explains, "is straightforward": the public would not support a campaign of annihilation (2009: 546). Various polls during the war revealed that no fewer than forty- six per cent of the population opposed terror-bombing. So, the government employed a justificatory strategy based on dissimulation and hypocrisy: they concealed their DH because admitting the deliberate massacre of non-combatants would cloud the war's moral clarity and erode domestic support. The dishonouring of Harris was far from a form of catharsis. Not only did Harris not publically reveal his dirt to the community as the Catholic account dictates - he breached government confidentiality and defended terror-bombing on utilitarian grounds - but his open and innocent knavery also deemed him an ideal scapegoat: the government wore clean gloves.

So far I have sought to suggest that the conception of DH as a stark dilemma which brings about the ephemeral loss of innocence is unsatisfactorily static: it misconceives the extent of the conflict between morality and politics and does not sit well with the realities of certain on-going practices, most notably politics. In so doing, I highlighted a number of problems which are entangled with the static conception of DH. Not only is the DH thesis unsatisfactorily abstract and melodramatic, but it gives rise to a counter-intuitive view surrounding the practice of certain vices (or dirty acts as DH theorists would put it). More importantly, the static account ultimately annihilates the purportedly value-pluralist vision it initially advances: Machiavelli's much cited by DH theorists message that politicians 'must learn how not to be good' is supplanted by a hopeful, yet unsatisfactory, vision of honesty, innocence, redemption and harmony.

A possible way to proceed from here is, perhaps, to reinterpret DH as involving a series of paradoxes of action which bring about the loss of innocence. This could make for a more nuanced account of DH in politics, but it would overlook a crucial feature of the static approach which merits more scrutiny: the assumption of an ex ante innocent man (the starting point of the DH thesis). Innocence, Walzer tells us, is tested and tarnished only when one is confronted with a paradox of action. It is only when certain tragic circumstances obtain and compel the agent to act immortally that Machiavelli's message of 'learning how not to be good' materializes. Until then, there are no particular problems with innocence venturing freely in politics.

But Machiavelli's message is not that one must merely 'learn how not to act well'. Machiavelli is adamant that those who opt to lead a political life must 'learn how not to be good'. Moral character

displays identity, not merely a spasmodic and sporadic collection of actions. A virtuous political life, in short, does not just require politicians to merely act in certain ways which conflict with ordinary morality as standard DH theorists contend. It also requires them to cultivate and continuously exhibit certain dispositions which are at odds with an admirable moral life. This much also follows by extending Shue's argument on torture to politics: 'static' analyses ignore that the virtuous engagement in certain on-going practices is conditioned upon the cultivation of certain vices. In what follows, I want to explore this point in more detail. The static account, I shall argue, also fails to capture the precise nature of such a conflict. Simply put, conceptualizing DH as a paradox of action (or a series of these) is not enough: this fails to acknowledge the way which moral character is incompatible with a virtuous political life. In doing so, I shall suggest that there exists a discrepancy between acting immorally, as a result of one's confrontation with a paradox of action - so that innocence, conceived as the absence of wrongdoing, is lost - and one's ability to take Machiavelli's advice to heart and learn how not to be good - so that innocence, conceived as a disposition, is irretrievably relinquished. The latter, can result in political failure in ways unanticipated by static accounts. In connection to this, I contend that this discrepancy captures a concern which lurks in the background of the discussion I have advanced so far: that the politician DH theorists present us with may not be as good for politics as they like to assume.

Leading a Political Life: Innocence and Virtù

In William Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, just after the eponymous character is defeated, Queen Margaret exclaims: "Henry, your sovereign, is prisoner to the foe; his state usurp'd. His realm, a slaughter house, his subjects slain" (1964: 31-33). What Margaret describes here is a political disaster: the tragic disintegration of Henry's kingdom. For Henry nonetheless, this turn of events seems hard to grasp. Like Walzer's politician, Henry is a good and innocent man, not worthy of such an end: his rule is altruistic and compassionate. Were we to utilize the DH thesis as a means of discerning the reasons of Henry's demise, we would be equally puzzled with his fate. Henry is not confronted with a stark paradox of action; his failure is not located in an explicit refusal to get DH in the traditional sense. Scrutinized through the lens of the DH thesis, Henry's innocence is yet to be tested; his failure is inexplicable.

But, as Peter Johnson observes, whilst Henry's "actions do not take the form of explicit choices ... at least in the manner required by the resolution of a specific dilemma ... they do stem from the disposition which characterizes his life" (1988: 245). And, it is this disposition - Henry's innocence - which is responsible for his failure: "Henry is too full of foolish pity" Margaret exclaims (Shakespeare, 1964: 77-

80). Henry spreads his compassion evenly across his political relationships. His unconditional trust and generosity is a signal of political infancy and impaired understanding of politics.

This point has an intense Machiavellian flavour: innocent aspirations fail in politics because they neglect the realities of power. It also signifies a disharmony between morality and politics which remains elusive for the DH thesis: the incongruence between the morality and politics does not just involve an incompatibility of action-guiding prescriptions; it cuts much deeper: it involves an incompatibility of character. When Warwick accuses Henry for being incapable of “shrouding himself from his enemies” and “recognizing the secret treasons of the world”, the sting of his accusation is not directed against Henry’s unwillingness to act in a particular way in a situation of extremity but against his character which constitutes an expression of his actions in normality. Henry laments that as a child he was innocent of such matters and cannot be blamed: “When I was crown’d I was but nine months old” (Shakespeare, 1964: 110-111). Richard, who sees the political irony of this remark, drives Machiavelli’s message home more forcefully: “You are old enough now ... yet, methinks, you lose” (1964: 112-113). Henry has reached an age and a position where innocence is a culpable deficiency.

To be clear, Machiavelli does not reject innocence as a disposition tout court. Nor does he reject the Christian moral virtues (i.e. *ozio*, mercy, unconditional generosity and a belief in salvation) and the ordinary conception of the good man in toto. These contribute to one particular conception of the good and can be fully pursued by a private individual - someone who seeks some corner of his own, a martyr perhaps. With respect to this way of life and the practices it entails, these are still to be counted as virtues. Otherwise, Machiavelli would not have acknowledged that the qualities of the lion and the fox - cruelty and deception - despite being political virtues are moral vices. As John Casey suggests however, the problem lies “at that point where certain morally good qualities and virtues pass into something else” (1982: 137). What Machiavelli condemns however, is the belief that innocence is compatible with a virtuous political life. To choose a life of innocence or goodness, whilst simultaneously aspiring to practice politics, is to condemn oneself to impotence and, like Henry, “to being used and crushed by powerful and ambitious ... men” (Berlin, 1981: 47). Innocence as a disposition, however morally admirable it might be, is not a political virtue. It is a vice.

I should elucidate more clearly here the Machiavellian insight of Shakespeare’s play which is overlooked by standard DH theorists. The DH thesis, by virtue of its overemphasis on action is oblivious to the way which moral character enters politics and jeopardizes political existence. Its contention that *ex ante* innocence should be *ex post* lost only in situations involving a paradox of action, cannot fully account for

what Machiavelli's motto entails: it leaves unexamined how innocence as a disposition compromises virtuous political engagement. For, there exists a discrepancy between innocence, as the absence of wrongdoing - which is lost following one's confrontation with a paradox of action and innocence as a disposition - which is forfeited when one learns how not to be good and cultivates certain vices conducive to a virtuous politics. This insight is also glimpsed by Herbert Morris: "there is innocent conduct that is simply not wrong" and "there are innocent persons ... who are absent of a certain kind of knowledge" and experience (1976: 141). Henry's innocence epitomizes the latter: it is not merely passive - something which is only acted upon or awaits to be tragically tainted upon one's confrontation with a 'static' paradox of action as DH theorists maintain. It has an active sense and is itself a source of political tragedy and disaster. Simply put, Henry's innocence is antithetical to political virtue - what Machiavelli terms, *virtù*: it is incapable of the cruelty of the lion and the cunningness and perception of the fox. Henry's unawareness of the harsh realities of politics, his inability "to recognize snares" and "protect [himself] from wolves", proves fatal both to himself and the community he is supposed to reign (Machiavelli, 1998: 69).

But it is not just that innocence as a disposition may jeopardize political existence in the absence of a 'static' dilemma. The discrepancy between innocence as a disposition and innocence as the absence of wrongdoing is such that the former may persist even after the latter is lost - that is, after hands are dirtied in the traditional way. "Children", Morris indicates, are often in this condition: "they are guilty of wrongdoing ... while still retaining their innocence" (1976: 141). To illustrate how this insight extends to politics though, we should take a closer look at Walzer's moral politician.

Recall that the starting point of the DH thesis is an *ex ante* innocent individual who is confident that his innocence is sufficient: he "wants to do good only by doing good ... he is certain that he can stop short of the most corrupting and brutal uses of political power" (Walzer, 1973: 165). But Walzer's politician is not an oversensitive soul; once faced with a paradox of action he is prepared to get DH to will the public good. Yet, once confronted with the messiness of politics, once his innocence conceived as the absence of moral wrongdoing is lost, his immediate reaction is one of 'tragic remorse' - akin to an individual who feels struck by an unanticipated misfortune. His innocent character, his obsession with salvation and purity remains and deems him incapable of hypocrisy and dissimulation. It prompts him to seek solace to a private life of contentment by washing his hands clean through an honest revelation of his dirt, confident that evading politics is easy and devoid from moral loss and unaware how his honesty may be exploited against him.

These convictions are not just politically suicidal for the reasons I documented earlier. They also constitute a testament of innocence, the antithesis of political experience and *virtù*, which Machiavelli arduously advocated. Since DH “is everyday part of the business”, Williams remarks, the politician who takes the claims of politics seriously “has to face the probability” of this problem (1979: 62). Virtuous political practice, Mendus adds, requires the knowledge that “politics will produce these sorts of dilemma”. For, “in choosing politics” the politician “has chosen a life which will predictably bring these conflicts with it” (Mendus, 1988: 340; 343). Resentment does not make for an erudite reaction to a predictable course of events. “A person of experience”, Hampshire tells us, expects “that his usual choice will be the lesser of two or more evils” (1989:170). Upon deciding to enter politics, an experienced individual is cognizant that his reward is not to be found in otherworldly salvation but in virtuously participating in politics. This is possible only if one irretrievably relinquishes his innocence by cultivating the necessary vices conducive to virtuous political practice. Unlike Walzer’s innocent individual then, an experienced politician is aware that the life he chose to lead cannot ever be free from conflict, vice and imperfection. Nor can it ever be clean.

Conclusion

This essay sought to suggest that, despite its purported Machiavellian lineage, the standard DH thesis is much closer to the idealistic vision of innocence and harmony it seeks to reject. In particular, I argued that the DH thesis is unsatisfactorily ‘static’ and, as such, it displaces Machiavelli’s vision: it misconceives the extent and the precise nature of the conflict between morality and politics. Differently put, the DH thesis captures neither what it really means to have DH in politics nor what leading a political life entails. Whilst it was not my intention to articulate a comprehensive alternative account of DH, the upshot of this is that making sense of DH in politics requires a re-orientation in the way we conceive the problem: we should restore Machiavelli’s lost insights by giving, to use Williams’ (2002: 3) words, more autonomy to “distinctively political thought”: we should take the messy realities of politics seriously and consider more carefully the qualities of character conducive to virtuous political practice. This also compels us to acknowledge that there exists a perpetual and intractable conflict between an admirable moral and a political life - that certain moral vices are political virtues. Whilst it is this recognition DH theorists should entertain if they wish to be taken seriously, Walzer’s contention that being ruled by men who have lost their souls is undesirable, his conviction that moral and political goodness are philosophically reconcilable, suggests that this is something which our innocence is often unwilling to tolerate.

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