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Political Responsibility as a Virtue: Nussbaum, MacIntyre, and Ricoeur on the Fragility of Politics

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Abstract

Contemporary virtue ethics is often criticized for its silence on political issues. In this article, it is argued, however, that virtue ethical theory can provide a clarifying understanding of political responsibility. Building on the work of Nussbaum, MacIntyre, and Ricoeur, first, the virtue ethical meaning of politics is elaborated. Then, the vulnerability of politics for typical threats is presented. Finally, it is established what political responsibility as the virtue to deal with these threats encompasses.

Keywords

political theory, philosophy, political responsibility, ethics

Holding individuals and institutions accountable is a key aspect of governance and administration, whether in parliament, city hall, or directly to the public via journalism. The issue may be insufficient preparatory measures to deal with floods or earthquakes, public shootings or firework accidents, financial mismanagement, and so on. A central question is always that of who is to blame and who should be held responsible. We can often witness a process of pointing and evading, a *blame game*, as political scientists who study this phenomenon call it. The politician or official who knows how to play this game well remains in office and may even benefit from it, while others stumble, fall, or step down to “spend more time with family.” It is all part of politics as power play as Max Weber defined it.¹

Sometimes, however, the idea of political responsibility is used in a very different sense. This is the case when someone claims, for example, “This is a responsible councilman” or “I am a responsible major.” Responsibility here does not refer to liability or accountability. It is not about particular wrongs or harms but rather about something more encompassing. Typical to this understanding of responsibility is the proper fulfillment of a certain task or role. It concerns the attitude of a politician or an administrator, not a single act or omission thereof. The case is similar when we talk about

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responsible parents, doctors, or teachers. In those cases, the individual's orientation toward education, the medical practice, or education is at issue. Jonas noted that responsibility in this sense is connected to, and may even be said to follow from, the realization that something is fragile.² Doctors are concerned with the patient's body and mind, which are vulnerable to disease and death. Teachers and parents take care of children, young individuals whose development still requires guidance.

What is meant by political responsibility in this encompassing sense? What exactly can be meant by "the political" as something that is vulnerable, as this appears to be different from Weber's politics as power play? Furthermore, what is it that threatens this fragile politics? And what should the responsible politician or administrator do for this vulnerable object?

In this article, I will turn to contemporary virtue ethical writers for answers to these questions. This encompassing understanding of responsibility is oriented not toward singular events and actions, as is the case with issues of responsibility as accountability. It is, in fact, very similar to the idea of a virtue: an attitude that aims at the realization of something good.³ Thus, virtue ethics is a promising approach to finding a theoretically informed understanding of responsibility in the second sense used above. Some may have doubts about this choice. Contemporary virtue ethicists, they may recall, have been criticized for their lack of attention to and poor understanding of politics.⁴ This critique may be accurate; however, it may also be possible that such observations have overlooked the particular understanding of politics in virtue ethical analyses.

This article examines the work of three contemporary virtue ethical scholars: Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Paul Ricoeur. In many respects, these authors differ considerably in their philosophical style, publishing venues and publics, and the opponents they choose or find. Notwithstanding this diversity, they all explicitly place themselves within Aristotle's virtue ethical tradition.⁵ I could, of course, have chosen others—Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss, for example. The scholars I have selected, however, remain relatively close to Aristotle, while being different enough to provide a broader picture.

The first section focuses on the virtue ethical understanding of the political. The second section is concerned with the vulnerability of politics and the particular factors that threaten it. In the third section, a first virtue ethical understanding of what political responsibility entails will be discussed. It will prove to be implausible. In the fourth section, a more sophisticated virtue ethical idea of political responsibility is introduced. In the conclusion, the implications of this elaboration will be noted.

The Virtue Ethical Understanding of the Political

Virtue ethical scholars typically begin their considerations of politics with the work of Aristotle. Ricoeur, for instance, in order to clarify what he means by "polity," cites the beginnings of Aristotle's *Politics*. All associations aim at some good, and the state, as the association that rules over other associations, has its *telos* in the highest aim, which is contributing to the human good. Within this polity, the individual can become truly human, that is, he can truly develop his potentials into a good life.⁶

For Aristotle and his contemporary followers, political activity is not a mere technique, an activity whose worth lies completely in the effects it realizes. Politics is not about surviving together but rather about leading a good life together.⁷ A political association is not a utility organization but rather a context for realizing the good life together.⁸ Political decision-making is not simply aggregating given individual preferences but rather a project of exercising good judgment regarding what the proper course is for achieving the common good.⁹ MacIntyre elaborates on this point by presenting the political community as a *practice*. A practice is "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity." Other examples of such practices are sports, architecture, farming, or scientific research. Through engagement in such practices, *internal* and

external goods can be realized or gained. Typical external goods are prestige, status, and money. These are goods that may also be obtained through participation in other activities. Internal goods, on the other hand, can only be obtained through participation—in certain ways—in cooperative ventures or practices. External goods may include an individual's property and possessions. They are typically the object of competition and involve a zero-sum game. Internal goods, however, make for an achievement for the whole community. Examples of these are knowledge, health, and art—or, in politics, the common good. By participating in a practice, one can acquire qualities that make it possible to achieve goods internal to practices. These qualities or virtues can be developed to a level of excellence.¹⁰

Political practice thus goes beyond preference aggregation or the realization of collective goods. An important element of the good life is participation in the political or public sphere for instrumental and intrinsic reasons. Membership and good activity in that sphere is instrumental to the development of good character. Education in a civic context can be broader, deeper, and more reliable than within the immediate family. Moreover, it fosters a sense of belonging to the political community.¹¹ Political participation also has intrinsic value; it is an end in itself. A life without political participation would be incomplete. To realize the good life, one must get involved in meaningful actions with others such as family members, friends, and fellow citizens.¹² Aiming for the good life is not a solitary project, and others do not constitute an intrusion into the project but rather are a necessary ingredient in its success.

Virtue ethics thus differs from most modern political theories in its understanding of politics and the political community. It does not take its cue in the freedom that individuals need to realize their given preferences nor in (natural) rights that express the inalienable worth of every human being. However, that does not mean that the individual and his ideas of the good life have no place in virtue ethical theory. Nussbaum readily follows Aristotle in her critique of Plato's effort to eliminate conflict for the political community by minimizing the possibility of separate wills.¹³ Ricoeur characterizes the relationship between citizens as different from that between relatives or friends. Citizen relationships in modern states are interhuman relationships that lie "outside of the face-to-face encounter of an 'I' and a 'you.'" Citizens have a life together within a historical community, yet that does not make them part of an organic whole. The basic ethical intention, Ricoeur argues, is "aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions." It is this intention that can be actualized within the state.¹⁴ Members of the polity have a particular bond, and this bond differs from an economic bond, as it cannot be understood to be a mere consensual agreement between individuals contracting for mutual advantage. A proper understanding of the idea of a social contract, as Rousseau presented it, for instance, must take into account its virtual and reflective character, according to Ricoeur. The social contract is a pact that has not really taken place, but that we imagine in retrospect and in reflection to express our appreciation of a preexisting political bond. We express a unity that underlies or is primary to existing class conflicts and the dynamics of economic domination and alienation.¹⁵

This characterization by Ricoeur implies two further elements of the virtue ethical understanding of the political sphere. First, a political community is always a particular association, a particular project with its own particular history and understandings. Citizens value their particular political practice, this project of realizing justice and the common good.¹⁶ Second, the virtue ethical political project is an egalitarian, democratic project. People differ in many ways, can have different understandings of the good life, and differ in excellence and virtuosity on all kinds of practices, always particular. What is equally shared, however, are opportunities to participate and develop one's capacities. Virtue ethical theorists do not take individual rights as their starting point or the groundwork for their political ideal. This does not mean, however, that they are against liberal democratic law and institutions. They, in fact, all note that such institutions can and should have a place within their neo-Aristotelian framework.¹⁷

What Threatens the Political

Now that a sketch has been provided of what true politics encompasses, according to the virtue ethical approach, we can turn to the factors that threaten to undermine it. Three types of factors can be distinguished in the work of virtue ethicists: on the general level of human nature (individual selfishness), on the meso-level of societal spheres (particularly the role of the economic sphere), and within the level of politics itself. Each type of factor is likely to undermine the commitment and mutual trust that is necessary for any political project to flourish.

Selfishness

The commitment of citizens to a common project is not simply a given. In fact, citizens may be inclined not to make certain contributions and sacrifices for the common good, and they may have reasons not to participate in the political practice. According to virtue ethicists, this behavior limits individual development and the good life, as well as the functioning and flourishing of the political community as a whole. It degenerates into a mere utility association or worse.

For MacIntyre, this threat is typical of modernity. The Enlightenment project, as he calls it, has taught all of us to be individuals with preferences and desires that deserve to be satisfied. We have lost our sensitivity to valuations within practices; we are not particularly focused on intrinsic goods anymore—that is, on actions that have intrinsic worth. In fact, our culture has become an emotivist one in which it is emotions that count rather than real values. “This is good” now means “I want this.”¹⁸ This development has also affected the political field. Individuals have learned to refer to individual rights to get their occasional preferences satisfied at the expense of real political debate on the common good.¹⁹

For Nussbaum, the selfishness that undermines common practices is a universal human trait, not an attribute that we developed over the last two or three centuries. We must accept “an unfortunate reality: people are inclined to be narrow and greedy in their sympathies, reluctant to support projects aimed at a common life if these require sacrifice. They are also prone to ugly practices involving the projection of disgust properties onto subordinate groups.”²⁰ She points to three more emotions that are also the enemies of our feelings of compassion toward our fellow countrymen: fear, envy, and shame. Fear makes it difficult to think about anything else but oneself and one’s immediate circle. Envy creates enduring hostility between members of a society. In addition, dominant groups may be able to present their own way of life as normal and successfully stigmatize the ways of others as shameful.²¹

Ricoeur also recognizes the threat of selfishness. He refers to the Aristotelian notion of *pleonexia* (wanting too much for oneself) and to Kant’s psychological insight that people are inclined to make exceptions to rules for themselves.²² Human selfishness is at odds with the commitment and support that are necessary for the functioning of just institutions and enabling of associations. This aspect of human nature threatens to undermine the political.

Intrusion by the Economic Sphere

A second threat to the political concerns its relation to other spheres, especially the economic sphere. As mentioned above, the political sphere or association is the highest one, for it regulates and supervises all others: health, education, economics, and so on. All spheres (or practices, for that matter) include their own aims, capacities, and virtues. Although the political sphere ideally supervises the others, in reality, it may be infringed upon by (elements from) the other spheres. The intruding sphere on which virtue ethical scholars concentrate is the economic one (Ricoeur also writes about the religious sphere infringing upon politics).²³

The economic sphere has a particular place in the Aristotelian tradition. It primarily encompasses the organized struggle of man against nature (the methodical organization of labor and the rationalization of the relations between production, circulation, consumption, etc.). The economy encompasses the mechanism that addresses human needs.²⁴ Economics, therefore, is the sphere of competition and profit. It is the sphere of efficient rational production and marketable goods and services. By the intrusion of this sphere into politics, virtue ethical scholars mean that the focus on the common good tends to be overshadowed by a concern for efficiency and money. Nussbaum notes, for example, that schools and education in general have in recent decades moved away from their true calling: civic education. School policies and curricula increasingly emphasize market performance and economic success. Not only education but also health, security, or access to public functions tend to become marketable goods.²⁵ The ever more rational and efficient struggle against nature in modern society tends to become “the new form of the sacred,” Ricoeur maintains.²⁶

MacIntyre elaborates on this infringement of economics in his analysis of practices. Practices are oriented toward internal goods, yet they also require external goods for their functioning. Health care, education, science, and so on, can only be practiced and flourish when there are funds and organizational structures in place that can exert power. Practices, MacIntyre notes, need institutions such as chess clubs, universities, hospitals, and others. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with external goods—goods that are scarce. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status; and they distribute money, power, and status as rewards. No practice can survive without institutions. However, institutions introduce competition for funds and ambition for higher status in the common activity. They also introduce performance measurement, routine protocols, output targets, and so on, to “deliver the goods and services” more efficiently. Government bodies degenerate into managerial machineries preoccupied with efficiency. For MacIntyre, this is another aspect of enlightenment culture. Disregard for intrinsic value and an emphasis on realizing preferences have led to a situation in which efficiency has become the dominant concern. Without a common good to aim for, the means have become an end in themselves: fulfilling whichever (majoritarian) preference or wish that presents itself as being as efficient as possible.²⁷

Ricoeur also sees a typical modern mechanism as underlying the economization of the political sphere. The spheres of health care, education, and so on, all have their own values. In the political sphere, the goods and values of these “lower” spheres must be ordered. However, given the modern condition of value pluralism, it is very difficult to reach a singular idea of the common good that gives all values their place. The compromises that are reached in these conflicts between spheres often choose an economic perspective, regarding spheres as producers of marketable goods that can be steered by a neutral language of efficiency. It is a “language” that everybody can understand.²⁸

The political is undermined in several ways by these forms of economization. First, increasing emphasis on external goods and efficiency limits the time and concern that is available for participation in the practice itself. Second, discussing issues in terms of marketable goods, efficiency, and so on, undermines the readiness and competence to deliberate issues in terms of intrinsic values and the common good. Third, the focus on marketable goods threatens to reduce citizens to mere preference-fulfilling individuals. It leads to a society that defines itself in purely economic terms, that is, as a society essentially based on struggle and competition, neglecting (the value of) primary bonds and collective practice. This tends to feed a selfish orientation and its related consequences for the political sphere, which we addressed earlier.²⁹

Politics

A third type of threat to the political lies in the level of politics itself. These sorts of threats are not a consequence of human nature or other societal spheres but rather follow from the typical character of

politics itself. Nussbaum, for example, notes the impact that speeches by politicians can have, making reference to speeches by Churchill, Roosevelt, and others.³⁰ Speeches and other public utterances by politicians can strengthen the compassion and trust of citizens, but they can also fuel envy, scorn, or distrust. This example shows that the political (understood as the practice of aiming together for the common good) may be strengthened but also undermined by politics (understood as the practical handiwork of politicians).

MacIntyre touches on this issue in his comments regarding the modern state. This institutional form, with its typical large size, anonymity, elections, and representatives, does not fit political practice. It makes a farce of civic deliberation and individual involvement and development. Instead of real practice politics, we get citizens who invoke their right to have their preferences realized and politicians and public administrators who think and behave like managers.³¹

Ricoeur makes an explicit distinction between politics (*la politique*) and the polity (*le politique*). The polity is the ideal of the common good, of “aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions.” This ideal or ethical intention must be actualized, and this is where politics enters the scene. Politics involves the real decisions that must be made and actions that must be taken. “From polity to politics, we move from advent to events, from sovereignty to the sovereign, from the State to government, from historical Reason to Power.”³² Weber defined the field of politics in reference to power, with the state as the authority that holds a monopoly over lawful physical constraint. It is about establishing new powers and maintaining these powers.³³ Ricoeur presents several ways in which politics threaten to undermine the polity, three of which I will briefly mention here.

A first elaboration focuses on the nature of the modern democratic state and, more particularly, representative democracy. My elected representative, Ricoeur notes, once elected, turns out to belong to another world—the political world “which obeys its own laws of gravity.”³⁴ My representative is like myself: a member of this community, taking part in this bond, concerned about our common practice (polity). However, he is also partaking in a different world, seeking advantage, using tricks, and recognizing friends and foes. Accepting the “other” as my representative is an act of trust, yet the actions of the representative continuously threaten to undermine that basic bond of trust.³⁵ For citizens, these actions may become ever less recognizable as actions for the common good: for example, continuing scorn for competitors after elections, the conflicts between a president and parliament becoming personal, the ongoing turf wars between members of two different political parties or agencies or representative bodies.

For another elaboration, Ricoeur focuses on constitutional rule. Each democratic constitutional state can be understood as a victory over brute force and brutal competition between individuals or groups. Meanwhile, in every decent modern state, there remains a residue of violence. Weber expresses this when he defines the state as the institutions with a legitimate monopoly over the use of force.³⁶ A state has the authority and the instruments to force citizens (and foreigners, in fact) to act in certain ways. With this residue of violence—moreover, one that is authorized—there always remains the possibility of the excessive use and abuse of state power. Anyone who comes to power is tempted to use the means they possess “to speed up” things and “remove barriers” to achieve their goals.³⁷ This also involves the frequent use of special executive powers rather than respecting rights through the secure but arduous road of lawmaking. Another example is the use of powers for reasons other than those for which they were initially intended (e.g., security measures implemented to curb immigration or naturalization). Power holders may even come to “forget” the actual employment of force that is involved in some of their measures (for instance, by maintaining that gathering citizens’ data does not really involve an infringement upon their liberties).

A third elaboration focuses on political language. Political language mirrors uncertainty and conflict. Concepts that are central to political debate do not and cannot have a definitive content and meaning. Meanwhile, in political discussions, we cannot rely on the kind of certainty and clarity that exists in mathematical or scientific arguments.³⁸ Political language must inevitably use rhetoric,

as decisive proof is not available. It can only appeal to probable forms of reasoning. However, this may give way to sophistic arguments, that is, “the construction of clever fallacies intended to extort belief (. . .) by means of a mixture of false promises and real threats.”³⁹ Taken to its extreme, the whole idea of reasonable debate and truth and falsity in political debate may end up being at stake (for instance, by systematically discrediting authorities on empirical data, by accusing media of presenting nothing but fake news and by presenting “alternative facts” that evidently are constructed).

The general point from all these different elaborations is that political power can be used in evil ways, that is, in ways that are at odds with the values and aim of the polity. It can take the form of tyranny, torture and killing, domination and suppression, untruth and deception, and so on. However, even without resorting to the most brutal actions on this list, politics can undermine the commitment to and trust in the common political project.⁴⁰

Political Responsibility: A First Step

In response to the threats to the political that they note, virtue ethical scholars present measures aiming to limit the effects of these factors and even push back against them. Nussbaum, for example, argues that patriotism and commitment should be fostered and writes about the revitalization of a sort of civic religion.⁴¹ She also recommends improving public policies on education, school organization, and curricula to strengthen the civic educational role of schools.⁴² Ricoeur urges politicians to act responsibly and take into account the effects on public trust of their use of rhetoric, the way they present rival political ideas, the use of force by government, and so on.⁴³

MacIntyre, in certain areas of his work, takes a somewhat radical position. In the conclusion of *After Virtue*, he alludes to cloisters as the local strongholds of true spirit in otherwise dark times. He suggests that we should turn away from modernist Enlightenment culture in order to create and protect real political communities.⁴⁴ Elsewhere, MacIntyre also puts his hope in (new) small-scale communities. The examples he provides of genuine practice communities are fishing communities in New England, Welsh mining communities, and farming cooperatives in Donegal, Ireland.⁴⁵ This seems a logical conclusion based on his analysis, which holds that evils have been brought upon us by the Enlightenment project and the modern state is the political manifestation of that project. True deliberation regarding the common good and authentic compassion for community members is problematic in large-scale modern states. The large scale also stimulates the development of rational bureaucracies and thereby the economization of societal spheres, including the political, for economical solutions. For true politics, therefore, we must retreat to small, more, or less autarchic communities.

MacIntyre’s radical solution to the threats to the political is problematic for two reasons, something MacIntyre, in fact, acknowledges. The first reason is that (re)turning to small-scale, homogenous local communities is not a feasible option. We have become highly specialized in our skills, and in all aspects of our lives, we are entangled in national (and even global) webs of dependencies. MacIntyre acknowledges, as commentators have readily noted, that modern states with their massive resources and coercive legal powers are necessary and irreplaceable in our large-scale societies.⁴⁶ MacIntyre, of course, is right that the type of deliberation and decision-making in contemporary representative democracies entails complications. It introduces a vertical dimension, as Ricoeur calls it, in the otherwise horizontal relationship among equal citizens. Civic participation becomes a far more complicated affair than in direct, small-scale democracies. These consequences, however, must be accepted as a fact of life; we cannot avoid them. MacIntyre, in fact, warns not to idealize local communities. “Local communities are always open to corruption and narrowness, by complacency, by prejudice against outsiders and by a whole range of other deformities, including those that arise from a cult of local community.”⁴⁷

This brings us to the second reason why we, also according to MacIntyre's own diagnosis, cannot simply eradicate the threats to the political by "stepping outside modernity." Threats to the politics of the common good may have become more complicated or aggravated under the conditions of the Enlightenment project. However, also in MacIntyre's analysis, they have a more fundamental nature. The undermining effect that the search for external goods has on practices and the realization of internal goods is a universal phenomenon, not a typically modern one.⁴⁸ These threats, moreover, are not simply an accidental externality. As MacIntyre notes, no practice can flourish without an institution. There can be no internal goods without the provision of external goods. So, paradoxically, without external goods and their threats, there would be no internal goods. Even in small-scale, premodern communities, threats to the political common good are a reality. Even if retreating to monasteries were a feasible option, it would not be a solution to the problem.

The answer to the threats to politics thus cannot be of the radical kind. The solution cannot be one that eradicates the threats or simply fights their source. The type of political responsibility that truly addresses the vulnerability of the political must be taken into account that what threatens the politics of the common good is, at the same time, a precondition for it.

Political Responsibility: The Complete Picture

The somewhat paradoxical relationship between practices and institutions in MacIntyre's analysis has its counterparts in the work of other virtue ethical scholars. They also show, on all three levels mentioned earlier, that undermining factors are at the same time necessary elements of a flourishing politics of the common good.

Selfishness or special concern for one's own interests and those that are most near and dear may threaten the cohesion and support that is necessary for achieving the good life under the common good, but it is also a necessary part of it. Nussbaum approvingly follows Aristotle in his comment regarding Plato's ideal of a political community without plurality and conflict, namely, that each person's concern for his own well-being and that of his friends and family members is part of the good life.⁴⁹ In her analysis of compassion-undermining emotions such as fear and envy, she notes a similar double sidedness. Fear, for instance, is an emotion that also has a positive side. It plays a crucial role, including in political settings, in steering individuals away from danger.⁵⁰ Ricoeur and MacIntyre also note that individuality and self-care, together with participation and involvement, are crucial aspects of being a person and leading a good life.⁵¹

On the level of intrusion by the economic sphere, I have already mentioned MacIntyre's analysis of the Janus-faced nature of institutions and the external goods they deliver. In his discussion of the different societal spheres, Ricoeur notes their mutual threats of intrusion as well as their interdependence. He approvingly cites Michael Walzer's depiction of society as consisting of different spheres (health, education, security, etc.), each with their own principles of just distribution—spheres that threaten to infringe upon one another. He also emphasizes the relationships between these spheres and their mutual dependence. The economic sphere, for instance, is one that addresses the needs of all human beings and, in consequence, all other domains.⁵² In her critique of the economization of the educational system, Nussbaum is well aware of the financial difficulties faced by schools.⁵³

Politics, which has its own "gravitational field" of word play and suggestion, power play and tactical maneuvers, can threaten trust in the political community. It is, however, a necessary reality if ideals are to be realized. Representation and bureaucracy are inevitable in complex modern society. Given the uncertainty in political argument, we cannot do without rhetoric in deliberative processes. Additionally, the reality of plurality sometimes makes it necessary to employ force to implement decisions.⁵⁴ Politics, as defined by Weber, is at once a threat to and a precondition of a politics of the common good.

This overview of the three levels of threats and preconditions implies that showing political responsibility is a complicated task; it means protecting the vulnerable politics of the common good from undermining threats while at the same time giving them their due. Political responsibility as a virtue implies the ability to address this tension. It is not simply a matter of safeguarding the fragile political.

This virtue ethical understanding of political responsibility has certain similarities with Weber's idea of political ethics. At the end of "Politics as a Vocation," Weber distinguishes between two normative considerations (*Verantwortungsethik* and *Gesinnungsethik*) that must both have their due. There are, however, a few crucial differences. First, the tension that Weber depicts is one between getting results and living up to ethical rules (of the deontological kind). The tension that virtue ethicists bring to light is not one between norms and desirable outcomes. If we focus on the political level, it can best be described as a tension between an ideal and the instruments to realize it. A second difference is implicated; Weber presents two conflicting considerations. Virtue ethicists, however, note that the two considerations conflict but, at the same time, presuppose one another. Third, in Weber's understanding, the politician is faced with a dilemma that cannot be overcome. Deontological considerations stand against utilitarian considerations. The good politician, for Weber, is a tragic hero. In virtue ethics, there is no such thing as an ethical or political dilemma that cannot be solved. It recognizes that there are complicated or difficult cases. In such cases, a multitude of relevant, sometimes conflicting considerations must be taken into account. Individuals possessing good judgment (i.e., those who excel in the virtue of *phronesis* or prudence) can distinguish better from worse actions in these cases.⁵⁵

This does not mean, of course, that a prudent person, whether or not a politician, cannot have the bad luck that accidental circumstances prevent him or her from realizing the best actions.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Virtue ethics has been critiqued for its lack of attention to politics.⁵⁷ The authors reviewed in this article, to be sure, have little to say regarding the design of political institutions—far less, in fact, than Aristotle, who inspired them otherwise.⁵⁸ In some remarks, moreover, they appear to demonstrate very little understanding of political reality. A typical case is MacIntyre's advocacy for local political communities. Although he does acknowledge that even these communities are not completely harmonious,⁵⁹ he does not give a clue as to how disagreements between members and clashes between parties with different interests could be addressed. Here, one is inclined to subscribe to Beiner's conclusion: "[MacIntyre] offers Aristotelianism without a polis."⁶⁰ What these ethicists have to offer, for instance, on guidelines for institutional checks and balances or the role of civic involvement, indeed does not come close to what we find in other currents of philosophy—for instance, in the liberal theories of Rawls or Mill.⁶¹ This does not mean, however, that writers who adopt the virtue ethical tradition have not made valuable contributions to our understanding of politics.

Virtue ethical theory encompasses a particular understanding of political practice. It involves the willingness by individuals to find the good life together in an association oriented toward the common good. This common project is vulnerable; it is prone to being undermined by a set of factors. Virtue ethicists urge concern for safeguarding the project of the common good from these threats. Everybody—and particularly politicians—should be concerned about (1) the selfishness of all individuals, which is at odds with the necessary commitment of citizens to the common project; (2) the infringement of economic practices and ways of thinking in the political sphere; and (3) the undermining of civic trust through power play, rhetoric, and other aspects of the political toolbox.

Concern for this vulnerable politics of the common good, or political responsibility, does not simply mean attempting to diminish or even eradicate selfishness, economic thinking, and political

tactics. This investigation of virtue ethics theory has made clear that these factors not only threaten the political project but are also preconditions of it. Political responsibility is thus a complicated task that involves combining potentially antagonistic elements in particular cases. This virtue, therefore, involves a form of prudence (good judgment or *phronesis*).

A virtue ethical approach cannot provide rules for how to act. Unlike other normative approaches, it does not provide principles, rules, or rights. However, this does not mean that virtue ethics cannot aid political decision-making and action. To illustrate the potential of a virtue ethical understanding of political responsibility, I will sketch its consequences for three key political issues: representation, political debate, and the use of power.

Being a responsible politician means recognizing that democratic representation is inherently paradoxical. It means being equal to all other citizens while at the same time being part of a small power-holding elite; it means standing both beside and above one's fellow citizens. Membership in the political elite has its own logic and temptations that can absorb political representatives. The responsible politician is well aware of the fact that citizens may easily lose trust when repeatedly confronted with representatives doing battle among themselves. Therefore, they attempt to ensure that their actions support the common good and that citizens can see and understand how the common good is at stake in their actions. Furthermore, representatives refrain from suggesting that there is no vertical relation between themselves and their constituents, while other politicians do belong to the distant political elite.

Neglecting or negating this inevitable aspect of representation also endangers people's trust in politics and politicians, leading them to suspect that even those who say they are on their side (level) will eventually let them down and become part of the elite as they gain power.

A responsible politician is also aware of the complicated relationship between truth-telling and convincing people in politics. Where absolute certainty on policy outcomes is often impossible and groups have different ideals and understandings, rhetorical skills are essential. However, the responsible politician takes care that ideals of truth (to the extent that they are attainable) and sincerity are upheld. The responsible politician also knows that, in fighting for one's position in political disputes, one must honor certain limits. The words and tactics used in debates should not threaten common cooperation in this polity; adversaries should not be turned into enemies that are no longer willing to compromise, third parties should not be stigmatized and thereby excluded, and, in general, people should be able to trust the problem-solving capacity of the democratic political process.⁶²

Third, the responsible politician knows how to deal with the Janus-faced nature of government power. Governing means using power, as Weber noted. It is the typical instrument for achieving goals in the common interest. At the same time—and Weber also recognized this—employing power essentially means using force. It means bringing the brutal into politics, even in a civilized democratic state.⁶³ Politicians must be well aware of this tension and of the undermining effects of the use of force on trust in the common project, even when it is used in the common interest.

One final point: understanding politics from a virtue ethical perspective means that political responsibility is to be understood as virtue (or like a virtue). This means that it can be learned and developed. A true political practice, then, is one in which a good politician is not simply cunning and effective, able to shift the blame and survive politically. A good politician is one who is recognized as knowing better than others how best to deal with the typical threats to politics.⁶⁴

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Notes

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33. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 1961.
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35. *Ibid.*
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44. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.
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46. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 133, 142. See Beiner, "Community versus Citizenship," 2000; Murphy, "MacIntyre's Political Philosophy," 2003.
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