Article:
Hall, E. (Accepted: 2026) Seductions of power: political irresponsibility and the theory of dirty hands. European Journal of Political Theory. ISSN: 1474-8851 (In Press)

Seductions of Power: Political Irresponsibility and the Theory of Dirty Hands

Abstract
Many prominent writers on political ethics suggest that refusing to employ violence and force when required is a mark of political irresponsibility given the specific demands and obligations of holding high political office. Such judgements fuel the theory of dirty hands, which famously holds that admirable politicians will sometimes have to commit or commission grave moral wrongdoing. Drawing on Bernard Williams's discussion of the audience of political philosophy, I suggest that the normative, action-guiding claims that the theory of dirty hands is standardly said to deliver are, ironically, likely to encourage dangerous forms of political *irresponsibility*. On the one hand, if the theory is intended to guide the action of high-ranking politicians, it is highly unclear that the responsible politician would accede to the suggestion that they must often act in ways that violate ordinary moral requirements which prohibit violent acts. On the other hand, if the theory is intended to improve the political judgements that citizens make about high-ranking politicians, it conflicts with a series of underlying political attitudes that responsible citizens will display.

Edward Hall, *University of Sheffield,* forthcoming in *European Journal of Political Theory*

The proposal that high-ranking politicians should not be too morally fastidious about the employment of violence and force is at the beating heart of much canonical work in political ethics. Nowadays, scholars typically explore these ideas via debates about the problem of "dirty hands", inaugurated by Michael Walzer's seminal article. In the most basic terms, the dirty hands thesis states that "we need morally good politicians who will generally allow morality to guide their thinking, though there are circumstances in which the politician must violate the deepest constraints of morality" (Coady 2008, 79). Although such actions are immoral, the theory suggests they are "justified, perhaps obligatory" (Stocker 1990, 12). In this sense, proponents of dirty hands provocatively hold that some actions can be both right and wrong *at the same time*.

Crucially, the high-ranking politician who refuses to violate moral injunctions when required stands accused of failing to abide by the distinctive standards that apply to them as the occupier of a critically important public role. The idea is that they have responsibilities that ordinary members of the public do not have for securing collective benefits, such as the defence of the country and the provision of public goods, and that this means they must make more consequentialist types of decision/judgment than ordinary members of the public (Nagel 1978). For this reason, we are told that high-ranking politicians have a "burden of responsibility that sometimes demands the violation of fundamental norms" and that "they must not shirk this responsibility" (Finlay 2011, 421-22). This is often presented as a matter of political common sense.[1]

Several significant implications for political philosophy are said to follow. First, as suggested above, the theory of dirty hands is taken to deliver the striking normative and purportedly action-guiding conclusion that holders of high political office *should* sometimes act in ways that would be straightforwardly condemned if perpetrated by ordinary citizens. For example, it is claimed that to do their job properly, high-ranking politicians may have to lie, deceive, manipulate, threaten, and perhaps even authorise murder and violence, and so on (Williams 1981, 58; Parrish 2007, 2). Second, proponents argue that the theory supports various metaethical claims that disrupt some standard assumptions of mainstream moral and political philosophy. Some scholars hold that it reveals a fundamental divide between the moral standards and principles that should guide the personal or private conduct of ordinary citizens and the political standards that should guide the behaviour of powerful politicians. The

contention, as Dennis Thompson puts it, is that there is an irrevocable "conflict between two moralities – one suited for ordinary life, the other for political life" (Thompson 1987, 12. See also Hall and Sabl 2022, 10-11). Others refrain from presenting these issues in terms of a clash between morality and politics. Instead, they suggest that the theory of dirty hands reveals a clash of incompossible moral obligations and insist that this exposes significant truths about the nature of morality itself (de Wijze 2022).[2] Much fascinating, high-quality philosophical work asks whether these metaethical claims make sense, philosophically and conceptually, or whether, in the end, they are simply confused (see, for example, Archard 2013; Eggert 2023; Hollis 1982; Nielsen 2007; Nick 2022; Parrish 2007; Walzer 2007; Williams 1981).

I do not address these now quite technical philosophical debates about the coherence of the theory of dirty hands, at least not head-on. Instead, I focus on the normative, or action-guiding, side of the theory by interrogating the common suggestion that, in a high-ranking politician, moral fastidiousness about the employment of violence of force ought to be seen as itself a kind of moral dereliction – and therefore a mark of political *irresponsibility* – given the role-specific obligations of holding high-office. My aim is not to refute that general claim per se. However, I do want to suggest that things are vastly more complicated than the standard model of dirty hands suggests and that appreciating these complexities yields important insights. I do so not by articulating an external philosophical critique of the suggestion that good political conduct sometimes involves commissioning or committing moral wrongs, for example by arguing that moral principles must always trump political expediency, as some hard-nosed deontologists may suppose. Nor do I attempt to

show that the problem of dirty hands rests on a series of philosophical confusions. Rather, by drawing on Bernard Williams's discussion of the audience of political philosophy and asking who the dirty hands thesis is for, I suggest the normative, action-guiding implications that the theory is conventionally taken to impart must be questioned.[3]

On the one hand, we might interpret the theory as attempting to directly guide the actions of high-ranking politicians. If we do this, we should ask how the responsible holder of high political office would respond to the suggestion that they must violate ordinary moral requirements which prohibit the employment of violence and force. I suggest that we have good reason to believe that a weighty and principled resistance to acceding to such recommendations is, in fact, evidence of the kind of political responsibility that many doyens of political ethics celebrate. Alternatively, we might interpret the theory of dirty hands as primarily attempting to improve the political judgements that citizens make about high-ranking politicians. The problem with this, however, is that these normative recommendations directly conflict with *and may serve to undermine* a series of underlying political attitudes that responsible citizens display. In both cases, the same basic problem emerges: any audience that strives to act in a politically responsible manner must be dispositionally averse to acceding to these action-guiding claims. To the extent that the theory of dirty hands succeeds in undermining these dispositions, we have good reason to fear that it is likely to engender *irresponsible* political conduct. In this regard, my goal is to sever the purported link between, on the one hand, greater openness to the idea that grievous

acts of violence and force are a necessary tool of public office, and, on the other, the promotion of more responsible political conduct.[4]

THE LISTENER/AUDIENCE DISTINCTION

In his essay 'The Liberalism of Fear', Bernard Williams suggests that any serious piece of political philosophy raises the question of who it addresses: "Who does the author suppose needs to know this philosophy, and for what purpose?" (Williams 2005, 54). Williams distinguishes between the 'listeners' of a work, that is, the people to whom the text is purportedly addressed, and the 'audience', the people who are actually expected to read and learn from the text (Williams 2005, 56). Sometimes the listeners and the audience coincide. For example, applied work in relatively technical fields, such as public health ethics or the ethics of AI, may be written as if it is addressed to people who either enjoy certain decision-making powers or have the ears of those who do. Moreover, the authors of such works would presumably like such people to form a large section of the audience. Such philosophical writing is, for want of a better phrase, ultimately technocratic. Other political philosophers, working on pressing contemporary political injustices, instead address the question of how ordinary citizens should respond to wrongdoing (see, for example, Hidalgo 2018). Here the listener and audience also coincide though in a quite different way.

In some cases, the listener and audience come apart. Williams writes that Machiavelli's *The Prince* is purposefully presented as if its listener is, indeed, a prince deciding how he should behave in order to shore up his power. However, the actual intended audience of the book is the much broader range of people whom Machiavelli

sought to instruct about the nature of politics (Williams 2005, 56-57). Similarly, Williams argues there is a notable dislocation between listener and audience in the kind of 'founding father political philosophy' spawned by Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Such works, Williams claims, ultimately present themselves as telling their listeners how to design a political society from the ground up, "perhaps not in a state of nature, but at least having just got off the boat" (Williams 2005, 58). Yet the intended audience of such works is clearly not a group of founders but the citizenry of a modern constitutional democracy.

Williams is not uniformly dismissive of works that exhibit a major dislocation between listener and audience. In line with his realist political-philosophic inclinations, he does not think this is a major problem in the case of *The Prince* because Machiavelli "takes seriously power and the surrounding distributions and limitations of power in a given situation" (Williams 2005, 59). He finds Rawls' approach more problematic because (he claims) Rawls' theory effectively envisions an empowered listener who can simply "enact what the writer urges on him" and the issue with theorising in this manner is that "no audience in the world is in that position". As a result, founding father political philosophy has the effect of alienating "politics from political philosophy" (Williams 2005, 57-58).

This is obviously a controversial line of criticism, and I do not intend to adjudicate on it here. The crucial point for our purposes is Williams's insistence that it is reasonable to ask how the actual intended audience of a piece of political philosophy are likely to respond to the proposals they are presented with given the unique position they occupy and the practical options they face.

WHO ARE THESE ACTION-GUIDING CLAIMS FOR?

At first glance, if we examine the theory of dirty hands, and ask '*Who are these pieces of action-guidance for?*', a rather straightforward answer appears to present itself: high-ranking politicians who are likely to find themselves in situations where they may have to make momentous, and morally charged, political decisions. Consider the most famous illustration of the theory, Michael Walzer's account of the ticking-bomb scenario, in which a newly elected leader is asked to authorise the torture of a rebel leader, who supposedly knows the location of several hidden bombs which are due to detonate in the next twenty-four hours, and which will cause much death and destruction (Walzer 2007, 283).

As Walzer tells it, the admirable politician faced with a ticking-bomb scenario would decide to authorise torture "convinced that he must do so for the sake of the people who might otherwise die in the explosions - even though he believes that torture is wrong, indeed abominable, not just sometimes, but always" (Walzer 2007, 283). The fact of the matter is that a leader who refuses to commit such "moral crimes" may "fail to measure up to the duties of his office (which imposes on him a considerable responsibility for consequences and outcomes)" (Walzer 2007, 279). In this spirit, it is now a staple of much political ethics that it is simply "a predictable and probable hazard of public life that there will be these situations in which something morally disagreeable is clearly required" and that "To refuse on moral grounds ever to be anything of that sort is more than likely to mean that one cannot seriously pursue even the moral ends of politics" (Williams 1981, 60). These claims read like pieces of normative advice which aim to directly influence political decision-making and

action. They suggest that high-ranking politicians cannot be too morally scrupulous about violence and force if they are to abide by the distinctive role-based obligations they inherit when they take on such roles. To refuse to dirty one's hands is a serious, blameworthy, kind of moral dereliction.

It is, of course, vital to note that theorists of dirty hands do not suggest that high-ranking politicians should feel good about this. They commonly stress that feelings of guilt and remorse are apt because even if these figures must act in the politically responsible way, they really will have done something morally wrong (de Wijze 2004). This is one of several reasons why, in his lecture on the vocation of politics, Weber repeatedly emphasises that admirable politicians will find the vocation extremely burdensome.[5] The basic idea is that politically justified dirty handed decision-making generates moral remainders – a kind of "uncancelled moral disagreeableness" – and that only those high-ranking politicians who acknowledge the real moral costs of dirty-handed decision making "have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary" (Williams 1981, 62). Walzer puts this point by writing that if the *moral* politician "were a good man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean" (Walzer 2007, 284).

Thus, whilst politics is replete with moral wrongdoing, cases of dirty hands are special. The wrongdoing they involve is not straightforward wrongdoing or immorality; it is justified or obligatory wrongdoing (Stocker 1990, 26). The moral politician who opts to dirty their hands is not motivated by "ill-gotten material gain or political advantage" but a "laudable and principled" commitment to the public

good (de Wijze 2018, 140). So, whilst dirty hands cases are wrong and shameful in one sense, they are motivated by the admirable aspiration to act responsibly for others. The acceptance of shame and the dirt are serious, and in some sense, unfair burdens, the acceptance and acknowledgement of which reveal the genuine nobility of intention. There is a clear sense of political martyrdom at work. High-ranking politicians who dirty their hands when required are ultimately presented as very courageous public servants; they choose to ruin themselves for the rest of us. It is in this sense that the theory can be classed as seductive.

Of course, high-ranking politicians are not the only possible audience for these normative claims. Though the arguments about dirty hands often seem to be addressed to this group of listeners, the audience might be conceived much more widely – roughly, as any member of the public who wishes to learn about the arduous demands of political conduct. In other words, such writings might be read as trying to convince ordinary citizens how they should evaluate the conduct of the people who rule over them and exercise power in their name. After all, in a democracy, the citizenry must decide what kind of people they want to hold power over them, and the theory of dirty hands is presented as distilling some significant truths that matter when we consider this important question. From this perspective, the point behind such writing is to convince the public at large that politics is a tough and hard business and that admirable politicians cannot be too morally squeamish about using violence and force, because these insights will supposedly enable citizens to make *better* judgments about those who act in their name.

It is also possible that the theory could serve a dual function by addressing both audiences simultaneously. In the remainder of the paper, I suggest that however we conceive of the ultimate audience of the theory, the claims that the theory of dirty hands delivers about the nature of responsible political conduct are dubious.

HIGH-RANKING POLITICIANS

Let us now turn to the case of the first possible audience - high-ranking politicians. It is critical to note that no audience is a blank slate – any audience will hold certain background assumptions and understandings, and have certain commitments, which mediate how they will respond to philosophical arguments. These background attitudes also affect what we can reasonably hope they will glean from these works. The attempt to offer an exhaustive account of the background attitudes that we should want high-ranking politicians to evince would be, at best, highly controversial. It may well even be impossible. Still, I will begin this section by isolating some reasonably minimalist and largely uncontroversial attitudes about politics that we would want them to exhibit.

Here Weber's celebrated lecture on the vocation of politics is a vital resource, even if we must refrain from attempting to fully reconstruct his often-bewildering contrast between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility. To be sure, Weber is scathing about the idea that an admirable politician could simply refuse to ever countenance authorising violence on grounds of moral principle. Politicians become involved with "diabolical powers" and must accept that they may sometimes have to employ "morally suspect" means to achieve good political ends (Weber 2010,

360). They should acknowledge that if they refuse to meet evil with force, they will be held responsible "for the spread of evil" (Weber 2010, 358). The disquieting reality is, therefore, that those thinking of getting involved in politics must be clear-eyed about the fact that they may forfeit the ability to retain their moral innocence: "Anyone seeking to save his own soul and the souls of others does not take the path of politics in order to reach his goal, for politics has quite different tasks namely those which can only be achieved by force" (Weber 2010, 366).

However, Weber also makes several highly insightful, and now widely granted, further claims about various dispositions and motivations that are anathema to responsible political action that are highly relevant to the issue at hand. Foremost among these are his remarks about the problem of *vanity*. Weber sees vanity – "the need to thrust one's person as far as possible into the foreground" – as the "mortal enemy" of admirable political conduct (Weber 2010, 353-54). The problem, in a nutshell, is that it causes many people to seek out and to exercise power over others for bad reasons. For one thing, many people simply "enjoy the feeling of prestige given by power" and therefore seek out power for its own sake (Weber 2010, 311). Yet when power is sought for its own sake, politics becomes a matter of "purely personal self-intoxication" and "emptiness and absurdity" result (Weber 2010, 354).[6]

Other politicians may avoid this kind of megalomania by seeking power in the attempt to realise ends they value. But even in these cases, the problem of vanity may arise because the politician may not be fully aware of what is really driving their conduct. Weber consistently stresses that power can be intoxicating. Exercising it can enable one to "have a sense of rising above everyday existence" by encouraging one

to feel that they hold in their hands "some vital strand of historically important events" – or as Weber sometimes puts it, "the spokes of the wheel of history" (Weber 2010, 352). In this sense, vanity is a standing threat to responsible political conduct because it can make politicians overly ready to exercise power. *Mature* politicians, on the other hand, exercise the requisite kind of 'distance' and 'objectivity' and accurately judge how to promote the political causes to which they are sincerely committed.[7] With these Weberian thoughts in mind, many scholars who write on political ethics stress that admirable political conduct demands a kind of self-disciplined prudence: "the ability to see and think clearly and not be overcome by passions or egocentricity" (Dobel 1999, 195-99. See also Dunn 1990).

With this in place, we can ask how a high-ranking public official who strives to act responsibly should respond to advice which suggests that they must commit a certain moral crime on grounds of necessity.[8] Although many "dirty" political decisions are justified in the name of necessity, it is far from clear that most ever reach that threshold, and hence whether they can therefore actually be excused. On this point, Judith Shklar is a valuable guide. In *Ordinary Vices*, she writes that "The usual excuse for our most unspeakable public acts is that they are necessary," but then asks "How genuine are these necessities in fact?" Shklar insists that neither of her heroes, Montaigne nor Montesquieu, were "blind to the imperatives of law and reason of state, but they knew that much of what passed under those names was merely princely wilfulness" (Shklar 1984, 30. See also Shklar 1990, 72). She makes a good point. In politics, we know that necessity is often *falsely* invoked. If we imagine the reflective and well-intentioned high-ranking politician who is assumed to occupy centre-stage

in the theory of dirty hands, and ask how they should respond to such warnings, we reach something of an impasse. Certainly, per Weber, it is hard to deny that the powerful politician who rigidly pursues their own moral purity and innocence – and straightforwardly refuses to countenance authorising violence and force *for that reason* – can be accused of moral self-indulgence, because this stance may end up having deleterious consequences for others. But at the same time, such a politician, presented with these historical and political lessons will, surely, remain highly resistant to the attempt to invoke considerations of necessity to excuse the violation of basic moral standards in any concrete circumstance, because the most likely political result of *not* remaining highly resistant will be to permit the commission of various moral crimes when doing so is not in fact, strictly speaking, required.

Considering the kind of emergency that the so-called ticking-bomb scenario asks us to imagine is a useful way to illustrate the point. This thought-experiment has migrated, in recent decades, from the philosophy seminar to the wider discourse about terror prevention. It is so pervasive, both in popular TV shows and media discussion, that it is often taken for granted as a relevant heuristic for real-world decision makers.[9] Yet, as many scholars have shown, the suggestion that the ticking bomb scenario delivers any conclusive recommendations about the acceptability of authorising torture in the real world is highly dubious. As Henry Shue argues, one problem is that the example is overly idealised. It supposes that the authorities have detained the right person, and that torture will result in prompt and accurate revelation of relevant information (Shue 2016, 59-62). The reality, though, is that authorities can only ever *suspect* they have detained the correct person. Moreover, the

empirical literature conclusively establishes that torture delivers extremely noisy information, if not scores of falsehoods (Rejali 2007, 461). For these reasons, Shue is right to contend that the ticking bomb hypothetical is a matter of thinking about torture in "dreamland" (Shue 2016, 58-66. For further discussion see also Hall 2025, 103-11 and Sarra 2025, 104-05).[10]

How would a high-ranking politician, who strives to act responsibly, behave if confronted by agents of the security services who recommended that they authorise the torture of a captive to disclose the location of a ticking bomb? The dirty hands theory suggests they should authorise such action *if necessary*. Presumably, the guidance will be that *this* time it really is necessary (as it always is). But, clearly, the reflective politician, aware of the highly discouraging history of invocations of necessity in politics, should remain very dubious whenever the language of necessity is invoked by subordinates in attempts to convince them to commission grave moral wrongdoing. After all, others in similar situations have been misled and badly advised. In the process, they have *un*necessarily stained their souls. The truly morally well-motivated high-ranking politician will be very sensitive to the risk of making the same mistake – and endeavour not to.

Furthermore, we would hope that they will be cognisant of the kind of warnings about the dangers of *vanity* that we canvassed earlier. They will recognise that power is alluring and often morally compromising. Because *salus populi suprema lex esto* is such a noble sentiment, and making hard and tragic decisions in order to satisfy this demand could win them glory, they should acknowledge that there are very good reasons, based on what we know about the sheer prevalence of self-

deception and motivated reasoning, to believe they are badly placed to make objective and balanced judgements about what must be done. Crucially, they will accept that good intentions cannot be decisive. After all, as Ariel Dorfman perceptively (and discouragingly) notes, we need to be realistic about the fact that "torturers do not generally think of themselves as evil but rather as guardians of the common good, dedicated patriots who get their hands dirty and endure perhaps some sleepless nights in order to deliver the blind ignorant majority from violence and anxiety" (Dorfman 2004, 16). Unless we are prepared to concede that most instances of torture really were necessary (which we really should not), the unwelcome implication is that most torturers were wrong to think that what they did was required to discharge their (moral) duties. Of course, it is possible that the reflective and well-motivated high-ranking politician will recognise all of this and still decide that this is one of the very rare cases where historians will decide that such moral horrors had to be committed. But there are extremely powerful reasons for them to be extraordinarily sceptical, and resistant to that idea in any concrete real-world situation in which the question of undertaking grave wrongdoing – such as torture – arises.

These are not knock-down arguments against the idea that we can imagine situations where terrible outcomes may obtain unless other's basic rights are grievously violated. But the typical ways that these stark, one-off hypothetical scenarios are presented in most discussions of dirty hands fail to do justice to the distinctively political issues at hand. The point is not simply that responsible high-ranking politicians will accept that sometimes they may have to make decisions that will generate moral remainders, of varying severity, and be reluctant to authorise such

actions for that reason. The more important point is that their desire to act in a politically responsible manner will itself generate a very powerful scepticism about the idea that, in any concrete situation, the case for committing or commissioning grievous moral wrongs is persuasive. To put it another way, in any concrete scenario where the case for dirtying their hands (e.g. through torture) may arise, the aspiration to act in a responsible manner will generate very powerful reasons *against* acceding to the kinds of action-guiding recommendations that the theory of dirty hands is believed to deliver.

The second concern relates to the more general attitude about the relationship between means and ends at work in the theory of dirty hands and, again, invokes the problem of motivated reasoning. It is highly likely that high-ranking politicians considering whether to employ violence and force to achieve a valued political end are going to be defective at judging in their own case. The reflective and honest among them ought to recognise that the (perfectly acceptable) desire to achieve credit or glory for realising a great political good is likely to compromise their reasoning abilities in their own case. (To repeat an earlier point, they ought to acknowledge that in this regard, the theory of dirty hands is seductive.) The basic problem here is the age-old threat of political hubris. Conceiving means-end reasoning of this sort as a matter of private judgement threatens the idea that major political decisions must be taken through the kinds of public institutions that we have created to protect us from the defective judgement of individuals. Responsible politicians should recognise that they have powerful reasons not to undermine those institutions unless they can be sure that doing so will have the salutary consequences they desire. And if they are being

honest, they will probably have to recognise that the vast majority of the time they are simply not in a position to accurately make such predictions. As John Dunn puts it, "Human beings today live in an extravagantly complicated world. What they need to learn to do is to acknowledge, understand and respond to its complexity. Learning to acknowledge this is in the first instance potentially an exercise in individual self-discipline" (Dunn 1990, 209).

I do not want to suggest that all the theorists associated with the theory of dirty hands are utterly naïve in this regard. After all, Weber's essay on the vocation of politics is replete with warnings of this sort, and his account of the ethic of responsibility is, in large part, an attempt to remind politicians that they must take responsibility for the *actual* consequences of their decisions when these are foreseeable, even if unexpected (Weber 2010, 357-62).[11] However, the simplistic way that means-ends reasoning is typically utilised in the thought-experiments at the heart of the dirty hands literature does not display this kind of sensitivity to the difficulty of thinking accurately about the consequences of violating ordinary moral standards. Most users of the ticking bomb scenario ask us to assume that if the leader authorises torture the ticking-bomb *will* be defused. This is just cartoonish; real life is never that clear-cut.[12] This is why it is reasonable to worry that reflective high-ranking politicians will have good reason to demur with the suggestion that so long as they act with good-intentions, and are prepared to accept responsibility for the actual outcomes of their decisions, they should be prepared to violate ordinary moral standards which exist to protect from violence the very people that they are responsible for. That they will

believe the outcomes will be good enough obviously matters, but it is hardly sufficient given that the commission of grave moral wrong is nailed-on.

If we return to Williams's question - "Who does the author suppose needs to know this philosophy, and for what purpose?" – and conceive of the intended audience of these action-guiding judgments as high-ranking politicians, we thus have very serious reasons *not* to want this audience to endorse the normative recommendations commonly supposed to follow in dirty hands cases. The problem is that internalising such recommendations is likely to impede the ability of these agents to make prudent political decisions. Reflective high-ranking politicians, who wish to act responsibly for others, should recognise that.

THE PUBLIC

Does the theory of dirty hands fare any better if we conceive of the audience as the citizens of a constitutional democracy?[13] To make progress here we should again begin by thinking about the background political attitudes that we can expect responsible members of this audience to evince. Precisely what anyone will hope for in this regard will depend on one's greatest political aspirations and is, therefore, highly contentious. But, as before, it is possible to identify some widely shared bedrock assumptions that most theorists would agree that ordinary members of constitutional democracies should acknowledge. Chief among these is the idea that that the threat of political power being abused is ever-present and must be guarded against. Alan Kahan puts this eloquently in his recent study of the liberal tradition:

> What liberals fear is arbitrary power, and liberalism is about building a society in which we need not fear other people, whether singly, in groups, or, perhaps most

> of all, in uniform—that of the police officer, the soldier, the priest. At its most basic, liberalism derives from the fear of an all-powerful individual, a despot. The spirit of tyranny hovers over the cradle of liberalism and is never absent from liberal concerns. In any society, the greatest potential enemy of freedom is the sovereign, whether sovereignty is exercised in the name of God, a monarch, or the people, because the sovereign has the greatest opportunities for despotism. Whoever is sovereign is the greatest source of fear. Hence liberal attempts to limit the powers of the sovereign and its agents (Kahan 2023, 3-4).[14]

Anyone who accepts the urgency of these fears will grant that politically responsible citizens will exhibit an apprehensive attitude toward public officials. Ideally, they will remain watchful of high-ranking politicians, and sceptical of such politicians' attempts to free themselves from the constraints that have been erected to limit their power, without falling into a kind of antipolitical cynicism which implausibly denies that prudent political decision-making can have salutary consequences and promote the public good.[15] This is often a fine line to walk. But still, the suggestion that successful democratic politics depends on a complex balance of trust *and* distrust between the ruled and the rulers is a bedrock element of the liberal worldview. This apprehensiveness toward government agents causes Isaiah Berlin to insist that one of the most central beliefs at the heart of liberalism is the idea that there must be frontiers "within which men should be inviolable, these frontiers being defined in terms of rules so long and widely accepted that their observance has entered into the very conception of what it is to be a normal human being" and which, for that reason, "cannot be abrogated by some formal procedure on the part of some court or sovereign body" (Berlin 2002, 211).

There is clearly a lot going on here, and I do not have space to cover all the minutiae. The key point is that, according to these mainstream liberal theorists, the prevalence of a suspicious temper or ethos amongst the citizenry is a vital bulwark

against the abuse of political power. If citizens refuse to accede these warnings, they act irresponsibly, and their lack of political judgment may well be a harbinger of terrible outcomes. Moreover, you do not have to be a card-carrying critical theorist to accept that fostering such an ethos is a constant battle, precisely because many powerful politicians do not want to be subject to such scrutiny as they would prefer a trusting and compliant public.

With this in mind, we can now ask how responsible citizens would react to the normative, action-guiding claims about the requirements of responsible political conduct at the core of the theory of dirty hands.[16] Citizens who display the kind of apprehensive attitude that I have described are likely to consider such claims with great scepticism. They will be extremely averse to acceding to such claims because they will fear that politicians are likely to falsely invoke necessity and exercise violence for nefarious reasons. Moreover, the most reflective among them will recognise that high-ranking politicians have a clear vested interest in them coming to be less morally demanding. This should, in turn, further strengthen their scepticism. Moreover – and this the key point – we should want them to display this resistance to the theory of dirty hands because these background attitudes are a vital bulwark against the abuse of political power. Philosophical work which weakens these attitudes is politically dangerous.

Similar worries arise when we turn to the idea that a well-informed public would accept the means-ends rhetoric at the heart of the theory, and agree that powerful politicians may have to grievously wrong some people in order to achieve welcome political ends for others. Even if they may be prepared to recognise this in the abstract,

the problem here is that, just as the responsible public official should recognise that it is very hard to offer the kind of epistemic guarantees that seem to be required, the reflective citizen should retain a wily scepticism about the idea that, in any particular case, the employment of such morally suspect means really is required in order for to the welcome ends to be realised. Furthermore, a politically responsible public would recognise that one significant consequence of relaxing our expectations about high-ranking politicians adhering to basic moral standards will be the liberation of such agents from constraints that have been created to protect ordinary people from the depredations of power.

These considerations do not refute the suggestion that we can describe imaginary situations in which responsible citizens would, on reflection, agree that high-ranking politicians should employ immoral means to bring about a greater common good. But the problem is that it is far from clear that we should want this audience to accept these arguments and relax their real-world political judgements accordingly. The purpose of the theory of dirty hands might be to improve the political judgements that citizens make about those who rule over them. However, when we consider the means-end connotations of the theory, it is clear that the supposed normative implications clash starkly with several political attitudes that politically responsible liberal citizens will endorse. To the extent that that theory succeeds in altering these attitudes, it is likely to be a harbinger of *irresponsible* political judgement.

I suspect that proponents of dirty hands approaches are likely to grant the importance of these attitudes, while insisting they nonetheless do not undermine the theory. They might accept that citizens must not become overly trusting of high-

ranking politicians but hold that the theory can still play a vital role in generating responsible political judgements by educating the public about the tragic ethical complexities of politics, so that they can make more clear-eyed judgements about political conduct. In particular, they might argue that the theory can help citizens to retrospectively deliberate about such decision-making after the fact, and thus help them to decide how such agents should be judged – including thinking about whether certain forms of punishment should take place (cf. Walzer 2007, 291-93).[17]

When confronted with such claims, we need to distinguish between two kinds of action-guidance that the theory might be thought to deliver to the public. First, one might directly invoke these considerations in support of the view that, here and now, in societies like our own, the theory of dirty hands *can* facilitate real-world citizens making clear-eyed, retrospective judgements about political conduct by helping this audience to decide if certain political decisions were straightforwardly wrong and inexcusable, or if they were cases of justified wrongdoing of the relevant kind as they involved a powerful politician picking the "lesser evil" to prevent a far greater evil.

The problem, however, is that whilst this sounds reasonable in theory, responsible citizens should be sceptical of the idea that, in practice, they will be able to make such judgements with a high degree of accuracy. This is because these kinds of real-world judgements require them to be able to access the relevant empirical information so that they can accurately judge whether acts that grievously wronged some were, indeed, justified overall in the sense at stake. However, due to their political scepticism and apprehensiveness, the responsible citizen will surely accept that in existing democratic regimes, the requisite kind of political transparency and

openness simply does not obtain. If they do not have untrammelled access to the relevant information, this makes judging whether or not they are confronted with a case of purportedly justified wrongdoing, or simple wrongdoing, highly problematic. To put this point another way, the suggestion that the theory of dirty hands can help citizens to come to more clear-eyed, retrospective judgements here and now is only plausible if citizens inhabit a very open and transparent political culture.[18] If we accept that no (or vanishingly few) real-world democracies come close to approximating this ideal, this way of defending the theory is thus called into question. To be sure, we might grant that the theory could play a useful role for imaginary citizens who inhabit a genuinely participatory, transparent and open democratic regime. But no audience in the real world is in that happy position. It is very unclear why the audience under consideration here – citizens of actually-existing democracies – should be interested in a theory that might help a merely imaginary group of listeners to judge their own politicians in a rather fanciful political environment.

Alternatively, it is possible that one might take these criticisms very seriously indeed and conclude that, for this reason, the real normative lesson that the theory of dirty hands imparts is that we should reform our democracies, and ensure they become more open and more transparent, so that, after the fact, citizens can judge whether high-ranking politicians have nobly dirtied their hands, or simply engaged in basic moral wrongdoing. I have few qualms with arguments in favour of greater openness and transparency. But if this is, indeed, the most salient and defensible piece of normative action-guidance that the theory has to offer to the public, one might

reasonably question its import. The problem is that *this* conclusion is neither novel or unique to the theory, nor how the theory is usually understood or taught.

CONCLUSION

My goal in this paper has been to problematise the purported link between greater openness to the idea that grievous acts of violence and force are a necessary tool of public office and the promotion of responsible political conduct. Asking questions about the audience of the theory of dirty hands generates serious problems for the idea that the theory delivers the kinds of normative, action-guiding recommendations about the necessity of employing violence and force that its proponents claim. Whether we conceive of the audience as high-ranking politicians, or the citizenry of a modern constitutional democracy, we have reasons to believe that these pieces of normative action-guidance are a standing threat to responsible political decision-making and/or judgement. If so, then even if standard models of the theory of dirty hands are useful ways of addressing some metaethical quandaries, there may nonetheless be compelling grounds for thinking that those concerned with fostering responsible political conduct should largely refrain from thinking in these terms altogether.

Acknowledgements
For helpful feedback on this article, I would like to thank Alasdair Cochrane, Robert Jubb, Christina Nick, Mark Philp, Paul Sagar, and Matt Sleat. I am also indebted to the editors and three reviewers at the *European Journal of Political Theory* for their incisive and thoughtful comments.

Bibliography

Archard, David. 2013. 'Dirty Hands and the Complicity of the Democratic Public'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (4): 777–90.

Berlin, Isaiah. 2002. 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. In *Liberty,* edited by Henry Hardy. Oxford University Press, 166-217.

Blakeley, Ruth, and Sam Raphael. 2020. 'Accountability, Denial and the Futureproofing of British Torture'. *International Affairs* 96 (3): 691–709.

Cherniss, Joshua. 2021. *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton University Press.

Coady, C. A. J. 2008. *Messy Morality: The Challenge of Politics*. Clarendon Press.

de Wijze, Stephen. 2004. 'Tragic Remorse: The Anguish of Dirty Hands'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*: 7(5), 453-471.

de Wijze, Stephen. 2018. 'The Problem of Democratic Dirty Hands', *The Monist* 101(2), 129-49.

De Wijze, Stephen 2022. 'Are Dirty Hands Possible?', *The Journal of Ethics* 28, 187-214.

Dobel, J. Patrick. 1999. *Public Integrity*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dorfman, Ariel. 2004. 'Foreward: The Tyranny of Terror – Is Torture Inevitable in Our Century and Beyond'. In *Torture: A Collection*, edited by Sanford Levinson. Oxford University Press, 3-19.

Douglass, Robin and Edward Hall (2026). 'Judith Shklar's Ethos of Skeptical Vigilance'. *The Review of Politics*.

Dunn, John. 1990. 'Reconceiving the Content and Character of Modern Political Community'. In *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essay 1981-1989*. Princeton University Press, 193–215.

Eggert, Linda. 2023. 'Dirty Hands Defended'. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*: 22(1-2), 1-20.

Finlay, Christopher. 2011. 'Dirty Hands and the Romance of the Ticking Bomb Terrorist: A Humean Account', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 14(4), 421-42.

Hampshire, Stuart. 'Public and Private Morality'. In *Morality and Conflict*. Blackwell, 101-125.

Hall, Edward. 2025. *Power and Powerlessness: The Liberalism of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford University Press.

Hall, Edward, and Andrew Sabl. 2022. 'Introduction: Dirty Hands and Beyond'. In *Political Ethics: A Handbook*. Princeton University Press, 1-20.

Hidalgo, Javier. 2018. *Unjust Borders: Individuals and the Ethics of Immigration*. Routledge.

Hollis, Martin. 1982. 'Dirty Hands'. *British Journal of Political Science* 12 (4): 385–98.

Jubb, Robert and A. Faik Kurtumuls. 2012. 'No Country for Honest Men: Political Philosophers and Real Politics. *Political Studies*: 60 (3), 539-66.

Kahan, Alan. 2023. *Freedom From Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism*. Princeton University Press.

Machiavelli, Niccolo. 2000. *The Prince*. Cambridge University Press.

Nagel, Thomas. 1978. 'Ruthlessness in Public Life'. In *Public and Private Morality*, Edited by Stuart Hampshire. Cambridge University Press, 75-92.

Nick, Christina. 2022. 'Dirty Hands and Moral Conflict – Lessons from the Philosophy of Evil'. *Philosophia* 50 (1): 183–200.

Nielsen, Kai. 2007. 'There Is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands'. In *Politics and Morality, Edited by Igor Primoratz*. Palgrave, 20-37.

O'Donovan, Nick. 2011. 'Causes and Consequences: Responsibility in the Political Thought of Max Weber', *Polity* 43(1), 84 – 105.

Owen, David, and Tracy Strong. 2004. 'Introduction: Max Weber's Calling to Knowledge and Action'. In *The Vocation Lectures, Edited and with and Introduction by David Owen and Tracy Strong*. Hackett, ix-lxii.

Parrish, John. 2007. *Paradoxes of Political Ethics: From Dirty Hands to the Invisible Hand*. Cambridge University Press.

Rejali, Darius. 2007. *Torture and Democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Runciman, David. 2006. *The Politics of Good Intentions: History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order*. Princeton University Press.

Sarra, Gianni. 2025. 'The Different Sources of Dirty Hands: Episodes, Rules, and Careers'. *Political Philosophy*, 2 (1), 98-127.

Schmidtz, David. 2023. *Living Together: Inventing Moral Science*. Oxford University Press.

Shklar, Judith. 1984. *Ordinary Vices*. Harvard University Press.

Shklar, Judith. 1990. *The Faces of Injustice*. Yale University Press.

Shue, Henry. 2016. 'Torture in Dreamland: Disposing of the Ticking Bomb'. In *Fighting Hurt: Rule and Exception in Torture and War*. Oxford University Press, 58-66.

Shugarman, David. 2000. 'Democratic Dirty Hands', in *Cruelty and Deception: The Controversy Over Dirty Hands in Politics*, Broadview Press, 229-49.

Stocker, Michael. 1990. *Plural and Conflicting Values*. Oxford University Press.

Strong, Tracy. 2012. *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Bannister in the Twentieth Century*. University of Chicago Press.

Sutherland, S. L. 1995. 'The Problem of Dirty Hands in Politics: Peace in the Vegetable Trade', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 28(3), 479-507.

Thompson, Dennis. 1987. *Political Ethics and Public Office*. Harvard University Press.

Tillyris, Demetris. 2015. 'Learning How Not to be Good: Machiavelli and the Standard Dirty Hands Thesis', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 18, 61 – 74.

Tillyris, Demetris. 2023. 'Dirty Hands as a 'Weapon of the Weak': Heroism, Aristocratism, and the Ambiguities of Everyday Resistance', *The Journal of Ethics*, 27, 601-23.

Walzer, Michael. 2007. 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands'. In *Thinking Politically: Essays on Political Theory*. Yale University Press 278-95.

Weber, Max. 2010. 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics'. In *Political Writings, Edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs*. Cambridge University Press, 309-69.

Williams, Bernard. 1981. 'Politics and the Moral Character'. In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973 - 1980*. Cambridge University Press, 54-70.

Williams, Bernard. 2005. 'The Liberalism of Fear'. In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn. Princeton University Press, 52-61.

[1] As Stuart Hampshire puts it, the basic contention is that "Violence, and the threat of violence or of force, have always been in prospect in public life and in the execution of public policies", and for this reason it is "irresponsible and morally wrong to apply to political action the moral standards that are appropriate to private life and to personal relations" (Hampshire 1983, 121-22).

[2] The work of Michael Stocker has been highly influential in this regard. He argues that the theory of dirty hands reveals the major role that "non-action-guiding act evaluations" play in properly attuned moral judgement (Stocker 1990, 13). While many moral theorists assume that morality is only concerned with telling us which acts "are or are not to be done", and thus present moral reasoning as a matter of offering "overall, action-guiding evaluations", Stocker argues that the theory of dirty hands reveals that action-guidingness and wrongness come apart (Stocker 1990, 11-17). Thus, on his view, even if we judge that an agent *should* commit or commission moral wrongdoing, there is no contradiction in holding that such wrongdoing "stains both the act and the agent". For Stocker, this establishes the role that a certain kind of double counting plays in our moral thinking: "The dirty feature is taken into account once in determining the overall value of the act and again on its own. It is thus double-counted. Further, when it is taken up again on its own, it is taken up in an evaluation that is not action-guiding" (Stocker 1990, 13).

[3] This appeal to how the theory is 'conventionally' or 'standardly' understood is important. As Gianni Sarra notes, much writing about dirty hands focuses on what he calls dirty episodes: "discrete decisions where determinate wrongdoings are justified as the lesser evil" (Sarra 2015, 100). In this paper, I am interested in thinking through the kinds of action-guiding recommendations typically derived from consideration of these episodes. This focus should not be read as slighting Sarra's more general point that the theory of dirty hands can be understood more broadly as also having implications for how we should think about careers and rules. Moreover, though I am interested in problematising how the theory of dirty hands is typically understood, my argument is quite distinct from Dimitris Tillyris' critique of what he calls the "standard" dirty hands thesis (Tillyris 2015). Tillyris is ultimately concerned with explaining why he thinks the standard view mischaracterises the conflict between morality and politics (roughly: it is too 'static' and fails to understand Machiavelli's point that admirable politicians must cultivate various moral vices and therefore evince various morally antagonistic character traits). This is a fascinating argument, but very different from my attempt to problematise the standard view by questioning the audience of the theory.

[4] Claims about the need for high-ranking politicians to sometimes employ violence and force do not exhaust the normative elements of the theory of dirty hands. Though much writing does focus on such momentous issues, other writing focuses on less morally stark behaviour, such as making deals with shady adversaries to improve one's electoral prospects. In this paper, I am concerned with the first, morally grievous, kind of behaviour rather than the second, grubby or squalid, kind. I remain agnostic about the extent to which the considerations I raise here apply beyond the grievous cases to the merely grubby.

[5] David Runciman summarises this very nicely when he writes that, for Weber, "All politicians with real power have dirty hands, because real politics can be a bloody business. The trick for Weber is not to hide them, nor to parade them through the streets, but just to get on with the task in hand, in the knowledge that dirty hands, and a soiled conscience, are the price that all politicians have to pay. Responsible politicians will suffer … the test of politics is whether you can cope with the knowledge that you are not as good as you would like to be" (Runciman 2006, 38).

[6] As David Owen and Tracy Strong put it, for Weber "Power is the necessary instrument but never the point of politics" (Owen and Strong 2004, xxxix).

[7] For discussions of maturity as a crucial normative standard for Weber see Cherniss 2021, 53-56 and Strong 2012, 129-32.

[8] There is another way of criticising the theory of dirty hands which I want to highlight in order to distance it from my own approach. Some scholars have argued that due to the likely baleful consequences of a theory being operationalised, moral and political philosophers may have overriding reasons as theorists not to disseminate their research, even if they believe it captures some significant truths (Jubb and Kurtumulus 2012). With this in mind, one might contend that given the sheer prevalence of malicious political actors in the contemporary world, it is dangerous for philosophers to be imparting the lesson that violating ordinary moral standards which prohibit the use of violence and force can sometimes be justified as a lesser evil, precisely because such a theory could be abused. Such arguments may have merit, but the argument that follows does not take this form.

[9] For example, several prominent British politicians have explicitly invoked the scenario when discussing the possibility of authorizing torture and other forms of cruel and degrading punishment in front of the Intelligence and Security Committee in the British Parliament. These include former Prime Ministers Boris Johnson and Theresa May, and former senior ministers Phillip Hammond and Amber Rudd (Blakeley and Raphael 20202, 705-07).

[10] Shue also argues that the scenario is unhappily abstract in the sense that it overlooks the fact that a vast state practice of torture must be institutionalized if torture is to have any chance of getting the positive results that its apologists envision (Shue 2016, 64-65. See also Rejali 2007, 446-479). Though I find this very compelling, I leave aside this element of Shue's argument here.

[11] As Nick O'Donovan puts it, according to Weber "one must accept liability for the *actual* outcomes (within limits), not simply justify one's choice – both in advance and in retrospect – by reference to predicted outcomes" (O'Donovan 2011, 97). The point being that in politics "we frequently find ourselves in situations that admit of multiple plausible hypotheses, based on equally detailed readings of the available data, each drawing different analogies with the past, each emphasizing different aspects of the present. Some of these hypotheses will better approximate the actual causal constitution of the political world better than others, but there is no formula for identifying the superior hypothesis *ex ante*" (O'Donovan 2011, 101). O'Donovan concludes that Weber believed that responsibility "far exceeded responsibility for anticipated results alone" (O'Donovan 2011, 103).

[12] Regrettably, much contemporary analytical philosophy proceeds in this manner. Many works attempt to reason about politics by eliciting moral intuitions via the medium of cartoonish descriptions of a far simpler version of something approaching our world, because interrogating these intuitions matters more to analytical philosophers than improving our real-world judgements. For an extended argument that this unfortunate turn must be resisted see Schmidtz 2023.

[13] One might be tempted to contend that given the diminutive moral stature of many of the people who occupy positions of high public office, telling the public to be *more* open to the possibility that violating ordinary moral standards against the perpetration of violence and force can be justified as a lesser evil is highly risky, to say the least. Isn't it more politically responsible for these academics to be stressing that the public need to vocally make more stringent, critical judgements about high-ranking politicians who perpetrate violence, and to give them some clear guidance about how they can do so? While there

may be something to these complaints, this is not the argument I mount here. As before, deeper problems, which invoke the idea of responsible political conduct and attitudes and dispositions (this time, on the part of citizens) can be outlined.

[14] Here Kahan is heavily influenced by the work of Judith Shklar whose liberalism of fear is grounded in the historical lesson that "abuses of power are inevitable unless carefully restrained" (Shklar 1984, 218).

[15] For discussion of this point with reference to the kind of "ethos" involved in Shklar's own work see Douglass and Hall 2026.

[16] My focus on how citizens should respond to the idea that politicians will sometimes have to authorise violence and force in order to act responsibly is not exhaustive of the questions we might ask about the public and the theory of dirty hands. There is now a large literature on the possibility of 'democratic dirty hands' which I sidestep (see, for example, Archard 2013; de Wijze 2018; Shugarman 2000; Sutherland 1995; Thompson 1987, 11-39). Likewise, my approach is notably different from Tillyris' intriguing recent attempt to argue that dirty hands reasoning can be reframed as a 'weapon of the weak' which can help marginalised subjects to fight political injustice (Tillyris 2023).

[17] Thompson calls this the 'retrospective accountability' approach (Thompson 1987, 24). In their critique of standard models of the problem of dirty hands, which focus on the decisions made by lone political actors, S. L. Sutherland argues that even if one grants that statesman may sometimes have to dirty their hands in genuine emergencies and bypass standard deliberative practices, there is a vital role for the public to play in asking if these decisions were justified after the event (Sutherland 1995, 504).

[18] In his discussion of democratic dirty hands, Shugarman distinguishes between "election-focused, elitist" and properly "participatory" versions of democracy. The former emphasize "citizens' passivity and deference to leaders between elections" and grant "elected representatives relatively unfettered discretion to be entrepreneurial", whereas in the latter, elected leaders "exhibit transparency in decision-making, openness in their dealings with citizens, and accountability (which means, to answer) to the public for actions and decisions taken, or in some cases, not taken, *not every four or five years, but on an ongoing basis*" (Shugarman 2000, 232-33). In the baldest possible terms, my contention is that real-world democracies are far closer to the former than the latter, and that this has serious repercussions for the issue at hand.