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## Merleau-Ponty and “Dirty Hands”: Political Phronesis and *Virtù* Between Marxism and Machiavelli

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### ABSTRACT

Despite rarely explicitly thematizing the problem of dirty hands, this essay argues that Merleau-Ponty’s political work can nonetheless make some important contributions to the issue, both descriptively and normatively. Although his political writings have been neglected in recent times, his interpretations of Marxism and Machiavelli enabled him to develop an account of political phronesis and *virtù* that sought to retain the strengths of their respective positions without succumbing to their problems. In the process, he provides grounds for generalizing the problem of “dirty hands” beyond Michael Walzer’s influential understanding that pertains primarily to “emergencies” and singular time-slice actions, and addresses concerns about the coherence of the very idea that there is justified action that one ought to do which remains wrong. Merleau-Ponty does this by emphasizing the diachronic relationship between theoretical principles and concrete political action over a period of time, thus imbuing the problem of dirty hands with a historicity that is not sufficiently recognized in the more static and action-focused discussions.

### KEYWORDS

Marxism; dirty hands; politics; virtue; Merleau-Ponty; Machiavelli

Despite rarely explicitly thematizing the problem of dirty hands, this essay argues that Merleau-Ponty’s political work can nonetheless make some important contributions to the issue, both descriptively and normatively. Like many of his generation, Merleau-Ponty was concerned with political action and violence throughout his career. His political writings engaged at length with Marxism, but also and intriguingly with Machiavelli, with Merleau-Ponty putting forward an account of political phronesis and *virtù*, to use Machiavelli’s term, that aimed to retain the strengths of their respective positions without succumbing to their problems. Part of the reason for his interest in Marxism and Machiavelli was for what they could elucidate regarding dirty hands and politics, in contrast to the liberalism and Kantianism that he thought ignored systematic structural injustice and thus disavowed their own dirt. In the process, Merleau-Ponty’s work provides grounds for generalizing the problem of “dirty hands” beyond Michael Walzer’s influential understanding of it as primarily pertaining to “emergencies”, and helps to

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resolve concerns about the coherence of the very idea of “dirty hands” and whether there is justified action that one ought to do which remains wrong. Merleau-Ponty does this not by focusing on any particular action and its “moral tag”, but by emphasizing the diachronic relationship between theoretical principles and concrete political action over a period of time, along with the issue of character. His dialectical work thus imbues the problem of dirty hands with a historicity that is not sufficiently recognized in the more static and action-focused discussions that have become standard.

The paper will proceed with three main sections:

Firstly, a sketch of the problem of dirty hands, which I elaborate via Sartre and Walzer’s influential discussions of the issue. To these views I emphasize temporality and historicity, and the dialectical inter-relationship between means and ends, thus preparing the ground for my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty and his relevance to the debate;

Secondly, I set out some of the key insights of Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy that bear on the problem of dirty hands and the way in which it is typically conceived, notably Merleau-Ponty’s ultimately positive take on Machiavelli and *virtù*, which involves a navigation between two vices but does not lapse into an idealized redemptive take on dirty hands *a la* Walzer;

Finally, I consider some key themes from his two main books on political philosophy: *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Although one is more normative than the other in regard to dirty hands, together they develop his account of the complexities of political phronesis and dirty hands in an intellectual and activist life.

## The Problem of Dirty Hands: From Sartre to Walzer

The problem of “dirty hands”, where it is thought to be “right to do wrong”, has different resonances depending on the discipline. In politics, it primarily indicates an embrace of political realism, where the ends justify the means, and considerations of morality are deemed to be inapplicable in war or other emergency situations. However, it is arguable that on such a view the “hands” in question are only superficially dirty, or not at all. That is, political realism may tacitly deny the existence of dirty hands, because it is not really ultimately “wrong” in any strong sense. Political discussion about “dirty hands” might also refer to the question of whether we need leaders who are not moralists or knights of good conscience, but who can do what is wrong. In this context, the idea of “dirty hands” denotes a position between the cynicism of “by any/all” means, and a moralism of “by pure means only”, which downplays or ignores structural inequity and the inevitable investment in preserving the status quo.

In philosophy, the literature on the problem of “dirty hands” tends to be rather more abstract, concerned with whether or not it is an actual phenomenon, with some philosophers suggesting that putative examples might be resolved as just difficult decisions in unknown circumstances, and/or focusing on whether it is ultimately rational and coherent to embrace the contradiction that, in some carefully defined circumstances, it might be “right to do wrong”. A lot of the philosophy literature is also typically synchronic in

focus. That is, actions are considered in isolation, and often in a time-slice manner, with an agent confronted by a “ticking bomb” or other emergency scenario. The literature is typically not especially involved in considerations of character, or of historicity, or even of the complexity of such decisions in real politics.

I will ultimately use Merleau-Ponty’s work to develop an appreciation of “dirty hands” that encompasses both dimensions, the political and the philosophical, but it is helpful to contextualize the problem via his colleague and sometime friend, Jean-Paul Sartre. After all, it was Sartre who introduced the idea of “dirty hands” into the contemporary discussion in his 1948 play of that name, *Les mains sales*. Highly controversial with the Marxist “left” at the time, the titular “dirty hands” pertained to the actions of the two main characters in the play, as well as the fictionalized rendering of the communist party.<sup>1</sup> The play’s plot concerns Hugo, who is eventually brought to assassinate a fellow traveller, Hoerderer. The party and Hugo deem that Hoerderer has lost his way and become more dangerous to them than their class opponents. With more experience in these political dark arts, Hoerderer is also more of a political opportunist. He sometimes works with class enemies. He lies to his own forces. And he is comparatively straightforward in acknowledging his own “dirty hands” – “I have dirty hands right up to the elbows”, he says. Although he does not come across as an unremitting tyrant, he appears relatively comfortable with that “dirt” as part of the lived-practice of politics in difficult times, unlike Walzer’s portrait of the “dirty hands” politician where anguish and public redemption/confession is morally required.<sup>2</sup>

Sartre juxtaposes Hoerderer’s character and way of bearing that political life and its duplicities with the more doctrinaire communist Hugo, who did not have yet have blood on his hands in any literal way (prior to undertaking the assassination), and who believed, initially at least, that the lines of right and wrong action, as indicated by the party, were relatively clear. Both of them either planned or committed acts of violence, albeit in the name of the revolution, which for a doctrinaire version of Marxism might justify (or excuse) the violence: any “dirt” on their hands is ultimately cancelled out, *if* it conduces to the overcoming of class struggle and the ascension of the proletariat.

Of course, Sartrean existentialism does not dispense with the issue of “dirty hands” quite so easily. Even in his most Marxist moments he retained an abiding interest in the choices and actions of individuals, rather than any objectivist view of historical progress, notwithstanding that he broadly agreed with his two main protagonists in *Les mains sales* that violence is necessary for the revolution.<sup>3</sup> While Sartre oscillated on the question of which character he agreed or identified with – perhaps reflecting his own transforming relationship with Marxism and the reception of his play, as Busk argues – the standard reading is to see Hugo as the educated bourgeois who is able, after a struggle, to move from theory to action and assassinates Hoerderer, but who will not subsequently bend to the relevant “party” excuse or justification for his dirty hands.<sup>4</sup> This is an important part of the logic of dirty hands in general: even if a given action is felt to be somehow justified, on balance, there is a moral remainder that ensures that it cannot (and perhaps should not) be wholly excused or justified. Overall, Sartre’s play nicely dramatizes the ambiguity of political action and judgments about dirty hands,<sup>5</sup> arguably more clearly than some of his theoretical writings on Marxism.<sup>6</sup>

The philosophical conundrum that Sartre’s play presented was refined in an influential paper by Walzer in the early 1970s. Walzer drew on Sartre, Machiavelli, and others and

clarified some of the logical issues at the heart of dirty hands. For Walzer, the “dirty hands” thesis is not just a description of the idea that real politics typically involves less than ideal behaviour. Rather, it also stands for a normative claim. As Walzer puts it: “It is easy to get one’s hands dirty in politics and it is often right to do so”.<sup>7</sup> This idea is indebted to Machiavelli’s provocative claim that the politician needs to “learn how not to be good”, although it is important to recognize that Machiavelli makes a claim about character and an enduring disposition, differing from Walzer in that regard. They concur, however, that it is sometimes right for political leaders to have dirty hands. A political leader ought to be able to do (or tolerate) that which is “wrong”, and yet at the same time the stain of the wrongness is not thereby cancelled out. This is the basic dirty hands thesis (abbreviated as DH hereafter). It can be analysed in at least two main ways: as expressing the idea that in some situations politics trumps ordinary morality; or as maintaining that there are two competing moral views where one takes precedence over the other (say the utilitarian over the deontological), but in both cases there is a moral remainder that cannot be wholly excused or justified.

Whether the DH thesis involves a conceptual confusion is much debated. Some argue that it involves a problematic double-counting in order to derive the ostensible contradiction that it is right to do wrong, as Tony Coady outlines (2014), perhaps thereby also offending against rationality as Nielsen holds.<sup>8</sup> While I agree with Coady and others that on a time-slice view there is indeed a double-counting, this need not present a *reductio* of the idea of DH *if* the temporal purview is expanded to encompass a reasonable stretch of time, and I will develop this claim through engaging with Merleau-Ponty’s work in what follows.

The DH thesis also needs to be distinguished from the basic idea that there is a conflict of values. While competing priorities and values are necessary for the normative idea that it is right to do wrong, they are not sufficient. It is not just that there are two (or more) bad choices available, and whatever way one chooses there will be some undesirable consequence. Rather, the DH thesis has a force or necessity about a particular kind of action as Coady insists.<sup>9</sup>

At first glance a Marxist or a utilitarian might seem to endorse DH. Both philosophies are understood by many – especially their opponents – to advocate some ruthless positions. The idea that the “end justifies the means” seems to follow from some of their respective teleological or consequentialist commitments (we will consider Trotsky’s reflections on this issue in Section 2b). But the idea that the end justifies the means also suggests that the ostensible “wrong” is ultimately cancelled out if the action in question conduces to the best consequences, and/or contributes to ending exploitation and alienation.<sup>10</sup> As such, whether any hands are genuinely dirty for the Marxist or utilitarian, in the paradoxical sense that it is right to do wrong, might be disputed. The “wrong” has been eliminated rather too quickly. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s political reflections seem to me to be committed to the view that a properly dialectical conception of historical action cannot wipe the dirt clean in this way. Rather, dirty hands are better understood as part of the “fold” of historical and political life, and the intermingling of an individual and society, intentions and situation, and the co-imbrication of means and ends. Although this is a descriptive claim, and a very general one, we will see that he maintains that it has a prescriptive force too (especially in *Humanism and Terror*).

What kinds of actions are in question in the DH literature? Sartre’s play focuses on torture, terrorism, and murder. The literature in moral theory since Walzer has typically

favoured examples that are deprived of their full context in a political life, with a proliferation of ticking bomb scenarios. It is arguably more helpful to consider actual historical examples (as Merleau-Ponty also does), because the full complexity of socio-political life is potentially available for consideration. We will consider Bukharin and Trotsky shortly, but we might also take the example of those brave citizens within Germany who internally plotted to assassinate Hitler in the lead up to July 1944. Prima facie, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others were right to do wrong, thus appearing to capture the DH paradox. Some might maintain the DH paradox can be resolved away, however. It remains arguable that this was merely a difficult decision, in the category of normally morally wrong but morally permissible in certain circumstances, and perhaps those circumstances were such that no “wrong” perdured. On this view, Bonhoeffer faced a forced choice between two evils, and he chose the lesser evil. His choice was between either: witnessing and facilitating evil by collaborating passively with many more deaths likely to ensue; or, plotting to kill Hitler and violating stringent moral principle not to murder, but stopping the greater evil that Hitler would continue to bring, on balance.

The “on balance” is important here, but it is not just a consequentialist weighing of probabilities and harms that matters. The DH question also needs to be considered diachronically and in relation to the principles and hopes of the individuals in question, over a period of time. Considerations of character and virtue are relevant. Bonhoeffer was initially a pacifist and consistently anti-war. His attempted murder of Hitler is continuous with some of his core principles, even if also difficult to reconcile with other principles of his, including parts deriving from Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Resolving whether or not this is a case of DH – that is, with contradiction and normative force about a particular action, but also with a moral remainder of “wrongness” – must involve consideration of the “arc” of a life. And that “arc” is typically more complicated than Walzer’s narrative arc, which is essentially *ex ante* innocence, then DH with guilt and moral remorse, then reconciliation if not redemption.<sup>12</sup>

There are also a range of more ordinary candidates for “dirty” actions, including lies and deception, manipulating others, and even compromise itself.<sup>13</sup> Walzer considers these forms of DH via the dilemma of the politician who lies and compromises himself to secure backing from a dishonest ward boss, promising them a contract in return for patronage and votes. But Walzer again presents this scenario in a rather static, “time-slice” fashion. As Tillyris notes, it is hard to see how one compromise might be all that is required.<sup>14</sup> If we provide a more real-life context and background, it appears inevitable that there will be further such decisions required, whether it be the next election and expectations for a similar deal, or even honouring the deal agreed to at all, which might then present unanticipated dilemmas. It is also difficult to see how the public accountability that Walzer requires could happen, without that individual ceasing to be a political leader. Still, this example usefully suggests that DH situations may pertain beyond emergency situations when lives are directly threatened.

To some extent the point can be generalized to so-called “private life” too, as Walzer briefly entertained at one point, and as Michael Stocker and others have argued.<sup>15</sup> Even if our own dirty hands are rarely revealed as dramatically as with the scenarios that confront our political leaders, we might hope to address the existential threat and moral challenge of climate change, but we decide to join a centrist party that we think has a chance of winning government, counting on being able to effect change from within. The

question where and when we influence that party, and where and when it influences us, and thus renders our hands dirty – given our own principles, character, existing commitments and hopes for the future – is difficult to determine. Outside of politics, our lives involve some similar negotiations too, and when those compromises badly effect others, they might sometimes count as instances of DH. Consider the nexus between principles and praxis in regard to relationships, parenthood, or artistic pursuits, all of which inevitably intertwine monetary and prestige considerations with happiness, prudential considerations, and more intrinsic goods, and they are all situations in which other parties have an ongoing moral claim upon us. These all involve what Aristotle called “mixed acts”, which are variously both means and ends, and they tell against eudaimonia in Aristotle’s view, even though they must be done.<sup>16</sup>

Without aiming to definitively resolve this question of the generalizability of the DH dilemma, it is important to see that the idea pivots around acts deployed as means for some other end. Dirty means like torture are used for ostensibly good ends (preventing harms, saving others, etc.). But in political praxis, as we will see in the rest of this paper, the means and ends co-evolve together, within dynamic and changing circumstances, and there is a feedback loop between them, along with a series of nested goals and objectives and differing possible means to enact them. It is not that one has ultimate intention A (world peace, communist revolution, etc.), and then simply implements dirty means B to get directly to that end, which if it happened might be unambiguously good and confer justification on the means. The realization of any ultimate intention is typically a long way off. Even in the Russian revolutions in 1917, the revolutionary will have a series of nested intentions or goals, with sub-intentions, and the means employed to realize those sub-intentions will make the overall goals more or less likely. Political action occurs in such lived and imperfect situations, without much knowledge of the best paths for given ends, even if those ends were unambiguously agreed to. There are two main ways of denying this temporal intertwining of means and ends that effectively also deny the possibility of DH: a cynical “by any and all means”, as well as the “only by pure means”. We will examine this further in the remainder of the essay, but some of this temporal complexity (and the allied co-imbrication of means and ends) is apparent through even a brief reflection on the ticking bomb scenarios. A political leader does not just decide to torture on the day that an emergency presents. Rather, they will have trained torturers in advance, at least if they are to be much chance of being effective.<sup>17</sup> And this is all often kept secret, with the public typically lied to. Even in this ubiquitous example, which does yet consider the character of the acting agent, it is clear that the question of DH must be considered in regard to actions and decisions over a reasonable temporal spread.

### **Merleau-Ponty, Machiavelli and Marxism**

An unnamed political editor of *Les Temps Modernes* from the mid 1940s till the early 50s, Merleau-Ponty published two main books of political philosophy, *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*, along with various essays and editorial contributions.<sup>18</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty did not systematically theorize DH, the various issues that motivate the view are considered in the course of his political writings, including the nature of political leadership and the possible justifications for violence. In addition,

many of his writings are framed by “neither-nor” considerations regarding political leadership – no pure morality, no cynical realism – that are closely aligned with the arguments of the proponents of DH from Machiavelli to Walzer.<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty nowhere espouses non-violence, owing to at least some ongoing agreement with the Machiavellian account of history as a site of struggle and the Marxist critique of the structural violence of both capitalism and liberalism. Throughout he also emphasizes the dialectical historicity of political action, and an experiential and characterological dimension that is not the focus of Marxism or Machiavelli. This all has consequences for how to better understand the DH thesis, in both its descriptive and normative dimensions, or so I will argue.

To begin to justify these general remarks about Merleau-Ponty’s *oeuvre*, however, consider the following quote from the beginning of *Adventures of the Dialectic*:

... he who espouses the politics of understanding is not able to judge from the event alone. If the decision he makes, which is just in itself, should tomorrow, because of its consequences, compromise the values he recognises, no one will absolve him from having bought his momentary tranquility at this price. He is not quit with history for acting in the moment according to what seemed just to him. One does not simply ask him to go through events without compromising himself; one also wants him, according to the occasion, to change the terms of the problem. It is necessary for him to enter into things, to be responsible for them, and not separate himself from what he does. In other words, *there are no just decisions, there is only a just politics.*<sup>20</sup>

In criticizing Alain’s politics of understanding,<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty here broaches something verging on a DH thesis. He also criticizes any decisionistic approach that seeks a “moral tag” attached to individual decisions and choices. Merleau-Ponty suggests that “no-one will absolve the leader”, and events and historicity will “compromise” the actor: there is we might say, a moral remainder. Nonetheless the claim is not that this might be avoided. Rather, he insists that it is necessary to enter into things, to be responsible for them, and to change the terms of the problem despite their inherent complexity.

In his earlier work, *Humanism and Terror*, he expressed some similar general views, notwithstanding the rather different conclusions of these two books about Marxism. According to Merleau-Ponty:

... decision is not a private matter, it is not the spontaneous affirmation of those values we favor; rather, it consists in questioning our situation in the world, inserting ourselves in the course of events, in properly understanding and expressing the movement of history outside of which values remain empty words and have no other chance of realization.<sup>22</sup>

Again, then, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the idea of private moral decisions in favour of an emphasis on historicity and immersion in the course of events.

These connections between these two books are not just cherry-picked remarks. In a related vein, he declares in *Humanism and Terror* that Machiavelli is worth more than Kant, and he ends *Adventures of the Dialectic* with the claim that Marxism is, in the end, too Kantian and even *a priori*, strangely divorced from experience, including, notably but perhaps counter-intuitively, “proletarian” experience.<sup>23</sup> In addition, in both of his books there is a criticism of Kantian liberalism around the inability to recognize their own DH in the disavowal of overt violence while other systematic forms of violence persist. Kant and contemporary liberals are blind to that which cannot be understood through reason or procedural fairness, say, but which derives its power



from other forces, be they unconscious, habitual, social, etc. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty held that it is in Machiavelli and the Marxist tradition that we see the complexities of political life more clearly, so it is important to consider his engagement with both.

### Merleau-Ponty on Machiavelli

It has been noted by Merleau-Ponty and many others (i.e. Louis Althusser, Claude Lefort) that Machiavelli's thought poses an interpretive problem for philosophy, revealing many traditional philosophical theories of justice to be profoundly utopic, erecting castles in the sky that have little to do with the realities of political life. Of course, Machiavelli's thought has been interpreted in a variety of different ways, with some scholars seeing him as a republican democrat, others as a cynical realist, and a variety of positions in between. We cannot aim to resolve that here, and Merleau-Ponty's engagement with him does not directly focus on these questions, although it is a positive and proto-democratic reading of the Florentine, including around the issue of DH.

On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Machiavelli is not a mere cynic or advocate that "might is right". Published in 1949 but written earlier as a lecture he gave in Italy, "A Note on Machiavelli" offers a more subtle and defensible position. While Merleau-Ponty agrees with Machiavelli's critique of abstract norms and principles in moral philosophy, he does not endorse cynical construals of Machiavelli as contending that DH is everywhere in politics and that one must hence do whatever it takes to retain power. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Machiavelli has him embracing DH normatively, not just descriptively, as well as setting some parameters for the exercise of political skill and leadership, but those parameters and limits are immanently construed, dependent on circumstances and *virtù* rather than moral rules that are ahistorical and above the struggle of people for power.

Merleau-Ponty turns back to Machiavelli because, in his words, he "describes that knot of collective life in which pure morality can be cruel and pure politics requires something like a morality".<sup>24</sup> On Merleau-Ponty's telling, one needs to be wary of good intentions that end up being cruel, either by virtue of lack of political skill or their motivated ignorance. And recognition of that "knot" of collective life is envisaged as a necessary condition for better navigating it, although it does not alone suffice. While Machiavelli admires some rather violent politicians by modern standards, i.e. Cesare Borgia, he also holds that the power which is legitimate is not based in hatred nor contempt. Rather, as Machiavelli put it: "the Prince must make himself feared in such a way that, if he is not loved, he is at least not hated".<sup>25</sup> While this would seem to preclude a reign of terror, albeit on strategic rather than moral grounds, it endorses a kind of flexibility regarding traditional moral values that has been associated with DH.

While Machiavelli is often reproached for the idea that history is a struggle, and because he treats politics as a relationship between people rather than principles, Merleau-Ponty asks: "is anything more certain?"<sup>26</sup> He ultimately agrees with Machiavelli on both counts, replying: "History is a struggle, and if republics did not struggle they would disappear. We should at least realize that the pieans remain bloody, merciless, and sordid. The supreme deception of the Crusades is not to admit it. The circle should be broken".<sup>27</sup> Likewise, he criticizes "the pious dodge" of those who turn their eyes and ours toward the heaven of principles in order to turn them away from what

they are doing”.<sup>28</sup> It is Machiavelli, Merleau-Ponty says, who brings political clarity, which includes the recognition of DH amidst the knot of collective life, as well as the idea of this constituting a distinct arena requiring political phronesis and judgment.<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty appears to accept the idea that the leader “must learn how not to be good”, as well as Machiavelli’s strategic reminder: but not all of the time, and not for just any reasons at all. How do we get an obedient populace? According to Machiavelli: by doing good when one can, and bad when one must. However, oppression calls forth rebellion,<sup>30</sup> and as such it can only be “episodic”. The leader needs sound judgment – political phronesis – to weigh up such considerations.

While the nature of that *virtù* is rather under-defined in the *Prince*, other than as a “means of living with others”, it retains the idea of excellence and capacity from the Greek concept of *arete*.<sup>31</sup> It emphasizes independent action, rather than a reliance on fortune, and is thought to help deliver certain goods such as stability, glory, and popular support.<sup>32</sup> *Virtù* is clearly different from traditional understandings of moral virtue, however, and it is noteworthy that Machiavelli often has recourse to the idea in the context of the morally problematic. What range of powers and skills must the Prince or political leader acquire, and what are they in aid of? Machiavelli says to maintain the state, and to achieve great things. Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes the need for the leader to be able to “speak to the mute spectators gathered around him and caught up in the dizziness of communal life”. This is not only a point about political propaganda, but a recognition that intersubjective relationships – and power – are cemented at a level deeper than judgment.<sup>33</sup> The political *virtù* of the leader must be cultivated and become habits or stable dispositions rather than isolated moments of decision (and dirtiness). It is a concept Merleau-Ponty also draws on in later work, including his Preface to *Signs*, as a reviewer helpfully pointed out.<sup>34</sup>

There is a connection with Aristotelean phronesis here, not only in this idea of a stable hexis or character, but also because it is a dialectical middle that Machiavelli and Merleau-Ponty are both concerned with – that is, avoiding the political vices that are the good conscience of liberal proceduralism and the cynicism of “might is right”. Although the idea of navigating between two extremes – excess and deficiency – provides guidelines, it also enables flexibility of response in regard to evolving circumstances. This analogy with Aristotle’s well-known “golden mean” should perhaps not be pushed too far, but for Machiavelli and for Merleau-Ponty there is an attempt to balance between autocratic and isolated rule by fiat and deferring to the decisions and judgments of others. This also obtains in regard to the question of whether the basis for leadership derives from the elites or the will of the demos. Siding with the elite all the time is not what Machiavelli advocates, since it would lead the Prince’s population to civil war. As such, the Prince is a mediator,<sup>35</sup> navigating between the dual demands of the elites and the demos, or the need to seek a compromise but also remain faithful to those one is representing.<sup>36</sup>

If we consider particular virtues, Machiavelli backs boldness over circumspection, so the overall moral picture is somewhat differently configured from what is usually ascribed to Aristotle. Machiavelli prizes pride, bravery, courage, and a kind of “toughness” that lies between the vices of squeamishness and callousness.<sup>37</sup> The point is that while generosity and compassion are needed, the leader also should not have too much of either, since that is likely to generate expectations and social instability. The

overall picture that Machiavelli presents is to suggest that the harmony and concord of Eudaimonia is improbable, and that political *virtù* involves an ability to come to terms with the difficulties and dilemmas presented by DH. Merleau-Ponty seems to agree in his essay on Machiavelli, emphasizing that the skilled leader must be able to understand – even if pre-reflectively – that values and material consequences are dialectically related, and that neither is sufficient on their own. To sum up, Merleau-Ponty’s essay on Machiavelli emphasizes a dialectical structure in which there is an intertwining of intentions and consequences, theory and action, and he will return to some related ideas in his two major books on Marxism.

## Merleau-Ponty and Marxism

For Merleau-Ponty, Marx and Machiavelli are connected. According to him, they both confronted the problem of a real humanism. Both were trying to get beyond the equivocal base of ahistorical principles and to advocate a position that was applicable to political practices.<sup>38</sup> In all of these senses Merleau-Ponty agreed, certainly in *Humanism and Terror*, but also still in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, where time and historicity eventually comes to be seen as counting against Marxism rather than in favour of it, and Marxism is no longer presented as *the* philosophy of history.

*Humanism and Terror* was concerned to address critics of Marxism, Arthur Koestler notable amongst them. Koestler and other critics rallied against an idea that they claimed to find in Marxism and which we considered earlier: that the ends justify the means. They primarily made the dialectical point – recognized by at least some Marxists – that the chosen means employed in political life will partly determine the ends that can be achieved. Bad practices can beget more bad practices, fracturing a democracy or splintering the party from the proletariat. Even if the ends confer some justification on the means, it is not the case that *any* means are compatible with *any* ends. There is a relationship of constraint here that Machiavelli’s work usefully illuminates. For Merleau-Ponty also, in related fashion, the dialectical relationship between means and ends are envisaged as mutually conditioning, rather than in any linear causal relationship, and situated within an embodied and historical lifeworld (unlike Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*).

Merleau-Ponty’s sympathetic reconstruction of Hegelian Marxism revolves around the claim that only good ends can justify violent means. ‘Good ends’ engender something like inter-subjective recognition (thus minimizing violence in the long run) and the ability to allow for change and transformation in a society and its institutions. It is in this light that Merleau-Ponty remarks that “What matters and what we have to discuss is not violence but its sense or its future”.<sup>39</sup> The critical question, for him, is whether the violence is likely to perpetuate itself. Any given action must be considered in relation to its history and possible/probable futures, just as the dialectical relationship between means and ends more generally must also be understood in that temporal light. In this way, Merleau-Ponty moves beyond the usual time-slice conception of the moment of decision and DH, since it is in the context of particular trajectories, commitments and the vicissitudes of their meaning, that agents and their actions are “dirty” or not.

In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty endorses what he calls the “wisdom” of Marxian praxis, as well as the wisdom of the great revolutionaries of 1917 who interpreted history as it was happening.<sup>40</sup> Defending Marxism, he says: “decision is not a

private matter, it is not the spontaneous affirmation of those values we favour; rather, it consists in questioning our situation in the world, inserting ourselves in the course of events, in properly understanding and expressing the movement of history outside of which values remain empty words and have no other chance of realization".<sup>41</sup> In *Humanism and Terror*, then, the revolutionaries are credited with understanding the dialectic that obtains between intentions/principles and consequences, and between means and ends. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the refusal to come to terms with this tension that ensures that opposing political theories (non-Marxist) are one-sided and myopic, evincing a kind of rationalism that denies the a-rational – that which is complex, contingent, and messy aspects of history and inter-subjective life.

Merleau-Ponty was concerned, however, that for some Communists too, objective consequences alone count – e.g. the eventual and necessary revolution and the ascension of the proletariat. In addition, some held – explicitly or otherwise – that their violence is legitimate (and, by contrast, that capitalist violence and oppression is not) because their aims were incontestable, scientifically pure, and without ideology. For such a Marxist, one's hands are dirty only in regard to contemporary bourgeoisie morality, thus ultimately not dirty at all. They embrace the "by any and all means", with a consequent denial of temporality and the complexity of its individual and historical unfolding. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty was critical of liberal political thought, suggesting, in effect, that espousing liberal principles of justice, or liberal proceduralism, only amounts to a mystification and an inability to cope with the ambiguous and messy terrain that is socio-political life. Against this innocence and the "judicial dream" of principles and good intentions, Merleau-Ponty says:

We only know of situated consciousnesses, which blend themselves with the situation they take and are unable to complain at being identified with it or at neglect of the incorruptible innocence of conscience ... we are what we do to others, we yield the right to be respected as noble souls. To respect one who does not respect others is ultimately to despise them; to abstain from violence towards the violent is to become their accomplice. We do not have a choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence. Inasmuch as we are incarnate beings, violence is our lot ...<sup>42</sup>

In such sentiments, Merleau-Ponty seems to embrace DH, both descriptively (it is part of political life) and normatively (political leaders ought to recognize it, rather than seek to pretend it is otherwise).

Interestingly, Nikolai Bukharin is sympathetically presented in *Humanism and Terror*, contrary to Koestler's depiction of him and the Moscow "show trials". Bukharin is famously sentenced to death at these trials, but on Merleau-Ponty's account Bukharin does not just give in to the party and its demands. Rather, he is envisaged as lucidly conscious of the tension between his historical situation and his own intentions. He is historically situated and guilty in one sense, but also a lived agent who is innocent in another sense; whatever he pleads he is simplifying the complex synthesis of each that constitutes his identity. He is hence unwilling to unambiguously plead either guilt or innocence and Merleau-Ponty describes this as "a contradiction founded in truth, in which the same man tries to realize himself on the two levels".<sup>43</sup> It is some similar contradictions that Merleau-Ponty explores in regard to Trotsky and Sartre in *Adventures*, as we will see, even if they rationalize away this contradiction more than face it. And this is part of

being what Merleau-Ponty calls a “situated consciousness” in difficult times. While classical Marxism has faith in the future and redemption there, even then “the knowledge of history’s secret does not give knowledge of its paths”.<sup>44</sup> And Merleau-Ponty’s own support for Marxism involves a more comparative justification: “Successful revolutions taken altogether have not spilled as much blood as the empires. All we know is different kinds of violence and we ought to prefer revolutionary violence because it has a future of humanism”.<sup>45</sup>

Although it is sometimes suggested that *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) is an apology of sorts for *Humanism and Terror*, this is an exaggeration, as Jean-Philippe Deranty has shown, even if Merleau-Ponty no longer expressed the same hope for a future for humanist Marxism.<sup>46</sup> *Adventures* is also framed by another *via negativa*, but in this case it is more between versions of Marxism. Trotsky and Sartre represent the two key polarities: on the one hand, there is Trotsky who sees the need for dialectical thinking but abandons it in real politics and cannot philosophically comprehend events after the fact; on the other hand, there is Sartre, and his subjective decisionism that Merleau-Ponty continually argues is insufficiently dialectical. Both are criticized for not getting their Marxism right, as well as their own dialectical relationship to themselves and their *oeuvre*, whether theoretical or practical. There is also a thread in *Adventures* that there is something about Marxism itself that leads to these dilemmas and problems, rather than it being about Trotsky and Sartre’s failings alone. As Merleau-Ponty puts it rather pointedly, nearing the end of the book: “the failure of the revolution is the revolution itself. Revolution and its failure are one and the same thing”.<sup>47</sup> His own dialectical position is developed through that recognition and engagement, and this is where the contrast with *Humanism and Terror* is most stark.

That said, his engagement with Trotsky (if not Sartre<sup>48</sup>) remains sympathetic, even if less so than was the case with Bukharin in *Humanism in Terror*. Trotsky seemed to unify theory and practice, and to exhibit the kind of wisdom and historical sense that Merleau-Ponty had credited the 1917 revolutionaries within *Humanism and Terror*. There is a shift in tone, however, in *Adventures*. Merleau-Ponty describes Trotsky’s various moves throughout the 20s and 30s, including how he chose to keep quiet for a period, and then to speak for the proletariat from outside the party. Inside or outside the party, the various dilemmas faced by Trotsky highlight important questions about the role for critical questioning within a group, which then holds the party line subsequently. And it is clear that Trotsky chose different means to navigate his situation to Bukharin, to Lenin, to Stalin, and others.<sup>49</sup> Did Trotsky sell out his principles, or those whom he purported to represent? It is hard to say in regard to any one action of his considered in isolation, as we have noted in the above sections. Did he effectively acquiesce, after he lost the initial struggle? If so, did he have DH in regard to some of what quickly began to transpire?

Rather than proffer a simple judgment, in the chapter “Dialectic in Action”, Merleau-Ponty considers Trotsky’s “revolutionary realism” in more detail, including Trotsky’s reflections on the debate between the cynicism of “by all means” and the pharisaism of “by pure means”. Trotsky says revolutionary politics does not have to choose.<sup>50</sup> While this is perhaps a little cagey and avoids the issue, there is much in Trotsky’s analysis with which Merleau-Ponty agrees. As he puts the point:

Since it is completely in the world, it is not attached to an ‘ideal’, and takes its share of the violence of things. What revolutionary politics does at each instant should be considered only as a moment of the whole, and it would be absurd to ask of each means ‘*its own moral tag*’. But because such a politics is still in the world, it does not have the excuse of good intentions and must prove its value on the spot.<sup>51</sup>

This remark from Merleau-Ponty, and the italicized quote from Trotsky, suggest that taking an action in isolation and expecting it to prove itself or be justified, is always superficial. So, when people criticize (or cynically promote) DH, they look at an action in isolation and seeks its moral tag. But Trotsky says: “in practical life as in the historical movement the end and means constantly change places”<sup>52</sup> – that is, there is dialectical interdependence of means and ends. Merleau-Ponty would agree, but not if this is thought to excuse or justify DH. Rather, if means and ends constantly change we are left with an inherent ambiguity of political life and action. We cannot justify or excuse an action in the name of antecedently defined ends, but also culpability or otherwise comes to pertain not only to what one objectively does, but also to how one bears that tension and ambiguity, and we must commence by recognizing that the great revolutionary end is not compatible with any means.

Merleau-Ponty agrees with Trotsky that revolutionary action must be comprehended and meaningful, and not just about mere external results, since it is also about what a given action helps to cause people to think about. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, summarizing Trotsky: “the revolutionary future can serve to justify present action only if the future, in its general lines and in its style, is recognizable in such action”.<sup>53</sup> Somewhere along the lines, though, Marxism became a heuristic – a “classic” – an agent of critique but not enough for change on its own, according to *Adventures*. Marxism has its own history and DH, we might say, which is not simply to incriminate it, since this is also part of the folds of history and pertains to institutions and ideas as much as to the arcs of individual lives.

But let us return to Trotsky. He faced a dilemma in the 1920s and he hesitated regarding his steps for a period. Did the degeneration of the party touch its essence and was it thus irreversible, or not? Parties can shift without ceasing to be themselves, but where is the “selling out” point, and where does DH begin, whether for an individual or for the institution they are a part of, or the people they represent? Trotsky’s situation here captures the real complexity of the issue of DH, which is temporal and historical, much moreso than any ticking-bomb scenarios. Is politics about the “yes” and “no”? Can you obey but also express judgment? Can you give a dialectical and nuanced “yes” to the majority? None of this is entirely clear in advance. Merleau-Ponty observes that in his subsequent reflections after expulsion by Stalin, Trotsky “never drew the philosophical conclusion from his failure: he restricted himself to recreating Bolshevism outside Bolshevism, Marxism outside of Stalinism. As for principles, he returned to the beautiful dialectical rectitude that he had somewhat jostled in action; he justified or rationalized his experience, rather than elucidated it”.<sup>54</sup> But beautiful dialectical rectitude is what we don’t have. Rather, we have dialectical contingency, perhaps especially given all that Trotsky lived through and his various decision and actions. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, in apparent retort to Trotsky: “equivocalness is in things. It is history that is equivocal”.<sup>55</sup> And for the Marxist, “revolution is progress when one compares it to the past, but it is deception and abortion when one compares it to the future that it allowed a glimpse of

and smothered”.<sup>56</sup> That is the ambiguity or equivocalness of history, but the one who seemed sensitive to this in 1917 – Trotsky – is not as sensitive in self-reflection on his own role in that historicity.

What then of Sartre’s version of Marxism? In “Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism”, an essay that dominates *Adventures* in terms of length, Merleau-Ponty targets Sartre’s book *The Communists and Peace* (1952). He contends that Sartre gives no allowance for the need for dialectical exchange between the leaders and their followers (unlike Machiavelli, who does). Merleau-Ponty also criticizes Sartre’s “truncated dialectic”, which he alleges cannot do justice to sedimentation, inertia, and sociality. According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre had faith that true action would stem from correct thought, but this was ultimately a rationalistic and disembodied approach. Although Sartre’s play nicely captured some of the ambiguity of political action concerning DH, according to Merleau-Ponty *The Communists and Peace* ends up adopting an ultra-Bolshevism, a decisionism in which you are either on the right side of history (with Sartre’s own philosophical reconstruction of it) or not.

Merleau-Ponty also considers Sartre’s philosophy of freedom here, and the difficulty that it presents for adequately conceptualizing DH as part of the folds of history, whether for institutions or any specific individual. He points out that, for Sartre, “... to say that we are free is a way of saying that we are not innocent, that we are responsible for everything before everyone as if we had done it with our own hands”.<sup>57</sup> On Merleau-Ponty’s view, Sartre’s very generalized conception of freedom and action also means that historicity (including DH, which depends on time and history) does not attach to individual actions. Rather, if all hands are treated as dirty and equivalently so (notwithstanding the normative call to become clean), this enables Sartre’s decisionism without ambiguity in *The Communists and Peace*.<sup>58</sup> But the details of the events that Sartre was ostensibly addressing – a worker’s strike – do not often admit of a simple “yes” and “no” in this way, just as we saw with Trotsky’s dilemmas in the 1920s. In the French case, the strikes bring about the question of their effective resolution, and at least potentially of compromise, and Sartre (who was in the USA at the time) would have no truck with any dirty compromises. In the name of principles, the difficult nexus of decisions about concrete political action, and the intermingling of means and ends, intentions and consequences, was avoided.

Much more can and should be said about “Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism”, but this short outline helps to clarify the basic transition between Merleau-Ponty’s two key works of political philosophy that both retain an emphasis on time and historicity. In *Humanism and Terror*, Marxist violence is minimally justified, but in a way that recognizes temporality and DH rather than obfuscates them, the “contradiction in truth” instantiated in concrete by Bukharin. In *Adventures*, we are presented with a more synoptic view of a political life as a co-imbrication of means and ends, whether rationalized to oneself or not. Merleau-Ponty offers a pessimistic take on the excuses and justifications offered by Trotsky and Sartre and others, and yet there is also an inevitability about them. There is a sense in which Sartre and Trotsky are at fault, not facing up to their own dirty hands, with their own self-knowledge and self-understanding being found wanting. But there is also another sense in which this is the fold of history, and of being situated and engaged in troubled times. Rather than the Walzerian narrative arc of DH – and the transition from innocence to guilt and back – when we look in detail at actual instances of political action that might appear involve DH, we see that

it is not smooth and unproblematic, even for some figures who are quasi-heroised, like Bukharin and Trotsky in the Marxist tradition.

## Conclusion

In working through some of Merleau-Ponty's post-war texts in political philosophy, I have drawn attention to some aspects of his thinking that enable greater recognition of the temporal depth of DH, including in regard to character and history. I have also sketched his transition from being inclined to endorse DH and violence for good ends (but the means must be appropriate to those ends), to being more reticent about the nature of that advocacy but never quite retracting it. That is, Merleau-Ponty proceeds from embracing the normative aspect of DH in *Humanism and Terror* and in his Machiavelli essay, to being more inclined to see DH as descriptively pervasive of the arcs of certain sorts of lives, notably political and activist lives. In both of these texts, Merleau-Ponty's detailed political analyses show that the issue of DH must be understood as involving a reasonable temporal spread, rather than any given action taken in isolation. He leaves us with a sketch of a way forward between two opposed vices, the *via negativa* approach that is characteristic of DH theorists from Machiavelli to Walzer, and involving political prudence and *virtù*. But, rather than being a harmonious virtue ethics *a la* Aristotle, or a redemptive narratological take in the manner of Walzer, Merleau-Ponty's analyses of Machiavelli, Sartre, Trotsky, and beyond, show just how difficult it is to determine and navigate any golden mean. Dirty hands are real, however, on his view, in contrast to views that take their ostensible contradiction to warrant their rejection, or which employ a consequentialist logic that likewise deny that they are real (we may not know the future, but if we did all would be clear). For Merleau-Ponty, they are akin to folds in time and character that derive from the dialectical co-imbrication of means and ends in political action.

## Notes

1. Though it might be wondered whether collectives can bear such an attribution of responsibility within the terms of Sartre's philosophy. See Flynn, *Sartre and Collective Responsibility*, for discussion.
2. Walzer, "Dirty Hands".
3. Sartre expressed this view in his Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and elsewhere.
4. See Busk, "The Violence of the Political and the Politics of Violence".
5. Merleau-Ponty's political writings also emphasize this, as we will see. Indeed, *Les mains sales* was published a year after Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror*. Sartre had read the latter as editor of *Les Temps Modernes*, where it was first published, and it seems likely that he was reading it while drafting his play. He later said that Merleau-Ponty taught him the meaning of history (see Sartre's moving eulogy, "Merleau-Ponty Vivant", collected in *Situations*).
6. Sartre's *The Communists and Peace* imposed a somewhat simplistic "for" or "against" strait-jacket on related issues. Merleau-Ponty criticized Sartre's position for more than 100 pages in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, in a chapter entitled "Sartre and Ultra-Bolshevism". Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* presents a richer and more nuanced vision of socio-political life.
7. Walzer, "Dirty Hands," 174.
8. See Coady, "The Problem of Dirty Hands"; and Nielson, "There is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands".



9. See Coady, "The Problem of Dirty Hands".
10. Sartre's Hoerderer maintains, at one point, that the only way to do away with lying is to address the conditions that produce such human behaviours: e.g. through the revolution itself. Whether this is an excuse or justification for his own lying is not clear, but one seems to need to believe in a given end for this argument to work and the question is whether the chosen means conduce to, or are compatible with, that end.
11. For more on this, see Brown, *Bonhoeffer*.
12. Walzer, "Dirty Hands," 178; c.f. also Tillyris, "Machiavelli and the DH thesis".
13. For a more sustained discussion of the kinds of compromise that might count, see Hall, "Political Compromise and DH".
14. See Tillyris, "Learning How Not to Be Good".
15. Responding to R. M. Hare's denial that there are dirty hands in the normative sense, Walzer said: "we can get our hands dirty in private life also, and sometimes, no doubt, we should" (Walzer, *Thinking Politically*, 188).
16. Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*.
17. The extent to which torture is an effective means of acquiring information is disputed, but it seems clear that skilled and trained torturers – rather than untrained – would stand a greater chance of acquiring solid information. Tillyris also notes that the public are likely lied to c.f. Tillyris, "Machiavelli and the DH Thesis," 66.
18. Many of Merleau-Ponty's essay contributions are also collected in *Signs* and *Sense and Non-sense*. Like his books, they were indispensable to examining the issues in a way that avoided the simplistic "us"/"them" dichotomies to which political discussion and action frequently lapses. Merleau-Ponty's political work has been comparatively neglected in the scholarship, however, notwithstanding important books by Kerry Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of Existential Politics*; and Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism*, and in the recent edited book by Melançon, *Transforming Politics with Merleau-Ponty*. Melançon's introduction, though, argues that Merleau-Ponty refuses a Machiavellian approach to the issues, which is not wholly congruent with the arguments of this paper about Machiavelli and DH.
19. A lot of his philosophy proceeds in this way. See, for example, Reynolds and Roffe, "Neither-Nor", which is primarily about *The Visible and the Invisible*, but there is a related dialectical negation concerning empiricism and intellectualism in *Phenomenology of Perception*.
20. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, 4 (my italics).
21. Alain was a pseudonym for Emile-Auguste Chartier, a well-known French journalist and philosopher, mainly writing in earlier parts of the twentieth century.
22. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 21.
23. As we will see, he thinks that the particular version of dialectical historicity affirmed by the Marxist tradition finds itself hobbled, sliding between objectivism and subjectivism (i.e. Sartre's version of Marxism).
24. Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 211.
25. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter xvii; Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 213.
26. Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 218.
27. *Ibid.*, 221.
28. *Ibid.*, 223.
29. *Ibid.*, 221.
30. *Ibid.*, 213.
31. A full exposition of Machiavelli is beyond what can be achieved here. It would need to include *The Prince*, but also *The Discourses*, *The Art of War*, and *The Florentine Histories*. Lefort has offered a more systematic interpretation. See also Benner, "The Necessity to be Not-Good".
32. For more details, see Benner, "Rethinking Machiavelli's Realism".
33. Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 213.
34. See Merleau-Ponty, Preface, *Signs*, 35.
35. Erfani, "Fixing Marx with Machiavelli".

36. Hall, "Political Compromise and DH".
37. Galston, cited in Hall, "Political Compromise and DH," 228.
38. Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 222. Merleau-Ponty also notes that Engels and Marx both praised Machiavelli – see *Humanism and Terror*, 104.
39. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 109.
40. *Ibid.*, 18.
41. *Ibid.*, 21.
42. *Ibid.*, 109.
43. *Ibid.*, 63.
44. *Ibid.*, 6.
45. *Ibid.*, 107.
46. See Deranty, "A Matrix of Intellectual and Historical Experiences".
47. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, 219.
48. Merleau-Ponty's chapter on Sartre is effectively a belated reply to the events and letters that caused him to quit *Les Temps Modernes*. Sartre's refusal to publish Claude Lefort's essay – Lefort was Merleau-Ponty's student – was the catalyst for their falling out, even if some of their political differences had been apparent for some time.
49. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in regard to the Marxist response to Germany in 1917, about which the revolutionaries all disagreed: "agreement on the ultimate ends left aside the question of the path to follow, and the way this path was traced by each of them expressed the total relation of each to the world. He who makes a mistake about the path to take betrays the ultimate ends ..." (*Adventures*, 6).
50. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, 75.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Trotsky, as cited in *Adventures*, 76.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures*, 88.
55. *Ibid.*, 104.
56. *Ibid.*, 209.
57. *Ibid.*, 161.
58. In the "Introduction" to *Signs* he makes a related argument about Sartre's reflections on his friend, Paul Nizan, who died in 1940 in World War Two. He also endorses the concept of *virtù* here (cf. 35).

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