**A Summary of Michael Walzer’s *Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands***

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In “The Problem of Dirty Hands”, Michael Walzer opens with a query: Can a person be confronted with two morally objectionable choices? He draws from the insights of Thomas Nagel, who concurs and posits that such scenarios arise when individuals must decide between upholding a crucial moral principle and evading an impending catastrophe (160). Walzer aligns himself closely with Nagel's viewpoint, finding a pertinent connection between the moral quandary and the realm of modern politics, introducing the evocative concept of "dirty hands." This notion stems from Hoerderer's powerful statement in Sartre's play: "I have dirty hands right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood. Do you think you can govern innocently?" (161) The idea of "dirty hands'' encompasses the intricate interplay of a government act that, from a utilitarian standpoint, may be the most pragmatic and justifiable, yet leaves the agent grappling with a moral wrong. The once innocent individual is now tainted by the act, losing the claim to moral purity. However, if he were to cling steadfastly to his morals and adopt an absolutist standpoint, he risks not only failing to execute what is ethically right but also falling short of fulfilling the obligations that accompany his office (161).

While moral dilemmas may manifest in various spheres of daily life, the distinct emphasis on politicians stems from their unique role as decision-makers, a responsibility they willingly pursue (174). A politician's role surpasses merely catering to the public's interests; it necessitates acting on their behalf. However, in this pursuit of service, they cannot escape the allure of their own aspirations, for success paves the way to coveted realms of power and glory, granting them authority to influence and mold the lives of the masses (162). Even worse, the triumphant politician often employs the tools of violence and the specter of violence, not solely in dealing with foreign nations, but at times, even in relation to his own people (163). As articulated by Max Weber in his essay "Politics as a Vocation," “the men who act for us and in our name are often killers, or seem to become killers too quickly and too easily” (164). Walzer extends this argument by drawing upon Machiavelli's insight, revealing that achieving success in this arena demands mastering the art of "how not to be good" (164). However, although the proposition evokes the semblance of a moral rulebook, denoting certain actions as 'bad’, Machiavelli paradoxically suggests that those engaged in seemingly corrupt dealings can still be regarded as “good men, who ought to be honored for making the right decision when it was a hard decision to make” (168).

Walzer presents three utilitarian arguments commonly used to expound Machiavelli’s viewpoint. He first puts forth the idea that if a politician were to base choices solely on the specific and immediate circumstances at hand, any action taken could not be construed as a crime, but a mistake, as the decision was made in isolation, to the best of his ability. Nevertheless, Walzer counters this notion by asserting that moral life is fundamentally a social phenomenon, woven by shared rules that govern our collective understanding (169). Thus, the attractiveness of this argument gives way to its implausibility. ​​Another perspective contends that moral rules are merely guidelines and warnings, not strict prohibitions, but Walzer argues that our defenses often include excuses, implicitly acknowledging a sense of guilt (170). The third argument explores the efficacy of guilt, where if a good person upholds moral rules diligently, then when faced with the necessity to deviate from these rules, he experiences guilt as a poignant reminder of his moral compass. The emerging understanding is that a politician's engagement in an atrocious act is a result of being cornered with no alternative, acting solely to avoid imminent and almost certain disaster. Walzer refutes this view by arguing that when an individual is fully cognizant that their actions are motivated by "good utilitarian reasons," they find no cause to harbor feelings of guilt (171).

Walzer ends by taking a step back to examine the dilemma of dirty hands from three distinct historical vantage points. The neoclassical viewpoint, exemplified by the Machiavellian school of thought, contends that the ends justify the means. In essence, the politician's deceit and cruelty, while morally objectionable, are vindicated by the positive outcomes he achieves. Consequently, citizens tend to overlook the transgressions and instead extol his successes (175). This argument hinges on the notion that the politician must “do bad things well” as there are no rewards for “doing bad things badly” (176). Interestingly, Machiavelli remains characteristically enigmatic on the specifics, leaving his moral sensibility open to interpretation. The subsequent perspective, the Protestant outlook, personified by Max Weber in "Politics as a Vocation," introduces the notion that personal anguish stands as the sole admissible excuse for political transgressions, wherein the politician assumes not just the role of a hero but that of a tragic one. Weber's theory centers on the concept of God, who has not sanctioned or condoned such acts of evil, where the politician, of his own volition, wields the sword and surrenders his soul, possibly forever (176). Weber endeavors to resolve the predicament of dirty hands entirely within the confines of an individual's conscience. Walzer, however, believes that anguish should find expression and resonance in the public sphere whilst remaining socially circumscribed. The public becomes cognizant of the politician's guilt, yet simultaneously clings to the prospect of redemption and salvation (177). Finally, the Catholic perspective, epitomized in Albert Camus’ "The Just Assassins," presents a view where there are seemingly no limits to the pursuit of political goals. Whatever blood may stain one's hands will ultimately be absolved in the final act of penance, death (178).

As Walzer states, “It is by his dirty hands that we know [a moral politician]. If he were a moral man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean” (168). In alignment with Camus' perspective, Walzer acknowledges that politicians cannot avoid getting their hands dirty, and the key lies in accepting this reality rather than feigning purity. He advocates for a discerning approach to political actions and their consequences, calling for appropriate punishment or penance, a departure from Machiavelli's pure pragmatism and Weber's focus on personal suffering, which may overlook the broader impact on the public (179).

**References**

Walzer, Michael. "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands." Philosophy & Public Affairs, vol. 2, no. 2, 1973, pp. 160-80. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2265139. Accessed 19 July 2023.