



# **Ethics of Political Leadership**

Introduction to Political Theory  
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King's College London



I. From Representation to Leadership

II. The Problem of Dirty Hands

III. Ultimate Ends vs. Consequences

IV. Political Theory in the World



# From Representation to Political Leadership

*Review*

Direct vs. Representative Democracy

Delegate vs. Independence

Descriptive Representation



# From Representation to Political Leadership

## *Essentialism*

One critique of descriptive representation is that it reinforces essentialism

Essentialism: Idea that a group has some *essential* characteristic that all members share

# **From Representation to Political Leadership**

All assume, to some extent, that representatives can act as either independent actors, delegates, or dialogical partners for underrepresented groups

Task is just to gradually approach that ideal



Max Weber  
1864-1920





# **From Representation to Political Leadership**

Three facts about modern politics that cast doubt on ideal of representation:

1. Bureaucracy
2. Parties
3. Inter-State (Military) Competition



# From Representation to Political Leadership

Weber's argument:

In the context of those three facts about modern politics, elected political leaders will not (and cannot) act as *representatives*





# From Representation to Political Leadership

Rather, elections produce *political leaders* who must act by combining their own convictions with the demands of attracting and retaining followers

New Question: What *ethical disposition* must guide these leaders?

# From Representation to Political Leadership

## *1. Bureaucracy*

Political representatives do not just pass laws that then get seamlessly applied

Rather, they interface with *large-scale, complex government bureaucracies*

# From Representation to Political Leadership

“In dealing with everyday business the civil servant was also the more powerful figure... That was not necessarily absurd. The minister was in fact the representative of the nexus of *political* power; his task was to represent its political norms and apply them to the proposals of his specialized subordinates...”

pg. 48-49



# From Representation to Political Leadership

## 2. Parties

Democratic politics is not about aggregating individual views through voting. Rather, it is about mobilizing supporters through a political party apparatus that requires distributing benefits/spoils.

# From Representation to Political Leadership

“The most modern forms of party organization stand in stark contrast to this idyllic state of affairs dominated by notables and, above all, by the members of Parliament. They are the offspring of democracy, the mass suffrage, the need to woo the masses and for mass organization, the development of the greatest degree of unity in the leadership and the strictest possible discipline.”

# From Representation to Political Leadership

“In the nature of the case, however, power lies in the hands of those who do the continuous day-to-day work within the organization or of those on whom the party apparatus depends for either money or personnel, whether as patrons or as the leaders of powerful clubs representing vested interests (such as Tammany Hall).”

Pg. 61-62



# **From Representation to Political Leadership**

## **2. Inter-State Military Competition**

The state essentially exists to monopolize the use of force in the context of competition with other states. Political leaders have to make autonomous, often secret decisions about the use of violence.

# From Representation to Political Leadership

“Anyone who wishes to engage in politics at all, and particularly anyone who wishes to practice it as a profession, must become conscious of these ethical paradoxes and of his own responsibility for what may become of *him* under the pressure they exert. For, I repeat, he is entering into relations with the satanic powers that lurk in every act of violence.” pg. 90



German Revolution  
1918



# The Problem of Dirty Hands

“For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.”

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV





# The Problem of Dirty Hands

If politicians are going to do their job, they need to get their “hands dirty”

Being a political leader means doing things that may break with “everyday” morality that applies to ordinary people



# The Problem of Dirty Hands

1. Politics is the domain of the regulation of the use of force/violence. Creation of peace and order is condition for all other morality/moral goods.
2. Politician's role is to use violence/force to ensure order.
3. Therefore, politicians have to “get their hands dirty.”

# The Problem of Dirty Hands

## Some Examples

1. Lying
2. Ticking Time Bombs
3. Total War

# The Problem of Dirty Hands

## Background Assumption

*Moral absolutes exist but can be overridden in specific circumstances by specific actors*

But those actors *rightly feel moral remorse/regret for their actions*




# The Problem of Dirty Hands

## Common Objections

All morality is consequentialist, therefore there are no “moral absolutes” to override

Politicians are just *doing the right thing*



# The Problem of Dirty Hands

## Common Objections

There are moral absolutes, and even politicians should abide by them

Politicians are just *doing the wrong thing*

# The Problem of Dirty Hands

## Common Objections

While in theory we can think of “moral dilemmas,” in practice the talk of “dirty hands” just authorizes politicians to do whatever they want

Should act as though there are moral absolutes



# The Problem of Dirty Hands

## Common Objections

We all face the problem of “dirty hands”: there is no role specific dilemma faced by politicians.

In face of these situations, non-politicians should also use violence to prevent much greater harm

# Ultimate Ends vs. Consequences

## Weber's Addendum

1. The use of violence/force is inherently *unpredictable* and so politics always involves *unintended consequences*
2. Politicians have to abide by an “ethics of responsibility” where they are willing to take responsibility for unintended consequences

# Ultimate Ends vs. Consequences

## Two Ethics

Ethics of Conviction: Grounded in the unconditional value of *ultimate ends*

Ethics of Responsibility: Grounded in willingness to take responsibility for *consequences* of actions



# Ultimate Ends vs. Consequences

## Ethics of Conviction

Belief in purity of goals *tends to go together* with blaming the moral failure of the world for failure of political projects and unwillingness to countenance violence (or else over-reliance on violence as leading to world without need for violence)

# Ultimate Ends vs. Consequences

## Ethics of Responsibility

Ethos of “objectivity” – focus on the external world rather than internal states

Must be tempered by *commitment to a cause*

Need for followers who are *inspired by the cause* (as well as spoils)

# Ultimate Ends vs. Consequences

“an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is *capable* of having a ‘vocation for politics.’”

Pg. 92



# Political Theory in the World



Political theory as an effort to reflect on the basic *concepts and commitments* that inform how we study politics

Born of historical political ideologies and practical struggle

But can inform contemporary questions:  
(why) is democracy valuable?

# Political Theory in the World

Debates within political theory mirror basic questions about how we approach politics

Realism or Utopianism?

Incrementalism or Radicalism?

What is *your* political theory?