Dirty Hands or Political Virtue?

Walzer's and MacIntyre's Answers to Machiavelli's Challenge

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Abstract

Can it be right to do wrong in order to do good? Can torture, for instance, be justified? This commentary argues that Michael Walzer's often-cited answer on these dirty hands issues is problematic, and that a properly elaborated virtue ethics is more convincing. The argument is of particular consequence for courses on administrative ethics and for practitioners dealing with hard cases.

Keywords: accountability, dilemmas, dirty hands, virtue ethics

Introduction

> (A) prince must learn how not to be virtuous, to make use of this or not according to need . . . and to know how to escape the evil reputation. (Machiavelli 1513/1981, chap. xv [see also xviii]; 1514/1987, vol. 1, chap. ix)

The implication of this famous lesson of the Florentine master seems to be inevitable: ethics is secondary to politics. Considerations of generosity, compassion, honesty, and the like can always be trumped by political expedience. Being virtuous (or appearing to be) is instrumental to political effectiveness. Thus any self-conscious political ethics that does not want to be the politician's servant has to face the challenge that Machiavelli poses. It has to address the question of how a firm ground for ethics in politics can be regained. Without a proper answer to this challenge, courses in management ethics are in fact superfluous, and concerns about ethical deliberation in administrative practice become problematic. In short, the first task of any administrative or political ethics must be to answer Machiavelli.

Reactions to Machiavelli's lesson can be differentiated into three categories. First, there are those who attempt to defuse Machiavelli's bomb by arguing that he starts from false presuppositions (or is intentionally deceiving his readers). A well-known comment in this line is that of Leo Strauss (1958). He tries to show

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that Machiavelli is "a teacher of evil" who must be unmasked. To do so, however, Strauss employs a cryptographic exegesis of Machiavelli's text that few find convincing (Pocock 1975b).

A second category of reactions grants that realizing political aims might sometimes demand deceit or other vices, but adds that Machiavelli had very specific political aims in mind. The prince's rule ultimately has to lead to the establishment and stable functioning of a republic. Machiavelli should be understood as a "philosopher of liberty" (Pocock 1975a; Skinner 1990; Viroli 1998, 2008). Authors following this approach can build on Machiavelli's writings in a more convincing way. Yet pointing out the good character of political aims does not solve the Machiavellian problem for political ethics. Virtues like honesty and benevolence are still sacrificed for political purposes. The problem, in fact, becomes even more complicated, as ethical considerations of one type (the political ones) now overrule the other type (ordinary ethical standards).

A third reaction agrees with the second that the political aims in Machiavelli's analysis should not simply be discarded as the arbitrary desires or interests of the ruler. It differs from the second, however, in taking the tensions between two types of ethical demands seriously. Influential advocates of this line of thought are Max Weber in "Politics as a Vocation" (1919/1961) and Michael Walzer (1973) in his well-known article on dirty hands.

In recent years Walzer's essay has often been cited in discussions on the justifiability of torture because of its classical formulation of the so-called ticking-bomb case. The answer he provides to the Machiavellian problem is that in politics one can be confronted by moral dilemmas. In such cases the holder of office has to do wrong to do right. Walzer says that the officeholder recognizes the good, but is guilty of doing evil all the same. He saves lives by disarming explosives, but has to order torture to do so. Walzer argues that we should recognize the reality of this type of dilemma, and that societies need to find ways to share in the unavoidable guilt that political action entails. Politicians who have dirtied their hands should not be left as lone tragic heroes, but should be comforted with something like a Catholic confession.

Walzer's solution to Machiavelli's problem is a peculiar one that raises several questions. He succeeds in keeping political action within the domain of the ethical, but at a price. He does not seem able to give any clue to the politician who asks the basic ethical question, "What should I do?" The remedy for dealing with guilt offered in his conclusion, furthermore, leads to the religious or psychological domain and away from ethics.

This article argues that Walzer's attempt to solve Machiavelli's problem is too vague and contradictory on crucial points, but that a virtue ethics as presented by Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) can address the issues raised by Walzer's argument. A full response entails an elaboration of the implications of virtue ethics for reason-giving and accountability. Machiavelli was wrong to turn away from the virtue ethical tradition. Following this course, the analysis answers the question of whether prominent contemporary approaches to political ethics answer the Machiavellian challenge.

Walzer's Approach and Its Problems

Military interventions and measures taken to deal with terrorist attacks have refueled interest in the issue of justified torture. Many articles and books on torture

cite Walzer's approach. For present purposes, however, it is not his specific view on torture that is of interest, but his general argument on the possibility of *ethical* political action. In what sense does he offer an answer to Machiavelli's challenges, and is that answer sufficient and convincing?

Walzer (1973) starts by pointing out a phenomenon that he believes the reader will readily recognize. In everyday life, and even more so in politics, individuals are sometimes confronted with dilemmas. These involve "the choice between upholding an important moral principle and avoiding some looming disaster" (160). Whatever one does in such cases, afterwards one is no longer innocent. As a politician, one has either failed to do the right thing, measuring up to the duties of office, or has dirtied one's hands by breaking some moral rule (161).

To illustrate the political reality of the dirty hands issue, Walzer presents two examples. The first is about a candidate running for office who makes a deal with a dishonest ward boss, involving the granting of construction contracts, in order to win the election. The second is about an official who must decide whether to authorize the torture of a captured rebel in order to locate bombs hidden in apartment buildings. In both cases, Walzer maintains, people hope that the person involved has scruples but will break the moral rule in order to do good, and will feel guilty about it.

The official's willingness to acknowledge and bear (and perhaps to repent and do penance for) the guilt is evidence, and it is the only evidence the official can offer us, both that he is not too good for politics and that he is good enough. Here is the moral politician: it is by his dirty hands that we know him. If he were a moral 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 (167–168).

Utilitarians, Walzer argues, will be inclined to dismiss the idea of a real dilemma, because in cases like the ones in the examples, it is simply right to realize the good outcome. The good person weighs the alternatives, calculates the consequences, and takes the proper decision. What is wrong in such an approach, Walzer points out, is that it does not take into account that some acts are known to be bad quite apart from immediate circumstances. They are understood to be simply wrong. These absolute prohibitions of wrongful actions, furthermore, are not merely guidelines or summaries of previous calculations. Such an understanding of these prohibitions does not "capture the reality of our moral life," that when we override rules we know we have done something wrong (170, 171).

Here is the moral politician: it is by his dirty hands that we know him.

According to Walzer, Machiavelli acknowledged the reality of the dilemma. In *The Prince*, honesty and benevolence are presented as moral standards and are not ridiculed or simply dismissed. Machiavelli acknowledged them, yet at the same time wanted to persuade princes to dishonor those standards for political results. What he did not say, however, is what the penalties are for not being good. "A Machiavellian hero," according to Walzer, "has no inwardness" (176). A completely different picture is drawn by Max Weber (1919/1961). In "Politics as a Vocation" Weber presents the good man with dirty hands as a tragic hero. He lies, intrudes, and does other things that are even worse—and he suffers. Weber's hero is a politician as one would like politicians to be, according to Walzer, because he has an inner life. Yet Weber's hero "is alone in a world that seems to belong to Satan, and his vocation is entirely his own choice" (176).

If the hero's suffering could be "socially expressed," Walzer argues, it would be better for himself and for the people on whose behalf he acts. Citizens would not want a politician with dirty hands "to lose his soul." He should therefore have some hope of personal salvation, just as a sinner does in the teachings of the Catholic Church. His act should be regarded as a determinate crime, and he must pay therefore a determinate penalty (177–178). In a sense, dirty hands acts resemble acts of civil disobedience; there are also rules broken to do good. In disobedience cases, however, the rules are legal ones. Dirty hands, however, is about breaking moral rules. And in this moral field, Walzer concludes, there seems to be no way to establish or enforce punishment. "Short of the priest and the confessional, there are no authorities to whom we might entrust the task" (178).

Walzer, in short, tries to save political ethics from the Machiavellian threat by emphasizing, first of all, the moral force of the rules prohibiting certain acts. Acting bad (i.e., breaking those rules) in order to do good is still bad. These ethical considerations are not secondary and merely instrumental. Second, in cases in which these rules are broken, the ethical character of the act finds expression within the conscience of the politician who dirties his hands to do good yet still feels guilt.

This solution contains weaknesses. A first set of problems concerns the contours of the notion of dirty hands: in what type of cases, exactly, might it be good to do bad? Walzer sometimes seems to mean that the issue of dirty hands is not restricted to specific issues or a specific domain. He speaks simply about dilemmas ("a situation where one must choose between two courses of action both of which would be wrong for him to take," 160); he dismisses the suggestion that everyday moral and political discourse constitute different levels of argument (162, 174); and he gives examples from very different contexts (e.g., war, terrorist threat, lying in office, cheating in elections).

In other instances, however, Walzer's argument strongly suggests that he wants to limit the "tolerable wrongdoing" of dirty hands to a more specific domain or to cases of a certain type. In the main part of the text, he focuses, for example, not on dilemmas simply, but on the acts of politicians. He notes not only that they turn to dirtying their hands more often, but suggests that there is a categorical difference with ordinary life dilemmas (162–163). Furthermore, not all motives for breaking rules seem to be valid: examples of emergencies dominate the text, suggesting that dirty hands have no place in more ordinary cases. The ambiguity or a lack of clarity in Walzer's concept is also apparent in the type of rules that are broken in dirty hands cases. In the conclusion Walzer explicitly denotes them as moral rules by distinguishing them from the legal rules that are broken in civil disobedience. Yet, elsewhere in the text, it seems to be laws (torture example) or political mores (election example) that are at stake. These ambiguities make it unclear when exactly any particular case must be treated as a dirty hands case.

A second problem in Walzer's argument becomes apparent: "What should one do in the case of a dilemma?" At first sight, it might seem that this position entails that the question cannot be answered. By using the term "dilemma" and by framing oppositions of considerations in the way he does, Walzer suggests that there is no right solution in dirty hands cases. Yet, on closer examination there seems to be more to it. He claims, for instance, that deliberating on a dirty hands issue is "a painful process which forces a man to weigh the wrong he is willing to do in order to do the right" (174). The formulation implies that there can be good

reasons to take one horn of the dilemma; deliberation (and not simply tossing a coin) is possible.

In other places, Walzer is even more explicit about what type of action is most proper. He claims that "it is easy to get one's hands dirty in politics *and it is often right to do so*" (174, emphasis added).[1] The particular formulation that Walzer chooses implies that "dirty hands" actually refers to taking one side in the dilemma: breaking rules in order to get results. And acting in this way is the mark of a truly moral politician: "it is by his dirty hands that we know him" (168).[2] And it is probably for this reason—doing the good thing by daring to break the rules—that Walzer follows Weber in calling such a public official a hero.

It is of course possible to read too much into these phrases. They might be slips of the pen, going beyond the intention. And indeed, Walzer does not specify what he means by deliberation, nor does he give any reason why taking one horn of the dilemma is better than taking the other. Yet if Walzer indeed intends to leave the dirty hands dilemma unresolved (and unsolvable), can his answer really be understood as a solution to the Machiavellian problem? His most dramatic change to Machiavelli's picture of the good ruler is the shift toward the "inner life" of the person who has dirtied his hands. One might say that Walzer, in fact, changes the question to be answered: he switches from the question "What should he do?" to the question "What should he feel?" or even "How can his soul be saved?" If the first question is typical for ethics, Walzer changes the perspective from an ethical one to a merely religious or a psychological one.[3]

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The analysis could stop at this point and file Walzer's solution in the archives of failed attempts to solve the Machiavellian problem. By taking that course of action, however, an opportunity would be missed to follow Walzer's suggestions in a more elaborate way. This implies turning to an ethics that can offer an understanding of deliberation in dealing with hard cases and that does link "choosing what to do" with a person's inner quality. A promising candidate for a more convincing solution to Machiavelli's challenge seems to be virtue ethics. By focusing on individual virtues, such a strategy centers on inner qualities. This approach is all the more interesting because Machiavelli himself uses some elements of the virtue tradition. In recent years the Aristotelian or virtue ethics tradition (re-)appeared in public administration. Most publications focus on specific aspects of the tradition—for example, practical reasoning (Beiner 1983), the importance of contextuality (Larmore 1987; Williams 1985, 2005), or the idea of virtues in practice (Cooper 1987, 1998; Crick 1962). Few explicitly deal with the Machiavellian problem, or with dilemmas for that matter. Many recent advocates of virtue ethics, however, draw on the seminal work of Alasdair MacIntyre. His work on virtue ethics is broad-ranging, making it a proper starting point for this analysis. Does virtue ethics, as presented by MacIntyre (1985, 1999, 2006), solve the problems in Walzer's answer to Machiavelli's challenge?

MacIntyre's Answer to Dirty Hands

Nowhere in his publications does MacIntyre explicitly address the Machiavellian problem, or the dirty hands issue for that matter. He has, however, a clear position

on moral dilemmas. MacIntyre affirms that individuals might find themselves entangled in contradiction and thus apparently face an irresolvable dilemma. Yet he follows Aquinas, who denied that moral dilemmas are "among the ultimate facts of the moral life" (MacIntyre 2006, 99). The person with a well-developed inner life may encounter hard cases, but will be able to take the proper course of action. To understand how MacIntyre reaches this conclusion, it is necessary to turn to the ethical argument that he elaborates, an argument that situates itself in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas.

The basic concepts in virtue ethics are not rules or unalienable rights or general principles (like the utilitarian "the greatest good for the greatest number") but virtues. Virtues refer to the attitudes and qualities of individuals that enable them to take the right course of action in specific situations.

People's dealings in all kinds of activities might bring them money or fame or power, items that MacIntyre calls "external goods." Such "goods" might be gained through participation in any kind of activity. Yet there are also "internal goods." These goods can only be realized through the proper kind of participation in specific sets of activities or practices. Typical examples of such practices are health care, education, science, art, and politics. In such activities people are involved together, and these activities are valued for the specific aim they realize (health, knowledge), but also for the good that participating in them itself entails (MacIntyre 1985, chap. 14).

Virtues allow the individual to participate in and contribute to a practice in such a way that the internal good can be realized. Being virtuous means having developed through experience, as a "second nature," the inclinations and qualities to make the proper judgment in each case, like a virtuoso or a skilled artisan. What exactly the virtues are depends on the particular practice in which they have their function (MacIntyre 1985, 154). Yet all the different virtues have their similarities. First, they can always be further refined and have no ultimum or maximum. People participating in a practice can recognize those among them who are more virtuous—just as one can recognize those who are more skilled in some profession—and can further develop their qualities by following the proper examples. All virtues, second, can be understood as a mean between falling short and overdoing it. The courageous soldier, for instance, is neither a coward who leaves his post too soon nor a reckless person who takes too great a risk.

Political practice, in MacIntyre's perspective, is not about competing interests and the struggle for power (although that also has its due), but is, essentially, the context in which participants can realize the common good. Thus political practice fulfills an indispensable function for realizing human excellence and well-being. It is the setting in which people learn the general or cardinal virtues—the virtues that are of importance in all types of practices: the virtues of justice, courage, reasonableness, and truthfulness (MacIntyre 1985, 156; 1994, 303; 1999, 132). Political practice fulfills this function, furthermore, because it encompasses all other practices. It is in politics that the preconditions for other practices are safeguarded and priorities between values are established. "Political excellence and above all the excellence of the legislator consist in being good at ordering goods both generally and in particular types of situation" (MacIntyre 1988, 107). Political excellence is thus about taking the right decision, and acting upon it, where multiple goods or values are at stake.

MacIntyre's virtue ethics is good so far: a good politician should be able to order

goods and aims. But what about employing the instruments needed to actually realize them? Does it not take more to be effective? Political effectiveness, MacIntyre maintains, should be considered in relation to, or as an aspect of, virtuousness. Aristotle discussed the realities of political life in the *Politics*, and that book should be read, MacIntyre emphasizes, in combination with the *Ethics*. Both presentations were meant, as Aristotle himself indicated, to educate the members of the polis (Aristotle 1982, 1095a, ll. 2–8; MacIntyre 1988, 102, 110). Especially in *Politics*, Aristotle gives examples of the types of things rulers have to do to get results. To keep soldiers on guard, for instance, it might be appropriate to exaggerate the actual enemy threat at a particular moment (Aristotle 1990; Johnson 1996; Stocker 1990, chap. 3).

In judging such acts of expedience, MacIntyre points out, it is again of importance to take the moral quality of the person into account. "What someone takes to be his advantage depends upon what he is aiming at, and the aims of the good man are very different from those of either the vicious or the undisciplined" (Aristotle 1982, 1144a, ll. 27–28; MacIntyre 1988, 108). The ruler ought to have excellence of character in perfection (Aristotle 1990, 1260a, l. 17). That also includes the quality to take into account the matters of effectiveness. In sum, the excellent ruler does not encounter real and unsolvable dilemmas; his skill and virtue make him take the right decision.

What, then, about the absolute prohibitions that Walzer invoked against the utilitarian consequentionalist type of moral argument? MacIntyre acknowledges the existence and moral relevance of rules and principles that transcend a particular context and even specific practices. Such rules, he argues, correspond to virtuous behavior that is appropriate in every practice. The prohibition to lie, for instance, expresses the virtue of truthfulness (MacIntyre 1985, 150–152, 200, 223; 1999, 109–110). The reality of these absolute moral qualifications, however, does not lead MacIntyre to conclude that politics is the field of unsolvable dilemmas. For one, he recognizes that these general or cardinal virtues can themselves conflict. Courage, for instance, might sustain injustice (MacIntyre 1985, 200). In such cases, the virtuous person again has to deliberate on the appropriate course of action in a particular context.

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Second, the absolute rules have to be understood in relation to the practices from which they arise. In discussing the rule of truth-telling, MacIntyre shows how truthfulness is a necessary precondition in a community in which individuals can develop into reasonable and virtuous actors. Yet if truth-telling would undermine this practice—and that might be the case when it faces the threat of enemies of this community or of its practice—it would no longer be a function of this practice. When the practice itself is endangered by it, the commandment to always speak the full truth might not be valid anymore (MacIntyre 2006, chaps. 6, 7). It would therefore be better to formulate the rule of truthfulness in a slightly different way:

> Uphold truthfulness in all your actions by being unqualifiedly truthful in all those relationships and by lying to aggressors only in order to protect those truthful relationships against aggressors, and even then only when lying is the least harm that can afford an effective defense against aggression. (MacIntyre 2006, 139)

In choosing this formulation, he implies that certain considerations have to play a role in the deliberation on taking extreme measures. Being concerned about doing the least harm implies considering all other options and all the consequences of each.[4]

The solution to the Machiavellian problem thus comes down to a position that denies the possibility of real unsolvable dilemmas. MacIntyre asserts that empirical cases cannot definitely prove—or falsify—the existence of real unsolvable dilemmas. Each specific example of a real-life unresolved dilemma for real-dilemma advocates is a proof of their point. Their opponents, however, can maintain that the proper solution in this case simply has not yet been elaborated (2006, chap. 5).[5] MacIntyre, moreover, does not deny the possibility that individuals have to make tragic choices in the course of their lives. In fact, he criticizes Aristotle for not taking tragic choices seriously. Aristotle claimed in his *Poetics* that heroes in tragedies lack practical reason. MacIntyre maintains that Aristotle misread Sophocles and missed an important aspect of human life: people do encounter conflicting goods. They can engage in many different practices in the course of a life, but sometimes these can come into conflict and make a choice unavoidable. Such cases are famously exemplified by the lives of T. E. Lawrence or Gauguin; the first endlessly oscillating between two worlds without choosing, and the second making a rigorous choice by fleeing to Polynesia.

Moreover, in dramatic cases, MacIntyre maintains, people can do better or worse in making choices. The better choices are those that fit best in a human life as a whole, a human life as an historical narrative. As Hall (2004) puts it in her discussion of MacIntyre's position: "It is the task of the individual to work to achieve a coherent story, to be able to account for one's actions and projects with reference to the narrative one is living out" (2–3). Practices, but also human lives as a whole, are understood as projects. It is in the form of narratives that such projects can be intelligible. This conception of the unity of a whole life as a narrative is closely linked to a virtue MacIntyre especially valorizes: constancy, that is, "the virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one" (1985, 223; see also 163–164, 179, 203, 212).

In sum, MacIntyre offers the following solutions to the issues Walzer's position raises:

- In a virtue ethics account of practical rationality, there can be good reasons for making one's hands dirty (or not) in specific cases. These cases might be hard, but do not result in unsolvable dilemmas.
- When deliberating on dirty hands cases, one must take into account all the options and all the consequences of (not) taking extreme measures. That involves considering not only whether it really is the best solution to this acute threat, but also whether it contributes to or is likely to undermine this common political project in the long run. In Walzer's rendering of the ticking-bomb case, only consequentionalist considerations of the first type seem to be taken into account.
- Situations of extreme emergency, of serious aggression, can indeed be understood as special cases: the actual domain of dirty hands. It is in these circumstances that the normal considerations that give ground to "absolute" moral rules may no longer prevail. This implies that Walzer's much-cited

ticking-bomb example might count as a dirty hands case; the case that many commentators neglect—that of bribing a ward boss to win the election—does not.

- The fact that dirty hands cases typically involve the breaching of rules and virtues that are relevant for all practices, that is, the rules and virtues that are central in political practice, explains why the issue is especially associated with politics.
- Dirty hands cases concern extreme situations and not simply all dilemmas. This explains the special concern in such cases, not for prioritizing specific goods or values, but for breaking a specific rule in order to realize a particular good.

There remains one point in Walzer's analysis of dirty hands that has not yet been touched on in this presentation of MacIntyre's position: turning to others for confession or punishment when one has made one's hands dirty. Walzer pointed out that one trusts administrators and politicians because they are seen to be struggling with difficult cases, and one appreciates their courage in conscientiously dealing with them. He seems to be pointing to an important and necessary element of a political ethics: showing the citizens how one deals with tough cases.

Virtue Ethics and Reason Giving

In virtue ethics the focus is always on the character and actions of individuals. Giving account of one's actions to others hardly ever gets any attention. Further, in MacIntyre's wide-ranging work, no specific book or article on accountability or a similar theme can be found. Yet scattered throughout his writing, concerns about reason giving and accountability can be found. On closer inspection, furthermore, the issue of giving account proves to be not merely accidental. It is of central relevance in virtue ethics on three levels: it is instrumental to safeguarding the realization of internal goods, it is an aspect of individual development, and it is connected to the ontology of virtue ethics.

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First, giving account fulfills a crucial function in guarding the integrity of practices, including political practice. In several places MacIntyre emphasizes that all established practices (family, school, hospitals, local communities) in which people can realize the good and develop their virtues involve established hierarchies of power. These hierarchies and their uses of power can be for the good, but they can also be "instruments of domination and deprivation" and as such will often frustrate movement toward goods (MacIntyre 1999, 102–103; see also 1985, 104). Social institutions thus have a double character. They can be used badly, that is, only for realizing the aims of the powerful, but also for the common good. The individual's virtues are one way to block abuses of power—and herein also lies a reason for developing them (MacIntyre 1985, 194).

Individual virtues need to be complemented, however, by institutional arrangements. The one specific field that MacIntyre goes into explicitly is that of

deliberation. In a society in which the furthering of independent reasoning is part of the common project, one has to be able and prepared "to evaluate the reasons for actions advanced to one by others, so that one makes oneself accountable for one's endorsements of the practical conclusions of others as well as for one's own conclusions" (MacIntyre 1999, 105). Institutionalized forms of deliberation are one of the essential preconditions to establish and maintain the right kind of relation between people (105, 129).

A second level is that of mutual learning and development. Central in the virtue ethical approach, MacIntyre explains, is the development of individual potentialities. Individual learning and development is a project that will never be fully completed. Virtue is not a fixed goal, and new cases will always demand their own typical answers. When the more skilled and virtuous present the reasons for actions, others can learn and improve their own judgment (MacIntyre 1985, 190). Truthfulness in communication in practices is a basic virtue precisely because it is a precondition for learning (191). As practical rationality in virtue ethics is not a matter of applying rules or principles, reason giving and dialogue have a further function. They constitute a way to test whether one has adequately taken notice of relevant aspects. Being well informed is a necessary precondition for proper deliberation (MacIntyre 1999, 91, 97, 129). Dialogue with others and exchanging reasons, finally, allow further development of the traditions in which specific practices stand. Dialogue with others, even others who have mastered other traditions, can lead to new insights and perspectives that inspire the further development of traditions (MacIntyre 1985, 194; 1988, 349).

The third level is the ontological one. At the basis of Aristotle's virtue ethics lies a specific ontology and a specific understanding of human nature. Human beings are understood to be naturally oriented toward the good, just as all entities in the cosmos are oriented toward their own specific *telos*. Explanations of natural phenomena in terms of natural ends are no longer accepted; causal explanations have rightly taken their place. In human affairs, however, a teleological approach is still appropriate and possible, according to MacIntyre. His alternative builds on the concept of the self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative. Human behavior cannot be characterized and understood independent of intentions, and intentions are only intelligible in social settings with a history. The intelligibility or meaningfulness of actions depends on the narratives in which they have a place.

The alternative of the flawed natural teleology of Aristotle, therefore, is a *narrative* teleology. Man, according to MacIntyre, is essentially "a story-telling animal" (1985, 216). If one is asked or wants to explain the meaning or meaningfulness of one's actions, one has to tell a story. And it is narrative that can give human life its unity, ordering all the different limited goods. People sometimes encounter—as mentioned earlier—a Sophoclean conflict of goods. On such occasions one has to find the proper narrative for one's life. In MacIntyre's phrase, "the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest" (1985, 216, 219; see also 58, 196–197, 205).[6] He emphasizes that giving account, giving reasons for one's actions, is what a narrative is. And being held accountable, and asking others for an account, is correlative to the narrative basis of leading a meaningful life together with others (1985, 217–218). Accountability, therefore, in MacIntyre's virtue ethics is not only an instrument to guard against abuse of power or a part of human learning. Giving account, due to its narrative form, is ontologically connected to virtue ethics.[7]

Returning now to Walzer's position and his attention to confession and punishment, it is clear that with a virtue ethics, the focus shifts from an almost religious perspective to an ethical one of reason giving and accountability. For Walzer, giving account is merely a cure for the soul of the tormented ruler who cannot do right. For MacIntyre that might be an element—sharing the burden and being reassured in the process of explaining one's choices—but there is much more to it. Deliberating with and being accountable to one's fellow citizens—that is, arguing whether one has made the proper decision and taken the right action—also implies checks on the use of power, and the possibility of mutual learning and exemplary action.[8] MacIntyre's understanding of political community as a practice, furthermore, makes it far less outlandish than Walzer suggested to understand existing political forums of all kinds as proper places to account for one's ethical choices in politics.

Conclusion

Machiavelli created a major problem for ethics in politics and government: his lessons for the effective ruler make ethics instrumental, or at least secondary, to political considerations. Walzer answers the Machiavellian challenge in his analysis of dirty hands cases. Political considerations are not simply prioritized to ethical ones; they are placed in opposition, creating a dilemma. This seems to rescue ethics, but at the price of several ambiguities. Walzer claims that taking one particular horn of the dilemma is sometimes the best thing to do, but he cannot give any reason why that is the case. And because his position leaves ambiguous the question of which situations are to be understood as dirty hands cases and which not, it is unclear when it is good to take that horn of the dilemma. Eventually, Walzer deals with the dilemma by urging bona fide rulers who have done good by doing wrong to share their feelings of guilt with others. His solution thereby seems to imply stepping from the ethical domain into that of religion or psychology.

MacIntyre also takes a view of ethics in which individual deliberation and personal quality are of central importance. He dismisses, however, the idea of fundamental and unsolvable dilemmas between political aims and instruments. He can explain, among other things, why in dealing with cases of extreme emergency there might be a need to break basic moral rules. A MacIntyrian virtue ethics can answer the shortcomings of Walzer's position. For such an answer to be complete, however, aspects of reason giving and accountability in virtue ethics need to be elaborated.

In conclusion, outlined below is a political ethics that can stand the challenge of Machiavelli.

- It is a virtue ethics that always must and can give a right answer in any specific context, including hard cases. Good decisions demand deliberation in which all the values and consequences of actions for the particular case in its particular context are taken into consideration. Deliberation is herein not about employing rules or principles, but a form of practical rationality that can be developed in experience and training.
- Actions that normally are considered to be prohibited may sometimes be inevitable. These are cases in which the integrity of the political practice and the continuity of a political community are at stake. In such cases of

extreme emergency, however, harsh measures can only be taken after due consideration of the further harm they might do.

- Rulers should be open about their actions and give reasons for their decisions, including hard ones (or dirty hands cases). Accountability is necessary for at least two reasons. First, as all social practices involve hierarchies and power that entail specific temptations, it is necessary to develop guarantees against abuses. Second, in a society in which the common good encompasses citizens' moral development and learning to be independent reasoners, giving reasons for one's actions is indispensable.

Machiavelli's writings on politics include some virtue ethical elements. He often formulates the bad things that a prince must learn as deviations from virtue (and not merely as rules that the prince must break, as Walzer has it): benevolence and compassion (Machiavelli 1513/1981, chap. xv). Also, for Machiavelli the good is closely linked to the quality and virtuosity of the individual. The ruler must be courageous (*Virtu*)—not least to deal with *Fortuna*, the "bitch Goddess of unpredictability." The excellent ruler, furthermore, is able to do the right thing in the specific setting. For Machiavelli, as for Aristotle and MacIntyre, good rulers should always act with a firm eye on their goals. Notwithstanding these elements, however, Machiavelli stepped out of the classical virtue ethical tradition. His virtues do not have the character of a mean between two vices, as is the case in Aristotle. Machiavelli often simply uses a dichotomy to distinguish virtues from complementing vices. Sometimes he even takes the enactment of a vice to be a virtue (Mansfield 1996, chap. 1; Strauss 1958, 47, 240).

That Machiavelli has a completely different understanding of the virtues and of their role is most evident in his understanding of the relation between virtue and the community. The virtues are no longer defined and justified in relation to common practices and a common good. They are understood to have value and be understandable independently. The common good in many instances, especially in *Il Principe*, seems to be reduced to the ambitions of the prince, against the background of his overall aim to continue his rule over the state. In other places, mostly in *Discorsi*, Machiavelli gives reason to believe that he aims at a republican constitution in which the interests of all are taken into account (Pocock 1975a; Skinner 1990; Viroli 1998). Yet it does not seem to be the case that this goes as far as the ideal of developing the good, and therefore virtues, in everyone (Strauss 1958, 254). Whatever interpretation one prefers, Machiavelli does not present any link between individuals and their virtues and the common good (however understood).[9]

Two aspects of his argument lead to the Machiavellian challenge, and it is on these two aspects that Machiavelli differs fundamentally from MacIntyre's virtue ethical approach. First, moral rules (or virtues) are presented as absolute, as valid in any specific situation and practice. Second, reason giving and accountability, as a central aspect of the political practice, is absent. It is because of these deviations from Machiavelli's position that a virtue ethical approach, like that of MacIntyre, is able to provide a more convincing political ethics.

This conclusion has clear consequences for the study of administrative ethics, for ethics curricula, and for practitioners who have to deal with dilemmas and hard cases. For the study of ethics, it demands further development and articulation of a virtue ethics that comprehensively and consistently includes discourse, delibera-

tion, and accountability. The importance of the revitalization of virtue ethics has also been pointed out by others, often for specific professional fields (e.g., Cooper 1987, 1998; Dobel 1999; Lynch and Lynch 2001; Macaulay and Lawton 2006; Oakley and Cocking 2001). Yet the role of accountability and deliberation within a virtue approach remains underdeveloped. Additional research is needed into the ways that modern values like reason giving and public responsibility can be integrated into the virtue ethics tradition. The three levels pointed out here (ontological, individual development, the functioning of practices) are starting points for such work.

There are also consequences for ethics curricula. Virtue ethics should not be presented simply as one of many theoretical approaches, but as an approach that is able to deal with a basic challenge in politics and administration. This conclusion supports the efforts of Cooper, Sherman, and others to develop ways to introduce virtue ethics in specific fields of public administration and public service education, and not least the realms of war and emergency (Cooper 1987; Nielsen 2006; Sherman 2005; Toner 2000). It should be made clear, further, that virtue ethics can be more than a merely personal ethics, because it has institutional consequences. As to dirty hands issues, it demands a proper setting to hold officials accountable, especially for extreme cases.[10]

For practitioners, the foregoing analysis bears several lessons. The virtue ethics approach, first, maintains that there are better and worse ways to deal with dilemmas. This is critical to those, like Walzer, who merely juxtapose the values at stake. They seem to end up in particular understandings of cases in which there is no framework for deliberation and the only option left is tossing a coin. Second, it should be noted that dirty hands cases are a special class of dilemmas in public office. They concern situations in which the survival of the political practice and its central values is at stake. It is only in such instances that it might be right to do wrong to do good. Third, officials dealing with dilemmas should always be willing to give account of their decisions. They should ask themselves: Can I answer for this, can I explain that this is what was best to do? Finally, and most specifically, the virtue ethics approach leads to another answer on issues of torture that differs from Walzer's. He approves of torture in ticking-bomb cases, arguing that the good of saving one or more lives overrides the evil of torture. A virtue ethics approach, however, demands that the consequences for the political practice and its central values be taken into account: What does it mean for the survival of the political community and its central values? As torture is likely to undermine the public trust in government and in politics itself,[11] a virtue ethical judgment disdains its use. We conclude that virtue ethics is of value in answering tough questions. It helps to overcome the problems in Walzer's analysis of dirty hands and in consequence it offers a promising answer to the Machiavellian chalenge.

NOTES

1. On Walzer's position in the dilemma that he himself sketches, see also Nielsen (2000).

2. Note that Walzer here comes close to Machiavelli's lesson, but there is also a difference. Machiavelli urges princes not to show the vicious side of their acts. Walzer suggests here, and in his remarks on confession and punishment, that the politician who made his hands dirty should come forward and be open about it. In other words, Machiavelli urges the ruler to dirty his hands twice (break the rules, and lie about it); for Walzer dirty hands acts contain only a single wrongdoing.

3. For reasons of space, the discussion in this article will not go into the relation between acting ethically, on the one hand, and feeling guilty or not realizing happiness, on the other. For these issues, see De Wijze (2007) and Stocker (1990, especially chap. 3).

4. MacIntyre here also shows that the Thomist idea of natural law (and thus of rules in ethics) is not contradictory to his ethical program (MacIntyre 2006, 139).

5. This problem explains why edited volumes can contain both essays that recognize dirty hands dilemmas and refutations thereof (e.g., Rynard and Shugarman 2000). There is, to be sure, an abundance of literature on ethical dilemmas, but it lies beyond the scope of this paper.

6. A full discussion of the criticism of this narrative teleology and the replies to such comments lies beyond the scope of this work. See on this topic, for instance Hall (2004), Kearney (2002, 79–83), Kerr (1995), and Johnson (1996).

7. In his discussion of MacIntyre's use of the narrative, Johnson summarizes: "Accountability is an essential feature of all but the most straightforward narratives and is suggestive of the idea that narrative is in its essence a democratic mode" (1996, 57).

8. Note that this comes very close to the argument Walzer (1970) himself develops for the case of civil disobedience. In other works Walzer develops arguments that deviate from his account in the 1973 article on dirty hands that is discussed here. The arguments in those works often come much closer to virtue ethics in regard to contextuality (1983, 1992) or deliberation (1987)

9. In her wide-ranging book, Benner (2009) tries to show that Machiavelli stood much closer to ancient Greek ethical thinking than has been acknowledged so far. She presents him as a straightforward exponent of the classical virtue ethical tradition. By proceeding in that way, she in fact answers the "Machiavellian challenge" by virtue ethically (re)interpreting his work so that the challenge does not arise. Her approach and the one presented in this article both lead to the same conclusion: virtue ethics offers a promising route for a viable political and administrative ethics.

10. This implication concurs with other institutional consequences of a virtue ethical approach for organizations: It has particular consequences for training, internal organization, public management, and leadership (Tholen 2011).

11. For this empirical claim, see also Bufacchi and Arrigo (2006) and Lukes (2005).

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