

ETHICS AND POLITICS: AN OVERVIEW

Realist Absolutism

Thucydides: *The Melian Dialogue*

Realism: aim at what is feasible

“Since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.

- No appeal to justice? Or politics refers to another form of justice where power makes right? In Plato’s Republic Thrasimachus states “justice is the advantage of the strongest” (a position that Plato refuses through the character of Socrates)

Realist Absolutism

Niccoló Machiavelli: *The Prince*

No moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power

- Authority and Power are Coequal: “Since there cannot be good laws without good arms, I will not consider laws but speak of arms”
- Power defines political activity and the real point is **HOW to use power**

Realist Absolutism

Niccoló Machiavelli: *The Prince*

- The **Highest Good**: A **free and well ordered state**
- The need for **stability** in a prince's principality: at stake is its **preservation**
- The **state** has no transcendent justification: it is an **instrument for common good** □ **separation between the church and the state**
- The **art of the state**: political **techniques** of extreme **realism**
Virtú: no moral connotation □ virtuous are those qualities and attitudes that contribute to the success of the prince □ **a moral vice can well be a political virtue** (for example, cruelty)
- **Prudence**: considering not only the short period, but the long period as well

Realist Absolutism

Niccoló Machiavelli: *The Prince*

Commonly it is said that in Machiavelli there is **no moral basis** on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power. Is it true? Perhaps there are **two different kind of morality**: one for common citizens (as private individuals) and another one for rulers

Flexible Disposition: varying her/his conduct from good to evil and back again “as fortune and circumstances dictate” □ The Prince should be both a **Lion** and a **Fox** because different enemies require different skills

- A very difficult talent (because of psychological predisposition to stability)

Realist Absolutism

Niccoló Machiavelli: *The Prince*

Legitimacy of law rests entirely upon the threat of **coercive force**; authority is impossible for Machiavelli as a right apart from the power to enforce it.

“The answer is of course, that it would be best to be both loved and feared. But since the two rarely come together, anyone compelled to choose will find greater security in being feared than in being loved.”

Reputation

a prince may be perceived to be merciful, faithful, humane, frank, and religious, but he **should only seem to have these qualities**. A prince cannot truly have these qualities because at times it is necessary to act against them.

Realist Absolutism

STRENGTHS: **Avoiding Crusades** □ No wishy-washy utopianism, reality is what it is. Refusing to fight for ideals. **Creating a common ground for politics** □ based on power and self-interest that all actors can recognize

WEAKNESSES: **Conservatism** □ No possibility of moral criticism, moral change, and moral improvement of politics. **Instability** □ notwithstanding the “objectivity” of the goals there is a complete flexibility of the means that leads to the impossibility of understanding what is permitted and what is forbidden

Idealist Absolutism

Kant: Perpetual Peace

Morality is practical: the totality of unconditional mandatory laws □ duty

“There can be no conflict of politics, as a practical doctrine of right, with ethics, as a theoretical doctrine of right.”

But Force is necessary for establishing the juridical condition (because the will of each individual is required)

Idealist Absolutism

Kant: Perpetual Peace

“I can easily conceive of a **moral politician**, i.e., one who so chooses political principles that they are consistent with those of morality; but I cannot conceive of a **political moralist**, one who forges a morality in such a way that it conforms to the statesman’s advantage.”

Idealist Absolutism

Kant: *Perpetual Peace*

It is a duty of the moral politician to correct the defects in the constitution of a state, even it costs self-sacrifice, but slowly and carefully

Against realists: The moralizing politician that uses the excuse that human nature is not capable of the good as reason prescribes it only makes reform impossible and perpetuates the violation of law

□ **They have not practical science but only practices**

Idealist Absolutism

Kant: *Perpetual Peace*

Fundamental question: In problems of practical reason, must we begin from its material principles, i.e., the end as the object of choice? Or should we begin from the formal principles of pure reason, i.e., from the principle which is concerned solely with freedom in outer relations and which reads “So act that you can will that your maxim could become a universal law regardless of the end”?

Certainly the second option!

Political moralist: technical problem □ prudence but results for peace are uncertain

Moral politician: ethical problem □ wisdom will lead slowly to peace

Idealist Absolutism

Kant: Perpetual Peace

“Seek ye first the kingdom of pure practical reason and its righteousness, and your end (the blessing of perpetual peace) will necessarily follow”

□ First right means that good ends will follow, or in other words, **only through the right means it will be possible to achieve good ends**

“All politics must bend its knee before the right. But by this it can hope slowly to reach the stage where it will shine with an immortal glory.”

Idealist Absolutism

STRENGTHS: **Belief in a better world** □ idealism pushes toward action in order to improve conditions. **Moral clarity and “objectivity”** □ because ordinary values and principles are a duty also for politics.

WEAKNESSES: **Rigidity** □ once rights are in force they can not be taken away even if this means the ruin of the entire community. **Moral Crusades** □ notwithstanding the Kantian reformist attitude this ideal type can lead to a position that refuses any compromise and tries to impose its view on others

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: Politics as Vocation

Definition of the state in terms of means: **the state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory**

- **Politics**: striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power either among states or among groups within a state

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: Politics as Vocation

Three forms of legitimacy:

- **Traditional** (patriarch)
 - **Charismatic** (individual leadership)
 - **Legal** (servant of the state)
- The modern problem of party-machines and plebiscitarian democracy**

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: Politics as Vocation

Three pre-eminent qualities of a politician:

- 1) **Passion**: devotion to a cause but not romanticism
- 2) **Responsibility**: guiding star
- 3) **Sense of Proportion**: distance toward one's self
(politics is made with the head)

Power instinct is important but it becomes dangerous if it moves from being an objective to a self-intoxication

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: *Politics as Vocation*

Two deadly sins in the field of politics:

- **Lack of objectivity**
- **Irresponsibility**

Ethics in the field of politics needs to take into consideration that the **means of politics is violence**

Absolute ethics does not ask for the consequences

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: *Politics as Vocation*

Ethic of Ultimate Ends

VS

Ethic of Responsibility

“There is an abysmal contrast between conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of ultimate ends – that is, in religious terms, ‘The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord’ – and conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of responsibility, in which case one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s action”

If an action of good intent leads to bad results:

EUE: the world, stupidity, or God is responsible for the evil

ER: takes into account the deficiencies of people and the results are ascribed to one’s actions

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: *Politics as Vocation*

“In numerous instances the attainment of ‘good’ ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones – and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications.”

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: *Politics as Vocation*

“The ethic of ultimate ends apparently must go to pieces on the problem of the justification of means by ends. As a matter of fact, **logically it has only the possibility of rejecting all action that employs morally dangerous means** – in theory! **In the world of realities**, as a rule, we encounter the ever renewed experience that the adherent of an ethic of ultimate ends suddenly turns into a chiliastic prophet. **Those, for example, who have just preached ‘love against violence’ now call for the use of force for the *last* violent deed...**”

Realist Pragmatism

Weber: *Politics as Vocation*

“Also the early Christians knew full well the world is governed by demons and that he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for **power and force as means**, contracts with diabolical powers and for his action **it is not true that good can only follow from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.**”

Various life-spheres each governed by its own laws

Protestantism legitimated the state (especially the authoritarian state) as a divine institution and hence violence as a means

The necessity of endangering one's own soul

Realist Pragmatism

STRENGTHS: **Moving into reality** □ although the individual involved in politics should be passionate he needs to be aware of the limits of reality. **Stressing responsibility** □ entering into politics does not mean to be free to do whatever one wants, it implies to sacrifice one's morality

WEAKNESSES: **Aristocratic view** □ politics at its best is a game for charismatic leaders. **The darkness of one's soul** □ It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain whether the sacrifice of the soul for the welfare of the community is real or just a mask.

Narrow Pragmatism

Marta Nussbaum, *The Costs of Tragedy*

Nussbaum structures a contraposition between:
the **obvious question** – **what ought we to do?**
and the **tragic question** – **is there a morally acceptable choice?**

The **tragic question** answers to the first level of desirability problem: holding ordinary times' standard it is possible to understand that the tragic question registers the **equal undesirability of any solution.**

Narrow Pragmatism

Marta Nussbaum, *The Costs of Tragedy*

“**[The obvious question]** may be difficult to answer. It may also be difficult to identify the best method for arriving at the answer. [...] What is not difficult, however, is to see that it is a question that has to be answered, since **some action must be taken**, and even inaction

Advantages:

first, it clarifies the nature of the ethical alternatives;

second, it remembers and reinforces the commitment toward some values that we are obliged to overcome in the obvious question;

third, it considers the possibility of reparation for the unethical conduct;

fourth, it forces to ask if it is possible to bypass the tragic question with a better social planning

Narrow Pragmatism

Walzer, The Problem of Dirty Hands

- Politician claims to act in our name
- Politicians are ruling over people
- Politicians can use violence or the threat of violence

Question: **how can we (as politicians) get our hands dirty by doing what we ought to do?**

Ex. 1) The honest politician that needs to get his hands dirty in order to get elected and doing good

Ex. 2) The ticking bomb scenario

The idea of feeling guilty

Narrow Pragmatism

Walzer, The Problem of Dirty Hands

Dirty Hands: The necessity of feeling guilty while doing what ought to be done

Against Utilitarianism:

- 1) Utilitarian calculus will fully justify the action because it maximizes the outcome, but it will delete the sense of guilt: his hands will be clean because he did what he ought to do
- 2) Rules are not really prohibitions of wrongful actions, but simply moral guidelines: no necessity of feeling guilty
- 3) Using the sense of guilty as a variable inside the calculus: but if it is useful why should he feel guilty once he made the calculation?

Narrow Pragmatism

Walzer, The Problem of Dirty Hands

The example of a correct application of dirty hands can be **Camus' *The Just Assassins***: terrorist in XIX century Russia. "The heroes are innocent criminals, just assassins, because, having killed, **they are prepared to die – and will die**. Only their execution, by the same despotic authorities they are attacking, will complete the action in which they are engaged: dying, they need make no excuses"

A comparison with **Civil Disobedience** (an illegal action, different from criminality because: publicity, appeal to common reason, accepting the punishment)

Problem is how to punish the politician

Narrow Pragmatism

Combining Nussbaum and Walzer:

Recognizing the unavoidability of wrongness as a matter of tragic question in order to keep ordinary morality evaluation alive

But then doing what is necessary to do as a matter of obvious question, dirtying one's hands

In other words, a **separation between the **justification** and the **action****

Narrow Pragmatism

The problem is that in this way **we lack a criterion for deciding what to do**. If what we are doing is morally wrong, then can we do whatever we want? Or is there a particular decision procedure with a secondary form of justification? The Obvious question is a **Not-So-Obvious-Question**

Ignatieff proposed the idea of **Lesser Evil** (instead of maximizing good, we should try to minimize evil), but this does not solve the problem, it simply reformulates the not-so-obvious-question as a matter of peculiar cost-benefit analysis

Narrow Pragmatism

STRENGTHS: **Preserving the moral dilemma** □ the tragic question registers the fundamental importance of keeping moral evaluations. **Providing a guideline** □ answering the not-so-obvious-question with the lesser evil approach

WEAKNESSES: **Hypocritical** □ the separation of ordinary morality and political necessity looks like an excuse in absence of a real sanction or better punishment.
Vague □ the decision procedure based on the lesser evil at best produces guidelines but not moral rules