
The Problem of “Dirty Hands” and Corrupt Leadership

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“Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.”

—Socrates, in Plato’s *Apology*, 31d–32a

“You should therefore know that there are two ways to fight: one while abiding by the rules, the other by using force. The first approach is unique to Man; the second is that of beasts. But because in many cases the first method will not suffice, one must be prepared to resort to force. This is why a ruler needs to know how to conduct himself in the manner of a beast as well as that of a man.”

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe e altre opere politiche*

Successful political leaders have often been of questionable moral character. A persistent image in the political sphere is that of the active and powerful man willing to do whatever is strategically important in attaining his desired ends even though doing so may weigh heavily on his conscience. Is excellence in governmental leadership somehow incompatible with moral excellence? Does doing what one ought

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to do in one's capacity as a leader preclude the possibility of doing what one ought to do as a human being? "The problem of dirty hands" refers to the alleged necessity of compromising or abandoning moral principle in order to play the role of a government official effectively.

"Dirty hands" are said to result when a leader encounters a conflict of duties or values and must choose between alternatives, none of which is entirely satisfactory. In Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Les mains sales* (Dirty hands), Hoederer explains the view to Hugo (who refuses to "dirty" his hands):

You cling so tightly to your purity, my lad! How terrified you are of sullyng your hands. Well, go ahead then, stay pure! What good will it do, and why even bother coming here among us? Purity is a concept of fakirs and friars. But you, the intellectuals, the bourgeois anarchists, you invoke purity as your rationalization for doing nothing. Do nothing, don't move, wrap your arms tight around your body, put on your gloves. As for myself, my hands are dirty. I have plunged my arms up to the elbows in excrement and blood. And what else should one do? Do you suppose that it is possible to govern innocently? ([1948] 1986, 193–94, my translation)

In thinking about this issue, it is important to distinguish self-serving opportunists from those who suffer corruption through their sincere efforts to govern well. Self-serving opportunists often rationalize their dubious measures to themselves through self-deceptive references to "the good of the whole," claiming that group loyalty demands moral sacrifice or that "the end justifies the means." Egocentric opportunism, however, differs conceptually from dirty hands. The question before us is whether corruption in the political realm might arise as a result of the very nature of governance and morality. Do rulers simply have more opportunities for temptation and therefore succumb more often than do private citizens? Or does good governance sometimes require the sacrifice of moral standards? When corrupt governmental agents are detected, society tends toward leniency in its "punishment" of them. Might this leniency reflect a recognition of the problem of dirty hands, which leads people to forgive and forget so easily the crimes of their governments?

"Realists" maintain that dirty hands are inescapable. In contrast, "idealists" hold that the so-called problem of dirty hands is merely an excuse adduced by those who lack the moral fiber to do what they really ought to do in governmental contexts.¹ Kenneth Winston sums up the opposition between these two positions: "To be a realist in politics is to believe that political life exceeds our capacities in certain crucial ways. Idealism is the view that human capacities are adequate to political life" (1994, 39–40). At issue, then, may be *humanity* in the moral sense of that notion. The question is whether corruption, a fundamental transformation in one's moral character

1. See Coady 1993. For a taxonomy of dirty hands, see Winston 1994.

and principles, is an inevitable consequence of one’s election of a governmental vocation. The word *corruption* derives from the Latin for “broken” and has a decidedly negative connotation, implying a loss of wholeness or integrity. We tend to view corruption as regrettable for persons themselves, even apart from the dangers that their corruption might hold for others.

Because the sorts of transformations in character that government officials undergo may well be irreversible, “dirty hands” might more aptly be termed “indelibly inked hands.” For example, according to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “habits build character” (1980), so a person who sacrifices his own principles one time becomes more likely to do so again in the future. Agents who set aside what once were their moral views become progressively desensitized to the sorts of violations that formerly elicited their moral indignation. Agents learn, and they become habituated to accept what once seemed unacceptable, no longer feeling compelled to object to what once seemed objectionable. In clinging to some goal while neglecting, even temporarily, his moral beliefs and principles, the agent thus metamorphoses slowly into a corrupted image of his former self. In this view, those who renounce moral standards and principles for the prudential interests of a group thereby transform themselves (albeit gradually) into persons who no longer embrace those standards and principles. Some might claim that they know where to “draw the line,” insisting that they will not sacrifice certain fundamental beliefs. Still, if habits build character, then even the act of sacrificing less-fundamental beliefs renders one more likely to sacrifice other, perhaps more-fundamental beliefs in the future. Corruption may be a long, irresistible journey down a very slippery slope.

Realism and Idealism Versus Pragmatism

Sartre’s 1948 play *Les mains sales* brought the expression “dirty hands” into common currency through the protagonist Hoederer, who in the preceding quotation expresses the basic stance of *realism*. However, Hoederer sometimes expresses a conceptually distinct view, evaluating as good any and all sufficient means to one’s desired ends: “All means are good, when they are effective” ([1948] 1986, 193, my translation).

According to realism, sometimes immoral means are required to achieve moral ends, if Hoederer truly believes that it is not wrong to renounce the dictates of morality in order to achieve his ends, then he should not consider his hands to be sullied at all. He expresses a pragmatic theory of value when he insists that effective means to one’s ends are good *in virtue of their efficacy*. According to pragmatists, there is nothing to the notion of goodness above and beyond efficacy, for there is no transcendent (metaphysical) concept of goodness to which good actions might correspond. Nor, according to pragmatists, is there an absolute Form in which actions might “participate” (à la Plato). Goodness just *is* efficacy. Because dirty hands are possible only under the assumption of some nonpragmatic criterion of goodness, in the

pragmatist's worldview, where appearance and reality coincide, no problem of dirty hands can arise. The guilt of agents who conduct themselves in an efficacious though unsavory manner is simply irrational.²

Idealists also insist that no one can act rightly by acting wrongly, but for different reasons than the pragmatists offer. It can never be your duty, governmental or otherwise, to do what is immoral. The so-called problem of dirty hands—that one might suffer corruption through performing one's official duty—is a conceptual impossibility, because acting in accordance with what is truly one's duty cannot cause the degradation of the agent. “*Ought* implies *can*” is often said to be a basic constraint on morality, and this maxim certainly suggests one plausible way of understanding the idealist position. It cannot be one's duty both to do and not to do something, but the problem of dirty hands presumes just such incompatibility, the reality of fundamental and ineluctable conflicts of duty. The idealist insists that multiple routes always lead to any given end, so a leader is never obliged to violate the dictates of morality in his official capacity. In this view, “dirty hands” defenses are self-delusive, and the burden of proof rests on the realist who would claim in any concrete case that the dictates of governmental excellence are incompatible with the dictates of morality.

The problem of political corruption is vividly depicted in Frank Capra's film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which a naive and forthright man is fortuitously appointed senator. Smith sets out on his journey to Washington filled with hopes of accomplishing noble aims, but he quickly learns that the conduct of contemporary political leaders bears no resemblance to the images of greatness that since childhood he has associated with men such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. In reality, the Capitol Hill politicians have sold their souls, enslaved themselves to the wealthy corporate sharks who really run the United States. Any political figure who refuses to acquiesce to the behests of the plutocrats is summarily ruined through the use of the capitalist-driven news media. Although truth and morality ultimately prevail, the “Hollywood ending” fails to dispel the profound cynicism instilled in the viewer throughout the rest of the film. Had the last two minutes been excised, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* would have been a powerful defense of political realism, as timely today as when it was made.

According to realists, in a social milieu where most people do not conduct themselves morally, those who do not alter their own strategies and flout the rules will be

2. Its title notwithstanding, *Les mains sales* is in my view more a forum for the expression of Sartre's condemnation of “*mauvaise foi*” (self-deception) and hypocrisy than it is an investigation of the problem of dirty hands. Hoederer is the agent of authenticity, who knows who and what he is and acts in accordance with his own values and beliefs. In contrast, Hugo defines himself throughout most of the play in terms of those around him. He lacks a strong sense of self and seeks to imitate others in order to fashion himself as someone he can respect. Given Hoederer's periodic expression of a pragmatic criterion of value, his position is not consistent throughout the play, so we would do well not to base our account of realism and idealism directly on Sartre's presentation, while duly acknowledging that it was indeed his play that gave the problem of nonopportunistic corruption in administration its popular name.

crushed, as Machiavelli explains: “Granted, if all men were good, this advice would be bad; but since men are pitiful and will not follow the rules in their dealings with you, you need not follow the rules in your dealings with them” ([1505] 2002, 68, my translation). Realists hold that sometimes the best choice that an official can make in the name of the governed is not the morally optimum action; indeed, immoral means sometimes must be used in order to achieve moral ends. The waging of war may be the most salient case of the alleged phenomenon of dirty hands in the real world. Must governments kill in certain political contexts?³ Expressing sympathy with dirty hands realism, Michael Walzer writes: “Just war theory is an effort to set limits on the injuries inflicted on innocent people; no just war theorist that I know of even pretends to overcome the injustices that are an intimate part of warfare itself” (2001, 86).⁴

According to idealists, the fact that some people are corrupt or corruptible should have no bearing on one’s own conduct. Multiple means always exist to any given end, and a moral official will opt for moral means to moral ends, limiting the range of acceptable ends to those attainable through moral means. If the only feasible means are immoral, then the end must be as well. Idealists are well aware that many people who enter the public sphere become corrupt, but they adamantly deny the inevitability of this sorry state of affairs. Although becoming an official may make it considerably more *difficult* to heed the dictates of one’s conscience and to adhere to one’s principles, idealists claim that these goals remain within reach. It is *possible* to govern both effectively and morally, which is not to say that in an organization permeated by unscrupulous agents it will be simple to do so. Those who flout morality are naturally at a practical advantage vis-à-vis those who do not.

The opacity of other agents’ intentions renders the ascription of dirty hands empirically problematic; it may be impossible to ascertain whether a given agent has suffered corruption through his overriding concern with self-promotion or with effective administration.⁵ But surely idealists are right about at least some cases, for government officials’ tendency to excuse themselves for anything and everything in the name of the good of the governed often borders on the farcical. Still, to own

3. A negative answer to this question is given in Calhoun 2001.

4. The terms *realism* and *idealism* are applied in two distinct manners with regard to dirty hands and war. Although Walzer is a realist about dirty hands, he is an idealist about war insofar as he believes that wars are subject to moral evaluation. Pacifists are also idealists about war, but in contrast to just-war theorists, pacifists maintain that all wars are unjust. (A pacifist can be either a realist or an idealist about dirty hands. Some pacifists who embrace realism about dirty hands are anarchists.) Realists about war, in contrast, maintain that the phenomenon cannot be evaluated morally any more than can rabid dogs, earthquakes, or hurricanes. Realists about war tend to be fatalists who claim that war is unavoidable, given human nature, and that once war has begun, there is no way to control or evaluate it—as in the cliché “all’s fair in . . . war.”

5. A further complication is that some highly prudential agents may hold altruism to be important to their personal happiness, and thus they may not become “corrupt,” in the ordinary sense of the word, by giving priority to their own personal interests.

that idealists are right about some cases does not refute, in and of itself, realism about dirty hands. That some dirty hands defenses are bogus does not imply that the compromise of moral standards is fully avoidable if one decides to enter the public domain. It is natural to sympathize with one obvious concern of idealists—that political leaders often indulge in hypocritical and self-deceptive rationalization of their dubious actions—but realism still may contain a kernel of truth.

Niccolò Machiavelli is the historical figure most frequently associated with dirty hands realism. In *Il Principe* (1505), he enjoins those who aspire to acquire and maintain power to follow the examples of men constrained by no moral limits whatsoever:

So anyone who deems that the approach to follow in his new domain of power is to destroy one's enemies, to gain allies, conquering either by force or by fraud, to endear oneself to while also making oneself feared by one's subjects, to render one's soldiers loyal and obedient, to extinguish those able or willing to offend, to innovate, using new institutions and practices in place of the old, to be both severe and generous, magnanimous and liberal, to extirpate disloyal troops and forge new armies, to maintain alliances with other powers, so that other leaders have to either curry your favor or else think twice before offending you—he who deems this the best approach cannot hope to find better recent examples than in the actions of Cesare Borgia. ([1505] 2002, 37, my translation)

Machiavelli's manual is addressed not only to "princes," the sons of kings, but to aspirant rulers, those who wish to govern successfully.⁶ Machiavelli reasons that the ruler wishes to maximize his power and control by sheltering himself from vulnerability to attack. *Il Principe* boldly calls into question the widely accepted dogma that corruption, the abandonment of moral principle, is categorically bad. At the same time, Machiavelli appreciates the importance of *reputation* to effective leadership:

It is not necessary for a ruler to possess all of the qualities listed above, but he definitely must appear to possess them. I would dare even to say that having these qualities and acting always in conformity with them will be harmful to you; but if you merely appear to have these qualities, they will be useful to you. Accordingly, you should seem to be compassionate, faithful, humane, of integrity, religious, and indeed you should be all of these things; but at the same time you should be ready, so that when the occasion arises, you will know how and be able to transform to their opposites." (68, my translation)

6. Machiavelli originally dedicated *Il Principe* to Giuliano de' Medici, but upon Giuliano's untimely death, Machiavelli readdressed the work to Giuliano's successor, Lorenzo de' Medici. This work might have been more aptly titled "The Ruler"—many rulers during Machiavelli's day were the sons of kings.

Machiavelli’s name sometimes has been associated with immoralism (hence the derogatory connotation of the word *machiavellian*), but this passage illustrates the thinker’s view that accepting the dictates of what we generally take to be absolute morality is, in and of itself, a good thing. Machiavelli’s position appears to be simply that principle must sometimes be sacrificed in order to succeed as a leader: *if* one wants to be an effective ruler, *then* one must be prepared to forsake morality. In this reading, Machiavelli is neither a moral relativist nor an immoralist, for he does not claim that leaders are immune from the dictates of morality, but that they must flout morality in order to lead well. Whether he is correct in his realism about dirty hands depends, then, on the nature of morality.

Normative Ethics

If *absolutism* is true, then there is a single true morality, and its principles apply to all moral agents everywhere. One obvious candidate for absolute moral principle is the widely embraced idea that it is wrong to kill innocent people. Beyond that, however, much controversy exists regarding the dictates of morality. Philosophers throughout history have attempted to offer theoretical frameworks within which intuitive principles might be understood and less-obvious moral duties determined. Logically speaking, moral theories can be divided into two broad categories, depending on whether or not they deem the outcomes of actions to determine their moral quality. Philosophers call these basic and contrasting positions the *deontological* and *teleological* approaches.

Deontological theories, from the Greek *deon* for “duty,” focus on the notion of duty and rightness of action. Divine Command theory is one example of a duty-based or deontological theory, according to which it is wrong to violate God’s commandments not because doing so will bring about undesired consequences, but because it is wrong, *tout court*.⁷ From the perspective of pure deontology, rightness is primitive, and nonmoral goodness (for example, happiness or pleasure) has no moral relevance, strictly speaking. If it is wrong to kill people or to lie, then it is *intrinsically* wrong to do so, even if doing so in some cases might make the world a better place in which to live.

Teleological theories, from the Greek *telos* for “end,” focus on goodness of outcomes, holding the results of one’s actions to be of paramount moral importance. If it is wrong to kill people, it is so because a world in which people kill one another is worse than a world in which they do not. If it is wrong to lie, it is so because a world in which people lie is worse than a world in which they do not. According to teleologists, rightness is defined in terms of nonmoral goodness. Right actions are those that effect goodness. Two major divisions within teleological ethics are *consequential*

7. Many Christians appear not to embrace their religion as a Divine Command Theory, for they consider the reward of heaven and the punishment of hell as relevant to their decisions about how to act. However, the story of Abraham and Isaac illustrates the basic idea of a Divine Command Theory. Abraham is ready and willing to do what God decrees *because* God has decreed it.

tialism, according to which states of affairs are morally relevant outcomes, and *virtue theory*, according to which states of the person (anima or soul) are what matters morally.

We cannot determine here whether or not morality is absolute, nor which specific theory might be true. However, if morality is absolute, then either the outcomes of actions are morally relevant or they are not. Accordingly, in order to ascertain whether the problem of dirty hands is a real one, we must consider the official's situation from the perspective of these two basic (exhaustive and exclusive) approaches to moral theory, the deontological and the teleological. The problem of dirty hands will prove to be real only if (1) morality is absolute, and (2) morality and governance place conflicting demands on an agent, whether the single true morality is deontological or teleological.

Although it is not possible here to consider the many variants of deontological and teleological theories, we can extrapolate from specific theories to more general conclusions about the problem of dirty hands, so long as we do not build substantive content into the theories considered. The method I employ is not intended to be weakly inductive, for, I suggest, the two possible basic structures of moral theory pose problems regardless of the precise content of their principles. By examining Kant's view as paradigmatic of deontology and Mill's view as paradigmatic of teleology, while bearing in mind the limiting cases of deontology (where there is only one absolute moral principle) and teleology (where the moral community comprises only the agent, or where the moral community is identical with the set of persons within the ruler's domain), it emerges that any analogous substitute for these specific theories will pose analogous problems for the official who wishes both to abide by his pure moral duties and to perform his professional functions well.

Deontology: Kant

The exemplary advocate of secular deontological ethics is Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who set forth his views in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* ([1785] 1964). According to Kant, our moral duties are prescribed by the “Categorical Imperative,” which applies universally and without exception to all rational and free agents. The outcomes of actions are morally irrelevant to the rightness and wrongness of those actions.

In Kant's view, morality is a matter of rationality, but rationality exceeds the narrow framework of instrumental application of means to obtain one's desired ends. Nonmoral or instrumental reasoning specifies merely hypothetical imperatives of the following form: “If one wants X, then one should do Y.” Such an imperative (the consequent of the conditional statement) applies only to those who satisfy the hypothetical condition (the antecedent of the conditional statement). Hypothetical imperatives

prescribe means to predelineated ends. There are typically (in fact always)⁸ multiple means to the same desired end, but instrumental reasoning helps to differentiate straightforward from circuitous routes and from those that are and are not consistent with one’s other values, desires, and beliefs. For example, if one wishes to acquire wealth, then one can do so in many different ways. Perhaps the quickest way is through the adoption of what according to the standards of society are immoral means.

If, as Kant maintains, all creatures rational and free are bound by the Moral Law, then the Categorical Imperative also can be understood as a conditional statement, but one in which all rational, free agents automatically fulfill the antecedent. It matters not what our contingent, historically determined beliefs, desires, preferences, and properties (beyond freedom and rationality) happen to be; relative to the class of rational, free agents, this imperative is absolute and without exception.

The most straightforward way to understand the Categorical Imperative is sometimes called “the principle of universalizability”: *always act only on those maxims⁹ that you can will to be universal laws of nature*. Many have found a second formulation, “the principle of respect,” more intuitive: *always act so as to treat others as ends in themselves and never merely as means*. Morally permissible actions are those that do not violate any formulation of the Categorical Imperative. So, for example, using people without regard to their dignity as rational, free agents is wrong, for it obviously involves treating them merely as means. Kant discusses in some detail examples of the sorts of actions that in his view are morally impermissible: making false promises, committing suicide, failing to help the needy, and failing to develop one’s talents. How the Kantian analysis is supposed to work in these cases has been the subject of much discussion.¹⁰

The sense in which Kant is the ultimate deontologist is illustrated by his example of why it is purportedly immoral to lie when asked by a killer to give the location of a prospective victim. Kant insists that lying is always wrong, no matter the circumstances, because the universalization of the telling of a lie would embroil one in practical contradiction. The very possibility of telling a lie clearly presupposes that almost everyone tells the truth. The entire institution of intersubjective communication would be rendered nugatory if everyone lied constantly. (In that case, all that one might infer from another person’s utterance would be that it was false, leaving an infinite number of possibilities for what might be the truth.) But the wrongness of lying, Kant insists, is not owing to the fact that the *consequences* of lying would be bad.

8. This follows from the truth of logic that every statement implies itself and an infinite number of other statements derived through expansion of the original statement via disjunction. In stating more conservatively that “typically” there are multiple means available, I mean to distinguish logical from actual and rational possibility.

9. A maxim is the propositional statement of one’s prospective action. Actions the maxims of which cannot be universalized are impermissible because they cannot be prescribed of all rational, free agents and therefore involve, in Kant’s view, a failure of rationality. The inability to universalize the maxim of one’s action as a principle according to which all agents must act reveals that the principle is invalid.

10. See Harman 1977, 66–77, for an illuminating discussion of Kant’s views on immorality as irrationality.

Indeed, in order to highlight this idea, he offers an example in which the consequences of telling the truth will likely be catastrophic for an innocent person. The strict deontologist's position is clear: one's duty is one's duty, and it has nothing to do with what other people may or may not do. If it is your duty to tell the truth (and it is, Kant insists), then it does not matter that by doing so you may facilitate another person's immoral action. If the prospective victim is killed as a result of your having revealed his whereabouts, then, provided that your will was correctly aligned, you will be morally irreproachable, for it was not your intention that the victim die. Your intention was only to tell the truth.

A general concern about lying is easy to explain, given that deception and lying appear to be rife in the public domain. Lying may be the single most common transgression that officials make as the means to what they allege to be moral ends. Rulers may often lie opportunistically in order to protect their own position, but in other cases they may truly believe that they are lying for the good of the governed. People often justify their lies to themselves by reasoning that the lies are innocuous, or "white," and the defense of "noble" lies has a long history, stretching back at least as far as Plato, who in *Republic* appears to condone the use of deceit in quelling the discontent of the lower classes of the Ideal State.¹¹

The context in which a lie is told seems relevant to its moral permissibility. More generally, our commonsense morality does embody the idea that consequences are not completely irrelevant. For example, in the United States the stiffest sentence for first-degree murder is not available as a punishment for attempted murder—a clear illustration that in our legal system intentions are not all that matter. If, as Kant maintains, intentions exhaust morality, then our legal system should be modified. As things stand, however, according to the morality of society now, at least as reflected in its laws, consequences have moral relevance. Although some scholars have gone to extreme lengths to render Kant's explicitly stated views consistent with our ordinary views of what morality demands of us, we need (and indeed should) concern ourselves here only with the gross structure of Kant's view in order to ascertain the status of

11. In *Republic*, the use of lies is portrayed as a perfectly permissible and even desirable means of appeasing the populace about their allegedly objective station in life. According to "The Myth of the Metals," the workers, auxiliaries, and rulers are meant to be workers, auxiliaries, or rulers because of the relative proportion of precious and semiprecious metals in their blood. If people are in fact variously disposed and apt to access the realm of the Forms, then this difference would seem to be an objective matter of physical constitution. Only those of supreme intelligence are capable of making their way out of "the Cave," at which point they can apprehend the nature of the Good. "The Myth of the Metals," a so-called noble lie, is heuristically justified by its efficacy in dispelling discontent and thereby securing the properly functioning Ideal State. Politicians and leaders who lie for "the good of the people" conduct themselves paternalistically under the assumption that *hoi polloi* cannot handle or understand the truth. Such an assumption runs counter to the democratic idea that ordinary people are themselves as qualified to discover the truth as anyone else. Plato was no champion of democracy, of course. Some have hypothesized that his aversion to democracy had much to do with the fact that Socrates was tried, convicted, and executed under democratic rule, but Plato's views on democracy are a direct consequence of his metaphysics and epistemology. In other words, the order of explanation may be reversed: given his metaphysics and epistemology, Plato should have expected such blunders on the part of a democratic regime.

dirty hands if such a deontological theory is true. The salient point is that, for Kant, morally permissible actions are those that do not violate the Categorical Imperative, no matter what their consequences may be.

Teleology: Utilitarianism

The most influential rival to strictly deontological theories of ethics takes the importance of consequences to its logical extreme, maintaining that *only* consequences matter morally.

Utilitarianism was originally articulated by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* ([1789] 1907) and subsequently elaborated by John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) in *Utilitarianism* ([1863] 1985). According to utilitarians, right actions are determined by “the principle of utility”: *act always so as to maximize the utility of the greatest number*. This approach to normative ethics differs fundamentally from a deontological theory such as Kant’s because outcomes are what matters above all, morally speaking. In utilitarianism, goodness is primitive, and duties are determined by the results to which they give rise. According to classical utilitarianism, the only intrinsic good is pleasure, and the only intrinsic evil is pain. The sources of pleasure and pain are irrelevant to their fundamental value of goodness or evil. Although much has been written regarding how precisely to understand *utility*, I concern myself here with only the essentials of utilitarianism. Again, by considering the theory as schematically as possible, we can extrapolate conclusions about the problem of dirty hands for teleological theories in general.

Utilitarianism provides a seemingly simple method by which to determine which of a possible range of prospective actions one ought to perform. Given a number of possible courses of action, one should choose the one that will maximize the utility of the greatest number. In the original formulation of utilitarianism, Bentham indicates that the relevant net utility calculations are to include all those who would be affected by the prospective course of action. It seems fairly obvious, for example, who will be affected when one decides to steal from another person. The relevant community often seems readily identifiable, so one simply calculates the net utility of all those affected by each of the possible courses of action and then sums up the net total for the group. It is one’s duty to perform the single action that maximizes the utility of the greatest number, and because only one prospective action can bring about the best outcome, all alternative actions are wrong.¹²

12. I am assuming, in the spirit of Bentham and Mill, that at least in theory utility can be measured quantitatively and measured precisely (to the number of significant figures needed to distinguish any two outcomes from one another). The literature on utilitarianism is vast, but, given my purposes, I need not go into exegetical details here.

With regard to utilitarianism, the question that bears most directly on the issue of dirty hands is: Whom are we to include within the moral community? The outcomes of utilitarian calculations are independent of one another, but the persons immediately affected and those affected only meditately or in the long-run will comprise two distinct groups. Yet the size of the group included clearly matters, for the precise specification of the group will effectively determine one's moral duty. Because it is one's duty to *maximize* the utility of the greatest number, the inclusion or exclusion of certain persons only meditately affected by one's actions will alter in many cases the content of the moral prescription to action.¹³ The added utility or disutility of even a single extra person may affect the entire series of net utility rankings for prospective actions, and because utilitarianism mandates maximization of outcomes, every action that is not prescribed is proscribed. So what should one do? Should one attempt seriously to consider the effects of prospective actions on all moral persons, present and future, or all those currently living, or those in one's country, state, or community, or one's family and friends, or perhaps only one's self? In fulfilling their official functions, leaders must employ quasi-utilitarian reasoning because they have a vocational duty to maximize their constituents' interests.

No less than Kant's view, utilitarianism captures what are often claimed to be essential constraints on tenable moral theories—namely, that they be “other regarding” and “universalizable.” However, Kantians and utilitarians construe moral persons differently. For the former, all rational and free agents are moral persons. For the latter, the group of moral persons may be more difficult to specify.¹⁴ Given that morality appears to be a uniquely human phenomenon, perhaps the least controversial manner in which to draw the distinction between moral persons and nonpersons is to define the former as all human beings. Racist, sexist, and classist or caste systems appeal to what appear to be arbitrary properties—race, sex, or social status—in determining how to treat other people. Nepotism would seem to be equally unacceptable because genetic similarity seems to be no more relevant to morality than is race or sex or economic similarity or, for that matter, place of birth or residence.

Having sketched illustrative examples of each of the two exclusive and exhaustive categories of moral theory, the deontological and the teleological, we are now in a position to return to the problem of dirty hands. Are irresolvable conflicts between governance and morality ineluctable? In order to answer this question, we must first clarify the concept of public administration.

13. For example, so-called utilitarian defenses of recourse to war invariably fail to take into account the long-range effects of war on the broader community in the future. See Calhoun 2002a.

14. If utility is construed as simple pleasure, then it would seem, as animal rights advocates such as Peter Singer insist, that we should include within the class of moral persons all sentient creatures—that is, not only all human beings, but also the ostensibly “lower” animals as well. If utility is interpreted in terms of ideals such as happiness, beauty, and friendship, then presumably only the creatures capable of attaining or appreciating those ideals (for example, human beings and cats) should be included in utilitarian calculations of the right action. The morally right action for utilitarians is identical with the action that maximizes the utility for the greatest number.

The Nature of Public Administration and the Potential for Conflict

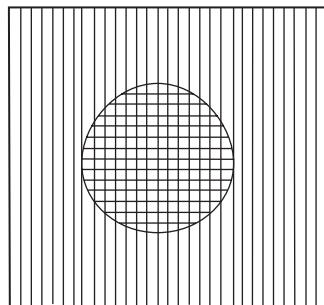
The word *administration* derives from the Latin *ministrare*, “to serve.” Administrators are public servants who work on behalf of the people who have appointed them their spokesmen and governors. Administrators have been delegated responsibility by people who depend on them to protect and perpetuate the people’s interests. That groups of people are more effectively organized when particular individuals are delegated to promote the interests of a group is the idea behind representative democracy, in which the people’s delegates establish and implement laws and policies. In the modern occidental world, there are no “princes” in the sense of absolute monarchs whose decrees exhaustively determine the laws of the land. Western leaders wield power ostensibly in the interests of those who have conferred upon these leaders the authority to manage their affairs in exchange for having agreed to make certain sacrifices of time and energy and for adopting a special interest in the group’s well-being.

People in official positions occupy multiple valuational worlds. As private people, they are presumably subject to the same moral dictates as moral persons in general, but as government officials they also have extramoral or nonmoral professional duties to act on behalf of their constituents. If the interests at stake are not the same for moral persons as they are for one’s administrative group, then from the utilitarian perspective, this situation is inherently problematic. As an administrator, the person should give priority to the interests of those who lie within his domain of power and professional responsibility, but, as a human being, he should weigh the interests of the moral community in general. Consider, for example, a case in which one has a large sum of money to distribute in the best possible way. If one is a utilitarian and calculates how the amount of money should be distributed, the result will depend crucially on the number of people whose interests are considered. If one’s community includes all of humanity, then as a private person one might decide to give all of the money to those in the greatest need. If so, one might end up giving none of it to citizens of the United States, who by any measure are better off economically than the people of most other countries. As a public administrator of a specific country, however, one has a professional duty to give priority to the interests of one’s compatriots. In other words, the “best” action will differ dramatically in the two cases, leading to a serious conflict of duties.

This situation is summed up by the simple diagram in figure 1. Let the square be the entire community of moral persons, where the area of vertical lines represents all members of the entire moral community, each of whose utility is morally relevant. Let the hatched circle represent the domain of the official’s professional concern, which is invariably (in the real world) a subset of the entire moral community.¹⁵ Distributing

15. The proportions depicted are for illustrative purposes only and obviously far from accurate, given the populations of the world and of particular nations.

Figure 1
Domain of Administration as a Subset of Moral Community



scarce resources over the entire population (the surface area of the square) will clearly lead to a lower allocation to each element of the circle than would a distribution that neglected all those persons lying outside the circle. In other words, an official charged with maximizing the interests of the members of a subset of the entire moral community will necessarily encounter conflicts in attempting to maximize the interests of “the greatest number” while simultaneously attempting to maximize the interests of those who have appointed him to give priority to their own interests.

As a concrete example of such a conflict, one might observe here that even a fraction of the U.S. defense budget might be used to effect substantial improvements in the quality of life of people in poverty-stricken nations or to implement significant programs to limit the spread of AIDS in Africa. U.S. officials choose instead to continue to fortify the nation’s defense establishment, although no significant rival to U.S. military might is anywhere in sight. They make these allocations in the name of the citizens of the United States, not on behalf of humanity.

Now, it is true that not all normative moral theories prescribe positive duties that officials would be required to violate in their allocation of resources to their own constituents while concomitantly withholding resources from “outsiders.” Nonetheless, it is unclear whether even the most skeletal theory of absolute morality would be compatible with the requirement that an official give priority to the interests of one select group. Suppose, for example, that there were only one absolute moral principle, a negative duty not to harm fellow human beings. Situations might arise in which maximizing the interests of one’s own group could be accomplished only through harming outsiders—for example, through the waging of war, often regarded as a paradigmatic dirty hands case.

One group may well benefit by killing some (or even all) of another group’s members. Indeed, a leader may assume that he must go to war in order to maximize his constituents’ interests. Some have argued that the 1991 Gulf War involved just this type of rationalization: thousands of Iraqi citizens were killed in a war intended

by the U.S. government to stabilize the Middle East for the benefit of U.S. citizens. The international outcry “No blood for oil” by those opposed to George W. Bush’s 2003 war on Iraq expressed a similar concern. And the same sort of argument might be made regarding U.S. policy vis-à-vis weapons exports, especially in view of the many civilian areas outside the United States that have been devastated by U.S. produced and exported weapons.¹⁶

To offer a further example of the types of conflicts that emerge for those pulled on the one side by broader humanitarian (moral) considerations and on the other by official obligations: during the 2003 diplomatic crisis leading up to George W. Bush’s decision to wage war on Iraq without the approval of the United Nations Security Council, the leaders of a number of needy African nations were placed in the difficult position of risking the withdrawal of U.S. aid for their refusal to support the war. As administrators of those nations, African leaders might have served their constituents best by supporting the U.S. campaign, for without U.S. aid, even more of their own already destitute population would likely be jeopardized by shortages of food and clean water.¹⁷ The trade-off for such administrators was between the interests of compatriots and those of noncompatriots—in this case, primarily Iraqis.

Consider also the case of military recruitment. Military administrators are no doubt well aware that their marketing schemes preferentially target people from the lower socioeconomic strata. Thus, in a sense they are allowing poor people to put their lives at risk in order to protect the wealthier members of society. From the recruiter’s perspective, what matters is to fill one’s quotas. But can military marketing practices be justified morally?¹⁸

Examples such as these suggest that even the most attenuated version of morality may not save the administrator from potential conflict if he truly intends to give priority to his own group’s interests. The administrator’s unique situation strikingly gives rise to conflicts of duties with absolute morality, whether the true theory is teleological or deontological. First, to reiterate, when one adopts the role of an administrator, the community relevant to one’s decision making in one’s professional life differs from the community relevant to one’s decision making in one’s life as a moral agent. Quasi-utilitarian calculations for the individual as an administrator and for the individual as a person will differ, producing conflicts of duties. For their part, deon-

16. The United States has refused to sign the Ottawa treaty banning the production, sale, and use of land mines and also leads the world in weapons exports—half of all weapons exports originate in the United States. Furthermore, the United States continues to deploy weapons proven to be devastating to civilian populations long after military action in a region has ceased. U.S. cluster bombs dropped on Iraq in 2003 maimed and killed innocent people on a daily basis, and the United States used depleted uranium ammunition in the 1991 Gulf War, in Kosovo in 1999, and in the 2003 Iraq war.

17. This outcome can be only a matter speculation. Some argued prior to the war that it would lead to a global destabilization with extremely negative ramifications for all nations. In other words, even given the threat of the withdrawal of U.S. aid (or, in some cases, the allure of possible new aid packages), some African leaders may have concluded that the war would be even worse for their own constituents than the loss of aid. Regarding how war promotes terrorism, see Calhoun 2002c.

18. For further discussion of this problem, see Calhoun 2002b and 2003.

tologists flatly deny that the morally right action is that which maximizes the utility of the greatest number or indeed has anything whatsoever to do with consequences: some actions are morally forbidden, no matter the circumstances and regardless of their consequences. This situation is problematic because the goal of administration is to maximize outcomes for those within the administrator's domain of power and responsibility. Were a Kantian-like paradigm correct, administrators would immediately encounter moral conflict when attempting to maximize the interests of those whom they govern because according to such a deontological view the right action does not involve maximization of *any* group's interests. Doing the right thing may or may not lead to good consequences. Administrators, however, are expected to concern themselves with the consequences of actions and policies for their groups, and any administrator who fails to do so will not be fulfilling his agreement with those who selected him as their administrator.

The Case for Realism

Given the inevitability of such conflicts, no one who affirms either a deontological or a teleological theory of absolute morality should be surprised when public officials become corrupt. As realists maintain, the sacrifice of moral principle may follow naturally for those who opt for excellence in administration, whether a deontological theory or a teleological theory of morality is true. The conflict between administration and morality is fairly obvious in the deontological case, for an administrator is required to count as significant what for deontologists is morally irrelevant—namely, the consequences of one's actions for a particular group of people. Moreover, the community relevant to practical decision making always shrinks when one accepts an official position, regardless of the precise form that a teleological theory might take and regardless of the precise content of its principles. The good administrator gives priority to the interests of some subset of what formerly would have been his moral community. This exclusivity involves elevating to the status of a moral relevance what is morally irrelevant: one is to act as though those who lie within the purview of one's control deserve a greater degree of consideration than those who do not.¹⁹ But to give priority to the members of a subset is concomitantly to neglect its nonmembers. Dirty hands will thus arise if any teleological theory with a nonarbitrary conception of "moral person" is true because, in order to act in the best interests of those whom one has been selected to serve, one must neglect those who lie outside one's sphere of authority. The requirement that the conception of moral person be "nonarbitrary" precludes the possibility that a utilitarian might define the moral community so as to coincide with his domain of administrative jurisdiction. Defining "moral per-

19. The interests of those who lie outside the administrator's domain have, from the perspective of the person acting in his capacity as an administrator, no relevance to his decision making regarding the group, except insofar as the consequences of his decisions might have repercussions (either positive or negative) for the group itself.

sons” as equivalent to the citizens of one’s own nation exemplifies the use of an “arbitrary” criterion, analogous to the criteria used by racists and sexists in deciding how to treat others.

One of the most oft-rehearsed objections to utilitarianism is that it would in some cases prescribe actions that we ordinarily would condemn in the harshest of terms (for example, torture, false conviction, or even intentional killing of the innocent), provided that the action leads to a greater net benefit for the group. Accordingly, one might protest here that because utilitarians have no sacred principles, they cannot have dirty hands,²⁰ yet this protest amounts to the same conclusion, though arrived at from the opposite direction. The upshot is that the demands of utilitarianism and the demands of administration fundamentally conflict. One cannot both heed the prescriptions of utilitarianism *and* maximize one’s efficacy as an administrator of a subset of the class of all moral persons. I am assuming, to reiterate, that the official does not *define* his moral community so as to *coincide* with the set of his constituents. To do so would require elevating to the status of moral relevance what must be morally irrelevant—namely, the property of happening to be a member of the group in question. The moral irrelevance here is best illustrated by the fact that the actual members of any society change frequently over time, with the birth and death of particular people. Accordingly, the problem of dirty hands follows immediately from the conflicting demands of administration and any teleological view of morality that takes into consideration the broader interests of the moral community, which is invariably much larger than the domain to which any administrator has been assigned.

I have assumed to this point that the interests of the moral community and the interests of relevance to an administrator (i.e., the interests of those lying within his domain of responsibility and power) are not one and the same. In that case, the argument for realism is straightforwardly mathematical. One cannot simultaneously maximize the interests of an entire set and those of a subset of that set unless the two sets coincide—that is, unless the subset is the set itself (which I have rejected as untenable). But what if “interests” are construed diversely in morality and in administration? What if what mattered morally were well-being or happiness, whereas what mattered administratively were money? The problem does not become less difficult by stating at the outset that a moral agent should care about the well-being of all moral agents, whereas the same person acting as an administrator should care above all about his constituents’ economic situation, as my Gulf War examples illustrate.

Basically, there are two possibilities, and either one leads to conflicts. Either the same “interest” measure is used for those within and those outside the domain of an administrator’s power and responsibility, or the measures differ in the two cases. The first scenario leads immediately to the problem of differential allocation described earlier. The same amount of resources distributed over more people obviously will not

20. An anonymous reader of an earlier version of this essay made this important point.

maximize the allocation to the members of a subset of that group. The second scenario leads immediately to the dirty hands involved in the decision to wage war while knowing full well that outsiders will be sacrificed for the greater good of people lying within an administrator's own domain.

Two points need to be stressed here. First, because I have divided the entire class of moral theories by appeal to the law of noncontradiction (either consequences are relevant or they are not), every theory must fall into one or the other of the two gross categories, deontology or teleology. For example, Aristotle considers *eudaemonia* (human flourishing) to be important to morality and so qualifies as a teleologist. Spinoza's ethics may be construed better as a deontological approach (though I shall not attempt to defend such an interpretation here). I am well aware that not all thinkers divide the class of all moral theories in this manner. However, given this schema of classification, there can be no moral theory unaccounted for. Every theory counts consequences (whether they be states of affairs, states of the soul, or sheer amount of pleasure, good, virtue, or happiness produced) as either relevant or irrelevant to morality.

Second, owing to constraints of space and finitude, my argument has focused on only one example of deontological theory and one example of teleological theory. Realism about dirty hands follows only if other deontological and teleological theories are indeed relevantly similar to Kantianism and utilitarianism, which I have suggested is the case, as summarized in table 1.

Because the constraints on administrators are purely legal as opposed to moral, cases will arise in which executing one's official duty to the fullest extent may well entail a violation of morality (as pacifists maintain is always the case when a leader opts for war as a solution to conflict). Although administrators are constrained in their actions by the law, the law of the land need not coincide with morality, as we learned from the Third Reich. Furthermore, at the highest levels of international law, the rulers of nations that refuse to accept the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court are in some sense "beyond the pale" vis-à-vis international standards and need only ensure that they do not violate the laws of their own land.

Now, it is obvious that not all leaders embrace absolute morality—some are no doubt unabashed political realists or moral relativists—but the point is that moral conduct is in no way built into the nature of administration. On the contrary, administration involves contractual arrangements between the governors and the governed. Officials straddle multiple valuational worlds: serving a subset of the moral community, while being at the same time a member of that larger group (whether or not they themselves believe in absolute morality). A third force also pulls the administrator—namely, prudence. There are levels of opportunism, of course, and idealists are concerned that opportunists may adduce dirty hands as an excuse for renouncing morality, but, in a sense underscored lucidly by Machiavelli, one must secure and retain one's position before being able to execute official functions.

Table 1
Conflicts Between Administration and Morality
(for Theological and Deontological Theories)

| | Teleology case 1: moral = administrative interests | Teleology case 2: moral ≠ administrative interests | Deontology |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Moral requirement | Maximize interests of moral community (larger than the administrator’s domain) | Maximize interests of moral community (larger than the administrator’s domain) | Strict adherence to rules (e.g., “Thou shalt not kill,” “Do not lie,” etc.) |
| Administrative requirement | Maximize interests of the administrator’s domain | Maximize interests of the administrator’s domain | Maximize interests of administrator’s domain |
| Conflict | Insiders receive less if outcomes for all are considered | Sacrifice outsiders for the good of insiders | Cannot base administrative decisions on outcomes while adhering strictly to morality |

Varieties of Realism: Socrates and Machiavelli

In the epigraph from Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates explains his reasons for having eschewed public life in preference for what became his peripatetic philosophical (a)vocation. There are two obvious interpretations of Socrates’ words. First, he might mean that those who come into conflict with the already corrupt people in positions of power will be quashed by them physically—for example, assassinated, incarcerated, or otherwise removed from society. This interpretation is compatible with idealism about dirty hands. Socrates may be claiming that those with scruples who attempt to enter into the fray of politics will be rendered somehow impotent. The plight of many persons who have chosen civil disobedience throughout history certainly confirms this hypothesis. The relatively few famous figures whom we revere in the history of cultural criticism are those who were not silenced irrevocably by the crushing and often lethal forces of conservatives in power. However, this interpretation of Socrates’ view leaves out the people who enter the public arena and are not destroyed, but become themselves wielders of power, including those who in the process undergo corruption.

Those excluded by the literal interpretation of Socrates’ words are accommodated by a second, more comprehensive interpretation of those words. In this reading, the “life” that will be sacrificed should one enter into politics is one’s integrity or inner life. If integrity involves strict adherence to one’s moral principles, then Socrates

may be the first historically identifiable defender of the thesis of realism regarding dirty hands. This possibility emerges plausibly through reflection on what seems to have been Socrates' view about personal identity (as presented by Plato in other dialogues). The identification of personhood with one's soul or mind implies that the destruction of the soul automatically entails the destruction of the self.

The attribution to Socrates of such a theory of the self would explain why he insisted upon his conviction that the Athenians would harm themselves by executing him:

Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than yourselves. Neither Meletus nor Anytus can harm me in any way; he could not harm me, for I do not think it is permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse; certainly he might kill me, or perhaps banish or disfranchise me, which he and maybe others think to be great harm, but I do not think so. I think he is doing himself much greater harm doing what he is doing now, attempting to have a man executed unjustly. (Plato 1981, *Apology*, 30cd)²¹

So far as Socrates was concerned, the Athenians could destroy his body, but they would leave him, Socrates, unscathed.

Interpreting the ideas of historical figures in philosophy is always difficult and arguably indeterminate in every case, and Socrates' "philosophy" is a fortiori elusive because he himself left no written documentation of his own ideas. Nonetheless, Plato's account of the trial provides a plausible explanation of why Socrates avoided the public life, despite his obvious concern with ethics and proper conduct in society. In this reading, Socrates appears to have recognized the truth in realism about dirty hands.

Indeed, both Socrates and Machiavelli appear to have been realists about dirty hands, though neither thinker could have anticipated Kant's and Mill's ideas. However, the same arguments will apply, mutatis mutandis, to other versions of deontological and teleological approaches, for the precise nature of the Categorical Imperative or the precise calculus used in determining the outcomes of moral actions will not alter in substance the conflicts that arise between official and moral duties (outlined in table 1). If some other deontological or teleological theory were the correct one, realism about dirty hands would still follow, so long as the nature of administration remained the same. Given the nature of administration in the real world, a conflict arises for those who wish not only to execute their official duties

21. A vexing question arises in this connection: If Socrates truly believed that by executing him the Athenians would harm themselves, turning themselves into murderers, why did he permit them to do so when other avenues were open to him? Socrates might respond, along Kantian lines, that he is responsible only for the actions that he himself carries out, and the moral quality of an action is determined exhaustively by the agent's intentions. In other words, permitting the Athenians to kill him is not the same as actively committing suicide. Of course, so far as we know, no one had to pry open Socrates' mouth to force him to swallow the hemlock.

well, but also to adhere to absolute morality of either the deontological or the teleological kind.

One manner in which the idealist might respond to these dilemmas would be to reject as morally unacceptable any official position that requires one to maximize the interests of a subset of the greater group of all moral persons. Thus, one can avoid the conclusion that the so-called problem of dirty hands is a real one by embracing anarchism. Having never accepted the professional responsibility to give priority to the interests of a group of people, the moral agent would never encounter the conflicts of duties diagnosed earlier. On the one hand, this strategy in some sense would vindicate idealism, but, on the other hand, it would still leave us with the problem of dirty hands in any world (including the real one) in which official positions do exist and agents do fill those roles. One might think that a satisfactory vindication of idealism should not rest on a wholesale rejection of all political institutions. Indeed, one might wonder whether such sweeping anarchism would not require a rejection even of the institution of the family, an implication that many would find untenable. In any event, anarchism would be one way of avoiding the types of conflict built into the administrative capacities in existence in the real world, where resource allocation is in fact one of the government’s functions, and where the moral community is never identical with the domain of a leader’s responsibility.

Idealists rightly maintain that dirty hands defenses are often self-delusive and duplicitous. However, realists appear to be correct that cases will arise in which excellence in governance requires the sacrifice of morality, if indeed morality is absolute. By implementing and adhering to the policy that best advances the interests of those within one’s sphere of power, one may well have to commit deeds that would be deemed morally reproachable if viewed from the broader perspective of humanity and committed by an individual with no governmental responsibilities.

Concluding Remarks Regarding Self-Deception

Socrates and Machiavelli are rarely regarded as ideological allies, but both qualify as realists about dirty hands. The salient difference between them is that Socrates exhorts (by his own example) those who would avoid corruption to eschew the public life, whereas Machiavelli exhorts those who wish to be leaders to accept corruption as the price that they will have to pay. Nowhere, however, does Machiavelli exhort anyone to become a leader. He claims, most realistically, that *if* one wishes to be a successful leader, *then* one must be willing to forsake morality. No one is forced to become a government official, and no official is forced to be a superlative one.

An official’s desire to retain his position of influence and responsibility may lead in some cases to a desire to administer well, provided that on some level he believes in meritocracy. On the other hand, officials may sacrifice moral principles in order to retain their position and thus be able to do more good. Furthermore, given that *other-regarding* stances are often thought of as moral, rulers themselves may choose, in good

conscience, to sacrifice principles, persuading themselves that they are acting selflessly.²² From the perspective of an administrator who is focusing on the interests of his constituents, the situation may seem no different from that of someone who focuses on the broader moral community. The administrator is basing his decisions not primarily on considerations of prudence, but on something like the notion of “the good of the whole.” Because an official’s domain constitutes a quasi-moral community (where interests are given priority to rules), it may be simple to slide into a situation in which principle is consistently sacrificed “for the good of the governed.”

Still, in light of the manifest motivation that any person has to protect his own gainful employment, it seems plausible that many officials are driven finally by prudence. Egoistic and professional forces may become conflated in reality and indistinguishable in practice. Machiavelli’s advice illuminates this difficult problem—the conflation of egoism and professionalism so apparent in many administrative contexts—one of the most dramatic examples of which may be the routine denial by military spokesmen of any responsibility whatsoever for the “collateral damage” killings to which military action invariably gives rise.

One final manner in which to criticize the sacrifice of principle for administrative efficacy is to insist that the leader who makes such a sacrifice is acting opportunistically. In that event, corruption is compounded by self-deception—another concern expressed by Socrates, famous for his dictum “know thyself.” According to this idealist critique of corrupt leaders, the problem of nonopportunist corruption in leadership is a chimera, for people decide to become leaders in order to enjoy the power and glory associated with leadership. Because leaders are free to abandon their official position, if they remain in power, electing to sacrifice principle for efficacy, then they have simply sold their souls. I have suggested that anyone who chooses to administer will face dilemmas that can lead to corruption through the development of habits, but no one need make this choice. One way to protect oneself from the potential conflicts of public and private life is to follow the example set by Socrates.²³

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22. To assume that because an action is “other regarding” it therefore must be moral, is to mistake what is at best a necessary condition for a sufficient condition and thus to commit the informal fallacy of affirming the consequent.

23. The problem of nonopportunist corruption is a serious one only if morality is absolute. If moral relativism is true, then there is no single true morality and therefore no objective standard by which to judge the formerly “uncorrupted” state of the agent as being better than his subsequent “corrupted” state (after having served as an administrator). For a persuasive defense of moral relativism, see Harman 1977.

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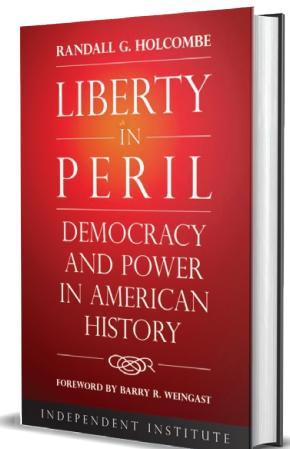
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