Records of Anguish: Democracy, Dirty Hands, and the Myth of the Tragic Politician

by

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I AM AFRAID OF THE ONES IN POWER WHO KILL PEOPLE AND DO NOT ADMIT GRIEF.

*Jenny Holzer, "Projections," Berlin 2001*
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### KEY TO BRIEF CITATIONS

**DH**  

*Note that the citation DH is distinct from the in-text citation for “Dirty Hands,” which refers to the chapter by that name in Michel Contat and Michel Rybaška’s volume Sartre on Theater.*

**EA**  

**GI**  

**PA**  

**PV**  

**TR**  
“It is necessary for a ruler, if he wants to hold onto power, to learn how not to be good.” So does Machiavelli confront us with the moral difficulties of political action, bluntly describing the political space as one that, by its very nature, confuses our usual moral judgments. The Machiavellian prince must learn “not to be good,” for if he were to be good, evil would result: his generosity would bankrupt the city; his compassion would breed chaos and instability.¹ If he acts in a manner usually considered to be morally wrong—if he is miserly, if he is cruel—the city will be prosperous and orderly. Yet though good results from the prince’s cruelty, this does not erase the bare fact of his cruelty as such. To put it another way, the efficacy of the prince’s actions does not excuse or undo their moral wrongness. It would otherwise be nonsensical for Machiavelli to describe the prince as learning *not to be good* (Machiavelli 48). As Michael Walzer puts it, the force of the dilemma that Machiavelli poses to us depends on Machiavelli’s own “commitment to the existence of moral standards” (PA 175).

My description of Machiavelli draws heavily on Walzer’s seminal article “Political Action,” in many ways the paradigmatic formulation of Machiavelli’s dilemma within contemporary political theory. Walzer characterizes political action’s paradoxical requirement that we “do bad to do good” with a simple but memorable phrase: “the problem of dirty hands.” That is, in politics we are required to “dirty our hands” by engaging in evil action in order to bring about a good. Whatever good

¹ On these examples, see Machiavelli 49-50, 51.
² Gerth and Mills translate the former ethic as the “ethic of ultimate ends” rather than the “ethic of
results from our actions does not exonerate us; our hands remain dirty. What we have done is good, and yet we are guilty of a moral wrong (PA 162).

Besides Machiavelli, Walzer points to the work of Max Weber, particularly Weber’s essay “Politics as a Vocation.” Walzer’s gloss on Weber is brief but instructive, and my reading of Weber in this thesis is indebted to him. Briefly, Weber writes of moral approaches to the political world as guided by one of two different “maxims,” the “ethic of conviction” and the “ethic of responsibility.” Those who act according to the ethic of conviction reject “doing bad to do good”; instead, they hold fast to their principles and reject morally bad actions altogether. In contrast, those who adhere to the ethic of responsibility are willing to engage in acts that we might normally classify as evil in order to bring about good consequences or avoid disastrous outcomes.

Weber’s two ethics map roughly onto the opposing moral systems of deontology, which holds that the moral value of an action resides within the action itself, and consequentialism, which holds that an action’s moral value resides in whether the act produces “good” or “bad” consequences. Like deontology, the ethic of conviction holds that we should act based on the goodness of our actions; like consequentialism, the ethic of responsibility holds that we should act based on the goodness of an action’s consequences. The dirty hands problem thus places deontological and consequentialist reasoning in conversation with each other. When

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2 Gerth and Mills translate the former ethic as the “ethic of ultimate ends” rather than the “ethic of conviction.” This translation, however, is somewhat confusing: “ultimate ends” might easily refer to the consequentialist reasoning that Weber ascribes to the ethic of responsibility. In full acknowledgement of my lack of command of the German language, I prefer the translation “ethic of conviction.” See, for example, Kim 111.

3 For a more complete description of the relationship of Weber’s ethics to consequentialism and deontology, see Kim 111-117.
the political actor “does bad to do good.” the “good” is a consequentialist good and
the “bad” is a deontological bad. The crux of the problem lies in the fact that the
political actor is damned if they don’t as well as if they do: if they choose *not* to act,
they would be “doing good” deontologically, but their inaction would lead to an evil
result. Weber’s solution, as Walzer notes, is to require that the ideal political actor—
the individual with the “calling for politics”—act according to the ethic of
responsibility, but hold in mind the moral demands of the ethic of conviction, so as to
retain a keen sense of the moral costs involved in political life (PV 127).

Walzer writes that “the dilemma of dirty hands is a central feature of political
life,” which “arises not merely as an occasional crisis in the career of this or that
unlucky politician but systematically and frequently” (PA 162). The obvious question
is why this should be the case. What makes political life a space in which the problem
of dirty hands appears with such frequency?

To begin with, political life takes place at a scale magnified far beyond that of
the moral questions faced by most of us in our daily lives. Political leaders act with
extraordinarily wide-ranging effects; whether or not they choose to dirty their hands,
and in what way they choose to do so, can affect the lives of enormous numbers of
people. It seems intuitive that this should somehow raise the moral stakes of political
action in some crucial sense.4 In other words, the problem of dirty hands is perhaps
not exclusive to political life—we can easily imagine how it might emerge in more

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4 Exactly what this sense is, however, is unclear. Actions with a wider scope might be understood as
morally weightier in a consequentialist sense: perhaps an action that benefits 100 people is 100 times
better than an action that benefits one person, and the same for an action that harms 100 people. On the
other hand, we might also understand some qualitative deontological difference between the moral
value of actions that take place on the vast scale of political life and the mundane actions of everyday
life. To act for 100 people (or for 100 million) might simply be a different moral matter altogether than
to act for the benefit of one other person.
mundane circumstances—but the moral questions it raises are particularly urgent within the sphere of politics because of the sheer scale of action at stake.

Besides the matter of scale, we might understand politics as qualitatively different in some way from other spheres of life, and therefore more likely to give rise to the problem of dirty hands. Thus does Weber write that “the decisive means for politics is violence,” and that the moral cost of politics emerges from the harm that violence does to the politician’s soul (PV 121). To engage in violence as a means, even in service of a good end, is to engage in an act of evil.

We might understand violence as to some extent inherent to power and to governance. This is perhaps more obviously true in the age of Machiavelli than in our current era, in which constitutions constraining government actions and protecting the rights of citizens have become comparatively commonplace. Nevertheless, as Robert Cover makes clear in his essay “Violence and the Word,” violence is to some extent inherent to even those systems of government founded on the rule of law. Writing that “legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death,” Cover describes law as intimately connected to violence in its ability to coerce action and impose punishment (Cover 1601). As an extreme but representative case, Cover points to capital punishment, the power of law to take a life (1622). Walter Benjamin makes a similar argument in his “Critique of Violence”: “in the exercise of violence over life and death more than in any other legal act, law reaffirms itself” (Benjamin 286).

While Cover focuses his description of law’s violence on the role of the judge, his point can be extended more broadly. To be in a position of power—a position to make, interpret, and carry out the law—is to sit “atop a pyramid of violence” (Cover
This will become brutally apparent in an example I present in the conclusion of my thesis, in which a government lawyer, after giving his blessing to the legal justification behind the targeted killing by drone missile of a suspected terrorist, then watches that killing play out over live video feed. By all accounts, the lawyer was deeply troubled by this brutal confrontation with the violence enabled by his act of legal interpretation (*Kill or Capture* 210). Thus, as a sphere of law and a sphere of violence, does politics also become a sphere of moral difficulty and of dirty hands.

Benjamin’s “Critique” suggests a further dimension to the role of violence in politics. After questioning whether “any nonviolent resolution of conflict [is] possible,” Benjamin concludes,

> Nonviolent agreement is possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of unalloyed means of agreement…. This makes clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language. (Benjamin 289)

While “Critique of Violence” is famously difficult to parse, this passage is nevertheless telling. Benjamin suggests that “nonviolent resolution of conflict” is possible in situations in which individuals are capable of reasoned discussion through language. If we can come to agreement through discussion, that is, we will have no need for coercion and thus no need for violence or the threat of violence. Benjamin confines this solution to “relationships among private persons,” but his vision finds broader expression in the work of thinkers such as Kant and Habermas, who similarly position reasoned conversation as a means of avoiding violent conflict.\(^5\) That is, if we come to exist within a political context that allows us to share ideas on the level of

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\(^5\) See Žižek, 1, and 12 fn. 2.
rational argument alone, we will have moved beyond a politics requiring the use of violence.

Kant, for example, envisions a world of rational, moral actors as emerging from the institutional establishment of “constitutional republics” across the globe, and the creation of a cosmopolitan federation of governments. These constitutions will both cultivate the moral lives of the individuals who live within them and constrain leaders’ actions to those activities and policies that are morally justifiable. Thus we will come to engage with each other through rational conversation on moral principles and come to agreements without the threat of violence.\(^6\) Kant’s vision is a happy one, but his reasoning makes extremely clear that “perpetual peace” cannot be achieved without the institutional prerequisites described. Even if we accept (as Kant did, and as President Obama likes to remind us) that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” we are a long way from the establishment of the Kantian institutions that would move us toward the end of that arc. Until then, violence will unfortunately remain necessary.

More pessimistically, we might dispute the extent to which Kant’s perpetual peace would be possible even in a world gifted with the appropriate institutions. Kant’s position rests on the assumption that we will be able reach a shared sense of normative commitments on which to base rational discussion and through which we can reach agreement, without the need resolve contentious issues through coercion. Yet this is far from obvious. If we accept, as Weber does, the notion of value pluralism—that is, that there exist multiple different systems of value and of rational commitments—it becomes more difficult to see how such a rational Kantian

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\(^6\) See Kant, “Idea for a Universal History” 49-51 and “Perpetual Peace” 112-113.
consensus would come about. In other words, we may never reach a situation in which we achieve a common rational grounding on the basis of which to communicate and reach agreement; as Weber writes, “the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion” (“Science as a Vocation” 152). “Struggle” in this reading never ends; coercion and violence may always be necessary to conclude disagreement in the absence of a single, rational system of value.

The presence of violence in political life is therefore not likely to vanish soon, perhaps ever. As such, the problem of dirty hands will continue to worry us. It is therefore important not only to understand the mechanics of the problem, but also to understand how we understand the problem: that is, to engage in the second-order study of the narratives through which we have come to conceptualize the moral principles at the heart of the problem of dirty hands, as well as those principles themselves. Why do we tell the story of dirty hands in the way that we do? And are we right to do so?

I am particularly interested in the characters who emerge in political theory and fiction as having dirtied their hands. Walzer spends a good deal of space describing not only the problem of dirty hands but those particular figures who engage in it, with his study of Machiavelli and Weber focusing on their different approaches to the inner life of the dirty-handed individual. Weber, he notes, depicts a deeply anguished soul, who suffers with the knowledge of the moral wrongs he

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7 I draw here on Raymond Geuss, who argues that political theory ought to more seriously engage itself with the historical context of moral ideas (Geuss 69-70). That is, instead of asking, “Is the dirty hands problem philosophically coherent?”, I propose to ask, “How and why do we think about the dirty hands problem in the way we do, and what effects does that method of thinking have on our political life?”
commits. In contrast, Machiavelli is simply not concerned with the inner life of his dirty-handed prince. Walzer suggests that this may be the source of our deep-seated cultural discomfort toward Machiavelli:

He is suspect not because he tells political actors they must get their hands dirty, but because he does not specify the state of mind appropriate to a man with dirty hands. A Machiavellian hero has no inwardness….we cannot find out what he thinks. Yet we do want to know; above all, we want a record of his anguish. (PA 176)

Weber’s hero, in contrast, is defined by his anguish. If Walzer suggests that the lack of anguish in the Machiavellian hero somehow puts us on edge, then by contrast, the anguish of the Weberian hero should set us at ease. Yet as Walzer also points out, there is perhaps something unsettling about confining our study of the problems of political action entirely to the anguished conscience of the actor.8

Walzer’s unease is well-founded. As I will argue, this figure of the anguished, dirty-handed political actor is not only central to the narrative of moral choice and political action through which we conceptualize the problem of dirty hands—it is also deeply problematic. This focus on an anguished, isolated decision-maker as the bearer of dirty hands is profoundly antidemocratic, and, for that reason, dangerous. Given the strong cultural influence of the narrative of dirty hands surrounding this character, this danger ought to be all the more worrying.

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the “dirty hands narrative” to evoke the common structure of thinking that surrounds the dirty hands problem, the motifs, themes, and stories of political action that appear again and again in descriptions and

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8 This leads Walzer to turn to a third approach to grappling with the dirty hands problem, represented in the work of Albert Camus. Camus requires his dirty-handed actors to publicly atone for their crimes—in the case cited by Walzer, through their own deaths.
fictionalizations of dirty hands. The “tragic politician” is the main character within this narrative, the anguished leader who does what he must but still keenly feels the moral costs of his actions. I use he advisedly: as I will detail in the following chapter, the tragic politician archetype is linked to specifically male narratives of the wielding of power, and the tragic politician’s authority is paternal in nature.

My purpose here is to understand the narrative of dirty hands and the archetype of the tragic politician more deeply, to give an account of their nuances and also of their dangers. I do not seek to deny entirely the vision of political action that this narrative sets forward. Rather, as will become clear, I intend instead to suggest possibilities for transforming it so as to better address the particular difficulties and experiences of democratic political life.

I begin with a series of chapters that are essentially diagnostic and explanatory in nature, sketching out the dirty hands narrative. These chapters function less as a linear argument, and more as waves or layers: each chapter shades in a different aspect of the narrative, with the “picture” in question increasing in depth and complexity as the reader moves through the text. I provide this “picture” through studies of three different literary works presenting tragic politician characters and thus engaging with the dirty hands narrative—Jean-Paul Sartre’s Dirty Hands, Jean Anouilh’s 1944 Antigone, and Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor.

Many theorists and philosophers have turned to fiction as a medium for moral argument, and it is not within my power to summarize all such works. I will merely point briefly to the writing of Martha Nussbaum, who describes literature’s powerful ability to “display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of
moral choice” and to show us that “human deliberation is constantly an adventure of
the personality, undertaken against terrific odds and frightening mysteries”
(Nussbaum 141-142). Fiction, that is, allows us to experience the difficulty of moral
choice in a particularly evocative way. This might be particularly true in the case of
the moral dilemmas posed by the dirty hands problem, in which the “terrific odds”
and “frightening mysteries” described by Nussbaum are perhaps unusually stark.

To use another idea from Nussbaum’s work, literature pushes us to use our
moral imagination: our ability to acknowledge, imagine, and incorporate others’
perspectives into our thinking, while also acknowledging that our imagining of those
different perspectives may be, or perhaps must necessarily be, incomplete.9 We also
see this in Hannah Arendt’s notion of “thinking with an enlarged mentality” or “going
visiting” (Lectures on Kant 43). By encouraging us to use our moral imagination to
conceptualize characters’ experiences and moral dilemmas, fiction moves us away
from more purely analytical modes of thinking that might not fully capture the
emotional and moral stakes of the dilemmas posed to the tragic politician and his
cohort. The dirty hands narrative is at its core a narrative, a particular story that we
tell about moral choice, and it can therefore be best understood through the modes of
moral and philosophical understanding that narrative offers.

I begin with a study of Sartre’s Dirty Hands, the play that first formulated the
dirty hands problem as we now understand it and on which Walzer bases his own
analysis. My study of the play focuses on Hoederer, the veteran political actor and
therefore the manifestation of the tragic politician archetype within the space of

9 See Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” in
Love’s Knowledge.
Sartre’s play. I sketch the dirty hands narrative and the tragic politician archetype, particularly studying the tragic politician’s engagement with the world as a place of moral confusion and messiness. The tragic politician is defined by his care for the state of the world over the state of his own moral integrity, and is willing to engage in actions that damage his moral sense of himself as a “good man” in order to better the world. He thus contrasts with idealists who prize their moral integrity above all and refuse to dirty their hands.

My second chapter studies two versions of the play *Antigone*, the classic by Sophocles and that of Jean Anouilh. Comparing the two, I examine how Anouilh reshapes the character of Creon to create a tragic politician. Unlike the Creon of Sophocles, whose bullheadedness and lack of self-reflection lead to his downfall, Anouilh’s Creon is almost painfully self-aware, constantly proclaiming his anguish over his dirty hands. Turning to the moral importance of anguish in the dirty hands narrative, I position anguish as a quality denoting the politician’s awareness of both the world’s irrationality and contradictions, and the necessity of action even in the face of those contradictions. Anguish is therefore linked to the tragic politician’s sense of his responsibility to act, and becomes a necessary—though not sufficient—component of moral goodness: we know that the tragic politician is a good man because he feels deeply anguished over the moral compromises he makes.

While my third chapter concludes this layered description of the dirty hands narrative, it then shifts into a more argumentative mode. I study Dostoevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor*, a famous chapter from the novelist’s *Brothers Karamazov*. I examine the Grand Inquisitor’s self-portrayal as anguished in his wielding of dirty-handed
political power but also separated from those he rules by that same anguish, suggesting that the tragic politician’s morally damaging experiences isolate him from those who have not been similarly tested by the moral difficulties of politics. If my first chapters have illuminated the complexity of the dirty hands narrative and the tragic politician archetype, this chapter begins to chronicle the long shadow of dirty hands: that is, its limitations and its antidemocratic implications. I argue that the Grand Inquisitor’s tyrannical and anti-democratic method of ruling follows naturally from the dirty hands narrative itself.

In my next chapter, I make a theoretical argument for the dangers of the dirty hands narrative when viewed from a democratic perspective. The dirty hands narrative allows the tragic politician to discount any public critique of his actions because of the people’s lack of experience in the political sphere. Similarly, the narrative’s focus on the isolated conscience of the leader ignores democratic norms of constitutional governance and limitations on violence. We ought also to consider the effect of dirty hands on the political community as a whole: the participatory nature of democratic politics suggests that the problem of dirty hands in political action ought to engage the moral selves not only of leaders, but of individual citizens as well. We are, to some extent, morally involved in what our leaders do.

I close with an analysis of the Obama administration’s targeted killing program as a manifestation of the dirty hands narrative’s dangerous effects on democratic politics. The administration portrays President Obama as intimately involved in this program of drone warfare, approving individual terrorists or terrorist suspects to be killed and, in some cases, perhaps even approving whether or not a
drone pilot is to “take the shot.” Yet, as a tragic politician, he remains deeply
anguished over his involvement in killing. This image of the president has effectively
allowed the administration to evade both democratic accountability for the program
and the imposition of any effective institutional checks. The dirty hands narrative,
that is, has made us comfortable with the model of unchecked power regulated only
by moral anguish.

My use of this case study underlines the importance of the dirty hands
narrative as a topic of inquiry. It is not only theoretically antidemocratic, but has real
effects in how political action is carried out—and, as in the case of the drone
program, this may literally be a matter of life and death. I both developed a rough
understanding of the tragic politician archetype and began seriously considering the
drone program as a topic of study in late 2012. Since then, the Obama administration
has slowly released more information on the program, and I have become more and
more convinced of the accuracy of my analysis, in a mix of scholarly pride and
genuine concern. I have described the concepts surrounding the dirty hands problem
as a “narrative,” but narratives shape how we think. To avoid being mastered by
them, we must remain keenly conscious as to their functioning and their power.
CHAPTER ONE
SARTRE’S DIRTY HANDS: MORAL INTEGRITY AND MORAL WOUNDING

1.1 Dirty Hands: Hugo and Hoederer

Describing the origins of his play Les Mains sales (Dirty Hands) soon before it opened, Jean-Paul Sartre declared the text to have been inspired by a remark made by the French revolutionary Jean Antoine de Saint-Just: “no one governs innocently” (“Dirty Hands” 208). While the phrase may have originated with Saint-Just, it is now most famous for its reformulation in Sartre’s hands. In a rhetorical flourish ending the dramatic description of sordid political action, the Communist leader Hoederer states, “I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth [merde] and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?” (DH 218).¹

Hoederer’s speech on the difficulty of governing innocently has become the paradigmatic characterization of the dirty hands problem. Indeed, as Michael Walzer notes, it has given the problem its name (PA 161). Sartre’s formulation is, of course, far from the first conceptualization of the problem of moral action in politics; Walzer suggests that the problem dates back to Machiavelli’s famous exhortation that the prince must “learn how not to be good” (Machiavelli 48).² Nevertheless, Dirty Hands represents an important step in framing the problem, and the means by which it characterizes the moral difficulties of political action are crucial to understanding the conceptual framework of the dirty hands narrative.

¹ S.L. Sutherland notes the importance of the original French in this passage. Hoederer declares that he has plunged his hands in merde et sang: while sang translates cleanly to the English “blood,” merde has a somewhat more complex meaning than either the English “filth” or “shit” allow. “Merde has a weaker scatological focus than the English ‘shit’: it comprises nonsense, doubt, petulance, confusion and futility” (Sutherland 487).
² Walzer writes that Machiavelli is “the first man, as far as I know, to state the paradox I am examining” (PA 175).
The essential plot of *Dirty Hands* rests on the conflict between Hoederer, the dirty-handed Communist politician who asserts openly his contempt for the notion that one can “govern innocently,” and Hugo Barine, a callow young revolutionary who goes by the code name “Raskolnikov” (*DH* 139). Much of the play’s action takes place in the back-and-forth between Hoederer and Hugo over the appropriate means by which to bring about the ends of revolutionary action; to use Weber’s language, the conflict between the two characters represents the clash between the “ethic of responsibility” (Hoederer) and the “ethic of conviction” (Hugo). In the last months of World War II, as the German army retreats and the Soviet army advances toward the characters’ fictional Eastern European nation, Hoederer wants to implement a power-sharing arrangement with the current fascist government and a more moderate, bourgeois-liberal party, so as to displace the blame for the inevitable post-war chaos away from the Communists. The people, he argues, will hold the two governing establishment parties responsible for post-war hardship, allowing the Communist Party to step in and take credit for restoring order. In this way, the Communists will become popular and will avoid alienating the public, enabling them to more successfully implement their revolutionary project as time goes on (*DH* 215-217).

Hugo, on the other hand, rejects this argument as destructive of the party’s core ideals. Rather than working toward “the realization of a socialist economy” through the “method” of class struggle, he argues, Hoederer is using the party “to pursue a policy of class collaboration in the framework of a capitalist economy” (*DH* 216). Moreover, Hoederer’s plan will require lying to “comrades” in order to motivate party members to accept an alliance with the fascists and bourgeoisie; this
Hugo cannot stomach (*DH* 217). Indeed, others in the party apparatus cannot stomach it either, and have sent Hugo to murder Hoederer in the guise of serving as his secretary.

Hoederer, therefore, represents Weber’s “ethic of responsibility” insofar as he is willing to lie and to temporarily sacrifice principles in order to save “a hundred thousand” lives by mitigating post-war violence and allowing the party to take power more smoothly. He acts with an eye toward the consequences of his actions. Hugo, on the other hand, represents the “ethic of conviction” in his unwillingness to accept Hoederer’s regard for consequence, to the point where he uneasily declares the necessity of those hundred thousand deaths: “you can’t make a revolution with flowers” (*DH* 219).

As well as a portrayal of ideological conflict, the play also functions as a *bildungsroman*, describing Hugo’s passage from youthful immaturity to adulthood.³ Dorothy McCall succinctly describes Hugo’s dilemma at the play’s beginning: “Hugo is supposed to represent… the purity of ends. But does he really? …His own idealism… is self-deception.” Hugo, an upper-class intellectual turned Communist idealist, acts not out of idealistic fervor but out of a desire to escape his “hated self" and the shadow of his estranged bourgeois father, both through the “strict discipline” of the party line and the chance that Hoederer’s murder offers him to redefine himself as a revolutionary assassin. His self-absorption and uncertainty in his own identity define his immaturity (McCall 58).

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³ Admittedly, an abruptly truncated adulthood, given that Hugo’s murder (one might also call it a suicide) follows immediately after, and as a necessary consequence of, his final achievement of maturity.
Hugo’s callowness can be read as representative of Sartrean “bad faith,” which can be defined roughly as a refusal to face the complexities and difficulties of human existence, namely “transcendence” (the existence of every person as a free and subjective consciousness) and “facticity” (existence as irreducibly contingent on and limited by the facts of one’s earthly situation). If I act in bad faith, I attempt to alter the relationship of my own facticity and transcendence by asserting the primacy of one or the other quality, without acknowledging the necessary coexistence and tension between the two (Cox 16, 35).

Hugo declares at the play’s end that, “I thought I was too young. I wanted to hang a crime around my neck, like a stone” (DH 235). That is, he seeks to metaphorically “weigh down” his fluid and uncertainty identity by assassinating Hoederer, thereby granting himself a clearly defined identity as a revolutionary and fixing that identity through an irrevocable act of violence (Cox 152). We can understand Hugo’s desire to transform himself in terms of Sartre’s famous description of bad faith as represented by a waiter whose behavior is simply too waiterly: the waiter’s smile is too fixed, his movements as he steps toward the customers a little too regular and mechanical (Minahen 43). He seeks to deny his transcendence in favor of pure facticity, to define himself wholly by his limiting role as “waiter” rather than as a subjective consciousness that transcends the brute fact of his employment (Cox 35). Like the waiter, who identifies himself as “waiter” and nothing more, Hugo seeks to become a “revolutionary” only, an inherently “static” descriptor which,

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4 Cox goes on to describe an alternate understanding of Sartre’s waiter, in which the waiter actually represents “authenticity,” and is therefore “the antithesis of bad faith” insofar as his choice to throw himself into his performance as a waiter characterizes Sartrean “being-in-situation” (Cox 35). Nevertheless, the interpretation of the waiter as paradigmatic of bad faith is the most common one, and it is the interpretation on which I rely here.
in deriving its power from the facticity of Hugo’s situation, cannot truly define every aspect of Hugo’s transcendent being, despite his best efforts (Wyatt 5).

We can see Hugo’s desire for pure facticity and denial of transcendence in his declaration that he has joined the party to “protect [him]self” from the process of thinking, instead finding relief in following the party’s orders and attempting to reduce himself to a being that “eat[s], sleep[s], obey[s]” (DH 172). That is, he seeks to abdicate his freedom and transcendence in favor of facticity and obedience as a “revolutionary” alone. Furthermore, throughout Dirty Hands, Hugo is associated with and describes himself using metaphors of theater and acting. He declares that “we’re in a play… nothing seems to me to be entirely real” and, despairingly, that he “live[s] in a stage set” (DH 175, 182). This language of theater emphasizes the degree to which Hugo has reduced himself to playacting the role of revolutionary, rather than acting as an authentic subject (Minahen 43).

Hugo, then, does not think for himself, but is attempting only to prove himself to others by solidifying his role as a revolutionary once and for all through an act of murder. Yet though at first he seeks to prove himself to the party through revolutionary violence, he soon becomes attracted to the parental concern offered by Hoederer. This explains his uncertainty and his failure to act for much of the play: all Hugo seeks to is to prove himself, but he cannot decide to whom he is proving himself. Is it to the party, to Hoederer, or perhaps—in some strange way—to Hugo’s own estranged, disapproving father? The degree to which Hugo’s existence is defined by those around him is particularly visible in his relationship with his wife, Jessica,
whose relentless refusal to see the world as anything other than an extended joke brings out Hugo’s own tendencies toward bad faith and playacting.

Read in terms of the relationship between Hugo and Hoederer, Dirty Hands describes the process of Hoederer’s recognizing Hugo’s aimless bad faith and attempting to take Hugo under his wing, with Hugo alternately yielding to Hoederer and rejecting him. Hoederer clearly fashions himself as a paternal figure: he refers to Hugo as “son” or “kid,” and declares his intentions to “keep [Hugo] with [him] and help [him]” (DH 228). By the end of the play, Hugo can declare openly that “I loved Hoederer” (DH 236). Yet this declaration also encapsulates the ambiguity and tension in this relationship, for Hugo can only admit his love after Hoederer has already died—and, moreover, has died at Hugo’s hand. Moreover, the altercation that finally leads Hugo to murder his would-be mentor, when Hugo sees Hoederer embracing Jessica, occurs when Hugo is returning to Hoederer’s office to pledge his loyalty. In short, the play reads not only as an ideological and philosophical study, but a sketch of the developing relationship between Hoederer and Hugo.

Since the first production of Dirty Hands in 1948, the play has been subject to a variety of interpretations and misinterpretations. An American production of the play, retitled Red Gloves and widely panned, presented Sartre’s work as unambiguously anti-communist.⁶ In this interpretation, the play’s assumed sympathies lie with Hugo as the unwitting dupe of Communist perfidy. It is true that

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⁵ Minahen analyzes Hoederer and Hugo’s relationship not only along the father-son paradigm, but also as homoerotic. The relationship therefore has a strong Freudian element, though Hoederer represents a “father-lover” rather than a “father-oppressor”; yet, as in Oedipus Rex, Hugo murders him anyway (Minahen 45-46).

⁶ It is worth noting that Sartre himself denounced Red Gloves, approvingly citing a friend’s description of the American rewrite as “a vulgar, common melodrama with an anti-Communist bias” (Zolotow).
Hugo’s final moment of self-assertion at the conclusion of Dirty Hands does arise out of rage that the party has chosen to embrace Hoederer’s approach to post-war reconstruction after all, and that therefore Hoederer’s murder took place for nothing; Hugo thus chooses to die rather than become complicit in the party’s rewriting of history (Birchall 85-86). Yet the fact that Hugo’s rejection of the reworked party line arises from an even stricter interpretation of Communism was, apparently, lost on some Cold War audiences—including Communists as well, who busily denounced the play (Sutherland 487; Birchall 85). Nevertheless, as McCall notes, this drastic misreading demonstrates how misunderstandings of Dirty Hands are largely based on misunderstandings of who “wins” in the play, or whom Sartre is siding with—Hugo or Hoederer (McCall 61).

To an extent, Dirty Hands’ final judgment on Hugo versus Hoederer is ambiguous simply because the text is a work of theater, rather than as a straightforward piece of philosophy. At the press showing, Sartre himself declared that “a good play should raise problems, not solve them,” and that “the theater’s job is not demonstration or solution… it thrives on questions and problems” (“Dirty Hands” 208-209). Nevertheless, as time went on, Sartre became more obviously sympathetic to Hoederer over Hugo in statements and interviews. In 1955, he stated that he “ha[d] never found Hugo a sympathetic character” and that “Hoederer’s is the only attitude I think sound”; in 1964, he declared, “Hoederer is the person I should like to be if I were a revolutionary” (“Dirty Hands” 220).

Hoederer held a certain attraction not only for Sartre, but for audiences and critics as well. A 1948 New York Times review of Red Gloves declared that “whether
or not *Red Gloves* is an anti-Communist play depends upon your susceptibility to Mr. Boyer [the actor playing Hoederer]’s acting,” suggesting that the gut appeal of Hoederer’s character was strong enough as to be capable of triumphing over the American audience’s better judgment (Atkinson). Similarly, Ronald Aronson describes Hoederer as “Sartre’s most positive hero,” admiring his “warmth… directness, honesty, flexibility, and sense of historical perspective” (Aronson 105). Hugo, of course, grows fond of Hoederer despite himself over the course of the play, and Hugo’s wife Jessica develops a strong attraction to him as well, culminating in the embrace that ultimately leads to Hoederer’s death.

Notably, both Jessica and Hugo rely heavily on physical description to express their love for Hoederer, almost to the point of using Hoederer’s physical being as synecdoche for his visceral appeal. Hugo says, “I loved his hands and his face,” whereas Jessica declares Hoederer to be “a real man of flesh and bone” (*DH* 236, 232). These constructions suggest the extent to which Hoederer’s appeal derives from his tremendous physical vitality and ability to exist comfortably in the physical world. Indications of this vitality appear throughout the play, at first in Hoederer’s obvious attraction to Jessica, then in the cigar smoke that lingers in his office and in his delight in cooking and making coffee for himself and Hugo (*DH* 170, 182). In a moment of Hoederer’s absence, Hugo picks up the coffeepot and declares that the pot “seems real when he touches it… I watch him drinking and I feel that the taste of the coffee in his mouth is real” (*DH* 182). The expression of physical existence made manifest by the coffee becomes representative of Hoederer himself.
Hoederer’s “realness,” linked to his physical presence in Hugo’s ruminations on the coffeepot, presents a striking contrast to Hugo’s own insubstantiality. Indeed, Hugo’s hollow declaration that he “live[s] in a stage set” comes directly after his fantasy of the “realness” of Hoederer’s coffee (DH 182). The dichotomy between Hoederer’s vitality and Hugo’s insubstantiality also manifests in Hoederer’s decisiveness and confidence in action, as opposed to Hugo’s wavering indecision: whereas Hugo vacillates for nearly the entire play, Hoederer has settled a plan of action and pursues it with great self-assuredness, even while acknowledging that his efforts may put his life in serious danger. Hoederer, that is, comes off well in comparison. In a 1949 performance of Dirty Hands in Berlin’s British sector, for example, Hoederer reportedly managed to capture audience sympathy despite his close resemblance to the president of East Germany, simply by the fact of performing opposite Hugo’s “neuropathic jack-in-the-box” (Birchall 85).

If Hugo, viewed in terms of Sartrean ethics, represents “bad faith,” how ought we to understand Hoederer? One reading, suggested by Gary Cox and Charles G. Minahen, positions Hoederer as representing “authenticity” and therefore the opposite of bad faith: the authentic person acknowledges their own facticity and transcendence as equal and in tension, accepting “the continued task of choosing responses that affirm freedom and responsibility” (Cox 43; Minahen 41). As an authentic individual, I accept my freedom to make choices and therefore my own responsibility for what comes of those choices, without denying the unavoidable contingency and facticity of my situation. I do not, as would an individual acting in bad faith, seek to flee from this responsibility and freedom through erasure of either facticity or transcendence.
With these concepts in mind, we might understand Hoederer as morally aware and responsible in his authenticity.

Jean Wyatt interprets Hoederer somewhat differently, as a manifestation of “pure subjectivity”; that is, of pure transcendence, a true transcendence that is not the insincere, inevitably failed transcendence of bad faith (Wyatt 5). In this reading, Hoederer’s confidence, his “coherence and solidity” all seem to represent a character almost too at home in himself to fit entirely within the tortured, fluctuating world of Sartrean existentialist ethics. We might therefore read Hoederer’s appeal as arising not only from his decisiveness, but also from his apparent ability to navigate the world without the usual difficulty and pain arising from the tension between facticity and transcendence. It is easy to see how this would appeal to the agonized and indecisive Hugo.

More than his decisiveness and “substantiality,” Hoederer’s physicality is also linked to his striking invocations of humanism throughout the play, what Dorothy McCall calls “pragmatic humanism” and Minahen “communistic humanism” (McCall 58; Minahen 41). This description of Hoederer’s “humanism” characterizes his desire to do all he can to save those hundred thousand people who might perish from a drawn-out post-war conflict: “for me,” he says, “one man more or less in the world is something that counts… it’s something precious.” He goes on, “I love [men] for what they are. With all their filth and their vices. I love their voices and their warm grasping hands, and their skin, the nudest skin of all…” Hoederer contrasts this love with Hugo’s hatred toward humanity, declaring that Hugo “detest[s] men because [he] detest[s] [him]self” (DH 229). Once again, then, Hoederer is allied with the
physical world in his love of humanity’s “warm… hands” and skin, a love that even encompasses the inevitable “filth” of physical existence; on the other hand, Hugo’s “detestation” of humanity is linked to own insubstantiality in the world.

1.2 Hoederer’s Accusation of Moral Self-Indulgence

Hoederer’s characterization of Hugo as a “destroyer” acting out of hatred is of a piece with Hoederer’s main moral counterargument against Hugo, and follows naturally from the famous “dirty hands” speech from which the play takes its title:

How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right! Stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth [merde] and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently? (DH 218)

Hoederer thus accuses Hugo of being unwilling to compromise his principles not out of attachment to those principles in themselves, but rather attachment to his own self-understanding as a morally pure agent who acts in a certain ideologically unimpeachable manner. (Insofar as Hugo’s desire to maintain ideological purity is linked to his bad-faith desire to solidify his own self-image as revolutionary, Hoederer is entirely correct.) In Hoederer’s eyes, this desire for moral purity can lead to either total inaction, in the case of the bourgeois in kid gloves, or to acts of great destruction: Hugo, he says, does not want to “change the world,” but to “blow it up” (DH 220).
This charge of moral purity laid against Hugo represents a key component of the tragic politician archetype and of the dirty hands narrative. The core of the argument is perhaps best characterized by Bernard Williams, who refers to this type of reasoning as an accusation of “moral self-indulgence.” In Williams’ description, the argument is usually raised against a moral agent who refuses to act in a certain way on the grounds that this action, though perhaps necessary under some metrics, would irremediably compromise their moral sense of self. In other words, this agent would be “open to the charge of being concerned with [their] own integrity or purity or virtue at others’ expense” (“Moral Self-Indulgence” 44).

In Williams’ account, moral self-indulgence arguments are usually made by utilitarian thinkers against non-utilitarians (“Self-Indulgence” 44). It is useful, therefore, to understand Williams’ argument against utilitarian philosophy, in order to better understand why he imagines that utilitarians might make such a claim. Williams’ “Critique of Utilitarianism” is partially founded on Williams’ understanding of the centrality of moral agency: that is, what is important is not simply that a relevant action is taken, but that I am the one who has, or has not, taken it. For utilitarianism, in contrast, “‘it’s me’ can never in itself be a morally comprehensible reason” (“Critique of Utilitarianism” 96). Williams argues that this view is entirely divorced from the moral experience of everyday life: to make such an argument is to “to alienate [a person]… from [their] actions and the source of [their] action in [their] own convictions” in favor of considering them as one interchangeable part in a sea of other interchangeable human parts, and is therefore “an attack on [that person’s] integrity” (“Critique” 116-117). This deep concern with moral agency
manifests clearly in Williams’ discussion of the moral self-indulgence argument, through Williams’ interest in how moral integrity should be conceptualized.

Williams’ rebuttal to the moral self-indulgence argument is ultimately to claim, somewhat strangely, that integrity is not a virtue and cannot therefore serve as a motive for action; as such, my concern for my moral integrity cannot possibly prevent me from taking action, contrary to what the utilitarian argues. Yet whatever the flaws or strength of this counterargument, it fails to address the powerful rhetoric of purity and filth inherent in the notion of “dirty hands”—that is, of hands that are “pure” and “clean” versus those hands that, like Hoederer’s, are stained with “filth and blood,” a representation of compromised integrity (DH 218). Williams’ position makes no movement toward dismantling this dichotomy, and therefore leaves the core of the moral self-indulgence argument as strong as ever. The rhetorical power of this argument lies, as Hoederer’s famous speech suggests, in the division between a pure self with integrity and a corrupted self whose integrity has been lost.

Perhaps Williams’ failure to address this point follows from his characterization of the moral self-indulgence argument as one leveled by utilitarians, for a utilitarian position, at least in Williams’ understanding of utilitarianism, would reject the moral significance of the dichotomy between filth and purity. This is true

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7 Williams’ argument here is somewhat obscure, and would seem to square strangely with his argument in “Critique of Utilitarianism,” where he suggests that concern for integrity can in fact be a motivator for action. C. Fred Alford’s analysis in Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power provides an empirical counterargument against Williams’ position. Alford finds whistleblowers to be generally motivated by a concern for their own integrity and moral purity, dreading the danger of a “corrupted self” (Alford 90). Rather strikingly, Alford describes this motivating impulse as one of “moral narcissism,” that is moral “rage at being rendered less than whole and perfect” (78). Alford attempts to mitigate the negative associations of the term “narcissism,” asking the reader to “put aside all [their] prejudices against narcissism” in recognition that moral narcissism can serve as a “deep and powerful source of morality,” as in the case of whistleblowers (63). Yet the negative rhetorical force of “narcissism” is hard to break away from; “moral narcissism” as a phrase fits strikingly well with Williams’ description of “moral self-indulgence”
for two reasons. First, as Walzer describes, utilitarianism denies the existence of the dirty hands problem, since it credits no countervailing moral principle besides the utilitarian principle acted upon: that is, the dirty-handed politician has no reason to feel guilt after taking action along consequentialist principles, since there exists no valid deontological moral principle with which a consequentialist action could be conflict. The politician has therefore acted entirely morally and has no reason to feel guilt or a tension between moral principles (PA 169). Second, as Williams argues, utilitarianism allows no space for moral integrity as a concern because of its dismissal of individual moral agency; a utilitarian would dismiss the notion of a corrupted moral self as incoherent, because utilitarianism denies the existence of the moral self. Yet this understanding of a moral self and moral integrity is crucial to the dichotomy of filth and purity.

This dichotomy resonates throughout Dirty Hands, not only as voiced explicitly in Hoederer’s “dirty hands” speech but also through its connection to a series of other linked dichotomies. Besides purity/filth, Sartre evokes dualities of death/life, youth/maturity, hatred/love, inaction/action, destruction/creation, and cleanliness/messiness. The poles of these dualities are themselves linked, with affinities between purity/death/youth/hatred/inaction/destruction/cleanliness and life/maturity/love/action/creation/messiness; in turn, these two groups of images each exist in opposition to the other.

While these dichotomies appear throughout the play, they are most explicit in Hoederer’s “dirty hands” speech and his following speech on his own love for

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8 Walzer also details two variations on this strong utilitarian approach, neither of which he considers to truly resolve the dirty hands problem (PA 169-172).
humanity versus Hugo’s hatred. The division of purity and filth, of course, follows
naturally from Hoederer’s own description of his own dirty hands as opposed to
Hugo’s desire to maintain his purity at all costs, as does the division of cleanliness
and messiness: Hugo wants “kid gloves” to protect himself from corruption, whereas
Hoederer enthusiastically embraces the “filth and vices” of human life (DH 218, 220).
As I have noted, purity may lead to either total inaction or total destruction, in sharp
contrast to Hoederer’s own confident action and desire to rebuild the post-war nation.
Furthermore, Hugo’s desire for purity is linked to his hatred of humanity and his
status as “destroyer”: “your purity resembles death,” Hoederer declares, implicitly
distinguishing between his own vitality and Hugo’s deathlike purity (DH 220).
Finally, insofar as Hugo represents youth and Hoederer maturity—“youth,” Hoederer
says, “I don’t know what it is; I went directly from childhood to maturity”—those
qualities associated with Hoederer become linked to maturity, and those associated
with Hugo, to youth (DH 186).

Hugo’s “purity resembles death,” therefore, not only because he wants to
destroy, but also because his purity is so clean as to be unworldly, set against love of
the world and of life. As Hoederer understands it, human life is messy and unclean,
yet this only makes it more worthy of love. This vision of death/life as linked to
cleanliness/messiness and unworldliness/worldliness is not specific to Dirty Hands;
indeed, it is usefully expressed in the writings of Sartre’s contemporary George
Orwell. Orwell’s characterization of worldliness and unworldliness elucidates a
crucial aspect of the tragic politician archetype, and is therefore worth examining in
detail.
Orwell’s essay “Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool” takes its unlikely starting point as a response to Tolstoy’s criticism of Shakespeare’s work as entirely mediocre and without artistic merit, with Orwell seeking to find the root of Tolstoy’s apparently irrational antipathy toward Shakespeare. Orwell ultimately concludes that Tolstoy disliked Shakespeare because he disliked life: that is, not the bare fact of being alive, but rather the difficulty, mess, and “painful struggle of earthly life,” instead preferring the “eternal peace” of the Kingdom of Heaven. To Orwell, the sheer “raggedness” and “exuberance” of Shakespeare’s work, full of loose ends and epitomized by the Fool’s rambling strangeness in *King Lear*, represents the essence of humanity and life itself. “Shakespeare… loved the surface of the earth and the process of life” (‘Lear’).

Orwell’s Shakespeare is, like Hoederer, a humanist, in contrast to Tolstoy and Hugo’s anti-humanist purity. Opposing Tolstoy’s pristine “sainthood,” Orwell links humanity with messiness, struggle, and love. His comment that “Tolstoy’s kind of saint… is not trying to work an improvement in earthly life” but rather “trying to bring it to an end and put something different in its place” recalls Hoederer’s characterization of Hugo as someone who seeks less to change the world than to destroy it (“Lear”; *DH* 220).

Orwell would return to this argument several years later, in his “Reflections on Gandhi.” In “Reflections,” Orwell elaborates his description of “sainthood” as opposed to humanity, arguing that “the difference between a saint and ordinary

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9 This description of Shakespeare as a humanist is made explicit in Orwell’s essay: “All of these [Shakespeare’s] tragedies start out with the humanist assumption that life, although full of sorrow, is worth living… The humanist attitude is that the struggle must continue and that death is the price of life” (“Lear”).

10 Indeed, Orwell explicitly acknowledged the connection between these two essays, writing that his essay on Tolstoy “really connects up with the Gandhi article” (Pai 58).
human being is a difference of kind and not of degree,” and that “sainthood is… a thing that human beings must avoid” (“Reflections”). Sainthood, that is, must be avoided because its goals are antithetical to humanity itself. Its purity and insistence on moral action in all circumstances constitute a rejection of the messiness and anguish inherent to human life on this planet.\footnote{In light of Orwell’s description of sainthood, it is noteworthy that Alford describes “moral narcissism” as “the source of the lives of the saints” (Alford 79).} Orwell writes:

> The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty… and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals…. If one could follow it to one’s roots, one would, I believe, find that the main motive for ‘non-attachment’ [i.e. Gandhi’s sainthood] is a desire to escape from the pain of living, and above all from love, which, sexual or non-sexual, is hard work. (“Reflections”)

This passage makes explicit the link between humanity, love of the world, and struggle. To live and to love others is necessarily to not be entirely pure, because of the inherent messiness of the world itself. Similarly, life cannot be simple or easy but is instead a constant struggle, a constant negotiation with the anguish and pain that may appear at any moment. Orwell’s language here on the necessity of being “prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life” strikingly echoes Weber’s description of the “knowledge of tragedy with which all action, but especially political action is truly interwoven” (PV 117).

Orwell does classify Gandhi as a saint, though he is far less critical of Gandhi than of Tolstoy. Gita V. Pai draws a distinction between the different sainthoods represented by Tolstoy and Gandhi: Tolstoy’s saint is “self-centered, oppressive, and...
fixated on the afterlife,” whereas Gandhi’s is “humble, ethical, and inhuman” (Pai 58). Orwell’s Gandhi, therefore, is far less tyrannical than his Tolstoy. It is also worth noting that Orwell himself draws a distinction between Gandhi’s sainthood and his method of political action and leadership, saying that “Gandhi’s pacifism can be separated to some extent from his other teachings.”12 Similarly, he closes the essay by declaring that, whatever degree of “aesthetic distaste” he has for Gandhi, he cannot deny the “clean… smell he has managed to leave behind” when compared with other politicians (“Reflections”).

Of course, this very cleanliness would disqualify Gandhi from having what Weber describes as the “calling for politics.” Reading Hoederer’s accusation of Hugo’s moral self-indulgence alongside Orwell and Weber, the first key tenet of the tragic politician archetype becomes apparent. To truly exist in the world and to take political action is necessarily to struggle, to be anguished, and to become what one might call morally “wounded,” that is, no longer quite whole or untouched. To use Williams’ language, the tragic politician has to some extent lost his moral integrity.

This reference to moral integrity is particularly apropos because Weber, in “Politics as a Vocation” describes the politician’s moral struggle in terms of the state of his moral self. The politician must be aware of politics’ “consequences for his… inner self” and must “know that he is responsible for what may become of himself under the impact of these [ethical] paradoxes” so central to Weber’s understanding of politics (PV 125-126). Weber’s reference to these “paradoxes” suggests that the “ethical irrationality of the world”—that is, the failure of the world to conform neatly

12 It is also worth noting Orwell’s acknowledgement that Gandhi “never made any such claim [of sainthood] for himself” (“Reflections”).
to a single moral paradigm and allow good to follow solely from good, evil from evil—is, at heart, what ultimately causes the tragic politician’s moral difficulties (PV 122). This is similar to Orwell’s argument: the world is a painful, ugly, and incoherent place, and to live in it is to struggle.

The tragic politician, therefore, loses his moral integrity as a result of political action; he is no longer pure. Yet the key point is that the politician must recognize and accept this loss of moral integrity for the sake of his people and his nation. Weber approvingly cites Machiavelli’s praise for those who “deem… the greatness of their native city higher than the salvation of their souls”; Machiavelli himself recycled this phrase late in his life in a letter to a friend, saying, “I love my native city more than my own soul” (cited in PV 126). In Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Machiavelli’s phrase, this question of “whether one was capable of loving the world more than one’s own self… has always been the crucial decision for all who devoted their lives to politics” (On Revolution 276 n. 20). In other words, the tragic politician’s moral compromise is an act of love, an expression of his deep affection for his people, his nation, and perhaps the world itself. This recalls Orwell: an embrace of compromise, struggle, and tragedy is a necessary component of loving “the surface of earth and the process of life,” as Hoederer does (“Lear”).

What can this argument tell us about those who love their souls more than their cities, so to speak? First, it implies that, as Hoederer suggests, those who seek to remain pure do not really love their cities, or at least not to the extent that the tragic politician does. Second, it suggests that the concern for moral purity represents an immaturity of sorts, an inability to face up to the “ethical irrationality of the world”
and the concomitant reality of tragedy and moral difficulty (PV 122). The dichotomy of Hoederer’s and Hugo’s approaches to the world is, of course, also aligned along the axis of maturity versus youth. Weber links the necessary “knowledge of tragedy” held by his ideal politician to maturity, writing that “it is immensely moving when a mature man—no matter whether old or young in years—is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct” (PV 127; emphasis in original).

As this suggests, Weber’s definition of maturity is not founded on age, but on “the trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and measure up to them inwardly” (PV 127). Maturity, then, represents a willingness and ability to confront moral tension and anguish, without allowing the knowledge of this tension to paralyze oneself and keep one from acting. Maturity, as expressed in the figure of the tragic politician, is to risk consigning one’s soul to hell for love of the world; to feel the pain of having done so; and yet to love the world regardless.

It is worth emphasizing that in Weber’s understanding, maturity requires acknowledging the tension between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility, rather than simply yielding to the consequentialist dictates of the ethic of responsibility. This distinction requires a further distinction between moral corruption as it is usually understood and the tragic politician’s moral wounding, or lack of moral wholeness. In the case of corruption, living in an ugly world has made the individual in question ugly, destroying their ability to live as a moral person; this contrasts with the tragic politician’s loss of moral integrity without corruption, which entails living and acting in an ugly world while striving to keep oneself from
becoming ugly. Finally, these understandings are both opposed to the approach represented by Hugo and by Orwell’s saints, who either deny the ugliness of the world or seek to remove themselves from that world altogether.

Weber seems to understand corruption as created by yielding entirely to an ethic of responsibility in one’s political actions, writing that “everything that is striven for through political action operating with violent means and following an ethic of responsibility endangers the salvation of the soul.” He elaborates that the violence of the ethic of responsibility—irreducibly violent, in his understanding, because of the inherent violence of politics itself—will inevitably “produce consequences… for [the politician’s] inner self, to which he must helplessly submit, unless he perceives them” (PV 126; emphasis added). In other words, the dangerous “consequences” wrought on the politician’s soul are able to corrupt him only if he remains unaware of their presence. That is, they can corrupt him only insofar as he is unaware of the paradoxical and tragic nature of his actions, ignoring the tension between the ethics of responsibility and of conviction in favor of acknowledging the ethic of responsibility alone.

While Weber emphasizes that the adherent to an ethic of responsibility is not necessarily an “unprincipled opportunist,” we can easily see how such opportunism might arise from such an unchecked adherence: if calculation of consequentialist benefit becomes the only consideration of importance, the politician may become more and more willing to use violence to achieve his ends (PV 120). This process of moral decay mirrors the similar resort to violence on the part of the adherents of the ethic of conviction, who run the risk of becoming “chiliastic prophet[s]” and
“call[ing] for the use of force for the last violent deed, which would then lead to a state of affairs in which all violence is annihilated” (PV 122; emphasis in original).

Weber’s argument suggests that both the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction can lead to unnecessary violence when unbalanced. This imbalance represents moral corruption: adherents of both ethics become easy with violence and lose their moral principles under the strain of the “ethical irrationality of the world” (PV 122). In contrast, Weber envisions the man with the “calling for politics” as an individual who adheres to an ethic of responsibility only up to a certain point, after which point he would be required to make a moral compromise that he cannot bring himself to countenance. He then shifts toward an ethic of conviction in declaring, following Martin Luther, “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Weber’s ideal politician—that individual who I have termed the tragic politician—is keenly aware of the costs that come to him from acting on the ethic of responsibility; the degree to which he “really feels such responsibility [for his actions] with heart and soul” saves him from the violence and corruption that so often follows from acting only on the ethic of responsibility, because he does “perceive” the consequences of his actions on his soul (PV 127). He is deeply aware and deeply anguished. In other words, he has “knowledge of tragedy” insofar as he keenly perceives the irreconcilable conflict between ideals and necessity, which awareness allows him to abandon the ethic of responsibility when it finally asks too much of him.

The tragic politician, then, is not morally corrupt, though his moral integrity—his “soul,” in Machiavelli’s language—is wounded by the actions that he must take
according to the ethic of responsibility. Following the dichotomy of maturity versus youth, we might say that he has lost his innocence.

It is crucial that it is the knowledge of tragedy, of moral conflict and compromise, that allows Weber’s politician to declare his resistance to consequentialism after a certain point. Moral self-awareness, and the anguish that follows from this awareness, becomes crucial in avoiding the moral conditioning that accompanies action. To put it another way, the moral self-awareness of Weber’s ideal politician enables him to break free of the slide toward violence that characterizes the non-ideal political actor. This is why Weber finds his moment of principled rejection to be so deeply important.

If Orwell understands Gandhi as a saint, and therefore as the political embodiment of the “anti-human” purity that Orwell finds so aesthetically distasteful, the tragic politician becomes the opposite: the political embodiment of moral struggle, anguish, and therefore of humanity and of life. Gandhi’s purity does not embody the ethic of conviction, but rather a position that denies the conflict between means and ends, and thereby denies the “knowledge of tragedy” that Weber finds so necessary. In Weber’s understanding, Gandhi would be a “political infant”—in sharp contrast to the tragic politician’s maturity, represented in his willingness to accept moral difficulty and to take on the burden of political action despite that difficulty (PV 123). This maturity is deeply human, as opposed to Gandhi’s sterile sainthood. Weber himself recognizes the central humanity of the tragic politician’s dilemma: the “mature man” who eventually declares, “Here I stand” represents something “genuinely human and moving” (PV 127).
Finally, it is important to emphasize the interaction of the tragic politician’s maturity with his role as a father figure. Hoederer’s maturity, obviously, manifests in his paternal relationship toward Hugo: he is the wise father attempting to guide Hugo away from his youthful, cruel idealism. This relationship points to the essentially paternal (and, as I shall argue, paternalistic) nature of the tragic politician archetype. I use *paternal* instead of *parental* advisedly, as the tragic politician’s character dovetails with specifically masculine narratives of power, while conflicting with narratives of feminine and maternal power. The tragic politician, in other words, is unambiguously paternal and male.

To begin with, the tragic politician is paternal in the general, abstracted sense that we evoke when we term male leaders “father of the nation.” Hoederer displays his paternal nature through his relationship with Hugo, but his essential maturity as a tragic politician inherently positions itself against the implied immaturity of others who either have not entered the political sphere or who, like Hugo, have done so unwisely. While “fatherhood” as a concept is easily abstracted from its literal meaning of fathering a child to the level of paternal care for a political community, “motherhood” is not so easily distinguished from the act of caring for a child. That is, the “father”-as-politician can protect and guide the nation-as-child, but the “mother’s” affections are more closely tied to a *particular* child or family. This draws, to an extent, from the well-chronicled association of the masculine with the public, political, and universal, and the counterbalancing association of the feminine with the private, domestic, and particular. The mother nurtures her child within the private
space of the home; the father-as-leader protects and guides nation-as-child in the public, political space.

This is not to discount the equally fundamental archetype of “mother of the nation.” Rather, I would suggest that “mother of the nation,” while an abstracted and idealized concept, is placed on all women, burdening them with the responsibility to raise their children as good citizens and in accordance with national ideals.13 “Father of the nation,” in contrast, is an archetype assigned to one particular man, who holds an abstracted paternal power over the political community. That is, “mother of the nation” masses individual households, creating a vast collection of particularistic private, domestic spaces; “father of the nation” points to one unified public, political space.14

When the tragic politician dirties his hands for the love of his city, he does so as a father protecting his children. Narratives of mothers dirtying their hands, however, tend to more closely tie the compromising action to the desire to protect a particular child than to political principle. We see this, for example, in Aeschylus’ Oresteia: the queen Clytemnestra, an early figure of ambiguous female power, literally dirties her hands by murdering her husband Agamemnon and seizing political power in the name of justice. However, the justice she seeks is justice for her

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13 The concept of “republican motherhood” is an example of this trend in the early United States (Kerber 11-12).
14 Here, I echo a variant of Hegel’s division between civil society and the state. In the sphere of civil society, we move beyond the wholly particularistic concerns of the family to become interdependent with each other in the public space, yet we are still definable by our individual and particularistic interests. In the state, by contrast, we exist primarily as a collective. While my analysis does not map exactly to Hegel’s terms, the concept of “mother of the nation” as the collection of individual households is roughly equivalent to Hegelian civil society; similarly, “father of the nation” evokes the unified collective of the Hegelian state. See Philosophy of Right sec. 182, 258, 260.
daughter specifically, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to the gods for ease of passage to Troy, rather than justice for the political community in general.\footnote{In describing Clytemnestra’s motivations as such, I am simplifying a contentious and complex question. For example, in Agamemnon’s absence Clytemnestra takes a lover, Aegisthus; some versions of her story, such that set forward by Homer in the \textit{Odyssey}, present her love for Aegisthus as her driving motivation in murdering Agamemnon. As my citation of Homer suggests, this question is additionally complicated because Clytemnestra is a mythical figure whose story has been set down by many different authors. Nevertheless, I would submit that the Clytemnestra of Aeschylus’ \textit{Oresteia} clearly understands herself to be acting in the name of justice to avenge her murdered daughter Iphigeneia. After killing Agamemnon, she declares, “Act for act, wound for wound! ...By the sword you did your work and by the sword you die,” in as clear a statement of Kantian retributive justice as we might possibly wish for (Aeschylus 1555-11558).}

It is important that Clytemnestra, in dirtying her hands, becomes explicitly associated with masculine characteristics of power and strength of will.\footnote{As one character says of her, “Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal, full of self-command” (Aeschylus 355-356).} She appears cold and emotionless in plotting and carrying out the murder; John Collier’s 1882 painting \textit{After the Murder} portrays her as proud and almost without expression, even as she holds the bloody ax. This brings me to the role of anguish and moral struggle in shaping the different relationships of male and female leaders with the tragic politician archetype, which is tied inextricably to the place of emotion in stereotypical narratives of masculinity and femininity.

For the male tragic politician, as I have shown, anguish demonstrates his Weberian sense of objectivity and his keen, unblinkered perception of the tragedy and messiness of the world (PV 116). Masculinity is powerfully associated with this sense of objectivity and rational understanding, which appear as characteristics of strength. In contrast, the feminine is often tied to a lack of objectivity, manifesting as excessive or “unreasonable” emotion. If a display of moral anguish in a male leader demonstrates characteristics appropriate in a politician—that is, moral awareness and a sense of responsibility—a display of anguish in a female leader would show the
opposite. Anguish in a male leader, that is, demonstrates his objectivity and moral judgment, and thus identifies him as having the knowledge of the world appropriate to the tragic politician; anguish in a female leader depicts judgment clouded by emotion, and therefore shows her to be weak.

We see this clearly in the 2011 film The Iron Lady, a biographical work about the life of Margaret Thatcher. An icon of female power, Thatcher was also—as her eponymous nickname suggests—famously steely and unemotional. Given that the film’s promotional materials described it as depicting “the price she paid for power,” one might have expected that The Iron Lady would portray Thatcher’s hidden moral anguish over her actions as prime minister, consistent with the archetype of the tragic politician. Yet by focusing on her relationship with her husband, the film located her anguish not in the political sphere but instead in the domestic, and tied her anguish to weakness by positioning it as an effect of her suffering from dementia.

Essentially, the tragic politician archetype functions only when the politician in question is male. As an image of paternal care and of anguish as tied to power, the archetype becomes incoherent when paired with a female leader, in that narratives of motherhood and of female emotionality are inconsistent with the archetype’s core characteristics. To put it another way, Hoederer’s famous speech on dirty hands simply would not hold the same emotional or narrative power if Hoederer were female. For this reason, the tragic politician is fundamentally male and a figure of paternal power.

17 I have argued here that the connection between masculine power and the tragic politician archetype is, if not coincidental, at least external to the archetype and to the narrative of dirty hands: masculine power happens to fit better with the tragic politician archetype than female power. I suspect that there may exist an even stronger connection between gender and the tragic politician archetype, with
1.3 *Dirty Hands*, Act VII: Hugo Takes Action

In the preceding section, I have described Hoederer’s characterization of Hugo as morally self-indulgent and have situated Hoederer’s argument within the broader framework of the tragic politician archetype. This section will return briefly to the final act of *Dirty Hands* to analyze the highly controversial significance of Hugo’s final action, and will once more contextualize this aspect of the play within the dirty hands narrative.

In a play so determinedly ambiguous, Hugo’s actions in Act VII are perhaps the most striking manifestation of ambiguity. The act opens with Hugo concluding his story: for the previous several acts of the play, he has been narrating his experience working for Hoederer to Olga, a staunch Communist. As described, Hugo has successfully killed Hoederer, not for political reasons, but rather because he saw Hoederer embracing Jessica, Hugo’s wife. After three years in prison, Hugo has returned to Olga and the Communists, but now discovers that the Party has changed its line and now, after Hoederer’s death, supports his policy of cooperation with the fascists and moderates. Olga urges Hugo to acquiesce silently to this change of policy by hiding the Communist’s involvement with Hoederer’s assassination. Yet Hugo, refusing to renounce his deed, instead declares the murder to have been politically motivated after all, and kicks open Olga’s door to face a Communist death squad.

Within the critical literature, the most common interpretation of Hugo’s final actions is to characterize his death as a continuation of the bad faith that has motivated him throughout the play. As Minahen puts it, Hugo “once again flee[s] narratives of masculine power intrinsic to the structure of the dirty hands narrative itself. I do not think this argument is necessary for my point, however, and I lack the space to delve into this argument here.
responsibility into…the safe haven of death” (Minahen 47; McCall 77-79). This interpretation asserts that Hugo has not changed or moved away from his bad faith over the course of the entire drama, making the critical error of ignoring the play’s function as a bildungsroman. Hugo has spent the play waffling with indecision, but here he finally acts, and acts quickly and decisively. Hugo’s characterization of his own death is absolutely crucial: declaring that he “loved [Hoederer] more than you [the Communist Party] could ever love him,” Hugo argues that rewriting Hoederer’s murder as politically motivated will give Hoederer “the death he deserves.” “A man like Hoederer… dies for his ideas, for his political program” (DH 241). That is, Hugo situates himself both as acting out of love for Hoederer and as rejecting Hoederer’s program of collaboration. He paradoxically honors Hoederer in his act of rejection.

This speech has two important ramifications. First, Hugo’s decisive rejection of Hoederer’s political program differs from his earlier rejection of that same program, which was founded on bad faith and so led not to action, but instead to indecision. At the play’s end, Hugo genuinely subscribes to the moral principle that Hoederer’s ideas were genuinely morally wrong. Moreover, this principle is Hugo’s own. It is crucial that Hugo has not yielded to Hoederer’s paternal influence, allowing his identity to be shaped by others once again; rather, he has found his own moral voice, distinct from Hoederer’s or from the party’s. He has become an authentic, autonomous moral actor.

Second, Hugo frames his action as an expression of his love for Hoederer. This is striking when compared to Hoederer’s earlier accusation that Hugo is motivated not by love but by hatred, for both humanity and himself. Hugo, that is, has
learned enough from Hoederer and has matured sufficiently as to be able to act out of love. Furthermore, since he initially “detest[ed] men because [he] detest[ed] [him]self,” this detail also demonstrates that he has reached some level of peace with himself: if he no longer detests humankind, presumably he has grown and changed enough so that he no longer detests himself either (DH 220).

It is possible that the critical confusion over the significance of Hugo’s death arises from his expression of love for Hoederer and rejection of Hoederer’s politics. In a 1964 interview with Paolo Caruso, Sartre stated that “the play’s meaning does not coincide with Hugo’s fate” (meaning, in context, that Hugo’s ultimate triumph does not place him philosophically in the right), but was meant to “examine dialectically the imperatives of praxis at the time” (“Dirty Hands” 219). Sartre’s use of “dialectic” here is suggestive: we might read Hugo’s complex relationship with Hoederer as reflective of the play’s structure as a philosophical dialectic between the two characters.

As framed by Weber in “Politics as a Vocation,” the problem of dirty hands manifests as a dialectic between the ethic of responsibility (Hoederer) and the ethic of conviction (Hugo, as he asserts this ethic authentically at the play’s end). Both ethics exist apart from each other, but must engage with each other in order to “constitute a genuine man… [with] the ‘calling for politics’”; indeed, Weber speaks of these ethics as “supplements” to each other, rather than “absolute contrasts” (PV 127). As Michael Walzer describes, this “supplementing” of ethics in Weber’s political actor leads to a characteristically Protestant inner guilt, carried within the politician’s soul
and not externally expressed. That is, for Weber, the problem of dirty hands is wrestled through “entirely within the individual conscience” (PA 174, 177).

On closer examination, *Dirty Hands* might seem somewhat strange in this respect, for we are never granted access to Hoederer’s conscience and therefore to any anguish that he might bear. Indeed, we have very little indication that Hoederer is anything other than an adherent to the consequentialist mandates of the ethic of responsibility: Sartre provides only the barest of hints, when Hoederer responds to Hugo’s suggestion that Hoederer “must feel right inside” with a short laugh and a wry, “Someday I’ll tell you about me” (*DH* 230). To an extent, this is simply an aspect of the play’s construction; McCall notes that “although Sartre reveals Hugo from several points of view, giving the spectator the impression of complete familiarity, Hoederer remains elusive” (74). Nevertheless, the absence of a window into Hoederer’s inner life is important. Walzer writes that he “suspect[s] [Hoederer] of being a suffering servant [Walzer’s term for Weber’s ideal politician],” but without any evidence, he can do no more than suspect (PA 179). To use Walzer’s language, Hoederer provides us with no “record of his anguish,” and Walzer suggests that this lack of a “record” is what leads us to distrust political actors like those described in Machiavelli (PA 176). Why, then, trust Hoederer?

If we read Hugo and Hoederer’s relationship as a dialectic, Hugo’s final action is crucial because it allows us to see and understand the moral compromises that Hoederer has undertaken, yet does not admit to openly. Hugo, speaking clearly and decisively as an authentic voice of conscience for the first time, dies for his belief in the moral bankruptcy of Hoederer’s policy. In other words, Hugo’s closing words
act as an externalization of Hoederer’s own conscience, revealing to us the doubts that Hoederer cannot or will not voice explicitly during his time on stage. Together, Hugo and (what we see of) Hoederer act as the ethical “supplements” envisioned by Weber. Indeed, the fact that Hugo both loves Hoederer and rejects his program underlines how Weber’s ethic of responsibility and ethic of conviction oppose yet supplement each other, working in a dialectic that points to a synthesis of the two in Weber’s “genuine man”—perhaps represented by Hoederer himself, if we were to see his inner life and find him anguished (PV 127).

Why does Hoederer not show us this anguish, if he does indeed feel it? To an extent, perhaps this is because we see him only through the eyes of Hugo and Jessica, who are in awe of his presence and his substantiality; Hoederer never appears in the play except in the presence of one or both members of the young couple. This is why Hoederer might appear as pure Sartrean subjectivity and transcendence without also being bound by facticity in the irreducible human struggle: he does struggle with his facticity, but we, seeing him through Hugo and Jessica’s eyes as a figure of impressive solidity and confidence, are simply not aware of it (Wyatt 5). This implication of unrevealed complexity, caused by seeing Hoederer only from a single outside perspective, may actually allow us to accept Hugo’s externalization of Hoederer’s anguish as a genuine manifestation of Hoederer’s own internal struggle. That is, the hidden struggle speaks to the other complexities of character that have also been hidden from us (McCall 74).

On the other hand, Hoederer’s political situation is not one in which a display of anguish would be well received. He is operating in the midst of a war, and
attempting to move swiftly and decisively in order to mitigate loss of life; he must appear confident in order to quash doubts and move his program forward successfully. A politician operating in a different context—perhaps a more democratic one—might have a very different incentive to display anguish, rather than hide it. Walzer, for example, suggests that not only do political leaders usually find it useful to “stress the painfulness of decision-making,” they may even fabricate that pain entirely in order to reap the political rewards of emphasizing it (Just and Unjust Wars 19).

Without a “record of anguish,” then, it is impossible to know whether a politician in a circumstance such as Hoederer’s really feels the burden of his actions. Hoederer is in many ways an archetypal representation of the tragic politician in his willingness to dirty his hands, his maturity, and his willingness to invoke the claim of moral self-indulgence against his idealistic opponent who wishes to remain pure. Yet whether he has the requisite “knowledge of tragedy” and level of moral self-awareness to be a tragic politician depends crucially on his anguish. In the case of Dirty Hands, the answer to this question depends on the cogency of the dialectic between Hugo and Hoederer, along with the authenticity of Hugo’s final action. Yet in view of the central role of anguish in the broader context of the dirty hands narrative as a whole, it is important that we understand the moral importance of anguish within this narrative. It is to this topic that I now turn.
Described by Hegel as “one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time,” and by George Eliot as “one of the finest tragedies of the single dramatic poet who can be said to stand on a level with Shakespeare,” Sophocles’ *Antigone* is among the most well-known and classic works of theater in what is commonly referred to as the Western canon (*Aesthetics* 464; Eliot 363). The play has been revisited and rewritten countless times, and Jean Anouilh’s 1944 reimagining has emerged as one of the better-known efforts. Anouilh’s *Antigone*, first performed in Vichy Paris and then again after the Liberation, is one of two World War II-era *Antigones*—the other being Bertolt Brecht’s 1948 interpretation. Brecht’s play, stringently anti-Nazi, leaves little to the political imagination; Anouilh’s, in contrast, is significantly more ambiguous.

Anouilh holds steady the basic outline of Sophocles’ classic play. The city of Thebes, formerly ruled by Oedipus, is in ruins after his departure and the warring for the throne between his two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. The army of Polynices, the rebel, has been defeated, but both brothers have been killed on the battlefield. Creon, their uncle, has taken power and has declared that while Eteocles will be given a hero’s burial, the corpse of Polynices will be left to rot in the sun, thus preventing his soul from entering the afterlife. Antigone, Oedipus’ daughter, buries the body of her brother against Creon’s orders, and is condemned to death. The play ends in tragedy for Creon as well as for Antigone: his execution of Antigone causes his son Haemon,
Antigone’s fiancé, to commit suicide in protest, and his wife then kills herself out of grief.

Anouilh adds some characters and deletes others (most notably the blind prophet Tiresias, who warns Creon of the folly of his position). Perhaps most significantly, Anouilh alters the plot so that the brother buried by Antigone might have been either Polynices or Eteocles. Creon confides to Antigone that both bodies were mangled beyond recognition after the brothers’ fight to the death, but that he picked one corpse at random to represent Polynices the traitor, for the purpose of telling a clear story about the distinction between disloyalty and loyalty. Nevertheless, the essential movement of Anouilh’s play remains the same, as a contest of wills between Creon’s authority and Antigone’s defiance.\(^1\)

Hoederer bears a striking resemblance to Anouilh’s Creon. Both are leaders in difficult times, embodiments of the tragic politician in their own way. In a moment so similar to Dirty Hands as to seem to have inspired Sartre while writing four years later, Creon says to Antigone: “You despise me, don’t you? …Funny. I’ve often imagined having this conversation… with a pale young man who’s tried to kill me… from whom I can extract nothing but scorn” (Anouilh 41; ellipses in original). The “conversation,” in this case, is a confrontation between Creon and Antigone over not only the justice of Creon’s refusal to bury Polynices, but over Creon’s willingness as a politician to undertake morally ugly tasks.\(^2\) The “pale young man” who provides “nothing but scorn” could well be Hugo, speaking with Hoederer.

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\(^1\) Interestingly, Leonard C. Pronko describes Anouilh’s Antigone as “not a translation or an adaptation,” but rather “a re-creation” (Pronko 201).

\(^2\) Or rather, the corpse arbitrarily declared to be Polynices’. 
Various critics, among them Pol Gaillard and Dorothy McCall, have commented on the similarities between Hoederer and Anouilh’s Creon. McCall positions Hoederer and Creon as “accepting life,” and therefore opposing Hugo and Antigone’s association with the purity of death (McCall 60-61, quoting Gaillard in translation). As her analysis suggests, the imagery in Anouilh’s Antigone strikingly foreshadows Dirty Hands’ use of dichotomies of life/death, maturity/youth, and worldliness/purity, as described in the previous chapter. In both plays, the mature statesman is linked to the acceptance of life and of the world, while his challenger represents a youthful rage for purity and death. While this gloss is perhaps crude and certainly skates over the many differences between the plays, it is nonetheless instructive in suggesting how Anouilh’s Creon, like Hoederer, fits into the archetype of the tragic politician. Moreover, just as Hoederer’s use of the moral self-indulgence argument clarified the role of moral identity and the dichotomy of moral purity versus moral wounding in the tragic politician archetype, Creon’s own quirks as a character will illuminate certain new aspects of this moral story—in particular, the importance and ambiguity of anguish.

In 1946, Sartre delivered a lecture in New York on contemporary French theater that positioned Antigone as paradigmatic of a new type of play, along with the work of Albert Camus and of Sartre himself. In Sartre’s vision, these plays arose out of the material and moral crisis of French life during and after the Occupation:

Dramas which are short and violent, sometimes reduced to the dimensions of a single long act… dramas entirely centered on one event—usually a conflict of rights, bearing on some very general situation—written in a sparse, extremely tense style, with a small cast not presented for their individual characters but thrust into a
conjunction where they are forced to make a choice—in brief this is the theater, austere, moral, mythic, and ceremonial in aspect, which has given birth to new plays in Paris during the Occupation and especially since the end of the war. (“Forgers of Myths” 42)

Sartre had yet to write Dirty Hands, but this passage describes that play well. The lecture positions Anouilh’s Antigone as representative of an understanding theater as moral struggle, moral self-awareness, and perhaps, following Sartre’s characterization of the new mode of theater as “the preoccupation of a nation which… is searching for new principles,” even as moral self-creation (“Forgers” 43). It is perhaps not surprising that Creon and Hoederer, both manifestations of the tragic politician archetype, should arise out of such a context.

Sartre’s talk also noted the political controversy sparked by Anouilh’s play. Anouilh, he says, “stirred up a storm of discussion with Antigone, being charged on the one hand with being a Nazi, on the other with being an anarchist,” though Sartre perhaps reductively reads this firestorm of criticism as a demonstration of Antigone’s moral relevance and importance (“Forgers” 40). To a certain extent, given the political situation at the moment of Antigone’s opening, this controversy was probably inevitable: the question, in the minds of “almost every commentator who saw [the play] performed during the last month of the Occupation or the first after the Liberation,” was whether Antigone’s sympathies lay with Vichy France and the German occupation, or with the Resistance (Witt 56). Creon, for example, was commonly interpreted as an analogue to the Vichy leaders Marshal Pétain and Pierre Laval, Pétain’s prime minister, leading to his character’s favorable reception by the collaborationist press and full-throated rejection by the resistance (Freeman xlvii-
klviii; Howarth 49).³ Antigone’s rejection of Creon’s authority, on the other hand, was often interpreted as a symbol of the Resistance. Kenneth Krauss quotes the French actress Beatrix Dussane:

“And each time [Antigone] declared or let it be understood that no argument or force should prevent her from burying her brother, the public exulted in its heart, You shall not prevent us from helping the men hidden in the wood behind the farm…” (Krauss 121)

The Resistance and the French collaborationists, then, fought over the meaning of Creon and Antigone and of the meaning of the play as a whole. Any given understanding of Anouilh’s message rested not only on the various significances of the clashing protagonists, but on a sense of where the play itself came down between the two. If Creon was Vichy and Antigone the Resistance, did Anouilh show Vichy to be corrupt and the Resistance noble, or the Resistance to be childish and shrill in opposition to Creon-as-Pétain, “a slave to duty who sacrifices everything that is dear to him for the sake of his country” (Freeman xlvii, quoting Charles Méré)?⁴ As Mary Ann Frese Witt puts it, the interpretive issue here is, essentially, “who ‘wins’ in the struggle between the two antagonists” (58). Four years later, Sartre would experience the same type of struggle over the “proper” interpretation of Dirty Hands. While Sartre was outspoken in his own political beliefs as related to the play, however, Anouilh confused matters further by maintaining that he had intended Antigone to be essentially apolitical (Witt 61).

³ Howarth cites a Resistance writer who, after having attended the wartime performance of Antigone, bluntly declared, “Creon, c’est Laval” (Howarth 49).
⁴ Mary Ann Frese Witt suggests an interesting alternate interpretation, according to which Creon represents Vichy, yet Antigone represents not the Resistance but the obsession with death, sacrifice, youthful purity, and the “rejection of bourgeois mediocrity” of the fascist far right (Witt 59, 66).
The confluence between *Antigone* and *Dirty Hands* goes some way toward contextualizing an otherwise incongruous question that Sartre received while interviewed at the 1948 press showing of *Dirty Hands*: “Who is to decide between Creon and Antigone?” Sartre responded, “As in Sophocles, none of my characters is in the wrong nor in the right” (“Dirty Hands” 209). It is of course telling that, when asked a question about *Antigone*, Sartre replied with an answer about his own play. To an extent, Sartre’s response foreshadows Albert Camus’ own definition of tragedy, put forward seven years later: “The forces confronting each other… are equally legitimate, equally justified… Antigone is right, but Creon is not wrong” (“Future of Tragedy” 301-302). Yet while Sartre references Sophocles in his response to the interviewer—and given the cultural cachet of Anouilh’s *Antigone* at the time, it is entirely possible that the interviewer meant to refer to Anouilh rather than Sophocles—there is some suggestion that Camus’ aphoristic description of tragedy was intended to reference Anouilh’s *Antigone*, rather than that of Sophocles (Freeman xlvi; Thody 31).

This confusion between Sophocles’ and Anouilh’s *Antigones* reflects the uneasy relationship between the two plays, the extent to which Anouilh draws from Sophocles and yet significantly rewrites and recontextualizes the substance of the story. Anouilh’s Creon fits easily into the archetype of the tragic politician, as can be seen in his foreshadowing of Hoederer, but his namesake in Sophocles’ play is emphatically not a tragic politician. By placing Anouilh’s and Sophocles’ texts side by side, we can better understand what aspects of Creon Anouilh altered in order to make the character more congruent with the tragic politician archetype. This, in turn,
will elucidate new components of that archetype by demonstrating which characteristics of Creon must be stressed in order to fashion him as a tragic politician, and thus which characteristics are central to that archetype.

In yet another anticipation of Dirty Hands, Anouilh’s Antigone extends the metaphors of theatricality used by Hugo to describe the play as a whole: the play’s opening is self-consciously meta-theatrical, with the character of the “Prologue” describing how “the people gathered here are about to act out the story of Antigone” (Anouilh 3). Murray Sachs writes that this meta-theatricality ensures that “the audience has the pleasurable sense of peeking behind the scenes, of being ‘in’ on the mechanics of illusion” (Sachs 8). Similarly, by returning to Sophocles as a source text and examining the methods by which Anouilh derived his Creon from the original character, we are able to look in on the moment of literary creation, and the mechanics by which a particular manifestation of the tragic politician comes into existence.

2.2 Two Antigones and Two Creons

Though Sophocles’ play is, of course, titled after Antigone, the character of Creon is central to the plot of the play and to its tragedy. Notably, George Steiner writes that “commentators have repeatedly suggested that Antigone and Creon would be a more just title” (133). As Steiner describes, critical argument over the play is equally rich in its discussion of Creon’s character as of Antigone’s. To an extent, the structure of the play itself contributes to this double focus on both Creon and Antigone: the play is what is known as a “diptych,” shifting focus after Antigone’s condemnation and concomitant disappearance from the stage in order to become an
exploration of Creon’s character, a chronicling of his growing doubt and eventual collapse (Howarth 19). 5

Given the degree of controversy that dogged Anouilh’s reinterpretation of Creon, it is perhaps not surprising that Sophocles’ Creon has also generated a wide range of critical disagreement. A very small minority of the critical literature understands Creon as a positive figure, the farthest thing from a villain; rather, these critics argue, Creon acts in good faith to serve his city. 6 In contrast, the most severe possible reading of Creon is perhaps that of Bertolt Brecht, whose 1948 interpretation of Friedrich Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles positions Creon as a blatant Hitler allegory; this is a vision of Creon as representative of unalloyed tyranny. 7 Most readings of Creon lie between these two poles, varying in sympathy as to his difficulties but remaining condemnatory all the same.

In Sophocles’ text, Creon’s defining motive is entirely clear: he is deeply concerned with the maintenance of state power and of popular loyalty to the city of Thebes. This concern is apparent from Creon’s very first appearance on stage. Using Plato’s classic metaphor of the “ship of state,” he evocatively describes the recent chaos wracking Thebes but then assures the citizens of his ability to right the “ship’s” course by restoring order. He declares:

…Anyone thinking another man more a friend than his own country, I rate him nowhere… …I would not be silent

5 Somewhat evocatively, Steiner describes the play’s structure as “dual or ‘broken-backed’” (Steiner 177).
6 See Calder, “Sophokles’ Political Tragedy.”
7 Bernard Knox describes Brecht’s Creon as painted in “Hitlerian black,” with Antigone as the representation of Brecht’s frustrated longing for a German uprising against Hitler (Knox 36). In the original German, Brecht goes so far as to have Creon’s subordinates refer to him as “mein Führer,” rather than a more literal translation of the Sophoclean “my king” (Savage 102).
if I saw ruin, not safety, on the way
towards my fellow citizens. I would not count
any enemy of my country as a friend—
because of what I know, that she it is
which gives us our security… (Sophocles 182-189)

These lines all make essentially the same point—traitors are worthless and
dangerous, security paramount—but Creon’s constant reiteration of this argument
emphasizes both his sense of its importance and his own deep anxiety over security’s
simultaneous necessity and fragility. Given that the state provides security, loyalty to
the state is necessarily of the greatest importance. It is this reasoning that leads Creon
to declare the necessity of desecrating Polynices’ corpse by refusing it a burial:
Polynices, unlike his faithful brother Eteocles, was disloyal to Thebes. To allow
Polynices’ corpse to rot while granting Eteocles a hero’s burial reestablishes a clear
distinction between disloyalty and loyalty, and emphasizes the moral centrality of
loyalty (Sophocles 191-210).

As Creon’s order is challenged over the course of the play, first by Antigone,
then by the prophet Tiresias and eventually by the Chorus itself (representing the old
men of Thebes), Creon’s arguments make a small but important rhetorical shift,
moving from emphasizing the importance of loyalty to emphasizing the dangers that
follow from disloyalty. “There is nothing worse,” he argues, “than disobedience to
authority. It destroys cities, it demolishes homes; it breaks and routs one’s allies”
(671-673). This emphasis not only on loyalty, but also on unquestioning obedience,
points to Creon’s hamartia: his rigid insistence on his own authority above all and his
concomitant refusal to listen to other points of view.
This flaw perhaps appears most clearly in Creon’s confrontation with his son Haemon, Antigone’s fiancé, midway through the play. When Haemon challenges his father’s order that Antigone be executed for her disobedience, emphasizing that “the entire people of Thebes” is against Antigone’s death, Creon counters, “Should the city tell me how I am to rule them? …Is not the city thought to be the ruler’s?” In response, Haemon memorably declares that his father “would be a fine dictator of a desert” (733-739). As Haemon’s argument shows, the injustice of Creon’s orders (that is, that Polynices not be buried and that Antigone be killed) lies in his refusal to admit the essentially collective nature of the political endeavor: as a political leader, if his rule is to be legitimate, he must take account of his people’s opinions. Instead, Creon’s refusal to acknowledge this crucial component of politics is the source of his brittleness and his downfall. When he says of Antigone that “the most fanatic spirits fall most of all… it is the toughest iron… you may see most shattered, twisted, shivered to fragments,” he unwittingly describes himself (484-487). 8

Throughout the play, Sophocles describes Creon’s rigidity through the metaphor of blindness. This metaphor is implicitly invoked in the contrast between Creon’s refusal to yield in the face of criticism and the urgings of Tiresias, the blind prophet, that he do so; it appears explicitly when a crumpled and defeated Creon laments “the awful blindness of these plans of mine” (1264-1265). Here, Creon’s “blindness” represents a refusal to admit his own mistakes or the possibility of such

8 Perhaps this dual act of description—that is, that Creon is simultaneously describing the brittleness of both himself and of Antigone—is appropriate. George Steiner argues that Creon and Antigone’s conflict arises from their mirroring of each other, particularly in their mutual unpleasantness: “Are they not, in fact, profoundly similar? Are their characters not hewn to precisely the same ‘sharp edges’? Does Antigone’s treatment of hapless Ismene not closely correspond to Creon’s treatment of herself and of Haemon?” (Steiner 184).
mistakes, and an attendant lack of self-awareness. Insofar as he is able to comment on
his own blindness at the play’s end, however, the tragedy he begets has awakened
some degree of latent self-awareness. Following this, he is able to express his own
responsibility for the deaths of his wife and son, both having committed suicide as a
direct result of his order that Antigone be buried alive (Sophocles 1269, 1319).

Much like the brittle iron that shatters, Creon utterly falls to pieces the
moment that he recognizes his own foolishness. He jumps from a complete refusal to
admit any culpability or fallibility on his own part, to an acceptance of his own
culpability to the point of essentially asking to be put to death: “lead me away, a vain
silly man… everything in my hands is crossed” (1339-1344). It would be inaccurate
to say that Creon revels in his anguish, as he derives no joy or self-satisfaction from
his admission of guilt; by the play’s end, he is a wreck of a man. Yet in a sense, he
welcomes in his wrongdoing and his pain just as he welcomes his death, allowing his
pain and guilt to envelop him entirely.9

Sophocles’ Creon, therefore, is emphatically not a tragic politician. He
recognizes his actions as leader to be morally problematic, but only after he has
already repudiated those actions, and not while he believes in their rightness or
expediency. If Creon fit the archetype of tragic politician, he would be troubled by his
orders to desecrate Polynices and to bury Antigone alive even as he gave those orders

9 Read carefully, Creon’s embrace of his own wrongdoing may be even more totalizing than a simple
admission of guilt. To declare that “everything in my hands is crossed” is, according to the simplest
reading, to acknowledge that I have done wrong. Yet it might also be read as a statement of a more all-
embracing metaphysical guilt: everything in my hands is crossed, not only those things that have
led to this tragedy but everything that I have done or ever will do. In this reading, Creon is guilty not
only because he has done wrong, but also because he is Creon: that is, being Creon, “a vain silly man,”
he is incapable of doing anything but wrong. This represents a complete and utter self-repudiation. If
this reading is correct, it is no wonder that Creon’s last action in the play is to desperately request his
own execution.
and felt them to be necessary; from such situations, in which leaders understand themselves as “doing bad to do good,” does the problem of dirty hands arise. Creon, in contrast, first wholly believes in both the goodness and the necessity of his order, and does not understand himself to be sacrificing any moral principle or any moral integrity in carrying it out. Then, after his moment of collapse, he repudiates his order entirely. In other words, Sophocles’ Creon does not grapple with the dirty hands problem, because he switches between believing his orders to be wholly, unproblematically right and wholly, unproblematically wrong, with none of the paradoxical ambiguity that characterizes cases of dirty hands.

Anouilh’s Creon, though he shares a name and a nearly identical politician situation, is an entirely different creature. To understand the differences between Sophocles’ and Anouilh’s interpretations of the character, we need only look to Anouilh’s rewriting of the confrontation scene between Creon and Haemon. In the original confrontation, as noted, Haemon comes off well and Creon poorly; in Anouilh’s text, the situation is reversed. Whereas Sophocles’ Haemon marshals moral arguments against his father’s arrogance, the arguments of Anouilh’s Haemon are entirely particularistic: he simply wants his fiancée to live, and begs his father not to “let them take her from me” (Anouilh 51). As Steiner puts it, Anouilh’s Haemon, unlike Sophocles’ dignified Haemon, is “average in ever fiber” (Steiner 156). Creon becomes a father consoling his hysterical son, not a dictator confronted with his own rigidity through moral argument.

Even more crucially, Anouilh alters the situation so that the people of Thebes—here represented by a gathering “mob”—are in favor of Antigone’s
execution, instead of against it, as in Sophocles. When Creon points to the massing crowd as a reason not to call off the execution, Haemon cries out, “The mob! What does it matter? You’re the master!”; Creon responds, “Under the law. Not against it” (Anouilh 50). This is almost an exact reversal of Sophocles. Here, it is Haemon, not Creon, who advocates acting against the will of the people, and Creon, not Haemon, who declares that the leader’s legitimate power only extends so far as the people are willing to let it go. Creon’s fluid movement between “the mob” and “the law” reflects the extent to which he understands the democratic basis for the legitimacy of his rule: “the law” becomes the democratic presence of the people, rather than the abstract, rigid order of Sophocles’ Creon. As Freeman points out, this scene is exemplary in its exculpation of Creon; if Creon admits of democratic limits to his authority, “then it must be doubted that he can be considered a tyrant at all” (Freeman 69). In this sense, Anouilh’s Creon represents “the best of all possible Creons” (Witt 65).

It is notable, however, that Creon refers to the people of Thebes as a mob, a word with an unpleasant, antidemocratic tinge that points to his relatively dim view of those he governs. In Anouilh’s version of the “ship of state” speech, Creon argues for the necessity of leadership by expressing his view that, without a “captain,” “the whole lot of [those “on board”] will die together because they think of nothing but their own skins and their own petty concerns” (40). His description of the rationale behind leaving Polynices’ corpse unburied is similarly misanthropic, even patronizing: the desecration of the corpse, he declares, is necessary “to make those clods I govern understand what’s what” (38).
Anouilh also deletes the character of Tiresias entirely. Sachs’ analysis is instructive here:

[Tiresias] steps forward as the embodiment of the last hope that Creon might yet see reason before it is too late; and he serves also to underline Creon’s blindness… Blindness is not the essence of Anouilh’s Creon: he is, on the contrary, completely lucid. Tiresias would have been quite superfluous for Anouilh’s purpose. (Sachs 8)

That is, in contrast to the metaphorical “blindness” of Sophocles’ Creon, Anouilh’s Creon is absolutely self-aware. Indeed, insofar as Sophocles’ Creon’s lack of self-awareness and his insistence on the absolute supremacy of his own authority are linked, Anouilh’s Creon’s self-awareness and acceptance of legitimate limits on his power are also linked, and are equally repudiations of the original Creon’s rigidity. Perhaps this is why Anouilh’s play does not follow Sophocles’ diptych structure, but instead distributes its focus evenly on both Antigone and Creon over the course of the entire play; Anouilh’s Creon is self-aware throughout the play, so there is no structural need to switch focus onto his collapse and development of self-awareness in the second half of the play. This points to another key difference between the two Antigones: while the original Creon dramatically repudiates his orders and his legitimacy as a leader, Anouilh’s Creon never openly changes his position on the necessity of Polynices’ desecration and Antigone’s internment. Anouilh’s play closes not with a renunciation of failed leadership and a prayer for death, but with a reminder that Creon must attend a five o’clock meeting.

The chief means by which Anouilh’s Creon demonstrates his self-awareness is through his near-constant description of kingship as the act of playing a role. Following the metaphor of the “ship of state,” he declares that “someone has to steer
the ship,” and that he is the one who has stepped into this role (39). Both he and the “Chorus” (in Anouilh, a single character) characterize his own act of leadership as analogous to a “workman” performing “an everyday job”: according to the Chorus, Creon begins each day “like a laborer starting a day’s work” (4, 33). Most strikingly, when Antigone accuses Creon of being “loathsome,” he responds, “Yes, child. It’s my job” (38).

These descriptions emphasize the notion of kingship as a preexisting position that must be filled, just as an available job must be done by an available “workman.” This role of kingship requires that the king perform certain unpleasant, “loathsome” tasks for the good of the city; indeed, the Chorus characterizes Creon as understanding the work of being a “leader of men” as a “sordid business,” though a necessary one (4). Creon’s self-awareness manifests in his ability to distinguish between himself and the role of kingship that he plays, leading to his acute awareness of the particular responsibilities and constraints placed on him by that role. As Antigone says: “And now, though you’d rather not, you’re going to have me put to death. Is this what means to be a king?” (39).

This notion of playing a role as essentially constraining is further borne out in the play’s dichotomy of “saying yes” versus “saying no” to the world, which strongly anticipates the dialectic between Hoederer and Hugo. When Creon says that “someone has to steer the ship,” he also declares the need for “someone… to say yes” to the burden of steering that “ship” and of kingship (39). In Creon’s telling, to “say

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10 Read meta-theatrically, Creon’s understanding of kingship as a role is particularly telling, suggesting the character’s own awareness that he exists within a play. Indeed, Creon’s assumption of the mantle of kingship is literally an act of playing a role insofar as the part of Creon-the-king is a role to be taken on by an actor.
“yes” is not only to say yes to leadership, but also to the confusion and messiness of life and of the world: “To say yes you have to sweat, roll up your sleeves, grab hold of life, plunge in up to the neck” (40). Anouilh’s Creon thus fits comfortably within the network of concepts described in the previous chapter, linking the life-affirming “yes” to leadership, difficult action, and the messiness and ugliness of the world. In Orwell’s terms, Creon emphasizes the importance of existing as a human being, rather than as a saint.

Antigone, in contrast, explicitly presents herself as the “no” opposing Creon’s “yes”: “I’m here to say no to you, and die” (40). “No” therefore becomes linked with death, just as in the case of Hugo’s deathlike purity; in Creon’s words, “it’s easy to say no, even if it means dying” (40). As in Dirty Hands, “no” becomes allied with youth and “yes” with maturity. Anouilh presents Antigone’s choice to die as a refusal to grow up and become, like Creon, a “yes”-sayer; Haemon’s suicide stems from a similar motive (Anouilh 51).

Several critics have noted Anouilh’s depiction of the role of the “yes”-sayer as essentially constraining. Leonard C. Pronko, quoting Oreste Pucciani, argues that “in accepting the responsibilities of power, [Creon] is ethically bound to behave according to a given pattern,’ and in this respect he is no longer free” (Pronko 25). A role, by its very nature, constrains: insofar as I must conform to the expectations defining my role, I am limited in what actions I can and cannot take. Having accepted the role of kingship, Creon finds himself performing actions that he seems to understand as distasteful or ugly. He is constrained in having to do unpleasant or even evil things in his role as a political actor; yet, following the dirty hands narrative, he
does not seem to understand his choice to play this role as excusing him from moral responsibility, or as mitigating the evil that he does. When Antigone calls him “loathsome,” he does not dispute her; rather, he implicitly acknowledges that she is right and declares his loathsomeness to be part of his duties as king. If Creon is, as Pronko argues, no longer free, he feels the loss of his freedom keenly.

Though Hoederer does not describe his own leadership in terms of playing a role, Creon does seem to foreshadow Hoederer in this way. As Hoederer would do in 1948, the 1944 Creon presents himself as a tragic politician. He believes his actions to be necessary for the good of the city, yet understands those actions to be morally unpleasant even as he undertakes them. Yet unlike Hoederer, whose moral anguish at his own dirty hands goes largely unspoken, Creon’s presentation of his own self-awareness allows him to wear his anguish on his sleeve. Even as he acts, he appears extraordinarily reluctant and pained by the wrong that he does. Antigone’s striking declaration that Creon is “too sensitive to be a tyrant” emphasizes this point: Creon is “sensitive” in that he seems to deeply feel the moral cost of his actions (Anouilh 39). Following the notion of moral integrity, we can say that Creon’s “sensitivity” and anguish is linked to his self-awareness insofar as he acutely feels the harm done to his moral integrity by the dirty actions of kingship.

The anguish of Anouilh’s Creon allows us to comprehend that Creon himself understands the moral compromises he makes. His vocalization of anguish allows us to see into a soul that would otherwise remain opaque, as in the case of Hoederer,

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11 Admittedly, the logic is somewhat shakier here than it is in Sophocles. Anouilh does not make clear why, exactly, Creon feels that it is necessary to desecrate Polynices’ corpse. The implication is that he does so for the same reasons as Sophocles’ Creon, that is, to emphasize the importance of order and loyalty, but this is never clearly stated.
whose anguish remains hidden and becomes visible only through the figure of Hugo. Anouilh’s Creon, in contrast, is more than happy to provide the audience with a “record of [his] anguish,” and it is this anguish that identifies him as a tragic politician (PA 176). Creon’s story, therefore, demonstrates the central importance of moral anguish to the tragic politician archetype.

Creon’s anguished acceptance of the constraints of saying “yes” contrasts sharply with Antigone’s “no.” As Pronko writes, “Antigone… is committed to no public value… she remains free to follow her ideal”; that is, in saying “no,” she resists the constraining power of a role. Rather strikingly, Pronko characterizes this choice as “selfish,” and so echoes the moral self-indulgence argument described in the previous chapter (25). That is, Antigone’s choice to say “no,” to reject not only the role and responsibility of leadership but life itself, represents a choice to die rather than to grow into a world in which action requires the compromise and disappointment described so beautifully by Orwell. Similarly, Lewis W. Falb argues that by positioning Creon and Antigone as he does, Anouilh makes an “essential distinction… between those who say ‘yes’ and make all the necessary compromises and those who say ‘no’ and refuse any concessions whatsoever” (Falb 54).

Antigone’s death, her youth, her integrity, is a rejection of compromise; like Hugo in Dirty Hands, her “purity resembles death.” Creon, like Hoederer, represents the moral and ideological compromise necessary for action in a struggling and difficult world.

This is not to say that Antigone dies only to reject compromise and affirm purity. As in the original Sophocles, she dies also to affirm the value of caring for her brother’s body, but for Anouilh her deathlike purity nevertheless plays an important
role. Antigone appears to understand Creon’s moral compromise as absolutely and inescapably corrupting of moral integrity: she tells Creon that, having “said yes,” he will “never stop paying” (Anouilh 39). In her eyes, Creon’s compromise is utter and complete; it cannot be stopped at a particular limit, as in the case of Weber’s tragic political actor, who at a certain point stands his moral ground and refuses to make any more compromises. Creon, rather, will continue to slide inexorably toward the corrupted opportunism of the most crass and unadulterated ethic of responsibility.

Clearly, Antigone’s critique of Creon paints him in a somewhat more negative light than does the above analysis. In her view, Creon is not a tragic Weberian politician with a “calling for politics,” but rather the very representative of the crass opportunism that Weber’s tragic political actor seeks to avoid; or, at least, he is on his way to becoming that opportunist. Thus Antigone—who does appear to have an eye for dissemblance and insincerity—seems to recognize that Creon may not fit as perfectly into the tragic politician archetype as he would like his audience to think.

Creon’s closing reiteration “someone has to steer the ship” similarly casts doubt on the sincerity of his anguish:

[To his page] I’m going to tell you something the others don’t know. There you are, face to face with what’s to be done. You can’t just fold your arms and do nothing. They say it’s dirty work. But if you don’t do it, who will? (Anouilh 60)

This speech is entirely consistent with my earlier portrait of Creon as self-aware and high conscious of his responsibilities. However, it begs two questions. First, what exactly is it that “needs to be done”? Second, is it really true that Creon is the only one who can perform this duty? Creon’s earlier characterization of himself as
a “workman” performing a job casts this assertion into doubt: such a workman is not unique, but is one among many. Why might another workman not step into the kingship in Creon’s place?

In answering the first question, it is important to note that Anouilh’s Creon presents no clear reasoning behind the orders he gives. This is dramatically unlike Sophocles’ Creon, who reasoning is emphatically clear: he is terrified of the collapse of order, seeing human life as a desperate struggle for order in the face of a constant threat of chaos. As king, it is his duty to do everything he can to hold back the wolf from the door. This vision of life goes some way toward explaining Creon’s initial rigidity in the face of Antigone’s challenge: he is panicked that, if he yields, chaos will quickly follow.

In contrast, the greater malleability of Anouilh’s Creon might go hand in hand with a greater self-awareness, but it also points to the lack of a clear purpose behind his actions. He is not rigid, because he simply has nothing to be rigid for. He appears to consider the duties of kingship to be necessary because they are there, rather than because they contribute to any greater purpose.

Indeed, Anouilh’s Creon has a somewhat bitter and cynical attitude toward his work, which seems at odds with the tragic politician’s moral elevation of the work of politics. The tragic politician understands politics as a serious moral endeavor, hence his choice to take the labor of politics as a life’s work, and the anguish he feels over his political compromises. Anouilh’s Creon, on the other hand, tells Antigone that she “deserve[s] better” than to die “mixed up in a political scandal”: “it is only a political scandal, you know” (37). He thus devalues the moral importance of both his order to
prevent Polynices’ burial, and of Antigone’s defiance of that order—an importance from which the original *Antigone* derives much, if not all, of its energy—as *only* an unimportant political scandal. This cynicism brushes aside both the value of politics and the role of morality in politics, and is linked to Creon’s lack of a purpose: if politics is worthless and petty, then no grand purpose can drive the political leader. Creon’s disregard for the potential moral importance of politics is somewhat unsettling in a leader who presents himself as hyper-aware of moral considerations.

With regards to the second question—is Creon really the *only* individual capable of leading Thebes?—it would seem that Creon displays a measure of vanity here. For some unstated reason, Creon sees himself as better suited to the task of leadership than any other. We must, then, try to find that reason. If we cannot, then perhaps Creon’s assertion stems from vanity alone, which would certainly undermine his self-presentation as a noble, self-sacrificing tragic politician. Weber, it is worth noting, identifies vanity as a cardinal sin of political actors (PV 116).

Creon appears to suggest that his anguish makes him uniquely appropriate for the duties of leadership. Grappling with Antigone, he declares: “If I were just an ordinary brute of a tyrant, you’d have had your tongue torn out long ago… But you can see something in my eyes that hesitates” (36). This recalls Antigone’s declaration that Creon is “too sensitive to be a tyrant.” In other words, if Creon were an “ordinary tyrant,” he would approach this challenge to his authority far more brutally; his “hesitation,” his anguish, is what inclines him to be merciful toward Antigone. We can easily extend this position to Creon’s general attitude toward ruling: it is better, the argument runs, to have a hesitant and anguished ruler than an “ordinary brute of a
“tyrant,” even if the two seek the same ends, because the anguished politician will be less likely to abuse his power.

This is an ancient argument, dating back to the *Republic* of Plato. According to Plato, a just individual will be unwilling to rule; hence, the just ruler will necessarily be unwilling to rule, unlike the unjust ruler who derives great pleasure from ruling (Plato 347b5-d8). Thus does Plato argue that philosophers ought to rule the ideal city, as their wisdom not only suits them best for ruling but also ensures that they will not take too much pleasure in their power, since they will prefer abstract contemplation to the work of governance (521b). It is crucial, however, that the unwillingness or anguish of the ruler is actually traceable to their being a just person; the unwillingness of the philosopher-kings to rule, for example, derives from their knowledge of the good and thus from their personal virtue. Anguish itself becomes a marker of, if not moral goodness, then of a strong moral sensibility.

Yet at the same moment as Creon declares himself to be something other than a “brute” or “tyrant,” he is twisting Antigone’s arm behind her back with strength enough to hurt her. Creon’s cruelty reminds us of a crucial corollary to Plato’s argument: not all displays of anguish are demonstrations of moral character. To use the language of logic, anguish is necessary but not sufficient; Creon may be anguished, but this does not necessarily mean that he is just. Indeed, his cruelty towards Antigone and his use of his own physical strength as a source of power over

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12 John D. Harman suggests that Platonic philosopher-kings function as tragic heroes, forced to compromise their commitment to the Good in order to fulfill their duty as political leaders. See Harman generally, but particularly 589-591, 594.

13 Indeed, when Antigone asks him to stop and tells him that he is hurting her, he refuses: “I’m the strong one now. It’s my turn to take advantage” (36). Despite Creon’s protestations to the contrary, this sounds like very much like the voice of an “ordinary brute of a tyrant.”
her suggests that all his talk about not being an “ordinary tyrant” is simply vanity after all, and that there is no reason why he is more qualified to rule than any other.

Is Anouilh’s Creon a tragic politician, then, or is he not? Insofar as this question boils down to whether he is in some degree good, just, or right, this is essentially the topic of contention in the critical literature on Anouilh. It is difficult to settle on a satisfactory answer, perhaps because the play itself is almost purposefully, frustratingly resistant to interpretation on this matter; indeed, while this ambiguity might be the source of the lasting cultural impact of Anouilh’s Antigone, it almost certainly contributed to the political firestorm raised by the play. Creon’s lucidity and his anguish fit him within the archetype of the tragic politician, while his cynicism and cruelty place him outside it. More worryingly, his negative characteristics might lead us to question whether or not his anguish itself is legitimate or feigned—for how can he be anguished if he is so cynical about politics, and does not appear to see its moral importance?

Even if Creon’s anguished is consciously or unconsciously feigned, however, it is nevertheless significant that he so clearly presents himself as anguished. If his apparent assumption that only he can rule Thebes is an expression of vanity rather than an acknowledgement of genuine qualification, so too might be his presentation of himself as anguished and hesitant, even as he twists Antigone’s arm. That is, his display of anguish acts as a demonstration of moral vanity, self-satisfaction with his own imagined goodness—since if he hesitates, is he not therefore better than an unthinking tyrant?

14 Writing on the controversy surrounding the initial 1944 performance of Antigone, John Harvey declares that “ambiguity, which in more normal times might enrich a work of art, now undermined a writer’s position” (Harvey viii).
The answer, of course, is “no,” at least as long as Creon’s hesitation does not trace back to any substantively moral goodness and does not actually prevent him from twisting Antigone’s arm behind her back. Nevertheless, Creon’s use of anguish as a tool of self-legitimation is greatly instructive, pointing us to the centrality of anguish in the archetype of the tragic politician. Even if Creon is not an anguished tragic politician and is only imitating one, it is his presentation of anguish that makes his performance potentially convincing.

2.3 Beauvoir and Camus on Morality and Anguish

Perhaps appropriately, given the historical situation of Anouilh’s Antigone within 1940s France, the mid-century existentialist philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus both offer relevant perspectives on Creon’s anguish.\(^{15}\) Both Beauvoir and Camus were deeply concerned with the possibility of a moral basis for political action, particularly with the use of violence in politics. Though their work primarily studies the use of revolutionary violence against an oppressor, this anxiety over violence situates their analyses well within the scope of the dirty hands problem. The most striking and alarming examples of dirty hands usually involve the use of violence; similarly, Weber explicitly frames the problem of tragic political action as arising because “the decisive means of politics is violence,” and hence any political actor must “let himself in for the diabolic forces lurking” in such violence (PV 121, 125-126).

\(^{15}\) Technically speaking, Camus’ absurdist philosophy is taxonomically distinct from existentialism (or so, at least, Camus and Sartre argued). Given that absurdism and existentialism emerged from the same cultural context and share most if not all of their central tenets, however, I am comfortable blurring the distinction for the purposes of this thesis.
While Beauvoir is perhaps best known for her foundational feminist text *The Second Sex*, her lesser-known work *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is equally philosophically rich. As the title of *Ethics* suggests, the notion of “ambiguity” is central to Beauvoir’s thought. Though the term evokes a certain degree of obscurity or epistemic uncertainty, qualities usually considered to be drawbacks in philosophy, Beauvoir considers ambiguity to be not only an essential aspect of the human condition but also the fundamental basis of any workable existentialist ethical system (Langer 89). As Sartre does, Beauvoir argues that human beings experience themselves as both “transcendence” and “facticity”: that is, as both subject and object, a “pure internality against which no external power can take hold,” but on the hand also a “thing crushed by the dark weight of other things.”

We are both free and limited by the brute facts of our situation in the world; thus arises our “tragic ambiguity” (*EA* 7). Humanity can therefore attempt, fruitlessly, to deny its ambiguity by one method or another, or it can embrace that ambiguity as a guide toward moral action.

Beauvoir considers the content of this moral action to be the duty of contributing to human liberation. Yet this duty can often require the use of violence, which would seem to sacrifice those very people whom we seek to save: “thus one finds himself in the presence of the paradox that no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against man” (*EA* 99). In response to this

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16 Beauvoir explicitly positions *Ethics* as an attempt to derive a moral program from Sartre’s existentialist magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. “It is true that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre has insisted above all on the abortive aspect of the human adventure. It is only on the last pages that he opens up the perspective for an ethics. However, if we reflect on his descriptions of existence, we perceive that they are far from condemning man without recourse” (*EA* 11). It is worth noting the suggestion, made by several critics, that Beauvoir overstated the degree to which Sartre influenced *Ethics*, and that her text draws more strongly from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (see Langer 90, Arp 52).
“paradox,” Beauvoir neither affirms the legitimacy of all revolutionary violence nor rejects it entirely. As Kimberly Hutchings describes, Beauvoir’s analysis at first seems to represent a simple balancing or sliding scale approach, according to which the actor must decide in each case whether the desired ends are “worth” the means. This does not deny the ethical questionability of violence, as would a purely consequentialist approach, but allows moral compunctions against violence to be balanced against the value of the end in question, while also taking into account “the chances and risks of the measure under consideration” (EA 148; Hutchings 122).

Following Hutchings, however, we can see that Beauvoir’s ethical program is somewhat more complex and sophisticated than this description would suggest. In a passage that beautifully captures the main movement of Ethics, Beauvoir writes:

One must retreat from neither the outrage of violence nor deny it, or, which amounts to the same thing, assume it lightly. Kierkegaard has said that what distinguishes the Pharisee from the genuinely moral man is that the former considers his anguish as a sure sign of his virtue; from the fact that he asks himself ‘Am I Abraham?’ he concludes ‘I am Abraham’; but morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning… What distinguishes the tyrant from the man of will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second keeps asking himself, ‘Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn’t this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim at it?’ In setting up its ends, freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself. (EA 134)

While Beauvoir’s approach to Kierkegaard is perhaps unconventional, she appears to have found great inspiration in his understanding of moral choice as taking place under conditions of great uncertainty, meaning that “a genuinely moral person
could never have an easy conscience” (*Prime of Life* 429). Morality becomes something that is essentially *difficult*, requiring “the painfulness of an indefinite questioning.” The flaw of the “Pharisee” or “tyrant” is not necessarily that they reject self-questioning entirely, but that, having once asked themselves if they are truly “working for… liberation,” they draw a final conclusion: “I am Abraham.” The “genuinely moral” person however, understands the impossibility of ever reaching such a conclusion, and instead continues the process of ceaseless, “*indefinite* questioning,” a constant re-contestation that never allows them to believe entirely in the morality of their actions.

To be moral, in this telling, is to be anguished. Beauvoir never allows us to rest secure in the rightness or goodness of our actions, but instead requires that we constantly subject ourselves to a destabilizing questioning. This reasoning follows naturally from Beauvoir’s understanding of ambiguity as an essential condition of human life: the nature of human ambiguity means that we are essentially limited in our knowledge, so however good a given action may appear in theory, it is impossible to entirely predict the impact of that action as it resonates through the world. To refuse to submit ourselves to questioning, therefore, is to refuse to admit our ambiguity and instead to assert ourselves as a complete transcendence without

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17 Mary Jean and Ronald M. Green write that “*Fear and Trembling* is not a work that comes immediately to mind in connection with the construction of atheistic existential ethic… What interested her and confirmed her own convictions was Kierkegaard’s unrelenting focus on individual moral choice and responsibility in circumstances deprived of certainty and support, and often in the face of opposition. Beauvoir’s appreciation of *Fear and Trembling* illustrates her creative appreciation of Kierkegaard’s work, and her willingness to go beyond surface differences to perceive deeper affinities” (Green and Green, 14-15).
facticity, capable of guiding events by our own will alone instead of existing at the mercy of contingency.\textsuperscript{18}

Beauvoir’s distinction between “negative” and “positive” moral acts is instructive, and recalls the clash between Antigone and Creon. To Beauvoir, “negative” acts are essentially composed of “negation” and “revolt.” She uses the example of a French official who should have refused to “hand over a communist [to the German occupation] to save ten hostages”; the moral decision at hand was a matter of pure refusal, a denial of German authority to issue orders. Beauvoir contrasts this morality-as-refusal with moral action that “aspir[e] to a positive effectiveness,” for example, the postwar rebuilding of France. In this case, the effort to rebuild is not achieved simply by rejecting the power of an unjust force, but is instead an ongoing project of “constructing” a just society (\textit{EA} 131-132). The rejection of the negative movement thus contrasts with the constructive effort of the positive movement.

While Beauvoir’s distinction between “positive” and “negative” is not meant to devalue the potential importance of negative moral action, she does describe such action as somewhat “easy.” The “negative attitude” manifests in a situation in which there exists one single, clear method of action that does not require compromise of principle or ambiguous calculation, simply \textit{because} it is an act of pure negation. The positive “attitude,” in contrast, is more easily co-opted away from its revolutionary origins, insofar as it does require such compromises and calculations, which each contain a myriad of potential ethical pitfalls (\textit{EA} 132). For this reason, while negative

\textsuperscript{18} As Hutchings puts it, insofar as we are ambiguous creatures, “our information is always partial and imperfect, and our control of events is limited” (Hutchings 120-121).
moral actions are “easy,” positive actions are morally difficult, in the sense that it is
tremendously difficult for us to maintain those actions as moral. To do so, we must
subject ourselves to the constant process of moral questioning advocated by Beauvoir
in her discussion of Kierkegaard. The fighter for liberation must remain anguished,
lest they begin to rest secure in the morality of their actions, become complacent, and
thus slide toward tyranny (EA 133). Beauvoir, then, does not side with positive over
negative moral action, but she does seem to understand positive moral action as more
representative of ambiguous existentialist ethics in its torments and difficulties. Such
action is more complex, and perhaps more mature as well.

Beauvoir’s description of negative moral action as easy, versus positive moral
action as difficult, recalls the distinction between Antigone’s “saying no” and Creon’s
“saying yes.” So, too, does it recall the collection of dichotomies of youth and
maturity, death and life, purity and messiness, described in the previous chapter as
manifest in the opposition of Hugo and Hoederer. When Creon declares that, “it’s
easy to say no… To say yes you have to sweat, roll up your sleeves, grab hold of life,
plunge in up to the neck,” he too allies the “no” of youth with simplicity and the
“yes” of maturity with a difficulty that here becomes almost physical (Anouilh 41).
Read together, Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics and Creon’s description of “saying
yes” are consistent with Orwell’s description of the world as a confused, messy,
painful place; to say “yes” to that world, to live in it and build something new in it,
will necessarily be equally messy and painful. Once again, this does not mean that
saying “no” and resorting to negative moral action is never a valid choice—as
Beauvoir frames the example of the French official, for example, it certainly would
have been—only that saying “no” does not encompass the full range of moral action in all possible circumstances. Sometimes it is necessary to say “yes” to the world, and to build.

Once again, the tragic politician manifests as a figure willing to endure the anguish of saying “yes” for the good of his nation; Creon, certainly, seems to conceptualize himself as such. Beauvoir’s existentialist ethics of ambiguity adds further detail this character sketch, clarifying how the experience of anguish engages with the archetype of the tragic politician. The politician’s anguish, his constant questioning of whether he has acted correctly, itself becomes a marker of his moral behavior and his identity as a moral man.

Albert Camus’ The Rebel similarly fleshes out this picture, and bears striking similarities to Beauvoir’s Ethics. As its title hints, Camus’ book analyzes the collective movements “rebellion” and “revolution,” both terms of art in Camus’ usage. In Camus’ definition, “rebellion” (or “revolt,” as he sometimes terms it) represents a rejection of the world’s injustice, whether that injustice manifests through an oppressive political regime or in the fact of death itself, which Camus variously deems “a mass death sentence” and “the universal death penalty” (TR 24, 100). Rebellion is therefore a howl of protest, an “incoherent pronouncement” against injustice (TR 106).

“Revolution” recalls rebellion in its expression of “the same desperate and bloody effort to affirm the dignity of man” against all odds, yet it is distinct from

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19 This is somewhat ironic, given The Rebel’s role in precipitating the well-publicized and extremely acrimonious public split between Camus and those of Sartre’s circle. The Rebel was published in 1951; Ethics, in 1947.
20 Indeed, David A. Sprintzen has argued that “Camus has located the origins of rebellion in the experience of outrage” (Sprintzen 124).
rebellion’s incoherent, outraged howl. Revolution instead “originates in the realm of ideas” (TR 106). If a rebellion can be characterized as an effort to overthrow an unjust regime, a revolution is an effort to replace that regime through an ideologically guided restructuring of government and society.21

Just as Beauvoir bases her ethics in a united effort against oppression, Camus finds rebellion and revolution as both originating in an expression of solidarity: we are outraged not only at the injustice done to ourselves, but at the injustice done to all others as well. Rebellion both arises from and creates this solidarity.22 Political violence therefore poses a particularly vexing problem for Camus, for much the same reason as it does for Beauvoir: given that rebellion acts as a recognition of human solidarity, how can the rebel justify the use of violence as a necessary component of that rebellion, since an act of murder is inherently subversive of solidarity? “It is a question of deciding if it is possible to kill someone whose resemblance to ourselves we have at last recognized and whose identity we have just sanctified” (TR 281).

Camus’ concept of *la mesure* is key here. John Foley, in his study of *The Rebel*, translates *la mesure* as “the limit”; Camus’ rebellion is therefore “a philosophy of limits” (TR 289).23 In a later essay titled “In Defense of The Rebel,” Camus describes *la mesure* as opposed to “limitlessness” or “excess”: *la mesure*, in contrast, represents “the affirmation by the rebel himself of a limit beyond which revolt

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21 It is somewhat tempting to map Beauvoir’s positive/negative division onto revolution-as-creation/rebellion-as-negation, but this would be a vast oversimplification. Camus identifies both positive and negative movements within rebellion, and much of *The Rebel* is an effort to describe why so many revolutions have become manifestations of destructive state power rather than acts of liberatory creation.

22 As Camus so memorably declares, “I rebel—therefore we exist” (TR 22).

negates itself” (“In Defense” 212).\textsuperscript{24} That is, the idea of \textit{la mesure} asserts that every means used by the rebel is not necessarily justified simply because it contributes to the end of rebellion. Rather, once the rebel crosses the line drawn by \textit{la mesure} and becomes willing to commit certain acts in the name of rebellion—namely, murder—that rebellion is no longer worth the name. Camus’ reasoning thus bears some similarity to that of Weber, whose ideal political actor is characterized by the point past which he declares himself no longer able to adhere to the ethic of responsibility. As noted, the politician’s affirmation of this limit marks him as a moral man rather than a crass opportunist or someone in danger of becoming such an opportunist—as Anouilh’s Antigone appears to view Creon.\textsuperscript{25}

Camus’ understanding of \textit{la mesure} appears particularly clearly in his description of Ivan Kaliayev, a nineteenth-century Russian anarchist and assassin of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich.\textsuperscript{26} As Camus tells the story, Kaliayev was at the point of throwing a bomb at the Duke’s carriage when he realized that the Duke had two children with him; he refused to kill the children and retreated. After a second, successful assassination attempt on the Duke, Kaliayev is executed for murder, but willingly so. He embraces his death gladly, and thus “visibly designates to all his fellow men the exact limit where man’s honor begins and ends” (\textit{TR} 286; emphasis

\textsuperscript{24} Camus’ phrasing here points to the difficulty of mapping a simple positive/negative split onto revolution/rebellion. In the same essay, Camus writes that “rebellion, far from being a limitless negation, is defined precisely by the affirmation of these limits” (Sartre and Camus 212). Rebellion thus becomes both negation and affirmation in one.

\textsuperscript{25} Beyond this, Camus’ and Weber’s understandings of the limit are somewhat different. Weber’s limit exists as a line that cannot be crossed, whereas Camus’, as will be explained, can be crossed as long as the rebel subsequently atones. Nevertheless, the similarities are instructive.

\textsuperscript{26} Besides his gloss in \textit{The Rebel}, Camus also provides a more in-depth portrait of Kaliayev in his play \textit{Les justes} (often translated as \textit{The Just Assassins}, but more literally \textit{The Just Ones}).
added). To Camus, Kaliayev respects *la mesure* in that there is a certain line past which he will not step in service to his cause: he is not willing to kill children.

Camus clearly links *la mesure* to the idea of tension and of struggle: “to say, therefore, that one must hold to this limit really amounts to saying that one must keep oneself on the most extreme frontier of the struggle, where emotional torment is not separated from lucidity” (“In Defense” 216). That is, if the rebel murders and yet believes deeply that murder is wrong in its violation of solidarity, this represents an affirmation of *la mesure*. This moral stance declares the rebel’s rejection of limitlessness, a position according to which all murders would be good and right if they were to advance the cause of rebellion. Yet it is significant that Camus does not describe *la mesure* as demonstrated through the simple refusal to murder, but rather in the rebel’s maintaining that murder is wrong and yet understanding it to be sometimes, tragically, necessary. *La mesure* is therefore “an affirmation of… contradiction” and of paradox (“In Defense” 213). The rebel makes concrete the existence of the limit by coming up against it, crossing over it in a situation of dire necessity, and then sanctioning that crossing-over as a necessary act of injustice for which the rebel must atone. Kaliayev’s willingness to die, therefore, represents his acceptance of *la mesure* in that it demonstrates his recognition of the murder of the Grand Duke as both “necessary and inexcusable” (*TR* 169).

27 Here, Camus seems to follow a retributivist Kantian logic: to murder is to establish a universal maxim approving of murder, and so murder must be punished with the death penalty in order to “cancel out” the objectionable principle established by the murderer and reestablish the general principle of respect for life. Kaliayev’s embrace of his own death therefore represents his understanding that his act of murder should not become a general principle, but instead an “exception”; he declares the injustice of the murder that he nevertheless felt himself required to commit by the dictates of justice. Here, in paradox and tension, we find *la mesure*.

Admittedly, Camus’ argument is not entirely clear here. Must the rebel-turned-murderer actually die for the affirmation of *la mesure* to hold weight? Foley offers an alternate suggestion: the
Not all rebellion necessarily requires this tension. Camus leaves open a space for forms of rebellion that do not come up against rebellion’s own limit, in the sense of never reaching the point of needing to murder.28 With regards to those forms of rebellion that do come up against la mesure, Camus sees two possible paths: either rebellion can move past the limit and degenerate into murder, or it can remain true to its origins and its cause if it is willing to maintain the tension of la mesure, as Kaliayev does. The same is true of revolutions, which arise out of rebellion. While Camus is deeply concerned with how ideologically based revolutions may become twisted into manifestations of state power and violence, a “good” revolution would nevertheless be possible if it were to remain acutely cognizant of basis in rebellion’s visceral desire for liberation, while combining this with a clear program for the future.29

Camus, therefore, follows Beauvoir in understanding tension to be at the heart of moral decision-making. Furthermore, he presents the morality of la mesure as requiring intense, almost physical “struggle” or “torment,” a “severe tension” that rebel need only be willing to die (Foley 95). It was merely Kaliayev’s great fortune (or, perhaps, misfortune) to be in a position where an authoritarian state was more than happy to actually carry out the deed.

28 One such example, from elsewhere in Camus’ oeuvre, would be Dr. Bernard Rieux of The Plague, who fits within Camus’ classification of the “metaphysical rebel” whose rebellion opposes the raw injustice of the universe, rather than a given oppressive political system. Rieux understands his medical career as an act of “fighting against creation as he found it,” specifically the injustice of the “universal death penalty” represented by the titular plague (Plague 127; Rebel 100). His language clearly foreshadows Camus’ thinking in The Rebel, but it would be misleading to position him as a dirty-handed actor; as a doctor, he simply has no need to murder for his rebellion to take place. Indeed, the situation is rather the opposite: Rieux rebels against death by fighting to save lives.

29 Here, I follow Foley and Sprintzen’s understanding of revolution not as the antinomy or opposite of rebellion, as Camus has often been read as saying (Foley 58, Sprintzen 18). Sprintzen reads revolution as a natural and necessary outgrowth of rebellion: “rebellion is a vain yearning if it does not give birth to a revolutionary development in which structures of exploitation are transformed… For what can be the justification of revolution if not its bringing into being a social order rooted in personal and communal liberty that institutionalizes human dignity and mutual self-respect?” (Sprintzen 14). In fairness to his critics, Camus’ “In Defense of The Rebel” makes this point far more clearly than does the original text itself.
“requires an effort of one’s entire being.” This tremendous yet necessary effort contrasts with the comfort to be found in simply not grappling with these moral questions: “what is comfortable… is spiritual and bodily inebriation, mental acquiescence to… simplification… and, finally, irresponsibility.” This passage has particular force when paired with Camus’ earlier description of *la mesure* as the point where “emotional torment is no longer separated from lucidity” (“In Defense” 213).

In other words, to acknowledge *la mesure* is to see the world and its difficulties clearly, and the anguish that this causes goes hand in hand with the “lucidity” that it entails. The ability to recognize and maintain the position of tension is not only a moral act and an act that requires great effort, but also an act of responsibility and honesty, a choice to understand the “ethically irrational” world for what it is and to respond to its challenges appropriately. On the contrary, the person who refuses to acknowledge the moral tension of *la mesure* is, in a deep sense, irresponsible and dishonest, whether that irresponsibility manifests through a refusal to see the world’s injustice or a reaction to this injustice through a “limitless” violence that passes remorselessly beyond *la mesure*.

Camus’ image of the “comfortable” and “irresponsible” individual recalls Sartre’s description of “bad faith” as the refusal to recognize one’s own freedom—an idea also examined by Beauvoir in *Ethics*. Kristana Arp notes that “what Beauvoir describes as choosing not to will oneself free has obvious parallels to what Sartre describes as bad faith” (Arp 55). The instances of “choosing not to will oneself free” described by Beauvoir are varied, but all share the central characteristic of an individual’s refusal to acknowledge their human ambiguity, and thus also a refusal to
recognize the tension necessary for positive moral action. This, too, represents irresponsibility, for the same reason as in Camus’ work: by denying ambiguity and tension, one rejects the possibility of any truly moral action, and thus of the project of human liberation.

For both Beauvoir and Camus, then, most moral action is anguished action. This moral action is conceptualized as a burden taken up only by those who are brave, responsible, and capable of clearly seeing the confused landscape of the moral world. Those others who do not take up this burden are, in contrast, morally irresponsible, choosing comfort over the morality of anguish. As such, this narrative of anguished moral action dovetails with the narrative of the tragic politician’s responsibility: the tragic politician, as described, is a figure willing to take on the responsibility of serving his city by compromising his soul, in contrast to those who do not serve in order to maintain their moral purity. The moral picture sketched by Beauvoir and Camus embellishes this story by suggesting that the anguish of the tragic politician over his wounded moral integrity is not only what identifies him as moral, but is also a component of moral action itself. To act morally is to be anguished. Furthermore, this embellishment maintains and deepens my earlier characterization of the tragic politician’s sacrifice: just as the tragic politician sacrifices the moral integrity of his soul for his city, he also sacrifices his comfort and sense of moral certainty for responsibility and the terrible anguish of moral choice.

Following the linked dichotomies of maturity/youth and yes/no, it is worth distinguishing between two different possible understandings of the connection between morality and anguish. Read one way, this vision of anguish might actually fit
easily within the youthful framework of Antigone’s “no”: the emphasis on moral
tagony emphasizes the cost of complicity with ugliness and possibly immoral action,
to the point of even positioning this anguish as paralyzing. The obvious example here
is Hugo, who vacillates constantly between the “no” of youthful purity and
Hoederer’s mature yet morally anguished “yes.”

As we might expect, however, this is not the vision of anguish most
appropriate to the narrative of the tragic, dirty-handed politician. Instead, a second
interpretation of moral anguish is more appropriate with the framework of adulthood
and of “yes.” Rather than vacillating between options in a desperate attempt to make
the right moral decision, this anguish goes hand in hand with the knowledge that one
cannot or will not ever be able to truly “get it right,” or if one happened to do so, it
would be impossible to know for sure. Here, the moral actor accepts ambiguity while
still feeling anguish keenly, giving up the quest for moral certainty and acting despite
the world’s ugliness and confusion. It is in this movement that we find maturity.
Camus, for example, finds inspiration not only in Kaliayev’s willingness to die, but in
his relationship with doubt: “Kaliayev doubted to the end, but this doubt did not
prevent him from acting” (TR 173).

2.4 Creon as the Tragic Politician’s Limitations

Anouilh’s Creon, then, appeals to the archetype of the tragic politician through
his constant invocation of his own anguish, his duty, and his responsibility, which
invocation is central in distinguishing him from Sophocles’ far more brittle and less
self-aware Creon. Reading Anouilh through the lens of Beauvoir and Camus, Creon’s
anguish becomes a tool by which we can be reassured of his morality. Despite his anguish, however, this rewritten Creon is not an entirely wholesome figure. He may not have the same rigidity as Sophocles’ Creon, but he has his own ugliness all the same: namely, his cynicism and vanity. Yet while these faults suggest that Creon may not fit within the archetype of the tragic politician, Creon also demonstrates other, perhaps more conceptually interesting faults that actually fit within the narrative and so point to the moral limitations of the narrative itself.

To begin with, for a character meant to be “the best of all possible Creons,” Creon is strangely dismissive of Antigone, and this dismissiveness has a strongly gendered element (Witt 65). Gender, of course, has always been an important component of Antigone: the rigidity of Sophocles’ Creon seems at least partially influenced by his umbrage at being challenged by a woman, while Hegel’s famous analysis of the play positions the contest between Creon and Antigone as a manifestation of the divide between the masculine/political/public and the feminine/familial/private (Sophocles 484-485, 677-680; Steiner 35-38, 185).

While William Calin argues that “Anouilh’s great innovation in treating the Antigone myth is to ennoble the character of Creon, to make him co-equal with Antigone,” a close examination of the play shows that Creon’s “ennobling” goes hand in hand with a devaluation of Antigone’s moral force (Calin 83). Crucially, Anouilh denies Antigone her usual incandescent certainty in her last moments before death: dictating a final letter to Haemon, she declares, “I don’t even know any more what I’m dying for” (Anouilh 57). Yet she then decides against telling Haemon her doubts, in what Freeman describes as a “sin of omission” that symbolizes Antigone’s own
inability to remain pure and free of the deceit and confusion of the adult world. While Freeman suggests that Antigone thus foreshadows Hugo’s vacillation, this interpretation would actually cast Antigone in a worse light than Hugo. Over the course of their respective plays, Hugo moves from “confusion and self-deceit” to certainty, while Antigone moves in the opposite direction (Freeman xliii). This is a striking and perhaps even upsetting change for Anouilh to make, given the iconic dignity and clarity of purpose of Sophocles’ Antigone.  

Furthermore, Creon himself displays a strong current of sexism toward Antigone, though it manifests as a benevolent, patronizing paternalism rather than the brittle, nasty misogyny of Sophocles’ Creon. He constantly devalues Antigone and the moral force of her position, calling her a “pocket Oedipus” (after her father) and a “little Fury” (Anouilh 36).  

Looking over events from Creon’s perspective, Antigone appears to represent the negative attitude’s pure howl of protest, and does not understand that a positive movement is also necessary. The easiness of “no” has its place, but must be followed by a mature “yes,” even if that “yes” requires compromise.

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30 Anouilh’s play has been criticized for its presentation of gender in other respects, in particular Anouilh’s choice to strip Creon’s wife Eurydice of her only speech and to transform her from a dignified queen into “a twee Homes and Gardens matriarch” (Freeman xlili-xliv). Compare, for instance, Anouilh’s approach to Anne Carson’s more recent re-“translation” of Eurydice’s speech, which takes a very different spin on the role of gender within the play: “This is Eurydike’s monologue it’s her only speech in the play. You may not know who she is that’s ok. Like poor Mrs. Ramsay who died // in a bracket of To the Lighthouse she’s the wife of the man whose moods tensify the world of the story” (Carson n.p.).

31 Creon’s use of “little Fury” is particularly gendered, in that the Furies have often been seen to represent atavistic, unbound, irrational female rage, as opposed to the masculine order and rationality of the law. This symbolism becomes particularly clear in Aeschylus’ Oresteia, in which the ghost of Clytemnestra summons the Furies to hound Orestes, her son and murderer. Orestes is saved by a court of justice convened by Athena (a female goddess, but one who, within the play, makes use of extremely misogynistic arguments), which institutes the rule of law and binds the Furies.
It is for this reason that Antigone’s assertion of “no” through death itself is so significant. Though Beauvoir positions resistance to the German occupation of France as an example of an “easy” moment of negative morality, her description glosses over the significant moral difficulties faced by French Resistance fighters: the German army made a practice of conducting harsh reprisals against hostages or even entire French villages in reprisal for Resistance activities. This turned many French citizens against the Resistance and significantly complicates the moral story told by Beauvoir. Given the fraught moral complexity of what Beauvoir positions as an example of a pure negative, “easy” movement, it would appear difficult to come up with an example of a genuine negative moral act that does not in some way engage its actor in ambiguity. Instead, we can understand death itself as the only “easy” negative act, through which the “no”-sayer simultaneously asserts their rejection of the world and ends their existence as an agent capable of morally ambiguous action. This understanding is entirely consistent with the idea of a Camus-esque rebellion that retains its purity through not coming up against la mesure: the political rebel might maintain purity through defeat, that is, by being killed before they reach the point of having to murder. Once again, we reach the notion of a “purity [that] resembles death,” as Hoederer says of Hugo and as Creon might well say of Antigone (DH 220).

As suggested by his description of the people of Thebes as unintelligent “clods,” Creon’s paternalism manifests itself most obviously toward Antigone but extends to his relationship with all those whom he governs (Anouilh 38).

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32 See generally Gildea. Given Ethics’ publication in 1947, Beauvoir may have had reason to sanitize the memory of the Resistance, for the postwar years in France saw a great lionization of the Resistance to an extent that often exceeded facts. Indeed, both Beauvoir and Sartre have been accused of hugely exaggerating their own (supposed) role in the Resistance far past the negligible contributions suggested by the historical record (Curtis 13, 235-236).
Interestingly, he demonstrates his paternalism through what is perhaps Anouilh’s greatest departure from the original text: that is, Creon’s dissimulation as to the identities of the corpses, and his positioning of Polynices as evil and Eteocles as good when both in fact were nothing more than “common crooks” (Anouilh 44). Anouilh’s Creon thus seeks to make a similar point about loyalty and disloyalty as Sophocles’ Creon does, but unlike Sophocles’ rigid yet truthful Creon, Anouilh’s conveys this message through the use of a Platonic “noble lie.” As described by Plato in *Republic*, the philosopher-kings tell this lie to their people in order to maintain social cohesion, believing that the people are incapable of otherwise accepting the rationale behind the social structure of the Platonic *kallipolis*. Similarly, Anouilh’s Creon seems to believe that order in Thebes must be restored, but that the people of Thebes are incapable of understanding the basis of this order without the aid of a falsified story about the loyalty and disloyalty of Eteocles and Polynices, respectively.

In her classic work *Lying*, Sissela Bok offers a critique of what she sees as the essential dismissiveness behind the telling of the noble lie. Bok notes that the Greek word meaning “noble” signifies “both ‘high-minded’ and ‘well-bred,’” as “noble” does in English (Bok 167). This double meaning, she argues, suggests that those powerful political actors who tell such lies often consider themselves to be *better* than those whom they lie to: that is, more able to understand what the world requires, more advanced in their powers of comprehension and more rational in those powers. To tell a noble lie is essentially to “underrate the comprehension of the deceived citizens, as well as their ability and their right to make a reasoned choice” (Bok 173). In other words, the telling of a noble lie is inherently aristocratic and antidemocratic, for its
telling treats the people as children without moral autonomy and the leader (or leaders) as a privileged, wise, paternal figure who alone is capable of making moral decisions.  

Bok’s description of the psychology behind the noble lie meshes surprisingly well—perhaps unsettling well— with Beauvoir and Camus’ portrait of moral anguish. As noted, Beauvoir and Camus both understand moral anguish as requiring a good deal of psychological effort and difficulty. A person who faces up to this difficulty and accepts the responsibility of moral choice, therefore, should be admired for their strength, while those who choose to remain in the “comfort” of “spiritual and bodily inebriation” are, in an important sense, cowardly or weak (“In Defense” 213). To describe Beauvoir’s and Camus’ arguments as antidemocratic may seem counterintuitive, given that their understandings of morality are centered on projects of human liberation and thus of human equality. Nevertheless, the division between those who accept a difficult moral burden and those who prefer to rest in comfort and irresponsibility can easily lead into the kind of aristocratic thinking described by Bok: those who accept the burden of moral action are braver, nobler, more responsible, and more moral.  

As Bok describes, this kind of personality is easily linked to the figure of the leader; Creon certainly seems to see himself this way, as the only one willing to face up to the difficult burden of governing. This, then, is a key component of the tragic politician archetype, and it is profoundly antidemocratic. The tragic politician’s anguished acceptance of his responsibility for his city over his soul goes hand in hand  

33 Similarly, Bok writes that “only those deceptive practices which can be openly debated and consented to in advance are justifiable in a democracy” (Bok 181). Only these practices, that is, treat citizens as morally autonomous and responsible individuals.
with the sense that he alone is morally brave enough to face up to this difficult responsibility. Furthermore, this focus on a solitary leader emphasizes that leader’s responsibility and the absence of the people, who are incapable of understanding the moral challenges involved in leadership and therefore can, in some cases, be lied to. Their moral autonomy is thus devalued as a casualty of the leader’s tragic nobility.

This antidemocratic thread traces back at least to Max Weber; in “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber describes the politician’s need for a “following, a human ‘machine,’” moved to action by the politician’s exhortations despite its “ethically base” motives (PV 125). Weber thus devalues both the moral autonomy of the “followers,” in referring to them as a single “machine” instead of ethically aware individuals, and the quality of any moral judgments that those followers might form independent of their status as “machine.” He similarly writes off their motives as entirely base. Finally, it is noteworthy that the question of whether or not it is permissible to lie to the people is at the center of Hugo and Hoederer’s dispute in Dirty Hands, and that Hoederer, a manifestation of the tragic politician archetype, comes down on the side of lying.

Creon’s paternalism, therefore, appears in a particularly ugly form in his sexist disregard for Antigone's reasoning, but is also linked to the archetype of the tragic politician. Moreover, his disregard for Antigone follows naturally from the dirty hands narrative, insofar as this narrative is intertwined with paternal and patriarchal modes of authority. While Bok criticizes the noble lie for its aristocratic and undemocratic presentation of citizens as incompetent children, the tragic politician
archetype can additionally be faulted for devaluing women in particular as well as citizens in general.

Insofar as Creon’s devaluation of Antigone and of his people as a whole points to this antidemocratic and paternalistic strain within the tragic politician archetype, Creon’s failings as a character also begin to indicate the limitations of the tragic politician archetype as a moral ideal. The concluding sections of *Ethics of Ambiguity* shine further light on these limitations, particularly Beauvoir’s striking description of the ideal politician as the “fusion of the commissar and yogi”.

If the fusion of the Commissar and Yogi were realized, there would be a self-criticism in the man of action which would expose to him the ambiguity of his will, thus arresting the imperious drive of his subjectivity and, by the same token, contesting the unconditioned value of the goal. But the fact is that the politician follows the line of least resistance. (*EA* 154)

Beauvoir imagines the ideal political actor as someone who can constantly self-question and yet still act, recalling Camus’ description of Kaliayev as both doubting and acting. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges that most, if not all, politicians cannot or do not fulfill this idealization. In the absence of this ideal, she turns to the necessity of political opposition: “for want of internal criticism, this is the role that an opposition must take upon itself” (*EA* 154). By “opposition,” Beauvoir signifies not opposition to “the very ends set up by a regime” (for example, the opposition of the French Resistance to the German occupation), but rather an opposition that “exacts a perpetual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means,” without ever opposing the goal of the regime altogether (*EA* 154-155). The duty of this second kind of opposition is to externally provide the criticism

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34 Presumably, Beauvoir is referencing Arthur Koestler’s 1945 essay “The Yogi and the Commissar.”
and “contestation” that Beauvoir believes to be so necessary for moral action, and that she almost exclusively describes as self-criticism. This vision of a loyal opposition is, however, much more democratic; it is democracy as the externalization of the leader’s conscience.

Though the contrast between Hoederer and Hugo is certainly not democratic in the strict sense—given that it plays out between only two relatively isolated individuals—this recalls Hugo’s role as Hoederer’s externalized conscience and thus the external manifestation of his anguish. Yet it is also important to note that Beauvoir seems to understand this type of opposition as essentially second best, necessary only in the absence of the leader’s idealized “internal criticism” (EA 154).

Creon, unlike Hoederer, provides the audience with this self-criticism or at least an approximation of it, wearing his anguish on his sleeve.

It might be tempting to see Creon as more completely filling the role of tragic politician through his open display of anguish. Yet despite his anguish, Creon lacks Hoederer’s charisma, and his cynical streak sets him at odds with the tragic politician’s embrace of politics as a life’s work. Furthermore, Anouilh’s Creon seems to be lacking a purpose for his actions and leadership. This sets him apart from Sophocles’ Creon, whose purpose derives from his sheer panic over what he sees as society’s ever-encroaching collapse, and even from Hoederer, who single-mindedly pursues the elevation of the Communist Party to power in order to bring about revolution.

Anouilh’s Creon’s lack of a clear cause or motive for action is a highly significant failing, for Weber writes that “passionate devotion to a ‘cause’” is one of
the key components necessary for an individual who truly has the “calling for politics” (PV 115). Following Beauvoir and Camus, it is difficult to trust an anguished politician without an obvious driving motive: the vision of moral anguish and morality-as-anguish described by the two theorists is not, as I have noted, purely formal, but rather envisions anguished action as moral action only if the goal of that action is good.35 Without knowing if Creon’s ends are good ends, therefore, it is impossible for us to evaluate his moral character, however anguished he presents himself to be. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear end and in context of Creon’s cynicism and use of the noble lie, it is easy to view his invocation of anguish as either a bare political ploy to bolster his legitimacy as a leader, or as a morally empty plea for Antigone’s sympathy.

Viewed together, Creon and Hoederer each flesh out the tragic politician archetype in different ways—or, to use a different metaphor, each illuminate different components of the narrative of the ideal dirty-handed political actor. Examining them each in turn and side by side provides a fuller picture of the complete figure, just as a visitor to a museum examines a statue from different angles in order to understand its three-dimensional presence. Hoederer has a clear cause (Communist rule), yet the audience receives only hints of his anguish and ultimately experiences it only through the figure of Hugo. This leaves ambiguity as to whether Hoederer himself genuinely experiences anguish, or whether Hugo’s final action simply allows anguish to be read onto Hoederer’s character whether he truly feels it or not. That is, there remains a possibility that Hoederer may not be an anguished politician, but an unrepentant

35 In the argument of Beauvoir and Camus, this end must be for human liberation, but perhaps other such goals might be imagined.
consequentialist. Creon, in contrast, exhibits his anguish with almost indecorous enthusiasm, yet because his political cause is obscure, it is hard to say whether we should trust anguish as a sign of moral character.

Anguish is central to the character of the tragic politician, yet this study also shows it to be irreducibly subjective. It is very difficult for a democratic polity to judge the genuineness of moral emotion in a figure as distant and carefully curated as a political leader, whether that leader presents himself as anguished but may not actually be (as in Creon’s case), or feels hidden anguish that he does not publicly reveal (as, perhaps, in Hoederer’s case). The archetype of the tragic politician, then, is limited not only in its antidemocratic tendencies, but in that its focus on anguish places a great deal of significance on a quality that is inherently difficult to judge as sincere or legitimate. We can thus begin to understand the limitations of the dirty hands narrative; as I shall show in the following chapters, the narrative casts an even darker shadow than I have so far presented.
CHAPTER THREE
THE GRAND INQUISITOR: ANGUISHED AND ISOLATED LEADERSHIP

3.1 Dostoevsky’s *Grand Inquisitor*

Following two chapters in the world of mid-twentieth-century French theater, this chapter will examine a text arising from a very different time and place: “The Grand Inquisitor,” a famous interlude in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Embedded within a novel itself widely considered a masterpiece, Dostoevsky’s chapter on the Grand Inquisitor has been described as “the most profound of all Dostoevsky’s works,” a story that “holds a unique place in world literature” (Mochulskuy 81, Sandoz 65).

Famously, the novel as a whole is an extended meditation on questions of good and evil, Christianity and atheism. Dostoevsky situates “The Grand Inquisitor” as a story told by Ivan Karamazov, an atheist, to his younger brother Alyosha, a deeply religious novice at a local monastery.¹ As the culmination of a long conversation during which Ivan seeks to explain to Alyosha the source of his antipathy toward religion, Ivan relates to Alyosha the “poem” of the Grand Inquisitor, which he has composed to express his moral and religious difficulties.

The story of the Grand Inquisitor is difficult to parse, but the structure of the plot is fairly clear. Ivan’s “poem” places the titular Grand Inquisitor in conflict with Jesus Christ, who has returned to earth in the midst of the Spanish Inquisition. Discovering Jesus’ presence in Seville, the Grand Inquisitor promptly imprisons him and proceeds to explain to him that it would have been better if he had not returned.

¹ As will be discussed, Ivan is not quite an atheist, though he is often described as such. He accepts the existence of God, but denies God’s moral authority. Camus describes him as a “metaphysical rebel” (*TR* 55-56; Davison 120)
According to the Inquisitor, Jesus’ demand that people choose to follow him out of their own free will, and his choice not to induce their uncritical obedience, is overly demanding of humankind. People are too weak to follow Jesus from free will alone; indeed, people are afraid of free will, of the responsibility that it places on them, and would rather give up their freedom if possible. The Grand Inquisitor and his cohort have answered this central human desire by turning from Christ to Satan and establishing a theocratic dictatorship, stripping humanity of its moral independence and responsibility and returning people to a childlike state of innocence. This, the Grand Inquisitor argues, will ensure human happiness and deliver humanity from the state of panic and anguish caused by moral responsibility.

The Inquisitors rest their rule on the devices of “miracle, mystery, and authority”: a dictatorial government (authority) that gains its people’s love and trust through apparent “miracles,” and which refuses to disclose to the public eye the mechanics of its functioning (mystery) (GI 30). While these devices derive from the three biblical temptations of Jesus, who refused the devil’s offers, the Grand Inquisitor and his cohort have accepted those offers in order to better govern weak humanity. Jesus’ return threatens to delegitimate the regime by showing that it is not truly doing the work of God; Jesus, therefore, must be disposed of. Jesus himself remains silent throughout this speech. At the parable’s end, he kisses the Inquisitor’s lips and the Inquisitor then releases him, telling him to “come no more” (GI 26).

Given the maddening ambiguity of Dostoevsky’s chapter, a great deal of critical literature has been produced analyzing Ivan’s “poem,” from both within Russia and outside it. It seems somewhat clear from the historical record that
Dostoevsky intended the story as a denunciation of the Catholic Church, represented in the chapter as the Grand Inquisitor himself. While the chapter’s meaning is of course tied to its Russian context, there also exists a history of “Western” criticism that abstracts Dostoevsky’s story from that context to make a broader point about the nature of authoritarianism. In the 1940s and 50s, a selection of British and American political scientists writing on democracy positioned the Grand Inquisitor as an anti-democratic interlocutor, a literal devil’s advocate. Neil Riemer, writing in 1957, described the story of the Grand Inquisitor as “offer[ing] brilliant insights into the bases of authoritarian power” and, in attempting to refute the Grand Inquisitor’s anti-democratic argument, stated:

I approach this task with a conscious appreciation of the Russian context of Dostoevsky’s work and the dangers of using a non-Russian orientation to criticize arguments that were shaped in Russian environment. Nevertheless, since the Grand Inquisitor’s arguments are held to have a world-wide applicability, I think he is a fair target in the current ideological war. (Riemer 249)

While the close of the Cold War put an end to the “current ideological war” of which Riemer writes, Riemer’s point is well taken. The following analysis approaches the story of the Grand Inquisitor from a consciously non-Russian...

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2 Dostoevsky seems to have associated the Church with socialism, which he vehemently opposed (Beauchamp 129).
3 See, for example, Lindsey, The Modern Democratic State (vol 1), 113-114; Friedrich, The New Belief in the Common Man, 103-1-4; Reisman, Individualism Reconsidered, 38; Pennock, Liberal Democracy: Its Merits and Prospects, 67. These writers’ use of Dostoevsky, a writer so centrally important to Russian history and culture, is particularly interesting in the context of the Cold War. Perhaps the idea was that, as a quintessentially Russian text, Dostoevsky’s work might hold some insight into the development of totalitarianism under Stalin.
4 The end of the Cold War has not, of course, ended the tradition of “Western” usage of the Grand Inquisitor. In 2003, the contemporary playwright Tony Kushner incorporated Dostoevsky’s story as the centerpiece of play critiquing the Bush Administration, titled (after a famous line of the Grand Inquisitor’s) “Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy.”
perspective. In doing so, rightly or wrongly, it both participates in the tradition of “Western” criticism of the “poem” of the Grand Inquisitor and examines the theoretical implications of the Grand Inquisitor’s arguments without reference to their role in Dostoevsky’s commentary on atheism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Disclaimer given, we can now proceed to an analysis of the Grand Inquisitor’s role as a dirty-handed tragic politician. A significant component of the story’s appeal comes from Dostoevsky’s sympathetic portrayal of the Inquisitor; indeed, Konstantin Mochulsky describes this depiction as an instance of “Dostoevsky’s genius” (Mochulsky 620). From a summary of the story alone, however, it is difficult to understand the Grand Inquisitor’s sympathetic draw. As noted, the Grand Inquisitor sides himself to some extent with Satan. Perhaps even more strikingly, he implicitly positions himself as usurping Christ, to the extent that some critics have read him as a manifestation of the Antichrist (Mochulsky 620). The Grand Inquisitor describes himself to Jesus as having “corrected Thy work,” and states that he and his fellow Inquisitors have “taken [the people’s] sins upon ourselves”—a reference to the people’s lack of moral awareness, which necessarily positions the Inquisitors as the only individuals who understand those “sins” as sins (GI 33). In echoing Jesus’ having died for the sins of humanity by taking “those sins upon himself,” the Grand Inquisitor locates himself in Jesus’s place. He thus implicitly seeks to replace Jesus, an act of such blasphemy and arrogance that it is initially difficult to understand him as sympathetic.

5 Indeed, Ellis Sandoz suggests that the Grand Inquisitor’s presence heralds a “political apocalypse” and is intended by Dostoevsky as a sign of the end of times, just as the Antichrist’s presence would. See Sandoz generally, Political Apocalypse.
While it is true that the Grand Inquisitor acts as a false Christ and sides himself with Satan, his position is nevertheless somewhat nuanced. Though he does the work of Satan, he does so only in the sense that he uses Satan’s tactics of “miracle, mystery and authority”: he does not promote Satan’s ends, given that he seeks to ensure humanity’s happiness by freeing them from moral knowledge and thus sin, rather than leading them to sin and eternal punishment. Similarly, he does not act, as Alyosha suggests, out of a “simple lust for power,” but rather appears to be deeply anguish by his actions (GI 34). Indeed, Ivan describes the Grand Inquisitor as “tragic” and “oppressed by great sorrow” (GI 35). The Grand Inquisitor himself links his own role as political leader to his suffering:

For only we, we who guard the mystery, shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil. (GI 22)

The Grand Inquisitor’s anguish positions him within the archetype of the tragic politician. Like Hoederer and Creon, he seems to understand himself as doing terrible things for his cause, and feels that burden heavily. Ivan’s “poem,” brief as it is, follows the general plot of the same story we have seen with these two other tragic politicians: at the center of the story is a confrontation between the tragic, weary politician and an idealistic, often uncomprehending opponent, who decries the politician’s moral compromises. The story of the Grand Inquisitor follows this logic insofar as it is structured around the Grand Inquisitor’s conversation with Jesus, though it does not entirely adhere to this pattern. Jesus, unlike Hugo or Anouilh’s Antigone, remains silent, and responds to his opponent wordlessly, with only a kiss.
The Grand Inquisitor also shares Hoederer’s “love of the world,” the humanism that is so central to Hoederer’s dirty-handed morality. Like Hoederer, he loves “the surface of the earth and the process of life”; Ivan describes him as “oppressed by great sorrow and loving humanity” (“Reflections”; GI 35). Speaking to Jesus, the Grand Inquisitor contrasts his own “love of humanity” with what he sees as Jesus’ lack of it: “man is weaker and baser by nature than Thou hast believed him… Respecting him less, Thou would have asked less of him. That would have been more like love, for his burden would have been lighter” (GI 29). Jesus, he suggests, cares only for those who are sufficiently strong-willed as to be capable of facing up to the harsh demands of the moral freedom that Jesus preaches. In contrast, the Inquisitor loves not only the noble among humanity, but the “weak and vile” as well, and cares for weak humanity by ensuring their happiness and not asking overmuch of them.

Dostoevsky’s notebooks contain unused passages in which the Grand Inquisitor baldly states to Jesus that “we are more human than you… we love the earth,” and, somewhat confrontationally, “I love mankind more than you” (Mochulsky 585-586).

The Grand Inquisitor’s argument has some validity to it, for there is indeed an element of cruelty in requiring people to do things that are simply beyond their capacity to do; surely this cannot be humanism. D.H. Lawrence incisively sums up the Grand Inquisitor’s position:

For the Grand Inquisitor finds that finds that to be able to live at all, mankind must be loved more tolerantly and more contemptuously than Jesus loved it, loved, for all that, more truly, since it is loved for itself, for what it is, and not for what it ought to be. Jesus loved mankind for what it ought to be, free and limitless. The Grand Inquisitor loves it for what it is, with all its
limitations. And he contends his is the kinder love.
(Lawrence 235)

Lawrence’s characterization of the Inquisitor strikingly foreshadows Hoederer and Hugo’s exchange on loving humanity for what it is (Hoederer’s humanism) versus loving it for what it can potentially be (Hugo’s purity). If we place Lawrence in conversation with Sartre, it becomes clear that the Grand Inquisitor is allied with Hoederer and with the humanism of the tragic politician. Furthermore, while one should not perhaps align Christ too closely with Hugo, it is true that Christ is a literal manifestation of Orwell’s detached, inhuman “saint.”

Yet if the Grand Inquisitor is understood as a tragic, dirty-handed politician in Hoederer’s mold, it is not entirely clear in what sense he has dirty hands, or “does bad to do good.” Clearly, the Inquisitor thinks that the creation and maintenance of his dictatorial regime are for the overall benefit of humanity, hence “doing good.” The question, then, is how this requires him to “do bad.” Ivan argues that the Grand Inquisitor does not believe in God: after having spent his life fasting in the wilderness in an effort to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, he has lost his faith, and now deceives humanity for their own good in the name of the very God whose existence he no longer accepts (GI 35). Yet the Grand Inquisitor spends almost the entire story speaking with Jesus Christ, and acknowledging him as such. How is it possible that he does not believe in God if God is present immediately in front of him?

Perhaps when Dostoevsky refers to the Grand Inquisitor’s atheism, he means something different than what we would usually understand as such: not a disbelief in God, but a renunciation of God’s authority. A similar position can be found in the supposed atheism of Ivan Karamazov himself. Ivan is often described as an atheist in
the secondary literature, and at the end of the “Grand Inquisitor” chapter, his brother Alyosha declares sadly that Ivan “do[es]n’t believe in God” (GI 36). Yet in the preceding chapter, Ivan declares that “it’s not that I don’t accept God… it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept” (GI 5). That is, Ivan’s outrage is focused on the existence of meaningless suffering in the world; he appears to acknowledge the existence and the power of God, but denies God’s goodness. In his study of atheism, Michael Martin refers to Ivan’s position as one of not atheism but “alienated theism”: that is, a rejection of the “moral authority” of the deity, rather than a declaration of said deity’s non-existence (Martin 466). The Grand Inquisitor’s motivations flow from a similar place as Ivan’s, in that he seeks to alleviate suffering in the world and faults Jesus for acting insufficiently to alleviate that suffering. We might, therefore, read the Grand Inquisitor’s stated atheism as rather an “alienated theism.”

Yet even this revision does not clarify the matter. If the Grand Inquisitor simply rejects the moral authority of God and of Christ, his project is morally unproblematic: he undermines Christ’s flawed vision of free human action in order to realize human happiness, whose value he accepts as a first principle. There exists no moral conflict here unless the Grand Inquisitor were to understand Jesus’ project as morally binding, for then he would be doing evil by consciously destroying that project. Yet the foundation of the Grand Inquisitor’s position is that Jesus’ project is cruel, overly demanding, and unrealistic, and the Inquisitor’s “alienated theism” implies that he rejects all possible moral requirements that Jesus might place on him.6

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6 Edward Wasiolek writes that the Grand Inquisitor “would prefer the strength and beauty and freedom of Christ, but…[has] seen that it is not a question of what man would like to be but what he is and can be... The GI would be the first to grant that Christ’s view of man is more attractive than his own, but he would correctly maintain that this does not establish the truth of Christ one bit” (Wasiolek 168-
By this same reasoning, the Grand Inquisitor's dirty hands cannot be understood as arising from his deception of the people: he tells them that he is doing the work of God when in fact he is doing the opposite. Here, we might usefully recall Sissela Bok's objection to the "noble lie," in which the politician deceives the people for their own good. Bok argues that such lies “underrate the comprehension of the deceived citizens, as well as their ability and their right to make a reasoned choice” (Bok 173). The foundation of the Grand Inquisitor's argument, however, is that the vast majority of people have no ability to comprehend the issues at stake or to make a reasoned choice. Indeed, this is what distinguishes his position from that of Dostoevsky's Jesus, whose concern for the moral autonomy of humanity would place him in agreement with Bok. Insofar as the Grand Inquisitor rejects Jesus' moral authority, he cannot conceivably consider himself as dirty-handed for "underrating the comprehension" of individuals whom he understands as having immensely limited comprehension to begin with.

Any reading of the Grand Inquisitor as a dirty-handed politician, therefore, looks to be somewhat incoherent. Weber describes the Grand Inquisitor as an example of the “chiliastic prophet,” the proponent of the ethic of ultimate ends who ultimately compromises on the question of means and ends in order to “call for the use of force for the last violence deed, which would then lead to a state of affairs in which all violence is annihilated,” or, more generally, calls for an evil act with the aim of entirely eliminating evil (PV 122). The chiliastic prophet is deeply inferior to

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169). That is, Christ’s ideal may be good and beautiful, but that does not make it morally binding. If the Grand Inquisitor’s choice is simply between two incompatible goods (the good of human happiness and the good of Christ’s project), he will have to sacrifice one good to another, but that does not mean that he does wrong or dirties his hands by doing so.
Weber’s ideal politician, with the strains of politics having eroded the objectivity necessary for political action. Rather than possessing the ideal politician’s wisdom and “knowledge of tragedy,” the “prophet” believes unlimited violence because they falsely imagine that they will thereby achieve a perfect world.

In the case of Dostoevsky’s story, the Grand Inquisitor is perhaps overly willing to establish authoritarian dictatorship, an action certainly conceivable as one of violence, in order to ensure eternal happiness and freedom from sin. Just as the prophet’s paroxysm of violence cannot truly usher in a world free of suffering, the Grand Inquisitor’s usurpation of God cannot truly grant humanity salvation. As evidence to this effect, we point to the fact that he so diligently maintains the terror of the Inquisition: some significant proportion of the people is presumably not taken in by his use of “miracle, mystery, and authority,” and therefore must be suppressed.

While the philosophical grounding of the Grand Inquisitor’s dirty hands is therefore unclear, his anguish is carefully and richly detailed. As the Grand Inquisitor himself says, the key to his political rule lies on his offering “freedom from freedom” to the people through sharply limiting their moral knowledge. The people over whom he rules are the opposite of the morally aware and autonomous beings supposedly idealized by Jesus; rather, they have found happiness in a total lack of moral awareness, freed from “the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure[d]… in making a free decision for themselves” (GI 22). In a sense, these people have been returned to prelapsarian innocence. They are entirely without moral knowledge or any conception of good and bad; they “know no sin” and thus are happy (GI 33). As Ellis Sandoz writes, “The primordial innocence of Eden is restored through sacrifice of
freedom and the knowledge of good and evil which first constituted historical existence in the wake of the Fall” (Sandoz 124).

This Edenic innocence, however, is enabled only by the suffering and moral responsibility of the Inquisitors. Gathering into themselves all moral knowledge and sin, the Inquisitors consider the moral questions that the people are no longer able to contemplate: “The most painful secrets of their conscience, all, all they will bring to us… And they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure at present in making a free decision for themselves” (GI 22). The Inquisitors therefore “take… their sins upon ourselves for their happiness” (GI 33). Along with moral knowledge necessarily comes the knowledge of sin and guilt; hence the Inquisitors “take on” all sin once it is told to them, because they are the only individuals capable of comprehending sinful acts as such. It is in this sense that the Grand Inquisitor positions himself as usurping Jesus, gathering sin into himself so as to save humanity. He even goes so far as to say that the Inquisitors’ displacement of moral knowledge has allowed them to “save… all” humanity, making his usurpation even more explicit (GI 33).

As this analysis suggests, the Grand Inquisitor’s relationship with his people is strongly paternalistic. He repeatedly refers to them as children or as “happy babes”—a description that is not farfetched, given their childlike innocence and lack of moral comprehension (GI 22). The Grand Inquisitor, with his burden of responsibility and moral knowledge, becomes the wise father as well as the leader. This description of the Grand Inquisitor’s paternalistic rule, of course, recalls Creon’s paternalism and
fits the Grand Inquisitor into the role of the tragic politician, despite the philosophical confusion I have identified over the source of his dirty hands.

If the people’s lack of moral understanding ensures their happiness, the Grand Inquisitor’s moral knowledge is, conversely, a major factor in his anguish. He describes himself and his cohort as “sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil,” thus linking their suffering to their knowledge (GI 22). Furthermore, his suffering and knowledge are linked with his acceptance of political leadership: it is through his leadership that he becomes a repository of moral knowledge, and thus comes to suffer. His anguish, like that of Creon and presumably that of Hoederer as well, is tied to his acceptance of political responsibility. Furthermore, insofar as the Grand Inquisitor’s moral knowledge entails his taking of the people’s sins upon himself, his political responsibility and moral knowledge create not only anguish but also a loss of innocence.

This analysis makes use of multiple senses of “innocence.” In one sense, innocence is simply a lack of moral knowledge: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, for example, were innocent because they did not yet have knowledge of good and evil. Children are often considered to be innocent in this way. In another sense, however, innocence describes a lack of guilt; to be innocent is to not have done anything that would make one guilty. This is, of course, the sense in the legal system uses the term.

To an extent, the Grand Inquisitor’s story collapses these two senses of innocence. The Grand Inquisitor’s lack of innocence in the first sense (that is, his knowledge of good and evil) strips him of innocence in the second sense (by
requiring him to “take on” the sins of others and thus become, in a sense, guilty of sin). As the next section will describe, this merging of different senses of innocence is not specific to the Grand Inquisitor, but is also true of the tragic politician archetype more broadly.⁷

3.2 Innocence, Responsibility, and the Burdens of the Political Sphere

By the sheer fact of being in the world, we are inevitably thrust into situations of what Weber describes as “ethical irrationality”: that is, situations in which, as Weber writes, “it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true” (PV 123). This is the gist of Orwell’s argument in his essays on Gandhi and Tolstoy. To truly live in the world and to be human is to love others, which is to set oneself up for conflict between one’s particularistic loyalties and the demands of more general ethical principles. Thus Orwell writes that to be human is to be “sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty” (“Reflections”).

Whether or not we are faced with such “ethically irrational” situations is in many ways a matter of what various writers have called “moral luck.” A great deal of ink has been spilled on the idea of moral luck, but the essential concept is that our

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⁷ Similarly, this connection of knowledge with a loss of innocence is not specific to the story of the Grand Inquisitor, but is also present in narratives of dirty hands more generally. It appears, for example, in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a novel obsessed with the idea of political guilt and dirty hands. Coetzee’s main character is the Magistrate, a happily complacent leader of a small town on the outskirts of a nameless Empire. One night he comes across the brutal evidence of the Empire’s cruelty, which awakens his conscience and changes his life: “I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering” (Coetzee 21). Knowledge itself acts as the “infecting” agent, awakening the Magistrate from his childlike ignorance and leading him to understand his moral responsibility to prevent the Empire’s violence. Yet the negative implications of “infection” position knowledge as something corrosive, corrupting of a desirable innocence. The Magistrate’s moral awareness is certainly for the good, but he has nevertheless been stripped of something precious.
moral judgment of an individual often depends on factors of luck that are outside the individual’s control. This complicates the common notion, expressed in the work of Kant and Hegel, of morality as tied to agency and intentional action; that is, the idea that whether or not we are moral depends only on what we “will.”

Moral luck has many dimensions, but for the purposes of this argument, the most relevant is what Thomas Nagel has described as “luck in one’s circumstances,” or luck as shaping “the kinds of problems and situations one faces” (Nagel 28). Nagel points to the case of a concentration camp officer, who “might have led a quiet and harmless life if the Nazis had never come to power in Germany,” or if he had happened to emigrated to Argentina before the Nazi rise to power (Nagel 26). His example is particularly dramatic, but we need not consider moral luck as arising only in situations of truly dire moral struggle; as Orwell suggests, any loving relationship carries the risk of placing us in a situation in which we must “commit sins for the sake of loyalty” (“Reflections”).

What, then, can this study of moral luck tell us about politics, and particularly about the problem of dirty hands? Michael Walzer writes that,

…the men who face the dilemma of dirty hands [i.e., politicians] have in an important sense chosen to do so; the[ir] cases tell us nothing about what it would be like, so to speak, to fall into the dilemma… Politicians often argue that they have no right to keep their hands clean, and that may well be true of them, but it is not so clearly true of the rest of us. Probably we do have a right to avoid, if we possibly can, these positions in which we might be forced to do terrible things. (PA 165)

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8 See, for example, *Philosophy of Right* sec. 105-112. See also Bernard Williams’ moving study of the Oedipus plays in *Shame and Necessity*: “the terrible thing that happened to [Oedipus], through no fault of his own, was that he did those things” (*Shame* 70).
Walzer’s description of “falling into” a “position… in which we might be forced to do terrible things” is also a description of circumstantial moral luck. He suggests that we may, to some extent, be able to avoid such situations, but does acknowledge that their occurrence is essentially a matter of luck: writing that we avoid them only “if we possibly can,” he implies that we may not be able to.

Yet this right to avoid ethically irrational situations as best we can applies only to those who do not act in the political sphere. Unlike “the rest of us,” who blunder into such situations as a matter of luck, Walzer describes the politician as having “chosen” to deal with such dilemmas. Elsewhere, Walzer gives the example of a politician who refuses to “get [their] hands dirty” in order to win an election: “assuming that this particular election must be won,” the politician will be disparaged, and Walzer suggests that “the disparagement is justified” (PA 165). That is, if the politician wishes to retain their “clean hands”—their moral wholeness and moral integrity—they ought not to have entered the political sphere in the first place, because the sphere of politics is a space in which one must “do bad to do good.” They might be a good person, but they are not a very good politician.9

Walzer’s distinction between politicians and “the rest of us” is therefore instructive. When politicians cross the threshold into the political sphere, they enter into a space of heightened moral costs and moral dilemmas. I have detailed this logic in my introduction, but it is worth briefly recalling here: the political sphere is a sphere of intense moral conflict because, as Weber writes, “the decisive means for politics is violence,” and the use of such violence tears at the politician’s soul,

9 It should be emphasized that Walzer emphasizes that we do want the politician to feel guilty for “getting [their] hands dirty,” even for a justified cause. This is how we recognize that they are a good person and not an opportunist.
corrupting him or bringing him anguish (PV 125). Such violence is present not only in acts of explicit force, but also lurks within the nature of the law itself, in the law’s authority to control action and mete out punishment; as Robert Cover writes, law positions itself “on a field of pain and death” (Cover 1601). Further, the scale of political action is by nature far expanded from the scale of most individuals’ lives: the violence of politics affects an enormous number of people, giving the tragic politician an even heavier moral burden to carry. He is responsible for those people; if he acts wrongly, their blood may be on his hands.

While certain people may cross the threshold into the political sphere without realizing the nature of its particular moral demands, most of those who enter politics likely realize that they have placed themselves in a position where they will face an assortment of difficult moral situations. As Walzer suggests, those who step into political life is locate themselves in a situation where they will be duty-bound to respond to moral challenges in such a way as to dirty their hands: “if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen,” as President Truman supposedly said (PA 165). To keep their hands clean is, effectively, to not do their jobs properly.

One might, for example, point to the crop of hard-line conservative members of Congress who entered the House of Representatives after the 2010 midterm elections. After the election, a common complaint emerged that these representatives were more concerned with ideological purity than with the compromises necessary to achieve results in politics—perhaps because they were, either intentionally or unintentionally, ignorant of the particular demands and responsibilities of the political sphere.

Truman’s use of this phrase is somewhat odd given his (in)famous involvement with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For the rest of his life, he maintained that it had not been a hard decision and that he would make it again if necessary, seeming almost to take steps against being seen as anguished (Phillips; Snowman). For this reason, Truman is an interesting counterpoint to the archetype of the tragic politician. There exists a minor yet interesting tradition of attempts to divine hidden evidence of Truman’s guilt, in what I read as an effort to fit Truman into the mold of the tragic politician. It is comforting to imagine that someone who effectively killed 200,000 people at one stroke (or, rather, two strokes) at the very least reflected on the moral questions raised by such killing. See, for example M. Miller 248, Ferrell 36, Miles 138.
A private individual who chooses their moral integrity over the beneficial end result of dirty-handed action might also be criticized, especially as “morally self-indulgent” (in Bernard Williams’ words) or as irresponsible. We might think of Williams’ example of an unemployed chemist who is having a desperately difficult time finding work to support his family, but initially refuses to take a well-paying job at a laboratory researching chemical and biological weapons, out of a moral objection to such forms of warfare (“Critique of Utilitarianism” 97-98). If the chemist does not change his mind and take the job, he could reasonably be accused by his friends (and perhaps by his family as well) of failing in his responsibility to his family by denying them the much-needed income. The difference between the politician and Williams’ chemist is, essentially, that the young chemist had no way of knowing that his family would end up in such dire financial straits when he married and had children. (Williams suggests that the chemist’s difficulty in finding work is due to a serious personal illness; we might also imagine that the chemist happens to be looking for work at a time of economic crisis, when little is available. Both these unhappy situations are often unforeseeable.) Politicians, on the other hand, are aware that the nature of the job they seek will require them to wrestle with moral quandaries; that is part of the price of walking through the door. The same is not true for the chemist.

Orwell tells us that loving another person will often lead us into a conflict of our ideals with our loyalties—yet we do not usually consider our family attachments with a sense of dread, pondering at the dinner table on how our love for our parents or our siblings might place us in a terrible moral position. For the politician, in contrast,

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12 Williams writes that the chemist’s career opportunities have been limited by a serious personal illness. At risk of being ahistorical, it is not clear why the chemist’s wife could not take a full-time job and let the chemist stay home with his children while he recovers from his illness.
the assumption of political power is inseparable from the weighty moral burdens conferred by that power. The American presidential inauguration provides an example: a behind-the-scenes component of the transfer of power from one administration to the next involves the handoff of the briefcase, or "football," containing the nuclear launch codes (Cheney). In this case, the assumption of power is inseparable from the potential responsibility of killing.

Those who enter the sphere of politics, then, accept the potential dirtying of their hands, even if they are lucky enough not to have to face such decisions. Consider, for example, the prime minister of an unassuming, reasonably well-functioning, and strategically unimportant country. During their time in office, this prime minister very well may never be faced with a serious moral challenge such as might give them dirty hands. Yet if war broke out or the country was faced with a terrorist attack, the prime minister might well have a responsibility to dirty their hands in order to protect their country. By virtue of simply holding the office of prime minister, they have made a commitment to dirty their hands if necessary. They have entered into the ethically irrational space of politics and have therefore chosen to dirty their hands, even if they have the moral luck of not actually needing to do so.

To enter into the political sphere, therefore, is to lose innocence, both in the sense of gaining moral knowledge and in the sense of assuming guilt. To be good politicians, individuals must be able to recognize “the ethical irrationality of the world” when faced with it, in order to successfully navigate that world. They must, therefore, have a strong moral awareness and a sense of the potential moral compromises that await: only in this way can they have the “knowledge of tragedy”
and anguish that Weber considers necessary for his ideal politician. Weber, of course, sees this tragic awareness of moral compromise as the key factor preventing the politician’s soul from being lost entirely to politics. On the other side of the coin, an individual who cannot recognize the world’s “ethical irrationality” but instead believes that “good… follow[s] only from good and evil only from evil” is, as Weber describes, a “political infant” and unfit to govern (PV 123).

Politicians must gain moral knowledge in order to participate in politics, and therefore must lose their innocence in the sense of moral ignorance. They also lose their innocence in the sense of preemptively accepting the burden of dirty hands by entering into the political space, and thus agreeing to be bound by the ethical dictates of that space. They are, therefore, preemptively guilty of those acts by which their hands may need to be dirtied.

All this is to say that when the Grand Inquisitor describes his presence as a political leader as necessitating a profound loss of innocence on his part, he speaks to something deeply ingrained in the narrative of dirty hands. He has lost his innocence by accepting the burden of political action, moral knowledge, and guilt, just as have Hoederer and Creon. Notably, however, the Grand Inquisitor takes the argument a step further in arguing that, since his entrance into the political sphere has required him to take on both guilt and moral knowledge, individuals not present in the political sphere must have neither guilt nor moral knowledge. Instead, they must be entirely innocent, children returned to Eden. He suggests that, by taking on the heavy weight of political responsibility, he has freed the people from the similarly heavy weight of moral knowledge and awareness of sin. This is, to put it mildly, a bit of a logical leap,
and depends on the Grand Inquisitor’s view of humanity as essentially “weak and vile,” desperate to be freed from the burdens of self-government (GI 29).

3.3 Sympathy for the Devil

The Grand Inquisitor is therefore deeply paternalistic, to the point of being dictatorial. He is also a literal devil’s advocate (to some extent), and some critics suggest him to be Dostoevsky’s interpretation of the Antichrist. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, a significant number of readers and critics consider him to be a deeply sympathetic character. Konstantin Mochulsky describes him as “the hero of the legend… portrayed with colossal art,” and writes that he is “not a ‘petty devil’” but “a majestic and tragic figure” (Mochulsky 620). It is striking that Mochulsky refers to the Grand Inquisitor as the hero of the tale, suggesting a strong degree of sympathy and even, perhaps, admiration.

Some critics, most notably Edward Wasiolek and D.H. Lawrence, seem to be taken with the Grand Inquisitor to the point of agreeing with his argument and his assessment of humanity. Lawrence, for example, describes the Grand Inquisitor’s argument as a “final and unanswerable criticism of Christ… unanswerable because borne out by long experience of humanity,” and reads Jesus’ closing kiss as an act of capitulation to the Inquisitor’s superior logic: “Thank you, you are right, wise old man!” (Lawrence 233, 241). Yet even those critics who disagree with the Grand Inquisitor tend to describe him as sympathetic, though they often do so somewhat grudgingly. Dismissing the Grand Inquisitor’s argument as essentially “sadistic,” for

[13] It is perhaps worth noting that Lawrence himself had deeply fascistic and antidemocratic sympathies, which perhaps explains his sympathy to the Grand Inquisitor’s argument (Eagleton 257-260).
example, Gordon Beauchamp nevertheless acknowledges his “awesome grandeur” (Beauchamp 44).

The Grand Inquisitor’s attraction as a character is closely tied to his anguish, which itself fits him into the archetype of the tragic politician. As described in the previous chapter, the tragic politician’s anguish is strongly tied to our impression of the politician as a moral man: his anguish demonstrates his brutal awareness of the difficulties and tensions of moral life. Similarly, Mochulsky comes close to describing the Grand Inquisitor’s “suffering” and anguish as his saving grace (Mochulsky 620). Within Dostoevsky’s text, it is significant that Alyosha’s instinctive rebuttal to his brother’s story involves a denial of the Grand Inquisitor’s grief:

> Who are these keepers of the mystery who have taken some curse upon themselves for the happiness of mankind? …It’s simple lust for power, for filthy earthly gain, for domination… Your suffering Inquisitor is a mere fantasy. (GI 34)

Alyosha seeks to rebut Ivan by arguing that the Grand Inquisitor’s anguish cannot possibly be real. (Perhaps he imagines that the Inquisitor’s anguish is feigned, as may be the case with Anouilh’s Creon.) The form of Alyosha’s counterargument is telling: he attacks the legitimacy of the Grand Inquisitor’s anguish in order to attack the Inquisitor’s status as a hero, a tragic figure rather than someone who acts only for “filthy earthly gain” in the manner of the corrupted Weberian opportunist. This points us, once again, to the importance of anguish in the character of the tragic politician. If anguish is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the politician’s morality, a lack of genuine anguish becomes deeply suspicious.
This focus of sympathy on the dictatorial and yet anguished Inquisitor can also be situated within a larger trend in how we think about suffering: that is, we commonly displace our sympathy from those who suffer onto the agents responsible for, and anguished by their involvement in, that suffering. We can find the most disturbing and striking example of this narrative in Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, specifically Arendt’s description of the propaganda tactics used by the SS commander Heinrich Himmler to rouse his men to the task of killing. Himmler was forced to confront what Arendt describes as “the animal pity by which all normal men are afflicted in the presence of physical suffering”; obviously, such pity would seriously impede the Nazi program of systematic murder if it were to prevent SS troops from carrying out the crimes required (*Eichmann* 105).14 Arendt describes Himmler’s solution as a simple one, requiring the individual to redirect their instinctive pity inward toward their own self, rather than outward toward the initial object of pity. “Instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people! the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duty, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!” (*Eichmann* 106). In the case of Himmler, Arendt sees this pity as *self*-pity, a mechanism through which Himmler and other Nazis tricked themselves into committing horrible acts by lauding themselves for their bravery in committing such crimes and in holding up under moral strain, rather than acknowledging the suffering of those harmed. However, there is no reason why this mechanism might not also be used as a method by which to bargain for others’ sympathy: “look how I suffer!” Arendt writes that Eichmann

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14 Arendt seems to draw on Rousseau’s understanding of pity as an instinctive human reaction to suffering, though she does not cite him directly.
did not use this defense during his trial in Jerusalem, but perhaps it was only for lack of a sympathetic audience.

Himmler is, of course, a grotesque example, but this displacement of sympathy also appears in less ugly historical moments. Crucially, Elaine Scarry draws on this narrative in her attack on the morality of nuclear weapons, critically assessing how Americans have traditionally viewed the president’s access to a nuclear arsenal of apocalyptic capacity. Scarry notes that “the population has often been asked to feel sympathetic” with the president’s “terrible burden” of control over nuclear weapons (*Thermonuclear Monarchy* 20). She goes on to argue that “the distress of presidential deliberation—not the distress of hundreds of thousands who stand to be annihilated… becomes the focus of sympathy,” describing Americans’ fascination with the ability of the presidential psyche to “contemplate killing” on such a scale (*Monarchy* 21). Scarry refers to this as a “short-circuiting of our compassion”: as in Himmler’s technique, attention becomes focused inward, not on the victims of a terrible action but instead on the actor.

Scarry describes the fascinating presidential psyche as understood as having “great magnitude” (*Monarchy* 21). Though she sees this “magnitude” in the sheer scale of violence made possible by nuclear weapons, we might also find it in the severity of the anguish experienced by the president in his tortured knowledge of the destruction he might need to cause. There exists a certain grandeur in this type of anguish, perhaps tied to the grandeur of the crime committed; we might consider, for example, of Beauchamp’s description of the “awesome grandeur” of the Grand Inquisitor (*Beauchamp* 144).
Interestingly, Elizabeth Spelman suggests that the attraction of this kind of grandeur is inherent to tragedy itself. In her critical analysis of suffering, Spelman describes tragedy as something that “makes human faults interesting,” and the tragic hero as someone with these “interesting and powerful kinds of faults”; the hero causes pain and then suffers from the realization that they have done so, evoking pity from the tragic drama’s audience (Spelman 46). Interestingly, Spelman too points to anguish as a marker of moral trustworthiness. If the hero fails to recognize his part in causing suffering and fails to be anguished by that realization, “he cannot have the goodness requisite for a tragic personage” (Spelman 53).

Spelman thus sees tragedy as focusing almost exclusively on the hero’s anguished awareness of the suffering they have caused, rather than the reality of that suffering as experienced by the victims of the hero’s action. Her analysis, therefore, fits neatly into the framework of the tragic politician’s narrative. The tragic politician’s anguish over his dirty hands, tied to his moral awareness, not only denotes him as a moral man but makes him interesting as a “character”—either literally as a character in a work of fiction, or as a focus of political commentary. It also grants him a certain nobility and grandeur. In the case of the Grand Inquisitor, this manifests clearly in the critical fascination with how interesting and complex the Grand Inquisitor is, and how paradoxically noble a villain.

Spelman understands these tragic heroes as enjoying the displacement of public or audience sympathy onto themselves, drawing attention away from the harm they cause to others. She is deeply concerned with the implications of this displacement, arguing that it leads us to devalue the experience of those who suffer at
the hands of “great men.” As suggested by Himmler’s use of this technique, it can also be easily abused by those who consider themselves “great” or, at the very least, carrying out a great task; we therefore might also be suspicious of this reasoning because of the scope it gives for rationalization of horrible acts. Himmler’s actions were unambiguously and unmitigatedly evil in the harm they did to others, but dirty-handed actions taken for a genuinely good cause also tend to harm people—thus the politician’s dirty hands.

Yet as Spelman suggests, the nature of a tragic story with a heroic protagonist inherently leads us to focus less on the suffering caused by the hero and more on their anguished psychological state. This is unsettling, because a crucial component of the dirty hands narrative rests on the tragic politician’s keen awareness of the moral costs at stake, hence his anguish and his ability to prevent himself from yielding to moral corruption. If such tragic stories elide the empirical manifestation of the suffering brought about by the tragic politician’s actions and instead lionize his anguish, it would be all too easy to lose touch with the suffering caused, and thus with the moral costs of dirty-handed action. This, in turn, might well put the tragic politician on the path of the corrupted Weberian opportunist.

Furthermore, as Himmler’s case shows, to draw focus away from the fact of suffering is to risk transforming the political actor’s anguish into a purely formal criterion. As noted, Albert Camus’ and Simone de Beauvoir’s understandings of the moral importance of anguish rest on the requirement that the actor must genuinely be aiming for a good end, the liberation of humankind; obviously, Himmler’s end did not fulfill this requirement. Yet it is far easier to forget the incredible evil of
Himmler’s project if we ignore the suffering he caused in favor of a focus on his psychological state. Anguish and goodness collapse into each other, with the moral narrative locked into a solipsistic circle. Himmler’s case is, of course, an extreme one, but this point holds for situations like that of Anouilh’s Creon, who presents his anguish as a marker of morality and yet has no obvious cause for which he acts. For anguish to be a meaningful component of the tragic politician’s moral self-understanding, it must be more than simply formal; yet the tragic narrative’s displacement of sympathy works against this substantive requirement, shifting focus away from the actions taken by the tragic politician and, by extension, the cause for which he takes them. Since the tragic politician’s actions and his cause comprise the substance of his dirty-handed morality, to devalue these considerations is to risk collapsing moral anguish into an empty formality.

The Grand Inquisitor fits strikingly well into this pattern, drawing on our sympathy despite a lack of clarity as to the nature of his dirty hands. He is certainly understood as a tragic figure in the critical literature; even Ivan Karamazov describes him as such (GI 35). His anguish pulls us in despite his more unsavory qualities. Insofar as the displacement of sympathy onto the actor rather than the sufferers risks eliding the moral costs at stake, it also risks making irrelevant the quality of that actor’s moral reasoning. Though the Grand Inquisitor’s position on the source of his dirty hands seems incoherent, his anguish nevertheless positions him as tragic.

As Arendt’s reference to Himmler shows, this method of displacing sympathy onto the (supposedly) tragic actor can function not only to elicit sympathy from others, but also to potentially convince that actor of their own goodness. Arendt sees
Himmler’s propaganda technique as extraordinarily effective in encouraging members of the SS to murder: it allowed them to see themselves as tragic and morally burdened heroes, rather than as killers and torturers. The historical record suggests that Himmler’s reasoning was not pure propaganda in the sense of intentionally misleading solipsism, but that he himself believed it deeply, suffering both physical and psychological pain from his anguish over what he saw as the terrible yet necessary acts he had committed in service to the Third Reich (Bennett 5-6).

This displacement of sympathy onto the agent of suffering, therefore, can allow actors to delude themselves as did Himmler. It also encourages sympathy from onlookers, though hopefully not in Himmler’s case: the audience of the play in the case of Greek tragedy (or perhaps Anouilh’s Antigone or Sartre’s Dirty Hands), the reader of an novel (like Dostoevsky’s Brothers Karamazov), the citizens who eagerly read or listen to accounts of their leader’s psychological state (as Scarry understands Americans as doing in the case of the nuclear program). Spelman’s account of the tragic hero as eliciting pity makes clear how the narrative of the tragic, dirty-handed politician can be enticing to us as both consumers of culture and as citizens, and how that enticement may paradoxically distract us from the moral costs at stake in political action.

3.4 “The Loneliest Job”

Spelman takes her argument further, arguing that this particular kind of thinking is potentially damaging to our understanding of the actor’s culpability and responsibility. In her view, our sympathy for the perpetrators of suffering allows them
“to be excused even as they are held responsible”: “typically they are their own harshest critics,” so they have “preempted” any possible criticism or judgment (Spelman 53-54). According to Spelman, this understanding of tragedy not only ignores the experience of the suffering victim, but essentially exonerates the perpetrator as well. We cannot possibly punish the tragic actor more than they have already punished themselves.

However, Spelman’s argument only holds if we are truly incapable of understanding the perpetrator’s anguish, and are thus incapable of judging them or devising appropriate punishment. That is, tragedy preempts punishment only if the tragic hero’s anguish is so great so be literally incomprehensible. While this may be grandiose, it dovetails with Spelman’s description of the hero’s tragic “grandeur” as representative of someone “exemplary” and “better than us,” whose flaws are also more outsize and exciting than our own (Spelman 37). Once again, Spelman’s and Scarry’s arguments go hand in hand. Scarry describes the “autonomy and solitude of… presidents during the act of decision-making,” and notes that

often presidential decisions are admiringly described as inscrutable, a word that suggests not only that the decisions were made in isolation but that, even after the fact, they cannot be penetrated from the outside. (Monarchy 63)

Scarry’s analysis of the “inscrutability” of presidential decision-making recalls the tragic hero whose inner life, as Spelman implies but does not explicitly state, cannot be understood.

Writing about the “short-circuiting of compassion,” Scarry discusses a famous photograph of John F. Kennedy—*The Loneliest Job*, by the *New York Times*
photographer George Tames—in which the president appears to be “weighed down by the gravity of his nuclear decision-making,” a portrait of the presidency’s terrible, isolating burden (Monarchy 20). Tames’ photograph is a stark depiction of loneliness, with the Oval Office in the photograph entirely empty except for Kennedy and the implied onlooker. The title of the photograph ties Kennedy’s loneliness to the burden of his role as president: it is his position as leader that both isolates him and seems to place the weight of the world on his shoulders.15

Scarry’s brief study of Tames’ photograph as a manifestation of presidential loneliness is consistent with her analysis, made elsewhere in her book on nuclear weapons, of the physical presence of “the people” as a basis for democratic consent. She terms this the “material requirement,” arguing that “the requirement for government ‘by the people’ means government by an embodied people… who have bodily presence to their governors” (Monarchy 24; emphasis in original). As an example, she points to the historical gathering of members of the public in the galleries of Congress during important debates (Monarchy 76-77). If we pull these threads of Scarry’s argument together, we see a stark contrast between the material presence of spectators in the congressional galleries and the isolation of President Kennedy, alone in the Oval Office.

This linking of Kennedy’s solitude to the absence of “the people” suggests the antidemocratic nature of this particular image of political responsibility: that is, by focusing so tightly on the moral life of the leader, we tend not to notice or care when

15 Interestingly, while Scarry links the photograph to Kennedy’s (presumably) anguished decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the photograph was taken several months before that crisis. Similarly, Tames later stated in an interview that Kennedy had not particularly been feeling the weight of the world in that moment, but rather often stood that way to ease his back pain.
the democratic public vanishes from the frame. From this arises the leader’s apparent “inscrutability.” Tames’ photograph not only shows us the president in an empty room, but shows him with his back turned; we see only his silhouette and thus cannot even try to read his expression to guess at the process of his thoughts. He is totally set apart, both physically and psychologically. The solitude of the “loneliest job” creates a leader who exists beyond understanding. Thus is his solitude magnified: he is alone, and no one can understand him.

These connections between solitude, inscrutability, and leadership are crucial aspects of the story of the tragic politician. Perhaps Hoederer, for example, does not explicitly express his anguish within *Dirty Hands* because it cannot be comprehended by any of the other characters, or even the audience as well; he is totally, brutally alone. If we take a charitable view of Anouilh’s Creon, this might also explain his more open display of anguish: Antigone comes much closer to understanding him than Hugo does of Hoederer, and hence Creon can at least speak to her, even if she rejects his reasoning.16

Finally, this narrative suggests a possible interpretation of the Grand Inquisitor’s deeply anguished conversation with Jesus. While their interaction is technically a conversation, in truth it is more of a monologue, given Jesus’ refusal to respond to the Grand Inquisitor until the very end of the story. Ivan Karamazov is characteristically insightful when he states that “all that matters is that the old man [i.e. the Inquisitor]… should speak openly of what he has thought in silence for ninety years” (*GI* 23). That is, the Inquisitor has kept his anguish hidden for his entire life,

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16 Perhaps Creon’s loneliness at the end of Anouilh’s play might not only be the loneliness of losing his family, but also the loneliness of losing the one person who understands him—that is, Antigone.
and only now, speaking to Jesus, does he express it. His monologue pours forth in such a torrent partially because it has been pent up for so very long.

As in the case of Hoederer, the nature of the Grand Inquisitor’s political project is such that he cannot explain his anguish without undermining that same project, for if the people were to understand what he was doing, his leadership would slip away. Furthermore, given that the Grand Inquisitor sees his people as children, and indeed has made them into children by stripping them of their moral knowledge and freedom, clearly they would not be capable of understanding him. (There are other Inquisitors, but perhaps the Grand Inquisitor’s leadership position indicates that he has greater knowledge or understanding than the others.) He therefore considers Jesus alone to be his intellectual equal, or at least capable of understanding his moral reasoning, and confesses only to him. Thus his blasphemy, in considering Jesus to be his equal or perhaps even a sufficiently enlightened inferior.

This view of the leader as someone incomprehensible and set apart can help us evaluate the Grand Inquisitor’s claim of his own humanism and love of the world, especially when placed in conversation with Hoederer’s love of the world. Hoederer, of course, memorably declares that he loves people “with all their filth and their vices,” that is, humanity in its weakness, imperfection, and struggle (DH 220). Despite his wisdom and apparent superiority to the other characters, Hoederer implicitly includes himself within this catalogue of imperfections. His love of the world manifests in his intense physicality, yet this physicality leads to his inability to control himself around Jessica, which in turn incurs Hugo’s jealousy and ultimately
leads to Hoederer’s own death. Hoederer, that is, has the same fallibilities as the humanity that he loves.

The Grand Inquisitor’s love of the world is similarly founded on an acknowledgement of human fallibility; indeed, he identifies his knowledge and acceptance of such fallibility as the main distinguishing point between himself and Jesus. As Wasiolek writes of the Inquisitor, “one can love what is weak and slavish, and perhaps love more deeply” (Wasiolek 166). Yet the Inquisitor holds himself apart from those whom he claims to love, seeing himself as capable of bearing the burden of freedom, unlike the rest of “weak and vile” humanity. Clearly, he does not imagine himself as weak or vile.

We can see this dynamic in Hannah Arendt’s brief analysis of the Grand Inquisitor story, particularly in her characterization of the Grand Inquisitor’s love of humanity—which she understands as “pity”—in contrast to Jesus’ love, which she calls “compassion.” In Arendt’s analysis, pity is something that one feels only when one “depersonalize[s]… the sufferers, lump[ing] them together into an aggregate” (On Revolution 75). Pity relies on distance between the superior, pitying onlooker and the pitied masses, a relationship evoked by Grand Inquisitor’s broad statements about the weakness and suffering of humanity as a whole. Arendt sees Jesus’ compassion, on the other hand, as an intense emotion of fellow-feeling and -suffering, which is therefore equalizing rather than hierarchical. To Arendt, the divinity of Dostoevsky’s

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17 For an alternate approach on Jesus’ frailty as reflecting the frailty and moral confusion of human life, see Reinhold Niebuhr’s section on “Sacrificial Love and the Sinlessness of Christ” in the second volume of his Nature and Destiny of Man. Niebuhr emphasizes Jesus’ sinfulness as a necessary corollary of his humanity and therefore as a reflection of the essential frailty of human life itself. This Jesus, keenly aware of human frailty insofar as he himself represents it, is a far cry from the unyielding idealism against which the Grand Inquisitor pits himself.
Jesus is represented in his ability to feel compassion “with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering mankind” (On Revolution 75). She reads Jesus’ kiss at the story’s end as an expression of compassion with the Grand Inquisitor’s suffering—suggesting, interestingly, that she accepts the sincerity of the Inquisitor’s anguish even as she decries his pity as hierarchical and tyrannical.

Arendt’s analysis points to the flaw in the Grand Inquisitor’s description of his love of the world: the Inquisitor sets himself apart from the weak humanity that he supposedly loves. His supposed love of the world is in fact deeply founded on his own feelings of superiority. It would be difficult to call this humanism.

Nevertheless, even if the Grand Inquisitor’s stated interpretation of love of the world distorts that same notion, his act of distortion—that is, his feelings of superiority—identifies something important about the role of love of the world in the dirty hands narrative. To put it another way, the narrative itself makes possible the Grand Inquisitor’s misrepresentation, because it contains elements that are easily stretched to the point of distortion. Hoederer’s humanism, for example, appears more genuine than the Grand Inquisitor’s, in that Hoederer does not set himself up as superior but instead embraces his own fallibility. Yet all the same, to the extent that Hoederer’s story is a tragic politician archetype, he nevertheless incorporates into his self-presentation a vision of the leader as a tragic, lonely, and perhaps incomprehensible hero—in other words, that same vision that the Grand Inquisitor uses to assert his superiority. The implied superiority of a tragic politician such as
Hoederer is perhaps subtler than that of the Grand Inquisitor, but it is implied all the same.

To begin with, it is worth examining why we might understand the leader as incomprehensible in the manner that I have described. This question returns our focus to the uniquely morally risky space of the political sphere. As I have argued, action in the political sphere weighs down the politician with both guilt and the difficulty of moral knowledge. To extend the argument one step further, it might be said that the tragic politician becomes “inscrutable” by the very fact of having entered the political sphere and being stripped of innocence in this particular way. By stepping into the political realm and taking on the burden of political action, the politician enters a space where the people cannot follow. It is for this reason that, viewing Tames’ *Loneliest Job*, we look at Kennedy as if from across an unseen threshold: we cannot cross the border drawn by his terrible responsibility.

This argument draws on the long history of the idea that the individual who founds a political community either does not or cannot belong to that same community. Arendt writes that, in ancient Greece, “the lawmaker was like the builder of the city wall, someone who had to do and finish the work before political activity could begin”; such individuals were therefore often brought in from elsewhere and were not citizens (*Human Condition* 194). The example of Moses also comes to mind: he acts as lawgiver, but is unable to enter the promised land.

Rousseau’s *Social Contract* draws on this idea through the figure of the legislator, a figure who appears from some nebulous space outside society in order to establish the laws necessary to create a political community. Rousseau sees the role of
the legislator as necessary in order to provide laws to people who are not yet socially advanced enough to write laws for themselves. The legislator therefore must know the community better than it knows itself, yet cannot be of that community (Rousseau 180). This description suggests a view of the lawgiver as somewhat of an extraordinary individual, with a wisdom ahead of their time; so too, of course, does the comparison to Moses. The notion of the lawgiver as outside the political community is therefore linked to an understanding of the truly outstanding individual as also outside it. We might think, for example, of the practice of ostracism within democratic Athens, according to which Athenian citizens would periodically vote for an individual who had grown too powerful to be banished from the city for a decade. Strikingly, Sara Forsdyke suggests that “ostracism became a necessary attribute of heroes,” citing a comic poet who joked that a certain citizen was insufficiently remarkable and therefore unworthy of ostracism (Forsdyke 153).

This notion can be extended further, to include not only the legislator or founder as exceptional individual but the protector of the community as well. Arendt describes the legislator as one who builds the wall to create the political space, and therefore must exist outside that space. By that same logic, the person who mans that wall and protects that community must necessarily exist outside the space of the community. This archetype draws heavily on the narrative of the founder: the protector, like the founder, is also an exceptional individual who simultaneously makes possible the existence of the political community and is excluded from it.

This idea appears very strongly in American culture, particularly surrounding the mythology of the American West. The John Ford meta-Western *The Searchers* is
a paradigmatic reflection of this trope, perhaps because the film itself was made as a commentary on the Western genre. The hero (or anti-hero) of *The Searchers* is John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards, who is both a quintessential Western loner and a deconstruction of that same archetype. Throughout the film, Ford creates a dichotomy of inside/outside, civilization/barbarism, and domesticity/wilderness, aligning Ethan on the side of wilderness (Budd 62, 70). Yet even in his alienation from “civilization,” Ethan is acts as the protector of domestic society. The film’s plot centers on Ethan’s efforts to police the boundaries of civilization and to restore the sanctity of the domestic space shattered by the violent opening events of the film.

*The Searchers* is perhaps best known for its closing shot, which dramatically stages the opposition of “civilization” versus “barbarism” or wilderness. Ethan has successfully returned home a young woman who, many years earlier, was abducted in what Ford styles as an “Indian raid.” The last shot shows Ethan standing in the desert, framed in the doorway of the family’s house; the rest of the family has entered the home, but Ethan remains outside. The camera lingers on him from within the doorway as he turns and walks toward the mountains on the horizon.

The shot portrays Ethan as unable to cross into the domestic space of the house, but instead forced to remain in the wilderness. Ironically, it is Ethan’s services to the domestic space—the violence that he perpetrates to restore order to civilization—that have made him unfit to reenter that same space. He knows somewhat too much about the brutality of the wilderness; he has blood on his hands.18

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18 The blood in question is not only metaphorical. Ethan, for example, scalps one of his enemies, in an act usually reserved in Westerns for Native American representatives of “savagery” (Eckstein 13).
Ford’s dichotomy of inside/outside and civilization/wilderness is instructive: Ethan protects the community, but that role requires him to live “on the outside.”

Insofar as the protector of the political community mans the metaphorical wall, keeping that community safe, he often must use violence or commit similarly terrible acts in order to ensure this safety. Yet these acts of violence locate him outside the safe space of the community, for such violence represents behavior incompatible with the norms of “civilized” community.

The contemporary historian and foreign policy commentator Robert Kagan has drawn explicitly on this idea. Comparing the American use of force in the world with what he sees as the European commitment to international peace and law, Kagan writes that “although the United States has played the critical role in bringing Europe into this Kantian paradise… it cannot enter the paradise itself. It mans the walls but cannot walk through the gate” (Kagan 77). Kagan thus models the United States along the lines of the quasi-mythic figure of Ethan Edwards.19

Kagan’s understanding of the American use of force in the world draws on his vision of international politics as “an anarchic Hobbesian world” (Kagan 3). This reference to Hobbes is apropos, in view of Hobbes’ foundational division between the wilderness of the state of nature and the civilization created by the social contract. Indeed, this division creates the Hobbesian sovereign as the most dramatic example of the necessary exclusion of political community’s protector from that community: Hobbes, of course, understands the social contract as formed out of a communal desire for safety from the constant violence that characterizes the state of nature.

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19 Furthermore, if the protector of the community is by nature an extraordinary individual, Kagan’s description of America as protector aligns with the longstanding myth of American exceptionalism.
When forming the social contract, individuals sign away their “right of nature,” or their right to everything that might assist their self-preservation. In the place of the violent anarchy of the state of nature, the social contract institutes the rule of the “Leviathan,” or sovereign power, whose chief duty and reason for existence is to maintain an ordered polity and prevent a return to the state of nature (Hobbes 109).^20

In a crucial move, Hobbes argues that while the institution of sovereign is created by the social contract, it is nevertheless not bound by that contract: the contract is made exclusively between the individuals who sign away their right of nature, not between those individuals and the sovereign. The sovereign therefore retains the “right of nature” and exists in the state of nature relative to the members of society (Hobbes 111). Here, again, the logic manifests by which the community’s protector exists outside the community. Hobbes locates the sovereign outside the social contract and instead within the state of nature. The sovereign is necessary for society’s existence, and indeed is brought into being expressly in order to establish peace and make possible the conditions for productive common life; yet in order to provide this peace, it must exist outside the boundary of that community. It is not within the social contract, nor subject to its laws.\(^21\)

Hobbes’ reasoning is paradigmatic in its clarity: the sovereign creates the safe space of the political community but must remain outside the safety of that space. The logic of inside/outside and civilization/wilderness, of which John Ford would later make use, is at work here. It is also significant that Hobbes’ excluded protector is

\(^20\) I should emphasize that my description here, and the below analysis, applies to Hobbes’ model of “commonwealth by institution.” He also allows for a model of “commonwealth by acquisition,” in which the political community is formed not through the social contract but through “natural force,” that is, coercion or war (Hobbes 109-110).

\(^21\) See Hobbes ch XVIII.
none other than the sovereign power of the political community. Hobbes thus reminds us that the figure of the community’s protector and the community’s leader are often folded into one: it is the leader/protector who, in Kagan’s language, “mans the walls but cannot walk through the gate.” Indeed, Kagan himself draws on this conflation of leader and protector in his description of the United States as both lone superpower (hence world leader) and protector of Europe’s “Kantian paradise” (Kagan 77).

Hobbes’ sovereign, it is worth reiterating, is an institution and not a particular individual. It is therefore the role of sovereign that is set apart from the social contract, rather than the person (or people) who fill that role. This points to two distinct, though not mutually exclusive, understandings of what it might mean for the leader or protector of the community to be set apart from that community. First, the protector can be set apart in their capacity as leader or protector, that is, to the extent that they fulfill and represent the institution of leader or sovereign (insofar as that institution is necessarily set apart from the community). According to this understanding, an individual who holds the role of sovereign would be separated from the community for the duration of their time in that role, but would be able to rejoin the community upon leaving office.22

In the second understanding, the leader/protector is set apart personally, not only in his institutional role but also as an individual. His experience as leader so

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22 Hobbes writes that the institution of sovereign may take many different forms, with sovereignty held by one individual (as in monarchy) or by many, if not all (as in democracy). My analysis here is most obviously appropriate to a case in which the office of sovereign is held by a single individual or by a select few. If all the people comprise the sovereign entity, then they would all simultaneously be located “inside” and “outside” the political community—“inside” in their role as citizens, “outside” in their role as sovereign. Hobbes, however, considers monarchy to be the best form of government because (he argues) the private interests of the individual monarch holding office are most closely aligned with the best interests of the public than in other forms of government (Hobbes 120). I therefore feel justified in positioning Hobbesian monarchy as the paradigmatic manifestation of Hobbes’ sovereign institution, as well as most consonant with my analysis of the leader’s isolation.
changes him as a person that he becomes incapable of reentering the domestic sphere, even when he leaves office. For the tragic politician, this kind of severe personal change is usually caused by experience of the terrible actions that he must do in service to the community; his dirty hands mark him as separate. This might set the tragic politician apart as morally wounded, having lost his moral integrity. He might also be morally corrupted, as in the possibility that concerns Weber: perhaps the experience of power has made him overly free with violence and has irreparably distorted his moral reasoning. In either sense, the leader’s experience has irrevocably altered the relationships he can have with those individuals who have remained within the private or domestic sphere and have not experienced political power.23 Even after returning from his post at the garden wall, he remains, to some extent, in solitude.24

The distinction of these two modes of separation—the leader as institution and as individual—depends on the similar distinction between the institution of leadership (which exists perpetually) and the individual who happens to inhabit that institution at any given moment. Yet this distinction can be hard to maintain. When we look at George Tames’ portrait of Kennedy, do we see the weight of anguish and responsibility as pressing down on Kennedy, or on “the president” as an abstracted concept and institution? Elaine Scarry notes that Tames’ photograph “has come to be generalized to the presidential office irrespective of occupant” (Monarchy 20).

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23 To some extent, this view of the leader seems to rest implicitly on the liberal understanding of separate and discrete public and private realms: the leader exist in the public realm and the realm of danger, whereas the people exist in the private and domestic realm. However, given that this narrative also appears in the decisively non-liberal models of the ancient Athenian polity and the Rousseauian social contract, perhaps this split between public and private realms is not entirely necessary for the argument.

24 This story of a return that cannot truly be a return is a comparatively common one, also appearing in the cultural narrative surrounding veterans whose psychological trauma prevents them from truly “coming home from the war.” See, for example, Jonathan Shay’s Odyssey in America.
Similarly, the composition of the photograph echoes the final frame of *The Searchers* almost exactly. Ethan Edwards is a single individual rather than an inhabitant of political office, but his anguish and separation from society is of a piece with that of the president as individual and institution. In both, we see the protector as if from across the boundary of our own inability to understand them, weighed down by their isolation and terrible knowledge.


We can now understand the tragic politician as the mythic leader/protector of the political community, whose responsibility to protect not only locates him outside the community as he fulfills that responsibility, but even after he completes his mission and returns to the fold. (We might think of John Wayne’s Ethan, standing awkwardly in the doorway but unable to cross the threshold into the domestic space.) By virtue of the political sphere that he inhabits, the moral knowledge that he acquires, and his dirtied hands, the tragic politician has lost his innocence in such a way as to enter a space permanently beyond public comprehension.

The Grand Inquisitor is the most dramatic possible example of this narrative: his people cannot possible comprehend him because they lack all moral comprehension whatsoever. Thankfully, however, this is not the case for most political communities: most people have some degree of moral understanding, even if they have not had the experiences borne by the tragic politician. Does this argument, then, mean that it is impossible for mature and morally aware individuals to understand events or experiences that occur outside their sphere of knowledge?

Certainly this is not the case. I do not mean to take the position of “insider epistemology,” which posits that we can only know people whose context or perspective we share; this position leads quickly to solipsism (Fay 9). Rather, my argument assumes that we as human beings are capable of empathy and moral imagination to the extent that we can always attempt to understand one another, though different contexts and perspectives can make that mutual understanding difficult. In the case of the political leader in a large-scale modern state, such understanding becomes even more difficult, because our access to leaders is limited.
and highly mediated whenever it does occur. It is thus not unreasonable to state that the leader exists in a space that is difficult for us to comprehend, and is therefore shaped by that space in ways that are also difficult to comprehend.

As described, the tragic politician’s loss of innocence, in the sense of both dirty-handed guilt and of the gain of moral knowledge, ostensibly sets him apart from others. Yet insofar as the politician’s moral anguish is a crucial component of his dirty hands, this suggests his anguish itself to be isolating: the particularized pang of this anguish cannot be comprehended (or can be understood only in a limited sense, and with great difficulty) by those who have not faced such brutal moral choices. Not only is the tragic politician anguished, but as in the cases of the Grand Inquisitor and Hoederer, his anguish cannot be communicated or understood; it is his anguish, too, that sets him apart. When we look at President Kennedy’s silhouette from our implied position across the span of the Oval Office, it is the physical expression of what we assume to be his moral suffering—his bowed head and weighted shoulders—that hides his face from us. We may feel sympathy for the implied weight of his burden, but his anguish creates a threshold of understanding that can be crossed only with great difficulty.
CHAPTER FOUR
DEMOCRACY AND DIRTY HANDS

4.1 Dirty Hands and Democratic Accountability

In the previous chapter, I described how the tragic politician comes to be understood as essentially apart from his community in a profound way, located on the margins of civilization through his experience of the uniquely difficult burdens of the political sphere. In the case of the Grand Inquisitor, this separation of the leader from the people is entirely consistent with the people’s lack of moral knowledge: the Grand Inquisitor’s people lack even the basic moral equipment with which they might be able to understand the dilemmas of political life. Clearly, however, this aspect of the Grand Inquisitor’s story does not carry over into democratic life, given that democracy is predicated on an understanding of citizens as morally aware and autonomous individuals with the capacity to make moral and political decisions. For this reason, this narrative of the tragic, isolated, dirty-handed leader becomes problematic when applied to democracy.

To begin with, this vision of the tragic politician as metaphorically separated from his people lends itself to a narrative in which the politician-as-leader can be neither understood, nor critiqued, nor held accountable. As I have described, the notion of the leader as set apart by his potentially dirty hands and his moral anguish does not locate the leader entirely outside the bounds of our moral imagination, but it does contribute a vision of the leader as inhabiting a wholly different world from the citizens. To an extent, this idea recalls my earlier discussion of the difficulties of using anguish as a criterion of moral life: the moral anguish linked to dirty hands is irreducibly subjective, making it difficult to gauge the legitimacy or sincerity of the
tragic politician’s claim of moral suffering and to discern that suffering when it is not explicitly presented as such (as might be true in the case of Hoederer).

This reasoning dovetails with the notion of pain as incommunicable, perhaps most notably presented by Elaine Scarry, who has described pain as “unshareable” and something that “shatter[s]… language” (Body in Pain 4-5). Scarry, along with most writers on this topic, focuses on physical pain. Nevertheless, her analysis is still applicable to the moral and psychological pain represented by the tragic politician’s dirty-handed anguish, for the narrative of the tragic politician often assimilates physical and moral or psychological pain to each other. Himmler’s physician, for example, considered Himmler’s numerous physical ailments to be a product of his psychological anguish over the noble task of murder in the name of the Third Reich (Bennett 6).1 We might also think of Kennedy’s bowed shoulders in George Tames’ portrait, which are often read as a literal manifestation of Kennedy’s “carrying the weight of the world.” Kennedy’s pained posture in the photograph thus both metaphorically reflects and provides a window into his (presumably) pained psychological state. Finally, it is worth noting that the term “dirty hands” itself inevitably involves the physical body of the morally affected individual: to feel moral pain or guilt is to see one’s hands made physically filthy.

If physical pain is by nature incommunicable, and the tragic politician archetype blurs physical and moral pain, the last step in the syllogism leads us to the idea that moral pain may also be incommunicable. The narrative of dirty hands can easily be extended to portray the political leader’s moral anguish as essentially incommunicable and thus incapable of being understood by anyone who has not

1 Himmler’s anguish, obviously, did not prevent him from actually carrying out these murders.
shared that particular moral pain—in other words, by anyone who has not also experienced the particular moral burdens of the political sphere. This reasoning is implied by Kennedy’s physical separation from the viewer in Tames’ photograph, and by Hoederer’s unwillingness to describe his own anguish to his childish interlocutors.

Such reasoning is sometimes explicitly invoked by political leaders, however, and often in potentially worrying circumstances. I recently attended a dinner at which the keynote speaker was a former government official who had held a series of high-ranking positions in the intelligence community; let us call him Culper, after an American spy network formed during the Revolutionary War. After his speech, Culper was confronted with a question about abuses of authority that had taken place at a particular agency during his tenure there. Over the course of a long and evasive response, he bluntly declared, “I’ve killed people.” The statement created a gulf between Culper, who had killed, and the audience, who presumably not done so. Culper thus successfully set himself apart from the other individuals in the room, invoking the division of the people as “inside” the polity and himself as “outside,” having committed violent acts and dirtied his hands in order to protect that community. We also might consider him as having reversed the geography of “inside” and “outside,” locating himself “within” a privileged space whose condition of entry required an individual to have had the distinguishing experience of killing, and therefore consigning the audience to “outside” that space.

Culper’s response was particularly telling as a response to a somewhat confrontational criticism of his past actions. His statement asserted his identity as a privileged protector of the domestic space of political life, drawing a barrier between
himself and the questioner and implicitly denying the questioner’s right to criticize his decisions. Here, we might recall Spelman’s argument on the tragic hero’s guilt as exempting the hero from punishment, and remember that Spelman’s position only holds if the people believe that they genuinely cannot understand the hero’s anguish. Read alongside Spelman, Culper’s position extends this implication of Spelman’s argument by suggesting that, if we cannot understand the hero, we are also unable to critique him.

Culper’s statement implicitly claims that the questioner’s argument is without value: the questioner cannot comprehend the types of moral dilemmas that Culper has faced during his years of government service, and thus this criticism of Culper’s actions is not morally serious. This argument might take two different forms. First, Culper might claim that the question is not pertinent because it does not acknowledge the existence of the serious value conflicts that underlie the dirty hands problem. That is, the questioner refuses to admit that, in implementing certain unsavory intelligence protocols, Culper might genuinely have felt himself to have been faced with a difficult moral decision: these protocols might have been morally wrong, but they contributed significantly to the national security of the United States and to the safety of those who live within its borders, and thus prevented the occurrence of great evils. Instead, the questioner takes the position that the protocols in question were entirely morally wrong and had no redeeming features.

This view supposes that the questioner rejects the “ethical irrationality of the world,” naively failing to see that unjust actions may lead to morally desirable results. Weber, of course, describes those who reject this “ethical irrationality” as “political
infant[s],” implying a certain degree of moral immaturity and a lack of seriousness that contrasts sharply with the tragic politician’s maturity (PV 123). Weber’s qualification of this worldview as one of political infancy suggests that this is may be a reasonable position to hold as long as one remains outside the sphere of politics. If this were the case, the error of Culper’s questioner would lie in his attempt to situate himself within a sphere whose moral dictates he is incapable of understanding. Weber, however, assigns a certain immaturity to those individuals who hold such positions even outside political life: “not only the whole course of world history, but every frank examination of everyday experience points to the very opposite” of the notion that “from good comes only good; but from evil only evil follows” (PV 122; emphasis added). The questioner, therefore, not only missteps in critiquing the political actions, but is also morally immature in a more fundamental sense. We might think of Hugo in Dirty Hands, whose desire for purity within the political sphere is symptomatic of his callowness outside it (or so Hoederer suggests).

Culper might also claim that the questioner is not morally serious in a second, more complex sense: the questioner may acknowledge the potential existence of serious value conflicts, but fails to acknowledge that those in positions of political leadership are morally obligated to dirty their hands when faced with such a conflict. In other words, the questioner might accept the “ethical irrationality of the world,” but critique Culper’s choice to act in accordance with the Weberian ethic of responsibility rather than the ethic of conviction. From Culper’s point of view, this position would also be morally unserious in ignoring the particular responsibilities with which actors in the political sphere are burdened: as described in the previous
chapter, politicians or officials who enter the political sphere are duty-bound to dirty their hands if necessary.

In criticizing Culper’s decision to dirty his hands, the questioner might implicitly imagine himself in a position of moral superiority relative to Culper. Like Hugo, he might pride himself on holding his moral integrity intact, unlike Culper’s wounded or perhaps even corrupted moral self. Again, however, Culper can argue that this focus on purity is deeply misguided within the realm of politics, for the political leader’s responsibility is to “love his city more than his soul,” as Machiavelli puts it. If Culper had retained his moral integrity—or the integrity of his soul, in Machiavelli’s terms—he would not have been doing his job properly. This understanding of political life also suggests that the questioner’s moral high ground is illusory: he is able to feel morally superior simply because, by luck or by choice, he has not been placed within a situation of moral crisis comparable to those situations faced by Culper. If he had, he might well have emerged with a wounded sense of moral self. His moral integrity, therefore, does not trace to his being a “better person” in such a way as to give him the moral standing to critique Culper.

Culper’s claim is essentially that the questioner may not have the moral knowledge required to critique political action or to act in the political sphere, and that the questioner is unaware of the particular moral requirements of political action. At their core, both these arguments boil down to the claim that the questioner’s critique is invalid because he has not experienced political life, and therefore lacks the necessary knowledge to make a morally serious critique of Culper’s actions. If Culper

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2 That is, the questioner has been morally lucky in not facing morally compromising dilemmas in his life as a private citizen. However, his supposed moral integrity is also a matter of choice, insofar as he has chosen not to enter public office and thereby not to open himself up to the moral pressures therein.
is correct, this argument is a serious blow to democratic accountability. Any time that
the people attempt to hold political leaders accountable by criticizing their rationale
for a given decision, the leader can simply tell them that they could not possibly
understand his reasoning and thus have no standing from which to critique it—and,
moreover, the leader will be right. Clearly, this would seriously limit democratic
discussion, for any public opinion on the leader’s policies or decisions would be
presumptively invalid. Furthermore, this model essentially requires the people to
place a good deal of trust in their leaders to do the “right” thing in any given situation,
without themselves having any conception of what that “right” thing might be.

This line of reasoning is consonant with David P. Shugarman’s argument that
the dirty hands narrative is only compatible with an “election-focused… model” of
democracy, in which “citizens’ participation is reserved for elections,” as opposed to
a “participatory” model of democracy that focuses on the presence of democratic
discussion between as well as during elections (Shugarman 232). Notably,
Shugarman points to Weberian “plebiscitary democracy” as an example of the former
vision of democracy; he might also have referenced Joseph Schumpeter’s model of
democracy as focused on the figure and election of the popular leader, given citizens’
ignorance on policy matters.3 To Shugarman, “election-focused, elitist” democracy
“assumes a categorical divide between governors and governed”; this suggests, as I

3 See Weber, “Parliament and Government in a Reconstructed Germany,” and Schumpeter,
Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, especially chapter 21 and 22. Both Weber and Schumpeter
make an far more radical argument against democracy than that which I have described (though not
endorsed), suggesting that citizens lack the understanding of public policy required to make informed
decisions on issues of public importance. Schumpeter, for example, writes that “the typical citizen
drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field” (262). In
contrast, I argue only that the dirty hands narrative positions citizens as unable to critique particular
moral decisions made in moments of crisis by their distant and (ostensibly) incomprehensible leaders.
Citizens may well be able form informed opinions on matters of public policy independent of inability
to understand the moral torment of their leaders.
have argued, that citizens within such a democracy are unable to coherently critique their leaders’ actions. Impenetrably separated from political leaders and officials, citizens have no experience or knowledge of politics and thus no basis on which to offer their opinions.

The situation sketched here bears some similarities to that of the Grand Inquisitor, though it is not nearly so exaggerated. Culper does not believe that his questioner is totally without moral knowledge of any sort in the manner of the Grand Inquisitor’s subjects; rather, he suggests that the questioner is without the moral knowledge specific to the political sphere, which would allow him to mount a morally serious critique. Yet all the same, while the Grand Inquisitor clearly positions himself as explicitly superior to his people, arguments such as Culper’s place leaders in an implicitly superior position by making them essentially unaccountable. To set the leader apart from the people and in a space immune from critique is to implicitly create a hierarchy on the basis of knowledge, ranking the sober and mature leader far above the ignorant and presumptuous questioner. There is therefore a certain paternalism implicit in this narrative, though certainly paternalism is not as strongly present as in the Grand Inquisitor’s story.

To return briefly to the question of Hoederer’s versus the Grand Inquisitor’s claims of humanism and love of the world, we can now see that Hoederer is to an extent positioned as superior despite his identification with the “filth and vices” of humanity. He may not present himself as superior to the hoi polloi in the manner that the Grand Inquisitor does, but his self-positioning within a narrative that presents the
leader as separate and unquestionable nevertheless locates him as a figure of antidemocratic superiority.

We need not assume, however, that Culper’s presentation of political officials as separate and superior is necessarily accurate. Indeed, his position is a variation of the flawed epistemological position that I described in the previous chapter, which presumes that we can only truly comprehend individuals with whom we share a particular experience or quality to some degree. According to Culper, the questioner cannot make a morally serious criticism of Culper’s actions without himself having experienced the unique pressures of the political sphere, because only through his own experience of those moral pressures could he have gained the knowledge necessary to critique Culper. Yet, as I noted earlier, this argument does not follow. It may be true that it is more difficult to understand the moral pressures of politics without having experienced them firsthand, but this does not mean that it is necessarily impossible to do so. We are capable of moral imagination, of integrating the perspectives of others into our thinking in order to understand the complexity of the issues at stake. Arendt, for example, writes about the importance of using our imagination to incorporate the “standpoints of all others” into our critical thinking, thus allowing us to achieve an “enlarged mentality”: “to think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (Lectures 43). Even if we have not experienced the burdens of the political sphere, then, the process of critical thinking by which we make judgments involves “going visiting” and thus including in our thinking some understanding of what those burdens might be.

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4 Indeed, Arendt identifies this inability to “go visiting” as Adolf Eichmann’s chief flaw, describing Eichmann as burdened an “inability to ever look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view” (Eichmann 48).
As many thinkers have argued at length, fiction is a key mechanism by which our moral imagination functions. I have quoted Martha Nussbaum as suggesting that, through the moral struggles of fictional characters, we come to experience the “complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of moral choice” from multiple different perspectives (Nussbaum 141). Reading fiction about the anguish of moral decision in the political sphere—such as the anguish of Hoederer, Creon, or the Grand Inquisitor—can assist our understanding of the moral dilemmas faced by politicians in the real world. Culper’s position, in contrast, not only denies that we might better understand Culper’s anguished choices by reading about Hoederer, but also denies that a realistic story about a character like Hoederer could have been written by an individual like Sartre, who was not himself a politician. Yet there is clearly some degree of realism to the dirty hands problem as described by Sartre and other writers, for political leaders have sometimes used the language of dirty hands to describe their own moral crises, though not in so many words. C.A.J. Coady, for example, points to former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s statement that “in order to do good, you must engage in evil” (Coady 76). This is a succinct summary of the dirty hands problem from an individual who himself experienced the moral difficulties of political life and who, in the moment of making that statement thirty years after the end of his tenure in politics, remained deeply anguished by his actions.

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5 Of course, Sartre did claim to have participated in the French Resistance, though the extent of his involvement has been disputed. See Curtis 13, 235-236.
6 McNamara presents an interesting case of the dirty hands problem. At the time of the Vietnam War, he was perceived by many as the cold, unfeeling architect of the war: “an IBM machine with legs,” certainly not a person with a great moral capacity for anguish. Decades later, however, he began to publicly display great grief over the Vietnam War and his role in it—most notably in Errol Morris’ film The Fog of War, from which Coady quotes the above statement by McNamara. Interestingly, the
All this is to point to the falseness of Culper’s suggestion that we cannot possibly comprehend the moral dilemmas of political action without having ourselves experienced those dilemmas. It is also worth noting Max Weber’s reminder that there always exists a danger of the political leader’s becoming corrupted by the violence of politics, and losing touch with the moral considerations that must be kept in mind; thus does Weber place great store on the politician’s anguish, and on his ability to hold both the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction in his mind. Following this logic, perhaps Culper’s politically inexperienced questioner might actually be more able to evaluate the moral implications of Culper’s decisions than Culper himself, given that the questioner has not been exposed to the corrupting influence of violence.

Culper’s argument, which is antidemocratic and evasive of accountability, cannot hold up under scrutiny. The threshold between the leader as “outside” and the people as “inside” the space of community, or the leader as “inside” and the people as “outside” the exclusive moral space of politics, is not nearly as impenetrable as Culper suggests. The people have the ability to make morally serious critiques of political leaders even without having directly experienced political life. Yet nevertheless, it remains important that the narrative of dirty hands and the tragic politician makes the people vulnerable to Culper’s line of criticism. Culper’s argument fits neatly into the dirty hands narrative, which enables him to take the position that he does. His position, in other words, may be a distortion, but it is a

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film presents McNamara’s declaration of the necessity of “engaging in evil” in context of Morris’ questioning him on the matter of Norman Morrison, a Quaker who burned himself to death below McNamara’s office window as a protest against the Vietnam War. McNamara’s moving account of Morrison’s self-immolation suggests to me that he may have felt privately anguished over the war even at the time of Morrison’s death, though he did not publicly present himself as such.
distortion enabled by the very narrative that it distorts—much as Creon’s and the Grand Inquisitor’s ugly exaggerations are themselves indicative of the limitations of the narrative of dirty hands.

4.2 Dirty Hands and the State of Emergency

Among contemporary critical literature on dirty hands, it is quite common to state that the problem of dirty hands arises not out of the political space in general, but out of a particular kind of political space characterized by routine violence and dissemblance. Dennis Thompson, for example, describes dirty hands as “originat[ing] in the world of kings and princes,” and appearing contemporarily in the form of “the dilemmas of revolutionaries” (Thompson 11). Similarly, Shugarman writes of the environment of dirty-handed politics as “hostile [and] warlike,” and notes that Machiavelli’s recommendations of brutal means arose from a world without “a bill of rights and constitutional constraints on office holders” (Shugarman 231-232).

Shugarman’s citation of Machiavelli is instructive. Soon after his famous exhortation that the prince learn “how not to be good,” Machiavelli includes a telling aside: “if all men were good, this advice would be bad; but since men are wicked and will not keep faith with you, you need not keep faith with them” (Machiavelli 54, emphasis added). Similarly, he writes that “in these days, those rulers who have not thought it important to keep their word have achieved great things” (Machiavelli 53, emphasis added). These qualifications of Machiavelli’s brutal advice, though subtle, are nevertheless important: they indicate the extent to which his recommendations rely on context. Machiavelli’s advice is relevant to the prince who acts “in these
times,” that is, in Machiavelli’s times of violence and brutality, where “men are wicked” rather than good. For the leader who acts in a qualitatively different “time,” perhaps where “all men,” or at least some of them, are “good,” Machiavelli’s ruthless pragmatism does not necessarily apply.7

To an extent, democracy creates a political space that differs from Machiavelli’s in the manner described. As Tom Sorell writes in his study of dirty hands, “democracy does seem to provide a cleaner environment for political decisions than other forms of government” (Sorell 81).8 We might think of Kant’s description of “perpetual peace”: in a world composed entirely of democratic states (or of states with “republican constitutions,” to use Kant’s term), leaders will be constrained in their actions by Kant’s principle of publicity, which declares that “all [political] actions relating to the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity” (“Perpetual Peace” 99, 125-130). Such a principle makes impossible the deception and manipulation that are so often at the root of dirty hands case; it also encourages leaders to act according to moral and constitutional means. Furthermore, the fact that Kant requires every state to have a “republican constitution” for the conditions of perpetual peace to be realized, and for those states to be organized in an international federation, extends the principle of publicity and the scope of moral political action into the international sphere (“Perpetual Peace” 102). Not only are manipulation and coercion prohibited domestically, but they are also prohibited as a matter of foreign policy.

7 See also Moon 76-77.
8 Similarly, Norberto Bobbio argues that “democracy is the political system that allows for the closest encounter between the needs of morals and those of politics” (Bobbio 84).
Kant does not argue that all leaders will always adhere to the principle of publicity and to moral action, even in conditions of perpetual peace; rather, he suggests that most leaders will generally do so. The crucial point is that democratic institutions, on both a domestic and international level, constrain political leaders so as to limit the conditions under which dirty-handed political action may become necessary.

While democracy is a highly complex and contested concept, many conceptual variations rely on the idea of collective conversation as a means of solving problems. If we are to engage in such conversation, particularly with those who may disagree with us, we must avoid a resort to the violence of Machiavelli’s time. We see this clearly in Habermas’ discourse theory, which posits that law can only be legitimate or rightful when it emerges from a dialogic process approximating conditions in which coercion and manipulation are absent. This process, which Habermas’ early work sought to make concrete in the form of the “ideal speech situation,” allows interlocutors to evaluate opposing arguments purely on the level of reason, outside the shadow of violence or power imbalance (Habermas 81-82).

Under democratic rule, therefore, there is no space for violence in resolving political conflict; deception, too, is limited. Insofar as this is true in the contemporary world, it is true in the context of domestic affairs, in stable polities under constitutional governance. The sphere of international relations remains one in which force and deception are remain common even on the part of democratic

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9 As Kant famously wrote, “nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of. Nature only requires of us that we should approximate to this idea” (“Idea for a Universal History 46-45”).

10 The state, of course, retains a “monopoly on violence” and engages in violence by the very fact of its existence. See generally Cover.
leaders. Kant’s perpetual peace, of course, requires the creation of structural conditions on an international level that will enable the elimination or near-elimination of violence and coercion between states; thus does his analysis apply to international politics as well as domestic. In the current absence of such an institutional structure, international relations exists as the primary, though not exclusive, space in which democratic leaders face the problem of dirty hands.

Similarly, another crucial difference between the Machiavellian world and the democratic political space lies in the fact that democratic political activity is governed by a constitution, as suggested by Kant’s insistence that states in the world of perpetual peace must be organized along the principles of a “republican constitution.” The presence of a constitution requires that the actions of political leaders and officials adhere to a particular procedural and substantive structure, which is to some extent normative. In the dirty hands narrative, such constraints do not come into consideration. Rather, the politician is faced with a decision presented as entirely within his own conscience, a choice between “doing good” and “doing bad to do good” that involves moral considerations wholly independent of outside constraint.

In the case of a figure such as Hoederer, this presentation of the dirty hands dilemma as purely internal is unremarkable. Hoederer is a revolutionary, not an elected official, and is not governed by a constitution or by law. In the case of the American president, however, to reduce questions of political action to the moment of individual moral choice implicit in the dirty hands problem, without keeping in mind the presence of constitutional limitations on political action, is to ignore a central aspect of political action in a democracy.
It is noteworthy, therefore, that paradigmatic dirty-hands dilemmas in a democratic context most often arise in situations of dire emergency, commonly linked to national security. Two of the most commonly cited examples of dirty hands derive from World War II: namely, Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb and the famous Coventry story, in which Churchill was forced to knowingly allow the Luftwaffe to conduct a deadly air raid on the city of Coventry. As the story goes, if Churchill had evacuated the city, he would have effectively alerted Germany that the Allies had successfully broken the Enigma cypher, and thus endangered the war effort (Hollis 391).\textsuperscript{11} For a more contemporary example, we might look to the question of torture, which arose after the Bush administration authorized the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” against detainees following the 9/11 attacks.

The degrees to which each of the above instances actually presented a dirty hands problem are certainly debatable.\textsuperscript{12} The crucial point, however, is that although these examples are all situations of moral choice that arose within a system of democratic government, they occurred in circumstances unconducive to the normal processes of such governance. In states of war or of comparable emergency, the characteristics that distinguish democratic from Machiavellian political life are no longer present to the same extent. A war, or an emergency created by a situation such

\textsuperscript{11} After presenting this example, Hollis notes that, in fact, Churchill himself was not actually confronted with the decision of whether or not to allow the bombing of Coventry. As a matter of fact the decision was made by an individual several, if not many, rungs lower on the chain of command (Hollis 391 fn. 5). S.L. Sutherland suggests that Hollis’ willingness to assign responsibility to Churchill, despite Hollis’ obvious knowledge of historical evidence to the contrary, indicates that Hollis’ thinking has been shaped by the parliamentary structure of British government, which assigns the prime minister political responsibility for the actions of a certain group of subordinates (Sutherland 495-496). I want to go further and argue that Hollis’ reasoning is influenced by structure of thinking created by the dirty hands narrative, which encourages the collapse of all moral responsibility into the figure of the leader.

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, the above footnote. We might also question—as many have—whether or not it was moral or effective to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons, or to torture detainees captured in the war on terror.
as the 9/11 attacks, shifts a democracy away from the presumption against violence and coercion: in a state of war or security emergency, violence not only can be used more legitimately but perhaps must be used. Similarly, war or emergency can loosen the constitutional constraints that apply in peacetime. Such situations, therefore, approximate the paradigmatic conditions for dirty hands much more closely than does democratic life in times of peace or normalcy.

This does not, of course, mean that dirty hands situations can arise only in situations of national security, war, or emergency within the space of democratic government. There exist countless instances of dirty hands in democratic domestic politics. To point to a contemporary example, President Obama’s former top aide recently released a memoir revealing that the president had been in favor of marriage equality for far longer than he had publicly admitted. This revelation precipitated a brief media debate over whether the president’s actions had been moral: he had deceived the public about his position on an important policy issue in order to secure his initial election. Perhaps it was morally wrong for him to lie, but if he had publicly committed himself to marriage equality prior to the 2008 presidential election, he

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13 This idea is reflected in contemporary international law on the use of force—for example, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (whose application is triggered when a situation of “armed conflict” is entered into) legalizes degrees of violence against individuals that would be unconscionable under International Human Rights Law (IHRL), which applies outside “armed conflict.” That is, under international law, entering into an “armed conflict” gives a state legal license to commit acts of violence (International Committee of the Red Cross). This is also true under just war theory’s notion of jus in bello, conduct in wartime—certain kinds of wartime violence can be morally justified that, outside of wartime, would be entirely immoral. Walzer describes this at length in Just and Unjust Wars.

14 John E. Finn writes that “almost every modern constitution makes some explicit provision for crisis government” (Constitutions in Crisis 13).

15 See Axelrod 446–447.
might well not have been elected and thus would not have been able to support policies in favor of marriage equality years later.16

This example is only one of many such cases that arise in peacetime domestic politics. Nevertheless, my focus here will remain on cases of war, emergency, and national security as paradigmatic dirty hands situations—in other words, dirty hands situations involving real dirt and blood. Such cases more closely model the background conditions of violence and isolated decision-making that are at the heart of the dirty hands narrative. Furthermore, the case of marriage equality represents a situation in which democratic processes are present but imperfect, allowing the use of deception for strategic purposes instead of open, rational Habermasian discourse. In the case of war or emergency, on the other hand, the preconditions for such discourse are often entirely nonexistent in the absence of trust or mutual normative commitments between rival states or leaders. In this sense, too, situations of emergency are more evocative of the paradigmatic dirty hands situation.

We can see this connection between emergency and dirty hands in the work of the infamous Carl Schmitt, whose Political Theology argues that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 5). The core of Schmitt’s argument is that, sooner or later, every political order must necessarily grapple with the problem of the exception: a situation that is essentially indefinable, but can be approximated as one

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16 On its face, this might seem similar to the kind of worries we face on an interpersonal level. Consider, for example, a couple in a serious relationship; they love and care for each other, but serious issues have arisen in their relationship that need to be dealt with. Person A, however, is overwhelmed with a family emergency. Ought Person B lie to Person A about the presence of problems in the relationship until such a time as Person A is equipped to deal with these issues? On the other hand, this deception would take place within the context of a relationship founded on mutuality and communication, and the purpose of the deception would be to maintain that relationship. In the case of Obama’s deception, however, no such mutuality exists. Obama lied in service of manipulation and political gain—albeit also in the cause of justice, insofar as his election facilitated gains for marriage equality.
of dire emergency or “extreme peril” to the state (Schmitt 6). For a liberal system of
government regulated by law, the essential difficulty of the exception is that its
parameters cannot be defined by law, and thus law cannot predict what powers must
necessarily be granted to the sovereign leader in emergency or “exceptional”
circumstances. Thus arises Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty: however regimented
by law liberal government may be, ultimately there must exist a figure whose power
it is to determine the existence of the exception, and who obtains “principally
unlimited authority” after having declared that state of exception (Schmitt 12).

The state of exception represents the situation in which normal legal and
constitutional structures are insufficient and must fall by the wayside, in deference to
necessity and sovereign power; thus, Schmitt mounts a critique of liberal legal
systems attempting to regulate for all possible eventualities through law.17 To
Schmitt, the essential truth of sovereign power resides in the moment of individual
decision when the sovereign declares the existence of a state of exception. Insofar as
the exception can be loosely and underinclusively defined as a situation of
emergency, Schmitt’s analysis dovetails with the notion of the dirty hands problem as
arising in situations of war or comparable crisis. In a situation of dire necessity,
constitutional structures fall away and political action becomes a question of
individual decision-making, whether on the presence of the exception (as in the case
of Schmitt’s sovereign) or on a problem of dirty hands (in the case of the tragic
politician). Similarly, the “unlimited authority” of the Schmittian sovereign allows
scope for a great degree of violence, coercion, and other activities that violate
democratic and constitutional norms; such is the situation of the tragic politician,

17 See generally Scheuerman.
whose hands are stained by violence and blood. As in the case of the Machiavellian prince, the violence of Schmitt’s sovereign is within the scope of the sovereign’s legitimate authority. As Schmitt puts it, in the state of exception, “the state remains, whereas law recedes” (Schmitt 12). The tragic politician acts within his purview when ordering acts of great violence, thus strengthening the notion that to enter into the role of political leadership is to “let… [one]self in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence,” as Weber puts it (PV 125-126).18

Schmitt’s diagnosis of the necessities of emergency state power is, historically speaking, somewhat of an overstatement: democratic governments have weathered emergencies without placing unlimited sovereign power in the hands of a single individual or institution. Constitutional restraints have been relaxed, but have not vanished.19 Nevertheless, it is telling that Schmitt’s thinking has such great consonance with the dirty hands narrative: both present an image of political leadership as without legal or constitutional constraints on action, involving the power to order acts of great violence, and resting on acts of decision that take place entirely according to individual judgment with very little, if any, outside critique and accountability. Given that Schmitt’s project aims more or less at the destruction of liberal constitutionalism, this consonance emphasizes the gulf between the limited

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18 Interestingly, Giorgio Agamben analyzes Schmitt’s understanding of sovereign power and the state of exception along what he calls “topographical” lines, describing the state of exception (and, thus, sovereign power) as simultaneously inside and outside the space of law (State of Exception 23-24). In an earlier work, Agamben similarly drew on Schmitt’s writing to conceptualize the sovereign as a “sacred life” both within and outside the parameters of law (see “Sovereign Body and Sacred Body,” 57-62, in Homo Sacer). Agamben’s argument on Schmittian sovereignty (and indeed, on the institution of sovereignty in general) positions Schmitt’s writings within framework of my earlier analysis on the figure of the leader/protector/sovereign as located outside the governed and protected community.

19 See generally Finn, Constitutions in Crisis.
space for dirty hands in democratic politics and the situation of dirty-handed Schmittian leaders such as Hoederer.

A state of emergency or Schmittian exception often enables or necessitates governmental secrecy—as in the case of the Coventry bombing, in which Churchill was (ostensibly) forced to keep secret his knowledge of the imminent air raid, lest he endanger the entirety of the Allied war effort. 20 Independent of whether secrecy in a given case is genuinely necessary, what is crucial is that secrecy allows the dirty-handed political actor to more easily claim their own separation from the polity, and thus to place themselves beyond criticism or accountability. When Culper, for example, creates a distance between himself and his audience by announcing that he has killed, the secrecy surrounding the conditions under which he killed contributes to that distance. The audience does not know who, why, or how Culper has killed, and if anyone were to ask, he would likely state that he was not privileged to say. Clearly, this makes it much difficult for us to know whether we have semi-successfully used our moral imagination to approximate an idea of what it would be like to be in Culper’s position—that is, whether we have “gone visiting” to the right or wrong place. If we cannot know what it is that Culper did, how can we possibly know whether we are imagining the situation correctly? To put the matter somewhat facetiously, under conditions of secrecy we cannot know if we know what he knows.

20 Following Kant, secrecy in such cases would not be incompatible with the principle of publicity, because of the absence of the institutions necessary for perpetual peace—hence the necessity of using force. In the absence of such institutions, politicians need not apply the publicity principle. “The condition which must be fulfilled before any kind of international right is possible is that a lawful state must already be in existence… for without this there can be no public right” (“Perpetual Peace” 129; emphasis in original).
The secrecy that often accompanies situations of war, emergency, or other national security issues therefore increases the difficulty of utilizing our moral imagination to critically consider the leader’s situation. The tragic politician can then argue with greater ease that we cannot possibly understand him, because the veil of secrecy impedes our ability to know whether we truly can reach some level of understanding. Certainly, the tragic politician might attempt to invoke such obfuscating secrecy in times of peace as well; the difference, however, is that secrecy is far easier to justify in a crisis, when democratic norms requiring publicity and accountability have to some extent been overridden by the exigencies of the situation.

4.3 Dirty Hands on a National Scale: The Problem of Complicity

A crucial component of democracy requires political leaders to be formally accountable to their citizens, unlike the autocratic princes of Machiavelli’s time. While a prince in a violent and undemocratic political space has no reason to reveal or explain his actions to the people, the democratic leader who owes authority to the people both can and should do so. For this reason, Dennis Thompson suggests that the use of secrecy in a democratic setting might doubly dirty a politician’s hands: the tragic politician would be guilty once over from the initial dirty-handed action, and guilty twice over if he hides that initial action from the people (Thompson 11).

The issue of accountability suggests yet another distinctive component of the dirty hands problem in a democratic space: that is, the question of responsibility. As Walzer puts it, “democracy is a device for distributing responsibility” (Just and Unjust Wars 299). In a democracy, in other words, it is perhaps not quite so easy to
place the entire burden of dirty-handed guilt on the shoulders of the individual leader; after all, the leader was elected by the people at large and can be held accountable to them by various methods. Imagine, for example, that Americans reelect a president whose foreign policy has shown itself to involve dirty-handed actions abroad, and whose campaign offered no promise to change those policies, but either directly or indirectly suggested that they would be continued. If that president’s reelection allows the continued implementation of that dirty-handed foreign policy, surely the American people are, to some degree, implicated in the moral guilt incurred by that policy. The people have given their consent; therefore they are complicit.

Such situations might manifest with greater or lesser degrees of clarity in the extent to which the people directly approved their leader’s actions. To what degree, for example, did the president make clear during the election season their intent to pursue a policy that would burden them with dirty hands? Elected officials often implement programs that have not been foreordained by campaign promises. If a president implements a dirty-handed foreign policy whose violence was to some extent implied by their campaign platform but was not explicitly promised by it, ought the voters also be burdened with guilt? And ought all Americans be so burdened, or only those who voted for this particular candidate?

The contemporary literature on dirty hands tends to agree, alongside Walzer, that democracy ought somehow to affect how we consider guilt and responsibility in cases of dirty hands. Dennis Thompson, for example, argues that “as long as officials are assumed to act with the democratic approval of citizens, officials cannot be burdened with any greater responsibility than citizens.” Thompson’s argument is all
the more striking because of his loose definition of “democratic approval”: he states that the criteria for such approval could be fulfilled simply by the formal requirement of fair elections (Thompson 22). His argument suggests that in a democratic polity, all are equally guilty of dirty hands, both the political leaders who implement policies and the citizens who cast their votes for those leaders.

Thompson’s position, however, simply goes too far. Michael Walzer makes the telling distinction between a perfect democracy, in which every citizen has the ability to participate in every act of decision-making, and the large-scale, imperfect democracies of the present world. In such an imperfect democracy, "political participation is occasional, intermittent, limited in its effects, and is mediated by a system for the distribution of news which… allows for considerable distortions.” In such a situation, we cannot rest entirely on the notion of distributed democratic responsibility; rather, Walzer writes that political leaders “bear a kind of regal responsibility,” meaning that responsibility is concentrated on the leader’s shoulders to some extent (Just and Unjust Wars 301).

Any democratic corollary to the problem of dirty hands must therefore keep in mind citizens’ involvement in politics while simultaneously considering citizens as less morally entangled in dirty-handed action than their leaders, or perhaps entangled in a different way. The issue becomes how to conceptualize citizens’ moral engagement with dirty hands. This is a thorny problem, which quickly bleeds into the question of how best to think about collective responsibility or collective guilt.

Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull provides a moving account of collective guilt from one who has experienced this emotion firsthand. The book is a chronicle of
the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission from Krog’s perspective as a reporter on the Commission, and a significant proportion of Country involves Krog’s emotional struggle as a white Afrikaner who opposed apartheid but nevertheless feels herself to be caught up in its evil. Her dilemma manifests most poignantly during the testimony of former members of a government death squad. While she first declares of the men that “I am not of them,” she is struck by their testimony, and afterwards angrily confronts an obstinate Afrikaner politician: “They all say they did the dirty work for you and for me. And all of us are trying to deal with that, with the responsibility of that, with the guilt of such a claim” (Krog 124).

Krog thus shifts her focus outward from the guilt of the individual killers to the moral entanglement of all those for whom the death squad’s “dirty work” was done. Her persistent effort to work through her own guilt suggests the difficulty of separating our moral selves from the actions taken by our governments, particular if those actions were explicitly taken “in our name” or for our good. Krog describes herself, along with many other Afrikaners, as “utterly sorry… deeply ashamed and gripped with remorse,” suggesting that her connection to Afrikaner culture and thus to the Afrikaner regime of apartheid has burdened her with guilt, despite her own opposition to the apartheid system (Krog 125). The question, essentially, is whether Krog is right to feel such guilt. Her case is not one of dirty hands, for apartheid rule was an unambiguous evil. Nevertheless, her guilt may be an instructive example.

While acknowledging the deep complexity of the concept of collective guilt or responsibility, I will here examine only two of the many possible approaches to the idea: that of Michael Walzer, and that shared by Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers.
These approaches provide a useful (though not exhaustive) survey of frameworks through which we might consider the question of citizen engagement in the problem of dirty hands.

Walzer’s argument rests on a deceptively simple formula: “the more one can do, the more one has to do” (Just and Unjust Wars 301). That is, in a democracy with significant freedom of speech and opportunity for political organization, citizens “can do” more and therefore have a moral obligation to do more. A democratic citizen with significant opportunity to act in opposition to their government’s evil action, who does not take advantage of that opportunity, can be judged as having failed morally in some way. This contrasts with an individual living in a totalitarian state, who “can do” very little, and therefore cannot be held morally responsible for their state’s evil actions.

Walzer’s formula raises the question of how we ought to gauge what a given person “can do.” Even the citizen of a totalitarian state could be considered capable of “doing” something in opposition to the state, though that action might result in their death. For example, the members of the White Rose, an opposition group in Nazi Germany, wrote and distributed anti-Nazi pamphlets at the eventual cost of their own lives; there was nothing preventing every other German from having done as they did. Walzer, however, sets a far lower standard than the White Rose for what we might reasonably expect people to do, arguing that we must do all we can, “short of accepting frightening risks” (Just and Unjust Wars 301.).

21 Notably, Walzer refers to actions that are "something less" than "death-defying" as "within the reach of ordinary people," and suggests that the cost of death is one that "we can expect few people to pay" (Just and Unjust Wars 294-295).
certain category of moral acts as in a sense “beyond the call of duty.” Such acts "are of moral value and which an agent may feel called upon to perform [by their own conscience], but which cannot be demanded and whose omission cannot be called wrongdoing" (Urmson 208).

Walzer’s formula creates a bridge between individual versus collective guilt or responsibility, locating moral judgment in how an individual responds—given available alternatives—to government action that somehow implicates or otherwise affects the political community. Insofar as Antjie Krog truly did all she could reasonably be expected to do in opposition to the apartheid regime, Walzer’s reasoning proposes that she would have no basis on which to feel guilty. In the situation of citizens whose anguished leader has engaged in dirty-handed action, a citizen who rallied against that action to the best of their ability would not be morally implicated by the leader’s dirty hands, while a citizen who chose not to oppose the leader’s action (perhaps because they believed it to be necessary according to the ethic of responsibility) would be complicit, and would have to bear that guilt.

This reasoning suggests that the extent of the moral entanglement of both leaders and citizens in dirty-handed action ought to be considered as a matter of degree. In other words, “the more one can do” implies degrees of what any one individual “can do,” and thus of the moral blame that ought to be assigned if that individual fails to do what they can. Clearly a political leader is capable of “doing more” and of having a greater effect on the outcome of events than is the democratic citizen: the leader has direct control of policy, whereas the citizen can only lobby to have their opinion heard or seek to change policy indirectly. To put the matter another
way, the failure to act when one could have made a bigger difference to the outcome represents a greater wrong. The leader can therefore be held morally responsible to a greater extent than can the citizen. This is particularly true in a large modern state, where there exist only a few leaders and a multitude of citizens, meaning that the individual responsibility of any given American citizen is tiny compared to the responsibility of, for example, the Secretary of Defense (to point once again to the anguish of Robert McNamara). Nevertheless, the responsibility and moral wounding of the Secretary of Defense and the citizen is of the same essential character; the responsibility of the Secretary of Defense is simply many magnitudes greater.

Hannah Arendt’s and Karl Jaspers’ writings on collective guilt and responsibility offer an alternative approach, suggesting that the difference in responsibility between leader and citizen is primarily not one of degree, but of kind. Both Arendt and Jaspers make a distinction between the natures of individual entanglement versus collective entanglement in evil. Arendt does so by differentiating individual guilt from collective responsibility, arguing that guilt is “strictly personal,” whereas in a case of collective responsibility, “I… [can be] held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group… which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve” (“Collective Responsibility” 149). In a slight contrast, Jaspers considers both individual and collective guilt as guilt, distinguishing individual “moral guilt” from collective “political guilt” (Jaspers 25).

21 Habermas has echoed Arendt’s position, arguing that, “There is no collective guilt. Whoever is guilty must answer for it individually. At the same time, however, there is such a thing as a collective responsibility for the mental and cultural context in which mass crimes become possible. And we are similarly inheritors of past events” (Habermas and Michnik 7).
While the dirty-handed political actor is morally and individually guilty, therefore, the democratic citizenry would only be politically guilty according to Jaspers, and would only bear the burden of collective responsibility according to Arendt. This is not to discount the possibility that citizens might also bear some degree of individual moral responsibility (or guilt), as Walzer argues, if they were able to oppose the dirty-handed action but either chose not to or failed to do so. Yet Arendt’s and Jaspers’ positions suggest that citizens would still bear some responsibility or guilt even if they were to free themselves from individual guilt by following Walzer’s formula. As Arendt writes, collective responsibility cannot be wiped clean by individual action (“Collective Responsibility” 158).

Arendt and Jaspers’ shared position makes clear the importance of considering moral factors outside the realm of intentional action. For citizens to be morally entangled with their community’s or government’s actions regardless of their own actions, moral significance must be granted to aspects of life outside the sphere outside of autonomous action; only in this way can citizens be held morally responsible for actions that they have not intentionally contributed to in any way. Such a notion of moral life is reflected in the idea of moral luck, which assigns significance to events occurring circumstantially and independent of intent.

Walzer’s position also involves an understanding of moral life outside intentionality: for me as a citizen, it is bad luck to have my elected leader carry out a dirty-handed or evil policy that is ostensibly for my benefit, since this may burden me with the responsibility of acting in opposition to this policy if I judge it to be morally wrong. Certainly, it burdens me with making a critical assessment of the policy in
order to gauge the extent of my own responsibility. Yet Arendt and Jaspers emphasize this component of moral life to a far greater extent, in that they do not allow citizens to be fully exonerated even after fulfilling the responsibility of opposition; rather, citizens remain burdened by collective responsibility or political guilt. Crucially, both Arent and Jaspers suggest that this burden is an inevitable consequence of living in a political community. We are entangled in the acts of others insofar as we coexist alongside them. Arendt writes that “this vicarious responsibility for things we have not done… is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men” (“Collective Responsibility” 158).

Jaspers, in turn, describes political guilt as arising from the fact that “every human being is fated to be enmeshed in the power relations he lives by” (Jaspers 38). Yet he also suggests a level of cultural interconnection reflected by the confluence of political and moral guilt, which he refuses to treat as entirely distinct. He writes,

The conduct which made us liable rests on a sum of political conditions whose nature is moral, as it were, because they help to determine individual morality… there is a sort of collective moral guilt in a people’s way of life which I share as an individual, and from which grow political realities. (Jaspers 69)

Jaspers appears to argue that our moral and political guilt are enmeshed with each other because of the interaction of our moral existence with our political existence: our political community shapes our moral lives by creating and inculcating moral standards, while our collective sense of morality shapes our politics. A given

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23 Arendt’s essay is, however, deeply unclear as to what exactly that “price” constitutes. In other words, what obligations does our collective responsibility place on us as members of a political community? Perhaps this might involve reparations—that is, citizens’ acceptance of the financial burden of paying reparations in order to acknowledge the crimes of the collective. In contrast, Jaspers’ reasoning on political responsibility is somewhat clearer: he suggests that the collective burden of political responsibility requires us to submit to whatever collective punishment the victor in war sees fit to implement (for example, the postwar occupation and division of Germany).
political act, therefore, can to some extent be traced back to the moral standards of the community, and because of this has implications for how we think of ourselves as moral individuals. Though moral guilt is individual and political guilt collective, my own moral guilt may still be incurred by the actions of others. Crucially, however, Jaspers ties this blurring of moral and political guilt to the presence of a shared cultural tradition, through which a collective sense of morality is inculcated and influences politics. In the case of the German people, for example, Jaspers writes that the “spiritual conditions of German life” and Germany’s “national tradition” gave rise to the Nazi regime: the shared cultural and “spiritual” life of Germany has created evil, and to the extent that any individual German has also been shaped by this cultural life, they should consider themselves also entangled in evil (Jaspers 73-74).

Jaspers’ description seems an accurate characterization of Antjie Krog’s experience. Krog understands herself as morally wounded as a result of having been born into and shaped by the same cultural heritage as the death squad killers: “what I have in common with them is a culture—and part of that culture over decades hatched the abominations for which they are responsible” (Krog 121). The question, however, is to what extent Jaspers’ analysis applies to political communities that are not founded on a shared cultural tradition in the manner that Jaspers assumes. The United States, for example, encompasses a great deal of cultural heterogeneity; if, as an American, my government commits an evil or a dirty-handed action, to what extent can I really take the position that American moral and political life are intertwined, given that I cannot assume the existence of a shared spiritual life out of which the government’s actions emerged? In a culturally diverse political community, therefore,
perhaps Jaspers’ position does not hold, or does not hold as strongly. Citizens might
still be burdened by moral and political guilt, but those two aspects of guilt would not
interact to indict citizens in quite the same manner.24

If, following Walzer, Arendt, or Jaspers, we accept that citizens are to some
extent morally affected by the dirty-handed actions of their leaders, this must affect
how we consider the dirty hands of the leaders themselves. As I have noted, part of
what makes politics sphere of heightened moral risk is the matter of *scale*: the actions
of political leaders simply have a wider effect than do the actions of individuals in
private life. This might also extend to the question of the citizens’ entanglement in the
leader’s actions. If the leader chooses to dirty his hands, his actions wound not only
his own moral integrity, but also the moral integrity of his people (though to a
different degree or in a qualitatively different manner).25 In representing citizens and
taking on the burden to act in their best interests, then, the leader also becomes at
least a partial custodian of their moral lives. Thus do the moral responsibilities of
political action weigh even heavier on the tragic politician’s shoulders.

The Grand Inquisitor presents an alternative perspective on this difficulty. His
approach to leadership involves not only a shouldering of political responsibility, but

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24 Jaspers seems to tie this intertwining of moral and political guilt to the presence of a shared,
homogenous cultural tradition. His reference to “the guilt of *our fathers*” is representative: “It is not
the liability of a national but the concern of one who shares the life of the German spirit and soul—
who is of one tongue, one stock, one fate with all the others” (Jaspers 73). Jaspers links the connection
of moral and political life to a shared cultural and even *ethnic identity*—that is, the consonance of
moral and political guilt arises because we, the German people, all arise out of the same German
cultural tradition, speak the same language, are of the same blood. This ethnic connection strengthens
the link between moral and political life. The basis of Jaspers’ reasoning here is somewhat unclear, but
if his reasoning genuinely can be confined to ethnically homogeneous societies, this would certainly
weaken the applicability of his argument to culturally and *ethnically* heterogeneous societies, such as
the United States.

25 Walzer writes that “representative functions are… peculiarly risky, precisely because statesmen,
oficers, and revolutionaries act for other people and with wide-ranging effects. They act sometimes so
as to endanger the people they represent, sometimes so as to endanger the rest of us; they can hardly
complain if we hold them subject to moral judgment” (*Just and Unjust Wars* 290).
also of all possible moral responsibility; indeed, part of his justification of his leadership is that he has taken on himself all moral knowledge and moral responsibility, thus freeing the people to live in oblivious happiness. It would seem incorrect, therefore, to describe the Grand Inquisitor’s people as morally entangled by the Inquisitor’s dirty-handed actions. The Inquisitor describes the people as children, and they are indeed childlike in their lack of moral knowledge. In the same sense as it would seem strange to consider a child as complicit in the morally problematic action of their parent, it would be incongruous to argue the same for the Grand Inquisitor’s subjects. Both child and subject have no conception of the moral world, and therefore are not morally aware actors. They therefore cannot be held responsible for the actions of their parent or leader.

As far as the Grand Inquisitor himself is concerned, his paternalism somewhat alters the nature of his political leadership. For him, the moral burdens of political life do not include the additional responsibility of potentially damaging the moral lives of his people, for his people essentially have no independent moral lives. Nevertheless, he can be read as burdened in a different sense: a good deal of his anguish, or at least his self-presentation of that anguish, stems from the weight of having to bear all moral knowledge and responsibility himself, rather than having that knowledge distributed among the people. He and the few other Inquisitors must act as the arbiters of all moral concerns. The moral burdens of leadership, therefore, cut both ways. If the polity is morally aware, the leader’s burden is heavy because his actions risk the moral well-being of the people as well as his own moral self; if the polity is morally ignorant and childlike, the leader’s burden is heavy because he alone is the custodian
of political and moral responsibility, further exacerbating his isolation. Such is the heavy weight of political office. While it is difficult to imagine in the real world a population as childlike as that of the Grand Inquisitor, citizens deprived of information and political dialogue under totalitarian systems may have a claim to innocence to some extent, thus burdening their leaders all the more.\textsuperscript{26}

If we make the reasonable assumption that most if not all political communities are composed of morally capable individuals, this offers us another counterargument against Culper’s claim that his questioner, as a citizen without knowledge of the political sphere, is incapable of understanding him and therefore of offering a legitimate and morally serious critique of his actions. Culper’s position is that the questioner lacks the unique experience of political office that would allow him to comprehend the moral difficulties and responsibilities that required Culper to dirty his hands as he did. Yet, as a citizen of that same polity that Culper sought to protect, the questioner is morally enmeshed in Culper’s actions. In other words, contrary to Culper’s claim, the questioner does experience the moral difficulties of the political sphere, simply by existing as a morally aware individual within the American political community.

This does not, of course, mean that the questioner has had an identical moral experience to Culper; as Walzer, Arendt, and Jaspers suggest, the experiences of the questioner (as a citizen) and Culper (as an official) differ as a matter of degree or of kind. Nevertheless, the questioner has acquired some experience relevant to assessing

\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, Stephen Garrett writes: "Perhaps the main instance in which a clear divide can be established between the moral responsibility of a leader and led concerns policies that involve secrecy, deception, or disinformation. In such a case, one might argue, the people cannot be considered to be complicit in the action since they had no knowledge of it and thus could not have approved of it, even indirectly” (Garrett 17-18).
and critiquing the actions of his political leaders, precisely because those actions affect his moral self as a member of the political community. If we understand ourselves as weighed down by the moral burdens of citizenship in such a way, we strengthen the ability of our moral imagination to comprehend the experience of political leader, for the leader's anguish is not totally alien but instead nearer to the boundaries of our own moral experiences as citizens. The moral entanglement of democratic citizens in the dirty hands problem, in other words, strengthens their ability to understand and therefore critique their tragic leaders—though the leaders may still argue otherwise.
5.1 Drone Warfare under the Obama Administration

In previous chapters, I have used particular texts as a means by which to depict and deepen the narrative of the dirty-handed, tragic politician. In this chapter, I will extend this approach to a current issue in American politics: the Obama administration’s targeted killing program, which has become a central component of the “war on terror.” Rather than using the targeted killing program as a lens through which to study dirty hands, however, I will turn my previous approach on its head and examine the program as a case study of the corrosive effects of the dirty hands narrative on democratic politics.

Within the United States, the American drone program has recently become a topic of great public interest. American use of drones began under the Bush administration as a method of prosecuting the fight against al-Qaeda and associated forces, but has grown in prevalence under the Obama administration, to the point of being described by former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta as “the only game in town” (Gardner 43). Just within Pakistan, the Bush administration carried out 48 drone strikes between 2004 and 2009, whereas the Obama administration has, as of early April 2015, carried out 347 strikes since 2009 (Drone Wars Pakistan: Analysis).

Those devices colloquially known as drones are also referred to as UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) or RPAs (remotely piloted aircraft). Drone technology allows a pilot to fly the drone remotely from a “cockpit” thousands of miles away; American drones flown in the Middle East and South and Central Asia, for example, are commonly piloted from locations in the Southwest United States. Drones may be
utilized for intelligence gathering or reconnaissance through use of live video feed, but the majority of controversy over American use of drones has focused on their function as weapons.

The United States currently uses armed drones capable of firing missiles, specifically the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper, to conduct targeted killing operations overseas. For a term that has recently become so common in the legal lexicon, it is strange to note that “targeted killing” does not have a specific definition under domestic or international law, though a report of a UN Special Rapporteur on the topic defined targeted killings loosely as situations in which “lethal force is intentionally and deliberately used, with a degree of pre-meditation, against an individual or individuals specifically identified in advance by the perpetrator” (Alston 4). That is, an attack on a particular general of an opposing military force would represent an attempted targeted killing; an attack on an undifferentiated squad of enemy troops would not.

It is important to note here that the question of the legality and morality of targeted killing in the “war on terror,” and the question of the legality and morality of drone warfare, are not necessarily the same question. The killing of Osama bin Laden, for example, was a targeted killing operation performed by a SEAL raid.\(^1\) Similarly, armed drones could easily be used as a weapon with which to conduct non-targeted killing (Wittes). Yet the two issues are not entirely distinct, insofar as drone technology enables the United States to carry out targeted killings on a vast scale,

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1 For example, the national security blog *Lawfare* lists both the bin Laden raid and the killing by drone of the al-Qaeda-affiliated cleric Anwar al-Awlaki (which I will discuss later in this chapter) in its list of “well-known targeting operations” of the American targeted killing program (“Well Known Targeting Operations”).
indeed as the main method of conducting the “war on terror.” It is all very well to send in a SEAL team after bin Laden, but such an operation is simply not feasible every time the United States wishes to neutralize the threat posed by a particular terrorist leader; this type of “boots on the ground” strategy would be expensive, risky, and in many cases simply impossible. Drones, on the other hand, allow the United States to consistently deploy lethal force without putting “boots on the ground.”

Furthermore, because drones can remain airborne for long periods of time—up to 27 hours for Predator drones—they allow a high degree of precision in targeting, enabling the pilot to both confirm the identity of a target through surveillance and to “take the shot” only when a low amount of collateral damage would result (Kaag and Kreps 23-24; Wittes).

The Obama administration initially trumpeted this precision as “surgical” in nature, resulting in low to no civilian casualties. However, these numbers have been disputed, either as outright dissemblance or as the product of an overly permissive method of accounting for collateral damage. As of 2015, the administration does not

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2 President Obama stated at his 2013 speech at the National Defense University that “it’s also not possible for America to simply deploy a team of Special Forces to capture every terrorist. Even when such an approach may be possible, there are places where it would pose profound risks to our troops and local civilians—where a terrorist compound cannot be breached without triggering a firefight with surrounding tribal communities, for example, that pose no threat to us; times when putting U.S. boots on the ground may trigger a major international crisis. To put it another way, our operation in Pakistan against Osama bin Laden cannot be the norm” (“National Defense University”). Obama’s description of missions intended to capture terrorist leaders also points to another difference between drone warfare and conventional warfare: that is, operations by drone essentially make it impossible to capture individuals rather than killing them.

3 In 2011, for example, John Brennan declared that the drone program had resulted in “not a single collateral death” (“Ensuring al-Qaeda’s Demise”). Similarly, in 2012 he described drones as enabling “surgical precision, the ability, with laser-like focus, to eliminate the cancerous tumor called an al-Qaeda terrorist while limiting damage to the tissue around it” (“Efficacy and Ethics”).

4 Jo Becker and Scott Shane report that “Mr. Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that… counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants… unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent” (Becker and Shane). According to Andrew Cockburn, the military and CIA define “military-age” as over thirteen years old, though presumably
dispute the existence of civilian casualties, but rather emphasizes that the precise targeting enabled by drone technology produces far less collateral damage than would other methods of warfare, such as ground invasion or aerial bombing of enemy targets. Indeed, both President Obama and various administration officials have pointed to this aspect of drone warfare as a justification for the United States’ heavy reliance on drones in the “war on terror,” reshaping that conflict from one involving major ground operations to one built on low-intensity, pinpoint targeting against particular individuals deemed to be a danger to American security—what Benjamin Wittes of the Brookings Institution has referred to as “micro-wars.”

Technically speaking, the United States relies on two separate drone programs, one run by the CIA and one by the military; each is governed by different legal constraints and justified on the basis of separate legal authorities. Despite the high level of secrecy surrounding both programs and particularly the CIA program, available information indicates that the two function somewhat similarly. In both cases, an individual comes to be targeted when their name is placed on what has become known as the “kill list.” Names are added to the “list” at low levels of the bureaucracy and then move upwards through the ranks, eventually reaching the point where they are vetted in a massive meeting of top lawyers and national security officials. If agreed upon, names are then sent on to the president for approval (McNeal 721-750). Once the presence of an individual’s name on the list has been

\[\text{Cockburn 217}\]


\[\text{McNeal 703-704}\]
approved by the president, the CIA or military will target them for killing by drone after visually confirming their identity through video feed and attempting to limit collateral damage to the greatest extent possible (McNeal 730-753). It should be noted that the process of vetting an individual for the kill list takes place entirely within the executive branch, without checks by or consultations with Congress or the judiciary.

This style of drone strike, in which a particular individual is targeted, is known as a “personality strike.” Somewhat more controversially, the United States also engages in “signature strikes,” which are conducted not against a specific, identified individual, but against a group of individuals engaging in a suspicious pattern of behavior. (Technically speaking, therefore, it would seem that signature strikes are not exactly targeted killing. Nevertheless, the loose and unsettled meaning of the term has allowed both commentators and the Obama administration to continue referring to signature strikes as such.) There is some suggestion that the institutional process for approving criteria on which to conduct signature strikes functions similarly to the process for personality strikes (G. Miller). 7

Because of the high degree of secrecy surrounding the program, it is difficult to give a concrete explanation of its functioning. In fact, until 2012, the Obama administration refused to so much as admit to the program’s existence, well past the point where the United States’ use of drones had become common knowledge. Robert Gibbs, a former White House press secretary, has stated in an interview that upon entering the job, “one of the first things they [the administration] told me was, you’re

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7 After a great deal of controversy over civilian casualties from such strikes, the administration suggested that signature strikes would soon be phased out. However, it does not appear that any change in policy on signature strikes has taken place (Zenko).
not even to acknowledge the drone program. You’re not even to discuss that it exists”—and this despite the fact that every journalist in the press room was aware that individuals had been killed by American drone strikes (Gardner vii). Since 2012, the administration has revealed details of the program piecemeal, though news releases, a series of speeches by administration officials, and speeches by the president himself. Nevertheless, many of the details remain unclear. Notably, the administration still refuses to release any data on targeted killings; all available information on drone strikes exists in the public eye courtesy of the small cottage industry of projects devoted to tracking foreign news media in order to collect information on strikes.8

The legal grounding of the drone program remains similarly opaque. It is deeply unclear, for example, on what criteria the government’s lawyers determine whether or not an individual is legally targetable. This lack of clear, public criteria was most apparent in the case of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen and al-Qaeda-affiliated cleric killed in 2011 by a CIA personality strike in Yemen: the administration refused to release any information on the legal justification for al-Awlaki’s killing, despite the fact that, as an American, al-Awlaki was entitled to a greater degree of constitutional protections than a noncitizen abroad.9 While

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8 See, for example, the New America Foundation’s International Security Data Site, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism’s data, and the artist Josh Begley’s “Dronestream” project. An associate at the New America Foundation described the purpose of the data site as “fill[ing] the transparency gap” (Schneider). It is worth noting that there is some indication that the government does have its own, unreleased count of drone victims; Steve Coll reports that in 2013, ”the White House reviewed an internal classified count compiled by the C.I.A. of civilian deaths from drone strikes…. The review remains unpublished—in part, a former Administration official said, because the White House couldn’t resolve internal debates about the reliability of its methodology” (Coll).

9 Samir Khan, also an American citizen and al-Qaeda propagandist, was killed in the same strike. As noted by a Department of Justice White Paper on the constitutionality of al-Awlaki’s killing, the protections offered by the Bill of Rights apply to citizens even when abroad (“Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation” 5).
information eventually began to trickle out (in the form of Office of Legal Counsel and Department of Justice memos on the permissible targeting of al-Awlaki specifically, and American citizens generally), The administration’s reticence initially led to a flurry of conversation over the president’s claimed authority to constitutionally kill an American citizen without due process of law, which cast the administration’s refusal to provide a public legal justification targeted killings in sharp relief.

The institutional functioning of the drone program also remains somewhat uncertain, particularly as regards the president’s relationship with the program. As noted earlier, the president seems to be centrally involved in the program’s functioning, personally approving all names on the kill list. A May 2012 New York Times piece by Jo Becker and Scott Shane presented the degree of Obama's involvement as “without precedent in presidential history,” reporting that Obama not only approves all additions to the kill list but also personally “signs off” on about a third of all drone strikes—all strikes in Yemen and Somalia, and the “more complex and risky strikes” within Pakistan. On the other hand, Daniel Klaidman’s in-depth reporting on the drone program suggests that the president approves individual military strikes, but has allowed the CIA to conduct strikes independent of his personal approval (Kill or Capture 42). Yet Klaidman has also written that, though al-Awlaki’s targeting was placed within the CIA’s purview, Obama was kept in the loop during the process of targeting al-Awlaki, and was involved in the decision as to whether or not to take a particular shot at al-Awlaki in a specific instance (Kill or Capture 261-262, 264).
Overall, then, the existing reporting presents a somewhat confused picture of the president’s involvement. There is also the question of at what point the president becomes involved in the targeting process. When Becker and Shane write that Obama approves names on the kill list but also “signs off on every strike in Yemen and Somalia,” does this mean that he is both approving all names as they are placed on the list, and also approving each strike in the heat of the moment? This would seem logistically difficult, especially given that roughly two thousand strikes have taken place during Obama’s presidency; even if strikes conducted by the CIA are weeded out, this is still an extraordinary amount of time to be spent puzzling over individual drone strikes (McNeal 729-730). Heightening the confusion, Becker and Shane also suggest that Obama reserves for himself the final call on a given shot in cases of real moral difficulty, such as in cases of potential civilian casualties, even when such strikes are conducted by the CIA.

While the scope of Obama’s personal involvement is remarkably unclear, most sources do agree that the extent of his participation is nearly or entirely unprecedented. While presidents have been closely involved in directing covert or military operations in the past, they have never done so to such a “systematic” extent as has President Obama (“How the President Decides”).

5.2 President Obama as Tragic Politician

However compelling Becker and Shane’s portrait of Obama’s involvement with the drone program may be, the secrecy surrounding the program makes it difficult to determine the extent to which their article accurately portrays the
program’s institutional functioning. Similarly, it is difficult to gauge the accuracy of the article’s depiction of Obama’s pensive engagement with the moral complexities of drone strikes involving civilian casualties. This is in part due to the timing of the article's appearance: it was released in late May of 2012, in the midst of campaign season for the presidential election of that year. Given Becker and Shane’s heavy reliance on anonymous sources within the administration, it seems unlikely to be a coincidence that so many administration officials were suddenly willing to speak with the Times on the president’s involvement with the drone program just as the general election campaign began to grow heated.

This description suggests a certain degree of artfulness in the administration’s presentation of the president's involvement, though, of course, this self-presentation might simultaneously function to support the president's bid for re-election and reflect his deeply felt sense of responsibility. While it is impossible to say to what extent Becker and Shane’s portrait functioned as campaign literature and to what extent it reflected a genuine commitment to involvement with the program on the part of the president, it is nevertheless worth examining what lies behind the notion that such an image of the president would shore up public support for his reelection—in other words, what made this portrayal of Obama appealing. Indeed, the portrayal was appealing: the day after Becker and Shane’s article was published, the New York Times Editorial Board published an editorial decrying the drone program, but stating that it was “to his credit” that the president felt a duty to take personal responsibility for drone strikes. Even when criticizing the president, the Board found Obama’s personal involvement with the program to be admirable.

10 Benjamin Wittes, for example, described Obama’s self-presentation as “entirely sincere.”
Underlying this portrayal of Obama’s involvement, of course, is the narrative of the tragic politician and of dirty-handed decision-making. The attraction of Becker and Shane’s article derives from its location within this familiar method of thinking about moral and political responsibility. This familiar narrative makes President Obama’s self-presentation appear attractive and reasonable not only to members of the American public, but perhaps also within the administration and even to the president himself.

Becker and Shane’s article positions Obama’s anguish as the defining characteristic of his involvement with the drone program—a characteristic central to the narrative of the tragic, dirty-handed politician. Becker and Shane tie Obama’s personal approval of drone strikes and names on the kill list to his thinking about moral responsibility and his study of the Catholic tradition of just war theory, which attempts to reintroduce the element of morality into warfare and rein in violence through moral principles. In this context, the article represents Obama’s decision-making on drones as a process of deep moral struggle. The president, suggest Becker and Shane, shoulders the moral responsibility for the drone program by considering the moral issues at stake closely and rigorously.

Tied to this is Obama’s relationship with John Brennan, the current director of the CIA and former top counterterrorism advisor. Like Obama, Brennan is a student of just war theory, and Becker and Shane’s article presents him as an individual deeply concerned with the moral considerations at stake in targeted killing. Becker and Shane quote Harold Koh, the then-current Legal Advisor to the Department of State, as saying that, “If John Brennan is the last guy in the room with the president,
I’m comfortable…. It’s as though you had a priest with extremely strong moral values who was suddenly charged with leading a war.” Insofar as Brennan appears to have been at Obama’s right hand throughout the president’s decision-making process on drone strikes, his involvement is representative of the extent to which the president feels that questions surrounding such strikes carry real moral weight. Obama emerges from Becker and Shane’s portrayal as a man who keenly feels the moral weight of warfare. He seems to understand his involvement with targeted killing as a form of dirty hands: engaging in an act of great violence by killing another human being, perhaps also by killing civilians, in order to maintain the security of the United States.

If Obama considers himself as having dirty hands, the “dirt” in question might represent his giving orders to kill another person in a terrible act of violence. If he and the administration are to be believed, those individuals killed are, by and large, dangerous and even evil. Nevertheless, a life is a life; perhaps the president feels that to kill, even to kill an evil and harmful individual, is to “let oneself in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence,” to use Weber’s phrasing (PV 125-126). To an extent, this feeling might be an artifact of the new and unfamiliar kind of violence created by drone warfare. As one drone pilot put it, drones enable “war at a very intimate level”: the act of killing a particular, named individual, rather than a group of generic enemy soldiers, has a peculiar, “bloodthirsty” quality to it (Rothenberg; Wittes). To order the deaths by drone of specific individuals, as opposed to presiding over an aerial attack on military targets or a ground invasion, has a particularly powerful moral charge.

While initiating any military operation surely entails serious moral questions, drone warfare can heighten the immediacy of the moral issues at stake.
Obama’s feeling of dirty hands might also result from the civilian deaths caused by the targeted killing program: despite the overall good of the program, he would feel his hands to be dirtied by those innocent deaths. To some extent, Becker and Shane suggests this in their depiction of Obama’s desire to make the final decision on strikes that may involve civilian casualties. Obama himself touched on this guilt during his May 2013 speech on national security at the National Defense University, stating that the civilian casualties incurred by the drone program would “haunt” him and others in his chain of command “for as long as we live.”

Notably, however, Obama stated in that same breath that the risk of civilian casualties “exists in every war,” not only in drone warfare but also in wars relying on “conventional fighting.” A president who orders a ground invasion or aerial bombardment might also feel his hands to be dirtied from the ensuing civilian deaths—insofar, of course, as the military action in question was truly necessary and was for a good cause. This is to say that, if Obama’s dirty hands derive from civilian casualties, this sense of moral anguish is not specific to drone warfare. Again, however, drone technology enables an “intimate” engagement with the fact of civilian deaths that is simply not present in other kinds of war. In the case of an aerial bombardment, for example, the president would certainly be aware in the abstract that the bombardment would place civilians’ lives in danger, yet with drone warfare, Obama himself can decide in a specific instance whether or not to kill a specific group of civilians in order to take out a high-value terrorist target. This represents a much greater degree of direct personal involvement, and hence the moral burden of ordering such deaths might weigh more heavily on the president’s shoulders.
Becker and Shane therefore portray Obama in a manner that strikingly recalls Walzer’s description of 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” (PA 168). That is, Obama is not only engaging directly in dirty-handed action through his involvement with the drone program, but also understands or at least publicly presents himself as doing so: he sees his hands as dirty and displays them to the public as such. Thus arises his agonizing over whether or not to approve a name or go forward with a particular strike.

Indeed, it has become surprisingly common for commentators to describe the president as anguished not only on the topic of the drone program, but also on questions of national security more generally. Daniel Klaidman refers to Obama as “Hamlet-like” on national security issues, and Jane Mayer of the New Yorker has written on “the contrast between Bush’s swagger and Obama’s anguish over the difficult trade-offs that perpetual war poses to a free society” (Kill or Capture 5; Mayer). Similarly, Tom Junod, who has been described as “the most perceptive writer on [what Junod has termed] the lethal presidency,” wrote that Obama’s National Defense University speech was remarkable for the president’s ability to speak to Americans in the language of moral struggle, and equally remarkable for his ability to make himself representative of moral struggle... the speech was personal, almost confessional, in its weighing of doubt and its admission of second thoughts. (“The Lethal President Sends His Regrets”)
Junod’s description of Obama’s “ability to make himself representative of moral struggle” recalls my earlier study of George Orwell’s reading of Gandhi as the manifestation of inhuman purity and saintliness. In contrast, I argued that the tragic politician becomes the political embodiment of Orwell’s vision of humanity, with the love of the world and the anguish that this entails. Junod’s portrayal of the president fits Obama near-perfectly into this role of the tragic politician, the embodiment of “second thoughts” and “moral struggle.” In contrast to Gandhi’s “political infancy,” Obama becomes the Weberian “mature man,” the politician who carries with him the “knowledge of tragedy with which… political action is truly interwoven” (PV 117).

Obama himself has invoked Gandhi in a similar context. Delivering an address upon receiving his Nobel Peace Prize, he offered a defense of the moral justifiability of the use of force in certain circumstances, derived from just war theory. He then went on to discuss the alternative tradition of nonviolent resistance:

I know there's nothing weak—nothing passive—nothing naïve—in the creed and lives of Gandhi and [Martin Luther] King…. But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people… To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason. ("A Just and Lasting Peace")

Obama’s reasoning here is instructive, particularly his declaration that he “face[s] the world as it is” and his reference to “the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.” Implicit in Obama’s description of himself as facing the existing world is a contrast between “the world as it is” and the world as it ought to be—and, similarly, a contrast between Obama, who must face the world as it is, and figures
like Gandhi, who need only face the world as it ought to be. This returns us once again to Hoederer’s distinction between his own love of humanity for what it is, with all its weaknesses and foibles, and Hugo’s love of humanity for what it could be. Obama’s statement is a striking echo of Hoederer, with even his discussion of the “imperfections of man” recalling Hoederer’s declaration that he loves people even “with all their filth and their vices.” To an extent, we can read Obama as sharing Hoederer’s humanism and love of the world—a crucial characteristic of the tragic politician. This contrasts with Gandhi insofar as Orwell situates Gandhi as an exemplar of “anti-human” purity.

Obama’s statement that “as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by [Gandhi’s and King’s] examples alone” is also telling. Here, Obama presents the particular responsibilities of political leadership as requiring him to engage in acts of violence, and, as such, dirty his hands; he cannot in good conscience keep himself pure. Thus, following the dirty hands narrative, Obama positions himself within the political sphere conceptualized as a space of unique moral burdens. Just as politicians in the abstract make an implicit commitment to dirty their hands if necessary when entering the political sphere, Obama describes himself as having a responsibility to engage in morally compromising acts of force for the good of his country. The implied act of taking the oath of office—"sw[earing] to protect and defend my nation"—acts as Obama's moment of entrance into the political space, his crossing of the threshold.

I noted earlier that, following the narrative of dirty hands, a crucial aspect of entering into the moral responsibilities of the political sphere is the politician's
awareness of himself as engaging in such an undertaking; the moment of crossing the threshold into the political sphere holds little significance if the politician is not aware of having stepped into a space with unique moral requirements. It is relevant, therefore, that Klaidman describes Obama as keenly aware of the president's responsibility to kill before taking office. Klaidman sketches Obama's meeting with Richard Clarke, a former White House counterterrorism advisor: Clarke "looked… the senator in the eye" and informed him, "As president, you kill people." According to Klaidman, Obama calmly told Clarke that he was aware (Kill or Capture 15).

Klaidman's telling of the story is perhaps somewhat dramatic, but it is nevertheless a useful indicator of Obama's awareness of the moral burdens of the presidency. Another, more recent comment by Obama further emphasizes my reading of his self-presentation as consonant with an understanding of political space as presenting unique moral burdens. Discussing the chaotic state of the world in an interview early in 2015, the president stated, "That's what I wake up to each morning—I get a thick book full of death, destruction, strife, and chaos. That's what I take with my morning tea" (Yglesias). The image is memorable not only due to Obama's somewhat ominous phrasing, but also because of the incongruity of routinely poring over a "book of death" alongside a morning cup of tea. The cup of tea is a literally domestic image, of "home" and of "normal" life. When Obama describes himself as reading through a "book of death" along with his tea, he

11 Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Obama has stated to be "one of my favorite philosophers," describes the moral burdens of political action generally and foreign policy specifically in a manner entirely consonant with the dirty hands narrative’s characterization of the difficulty and conflict of the political space. To Niebuhr, the use of force is simultaneously necessary and morally compromising (Irony 37). From Obama’s own description of Niebuhr’s work, he seems to understand Niebuhr as saying as much; as such, perhaps there is some basis in saying that Obama held a theoretical understanding of the moral dangers of political action on a vast scale before entering the presidency (Brooks).
imagines the safety of the domestic space as invaded by the crisis and pain of politics. In this way, he emphasizes his own separateness from the domestic sphere as a political leader who exists instead within the morally compromising realm of politics.

Obama's self-presentation therefore positions him well within the archetype of the tragic politician. As a democratic leader, however, his use of this narrative is necessarily problematic, for the reasons detailed in the previous chapter: the narrative of the dirty-handed, tragic politician ignores democratic considerations of accountability and constitutionalism, and places an emphasis on violence that is only compatible with democratic life in emergency situations.

Like the paradigmatic dirty hands situation, the drone program arises from a context of national security and emergency as expressed in the "war on terror." Alternately, if the "war on terror" is not truly a war but some post-modern, nebulous form of conflict (as some have argued), the program is a component of what journalist Mark Danner has termed the post-9/11 state of exception: "these years during which, in the name of security, some of our accustomed rights and freedoms are circumscribed or set aside, the years during which we live in a different time" (Danner). John E. Finn refers to this as the "post-9/11 security regime," and argues that the drone program is of a piece with the general post-9/11 relaxation of constitutional constraints on the executive (Peopling the Constitution 196-197).

The practical effect of this relaxation is to enable a program that operates, as I have described, entirely within the executive branch, without any institutional checks from Congress or the courts. Anwar al-Awlaki, for example, was placed on the kill list and targeted without any consultation or review from any government actor from
the judicial or legislative branches. Attorney General Eric Holder later defended this procedure as constitutional even under the Fifth Amendment's Due Process Clause, which states that no person "shall… be deprived of life… without due process of law" and is normally interpreted as requiring judicial overview, by arguing that "due process" is not necessarily judicial process—in other words, that the due process requirement could be fulfilled by a review process entirely within the executive branch (Peopling 197).

Similarly, like other post-9/11 security measures, the drone program is highly secret. In the name of national security, information on the functioning of the program, the identities of targeted individuals, and data on the program is generally not released to the public. This is not to say that such secrecy is not necessary to some extent—John Brennan has described secrecy as "part of the business, unfortunately"—but the phenomenon is nevertheless worth noting as relates to the dirty hands narrative (Cherlin). Together with the lack of checks on the drone program from other branches of government, the high level of secrecy surrounding the program creates a situation in which there exists very little accountability to either other government actors or to the public.

On the matter of civilian casualties, for example, Obama stated in his National Defense University speech that "there's a wide gap between US assessments of such casualties and nongovernmental reports," with the government's account positing a far lower number of civilian deaths (“National Defense University“). Yet the United States still refuses to release its own assessment, nor will it release information on its methodology for calculating civilian casualties—that is, how it determines which
individuals in the area of a strike are civilians and which are not. Without knowing how the government produces its own figures, it is impossible for any member of the public to substantively critique those figures: the government can simply continue to insist that its assessments of casualties are more accurate, while providing no means by which to gauge the legitimacy of that assertion.

John Brennan has utilized this secrecy to make arguments similar to those of Culper about the functioning of the drone program. In an interview given a few weeks after his contentious confirmation hearing on his nomination for Director of the CIA, Brennan described the secrecy surrounding the program and then stated that he did not feel that those protesting the program "understand the agony that so many people go through in the counterterrorism community to make sure that they don't make a mistake" and kill civilians (Cherlin). In context, Brennan seems to be suggesting that this lack of understanding derives from the administration's need to maintain secrecy: protestors cannot understand the "agony" that Brennan and others go through because information on that agony is so hard to come by. Like Culper, Brennan suggests that his critics simply cannot understand the decisions he makes because of their presence outside the political sphere. Without being part of the counterterrorism community and themselves experiencing Brennan's "agony," his critics cannot truly know the moral anguish created by the drone program, and their critiques are therefore not to be taken seriously. Unlike Culper, however, Brennan presents himself as deeply pained by his inability to persuade his detractors of his sincere anguish (and, by extension, the sincere anguish of the president) over the responsibility of ordering
drone strikes. Brennan's isolation is itself a component of his anguish: he is agonized that he cannot fully communicate his agony.\footnote{While I do not wish to collapse Obama and Brennan into each other, Brennan’s comments are indicative of Obama’s general approach to the targeted killing program. The two worked closely together in shaping the program and their attitudes toward it are consonant in every other respect. I feel comfortable, therefore, using Brennan’s comments in this interview to illustrate how Obama’s approach to the drone program fits into the tragic politician archetype.}

The secrecy surrounding the drone program, therefore, both makes it difficult for members of the public to critique the program and allows the administration to discount as unserious those critiques that are offered. A further lack of accountability derives from the program's being located entirely within the executive branch, with no other government actor or branch of government having the institutional authority to review the targeting process or provide restitution for an unjust death. To return once again to the al-Awlaki case as illustrative, Nasser al-Awlaki, the father of Anwar, has filed two unsuccessful lawsuits against the US government for its targeting of his son: one challenging Anwar al-Awlaki's placement on the kill list, and one suing for wrongful death after al-Awlaki's killing.\footnote{The family of Samir Khan, the second American citizen killed by the missile that killed Anwar al-Awlaki, filed suit jointly with Nasser al-Awlaki.} Al-Aulaqi v. Obama was filed in 2010 after Anwar al-Awlaki was placed on the kill list, and was dismissed both on the grounds that Nasser al-Awlaki lacked standing to bring the suit on behalf of his son, and that the court had no jurisdiction over the question at stake (Peopling 196).\footnote{As with many words transliterated from Arabic (“al-Qaeda” among them), there is a good deal of confusion over the proper English spelling of “al-Awlaki” or “al-Aulaqi.” Following the most widely used transliteration, I have used “al-Awlaki” for ease of readability. There is also some indication that Anwar al-Awlaki used this spelling in English, though his father’s court filings list his name as “al-Aulaqi” (Bell).} After the deaths of both Anwar al-Awlaki and his teenage son, who appears to have been accidentally killed in a separate signature strike, Nasser al-Awlaki filed a wrongful death suit in Al-Aulaqi v. Panetta. This suit was also dismissed, partially on
the basis that allowing Nasser to seek damages for the deaths of his son and grandson would "impermissibly draw the court into 'the heart of executive and military planning and deliberation'" and would "hinder [the executive's] ability in the future to act decisively and without hesitation in defense of US interests" (*Al-Aulaqi v. Panetta* 36, quoting *Lebron v. Rumsfeld*).\(^{15}\)

The courts' unwillingness to serve as a judicial check on the drone program both indicates and contributes to the program's pervasive lack of accountability.\(^{16}\) An individual harmed by a drone strike, or the family of such an individual, has no means of recourse against the government. Rather, the program is entirely insulated from both the public and from other branches of government—both in terms of the information that the administration refuses to release, and the lack of any form of public or institutional accountability.

This portrait is unsettling, especially as a depiction of a program that not only holds the power of life and death in general, but wields this power over particular, named individuals. It is a foundational principle of liberal-democratic governance that governmental power must be checked by power, lest it overreach itself. At the very least, this system of accountability encourages the executive to give reasons for its actions, a process that ideally strengthens the rationale for action by subjecting that rationale to dialogue and critique. This process also constrains action in that, if an

\(^{15}\) Specifically, the court held that Nasser al-Awlaki was not entitled to a remedy under *Bivens v. Six Unknown Agents*, a 1971 Supreme Court case that provides individuals with a cause of action to bring a suit against a government official who has violated their constitutional rights (*Al-Aulaqi v. Panetta* 27-36). Jameel Jaffer of the ACLU has suggested that drone strikes might be effectively regulated by courts through the use of *Bivens* claims (Jaffer).

\(^{16}\) Jaffer has written that “the judiciary has a crucial role to play in articulating and enforcing legal limits on the government’s use of lethal force”—that is, on the matter of targeted killing (Jaffer 187). Similarly, Steve Vladeck writes that *ex post* judicial review of drone strikes would “have a deterrent effect on future government officers,” pushing them to “make sure that [they are] much more convinced is who the government claims, and that there’s no alternative to lethal force” (Vladeck).
actor must give reasons for their proposed actions, it is less likely that those actions for which reasons cannot be given will ultimately be performed (Peeling 203). Conversely, in the absence of reason-giving requirements, it is perhaps all too easy for actors to move forward with actions that may turn out to be unnecessary. In the absence of any institutional checks on, or public accountability for, the drone program, we should therefore be concerned that the use of targeted killing by drone will soon become indiscriminate—which, indeed, many allege has already occurred.

It is in this context that President Obama's self-presentation as an anguished, tragic politician becomes crucial. Junod quotes a "former administration lawyer" as saying that Becker and Shane's portrayal of the president's involvement with the program "is consistent with the administration's approach, which is that since there can be no external oversight of the program, the greatest internal oversight that you can have is for this to be the personal responsibility of the president himself" ("Lethal Presidency"). While the lawyer's assertion that "there can be no external oversight of the program"—presumably because of considerations of secrecy—is far from self-evident, his statement is nevertheless telling. Junod describes the administration's portrayal of the presidency in Becker and Shane's article as a "plea for sympathy," a statement to the public that "killing is hard." As he sees it, the drone program is essentially grounded on Obama's own self-assurance that he is a "good and honorable" man, who therefore deeply feels moral qualms over the act of killing ("Lethal Presidency").

The administration's idea, according to Junod, seems to be that the president's personal moral qualms place a sufficient check on killing to prevent the program from
becoming indiscriminate in its use of force. Junod's reporting portrays Obama's involvement in the drone program as greater than it may actually be; Junod seems to suggest, for example, that the president personally approves every drone strike. Nevertheless, his analysis is astute as a general sketch of Obama's self-presentation.

In the dirty hands narrative, anguish acts as a moral indicator, a sign of moral honesty and responsibility. For the tragic politician to display anguish is for him to show that he has thought deeply and sincerely about the moral justification for, and the moral consequences of, his actions. To Weber, the politician's anguish indicates his awareness of the importance of both the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction, and thus his awareness of his own involvement in evil. As I have described at length in previous chapters, the narrative of dirty hands positions anguish as a sign of the politician's resisting the corrupting influence of violence: without a keen awareness of the moral compromises at stake, the politician can easily become opportunistic and overly free with violence. Anguish as moral self-awareness counteracts this potential slide toward opportunism, by ensuring that the tragic politician acts in the name of the Weberian ethic of responsibility yet also understands that such actions morally wound him.

This recalls my earlier distinction between moral corruption and moral compromise or wounding—that is, the difference between an individual whose engagement in evil has corrupted their sense of morality to the point where it no longer functions as such, and an individual who maintains their moral sense of self.

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17 Specifically, Junod writes that Obama “probably approved the strike that killed” Anwar al-Awlaki’s son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki (“Lethal Presidency”). This, however, seems dubious. It is true that Abdulrahman al-Awlaki was likely killed by a military strike rather than a CIA strike, meaning that the president would have had greater opportunity for involvement, but I have already cast doubt on descriptions of the president as personally approving every strike (Mazzetti 311).
despite their dirty-handed actions, and thus deeply feels anguish over those actions. Obama's anguish over targeted killing, therefore, indicates that he is morally wounded but not morally corrupted, and thus seeks to show that the public would be wise to place its trust in him. In other words, in the absence of any institutional check or system of accountability, the program functions with Obama's anguish as its check.\textsuperscript{18} This is what Junod's source means when in declaring that "the greatest internal oversight" possible is "the personal responsibility of the president."

We can now see that Obama emerges from depictions of the drone program as a paradigmatic tragic politician. He makes difficult, bloody moral decisions in a more or less isolated environment, without constitutional constraint or accountability; he is both brutally aware of his own terrible responsibility and has chosen to accept that responsibility as a matter of principle. Finally, his dirty-handed anguish, the tragic politician’s salient characteristic, acts as the foundational principle on which the drone program's institutional functioning has been built. We might think again of Tames’ portrait of Kennedy, isolated and weighed down by responsibility. Like Kennedy, Obama sketches himself as burdened by the world in a way that no one—or, perhaps, no one but John Brennan—could possibly seek to understand.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Benjamin Wittes stated that, “It says a lot about Obama that Anthony Romero [the head of the ACLU] sufficiently represents authenticity to him that he takes Romero’s criticisms very seriously… We [Wittes, Jack Goldsmith, and Robert Chesney] don’t represent voices of political authenticity to him… even though what we actually think is really close to what he does, to his substantive legal positions… We represent his compromised self, after he has lost his soul. Whereas [Romero] represents what he’s left, departed from, and the way that he still thinks of himself… He sees himself as a man of the left who has had to do certain things, not a man of the political center who has some values from the left and some values from the right.” Note particularly Wittes’ description of the president’s “compromised self” as having “lost his soul.” Like the Machiavellian hero, the president “loves his city more than his soul,” yet keenly feels the loss of his moral integrity.

\textsuperscript{19} Josh King, the founder of the Polioptics podcast on political stagecraft, has compared the staging of a particular address by President Obama to Ford’s famous closing shot of Ethan Edwards, which—I have argued—similarly positions the leader/protector as outside the comprehension of those within the protected, domestic space. Obama ended his September 2014 address announcing military action
This vision of the drone program as constructed entirely around the personal moral feelings of the president is deeply worrying on multiple levels. First, there is the question of institutional constraints, or the lack thereof. In a very real sense, the strength of the dirty hands narrative has helped prevent the imposition of any institutional constraints on the drone program. That is, if we trust in the strength of Obama's moral compass and in his anguish, institutional constraints become obsolete; all necessary oversight is supplied by the president’s conscience.

The difficulties with this are manifold. If the main check on the program is Obama's anguish, it would be best to be certain both that his anguish is genuinely functioning as a check, and that his anguish is genuinely felt and not merely a form of self-presentation designed to achieve political goals. To begin with that first question, it should be pointed out that while the exact extent of Obama's involvement is unclear, it seems fairly certain that he does not grant individual, real-time approval for each strike. Given the lack of clarity surrounding the degree of Obama's involvement with the program, and the additional question of the point at which his approval is required in the targeting process, it is difficult to say to what extent Obama's anguish restrains who is placed on the kill list and what level of collateral damage is acceptable for a given strike. When pressed to describe the nature of his personal involvement with approving strikes in a 2012 interview, Obama hedged:

> Obviously as president I’m ultimately responsible for decisions that are made by the administration… I can’t get too deeply into how these things work, but as I said, as commander in chief ultimately I’m responsible for the process that we’ve set up. (Yellin)

against ISIS by turning and walking away slightly to the right, framed by the hallway, in a shot that closely mirrored Ford’s famous closing scene (King).
His response is deeply, and perhaps intentionally, opaque. If we are to trust
that his anguish legitimately constrains the program, however, we must know by what
mechanism that constraint is functioning. In the absence of such information, Obama
is simply asking the public to trust him. He might have very little actual involvement
with approving strikes, and we would have no idea; we would continue to consider
his anguish as a legitimate check.

Second, there is the question of how to gauge the sincerity of the president's
anguish. As I have noted, anguish is problematic as a characteristic of the archetypal
tragic politician precisely because it is inherently difficult to judge whether it is
feigned or genuine. Even assuming that Obama's anguish is to some extent sincere, it
would be nearly impossible to distinguish between his public presentation of his
anguish and the feeling of anguish itself—if, for example, he does feel some degree
of anguish, but publicly exaggerates the strength of that anguish or the extent to
which his anguish reins in the drone program's potential excesses.

There is also the additional problem, mentioned in an earlier chapter, of the
susceptibility of anguish to being transformed into a purely formal requirement,
without substantive content: the tragic leader begins to reason that, because he is
anguished over a given issue, whatever conclusion he comes to must be the morally
right one. Junod evokes this concern when he writes, disapprovingly, that Obama has
achieved "moral confidence in the act of killing," and "struggle[s] with [his] moral
qualms… only to gain the moral distinction of triumphing over them" ("Lethal
Presidency"). As Junod portrays it, this danger is a variant of the moral corruption
that Weber believes derives naturally from the use of violence, and which all
politicians must guard themselves against. In the case of President Obama, Junod suggests the specific form of danger to be that of a feeling of moral superiority or overconfidence on the part of the president: an excessive belief in the strength of his own moral judgment, creating an absence of the self-reflection that thinkers such as Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir posit as centrally necessary for morally legitimate anguish.

We can imagine a man who, secure in the confidence of his good judgment, deeply feels the pain of killing another person, yet slowly begins to use that pain as its own moral legitimation, and as a result becomes freer and freer with violence. At the extreme, we arrive at an individual who can justify any action by the fact that, as a nominally good man, he first anguished over it. This is not to say that Obama has reached this point, of course, but rather to identify the risks of this self-presentation. Both the poetry and difficulty of Weber's narrative of anguish derive from his reliance on the individual conscience as the only possible means of managing that risk, in the same breath as he worries that this conscience might easily become corrupted and thus contribute to the politician's descent into violence.

Junod finds ammunition for his accusation of the Obama administration’s false "moral confidence" in another New York Times story, again reported by Scott Shane, and published shortly after the 2012 presidential election. Shane wrote that, facing the possibility of an electoral loss to Mitt Romney, the administration had begun to develop legal and institutional safeguards to govern the drone program in preparation for a potential Romney presidency. The story, along with the reporting that followed, suggested that the Obama administration had discarded these nascent
safeguards after Obama secured his reelection (Shane; Gardner 211). To Junod, Shane's story reads as an affirmation of the administration's and the president's feeling of "moral superiority," and thus, presumably, potential moral corruption. That is, "the Obama Administration regarded itself as morally superior to a Romney Administration… and… Barack Obama regarded himself as morally superior to Mitt Romney" ("Age of Enlightenment"). From a Weberian perspective, the Obama administration's confidence in its own moral superiority ought to be deeply worrying.

Importantly, Shane’s story also suggests that the administration does genuinely believe Obama's anguish to be a sufficient check on the drone program. They began considering alternative safeguards when there arose the possibility that this anguish would no longer govern the program, and failed to pursue those safeguards when it became clear that Obama, and his anguish, would remain in office. The official presentation of Obama's anguish would therefore seem to be genuinely felt. If the dirty hands narrative has contributed to the lack of institutional checks on the drone program, it has done so partially by convincing members of the administration, and perhaps even Obama himself, of the legitimacy of presidential anguish as a check on killing. Yet however deeply felt this belief in Obama’s anguish may be, it is important to keep in mind that this portrait of the president first surfaced in a blockbuster New York Times article published in the thick of election season. That is, the administration has also made use of the dirty hands narrative to legitimate the program's functioning in the eyes of the public. If the public accepts the image of President Obama as a deeply anguished, dirty-handed, tragic political actor, they will

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20 It will be interesting to watch how the administration prepares for the transfer of power after the approaching 2016 presidential election.
trust in the strength of Obama's anguish, and will not place public pressure on the administration to reform the drone program with stronger institutional checks. This, at least, appears to have been the administration's goal—conscious or not—in presenting the president as anguished.

Besides the interaction of the dirty hands narrative with the question of institutional accountability for the drone program, there is also the question of secrecy. As with the problem of institutional accountability, the narrative of dirty hands also contributes to administration's failure to make public many of the details on the program. That is, the administration presents Obama as personally shouldering responsibility for targeted killing and therefore personally considering the moral questions at stake; this image can lull the public into a false sense of moral security, a confidence that these important moral issues are being seriously considered by the president and therefore that there is no need for public discussion on the matter.

Similarly, it is also noteworthy that Becker and Shane present the president's choice to shoulder moral responsibility for the drone program as tied to his knowledge of the just war theory of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. From this description, many members of the public might easy conclude that Obama's superior education on these issues qualifies him to take responsibility for drone strikes: most Americans do not share the president's deep knowledge of just war theory, and therefore could reasonably consider themselves unequipped, compared to the president, to consider these moral questions.

The cultivated narrative of Obama's anguish, therefore, dissuades Americans from examining the morality of drone strikes: not only is Obama already anguish
over those moral issues, but he is better qualified to do so. We are comfortable, or more comfortable than we might otherwise be, to let the matter rest with him, perhaps particularly because his self-presentation as a deeply anguished moral man seems to be genuinely felt. Yet if we do not consider it necessary to consider the morality of the drone program, we will also feel no need to pressure the administration to lessen the secrecy surrounding the program, which would provide us with the increased information necessary to make our own assessment of the matter.

This dynamic is strikingly paternalistic, in a manner that recalls the Grand Inquisitor's relationship with his people. Like the Grand Inquisitor, Obama seeks to take onto himself all moral consciousness on the question of drone strikes, on the basis that he is the individual who is best qualified to consider such matters. Obama's position, of course, differs from the Grand Inquisitor in that the Inquisitor seeks to shoulder all moral responsibility and all moral consciousness, whereas Obama shoulders only moral responsibility regarding drone strikes. Nevertheless, this is still significant: it represents an abdication on the part of the American public of their status as morally autonomous and aware individuals, as relates to the drone program.

Overall, then, the administration's portrayal of Obama as a tragic, dirty-handed leader has helped prevent the creation of institutional checks on the targeted killing program and the much-needed release of greater information on the program. The familiar structure of the dirty hands narrative explains the attraction of this portrayal of the president to the administration, the public, and the president himself.

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21 Junod, for example, quotes a “former administration official” as saying that “President Bush would have never been able to scale this [the drone program] up the way President Obama has because he wouldn’t have had the trust of the public and the Congress and the international community… That trust has been enabling” (“Lethal Presidency”).
which attraction has served both to legitimate the drone program and to shield it from institutional oversight and democratic accountability. The tragic politician archetype not only guides our thinking on moral decision-making and moral responsibility, but also shapes political action in the world, and does so in a dangerous and anti-democratic manner.

5.3 Drones, Dirty Hands, and Democratic Peace Theory

Obama's self-presentation as a tragic politician is also relevant to drone technology in another sense, relating to the effect of drones on democratic peace theory. This theory originates with Immanuel Kant's 1795 essay on "Perpetual Peace," which set forward the idea that democracies (what Kant refers to as "constitutional republics") will be less likely to go to war. According to Kant, people will inevitably bear the cost of a war in "blood and treasure"—the deaths of loved ones as soldiers or civilian casualties, along with the financial burdens of war in taxation and national debt—and so, under systems of government in which the disapproving people can hold warmongering leaders to account, leaders will be less likely to enter into conflict ("Perpetual Peace" 100).

As voiced by Kant, democratic peace theory depends on the sheer costliness of war as a bar to democratic states entering into conflict. Armed drones, however, create serious problems for this theory. The chief benefit of drone warfare is its ability to efficiently and effectively gather intelligence and target enemy fighters while keeping soldiers out of harm's way—indeed, thousands of miles out of harm's way. In this respect, drone warfare represents the latest manifestation of an American
trend toward casualty-averse warfare, beginning with Vietnam, in which the public has become progressively less willing to accept soldiers' deaths. Before the development of drone technology, the most notable manifestation of this trend appeared in the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo, in which planes flying at high altitudes ensured the safety of NATO troops but endangered the lives of Kosovar civilians, for increased bombing altitudes decrease bombing accuracy. Paul Kahn's description of the NATO bombing as representing "riskless warfare" seems appropriate for drone warfare as well (Kahn 4). Whereas other recent American conflicts have resulted in low casualties for US troops, drones enable a nation to potentially wage war with no casualties whatsoever.

The bombing of Kosovo came under heavy criticism for the harm done to civilians by NATO's risk-aversion. Drones do not present this difficulty; indeed, proponents of drones describe drone technology as more able to distinguish between civilian and enemy targets, and thus save civilian lives while also protecting soldiers. Nevertheless, the reduction of risk made possible by drones is a potentially serious problem under democratic peace theory. To put it bluntly, drones may make it too easy for democracies to go to war. A political leader who initiates or carries out a conflict by means of drone warfare will face comparatively little democratic resistance, because no soldiers will be placed in harm's way and the people will therefore have less reason to protest. There is also some suggestion, though disputed, that drones are cheaper and more cost-effective than traditional aircraft; in this case,

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22 See Kaempf; Enemark 6, 20; Chamayou 127-134.
drone warfare would also shield the population from the financial costs of war.\textsuperscript{23, 24} Drones, that is, may lower the threshold for entering into a conflict, so that political leaders turn more quickly to violence.\textsuperscript{25} In the case of the "war on terror," drone warfare might also be prolonging a preexisting conflict by reducing public pressure on the government to wind down hostilities.

If drones are under suspicion as enabling warfare and violence at too low a cost, Obama's anguish plays a reassuring role. In the absence of public resistance to conflict and the leader's accountability to that resistance, the leader's tortured conscience ensures that the state will not stumble into or prolong conflicts unthinkingly. As with the matter of institutional constraints, anguish acts as a check in the absence of other forms of accountability. Obama's presentation of anguish seeks to demonstrate that he does not use violence freely or lightly, but only with a heavy heart, and therefore only in situations where it is genuinely necessary—not, therefore, as a first resort. If drones both lower the cost of war and shield the people from suffering that cost, Obama's anguish shows that he keenly feels the \textit{moral} cost of war. Instead of wounded soldiers, we are presented with Obama's moral wounding.

Historically speaking, this idea—that is, of the president's sense of moral wounding as a constraint on otherwise effortless killing—finds some precedent in the

\textsuperscript{23} Initially drones were discussed as both cheaper and more cost-effective than traditional manned aircraft, but more recent reports have indicated that this is not necessarily the case (Kaag and Kreps 58-59; Abizaid and Brooks 22-23). If drones are genuinely cheaper and more cost-effective than manned aircraft, this would also reduce the financial burdens of war on taxpayers.

\textsuperscript{24} This argument about drones and democratic peace theory has become somewhat of a cliché among commentators on drones. See Kaag and Kreps 53-69; Sauer and Schörmig; DeBrabander; Enemark 6; Singer 316-318; Chamayou 182-194.

\textsuperscript{25} As a report issued by the British Ministry of Defence stated, "If we remove the risk of loss from the decision-makers' calculations when considering crisis management options, do we make the use of armed force more attractive? Will decision-makers resort to war as a policy option far sooner than previously?" ("Joint Doctrine Note").
debate over nuclear weapons. As weapons whose power rests in their ability to kill massively and indiscriminately, as opposed to the precision targeting enabled by drone technology, nuclear weapons present a very different set of moral questions than do drones. Nevertheless, there exists some similarity between the two technologies, in that nuclear weapons, like drones, enable a democratic leader to wage war without engaging with the population in the war effort. Drones make this possible by lowering the visible costs of war, whereas nuclear weapons offer the capability to destroy on a massive scale without mobilizing an army (*Monarchy* 86).²⁶

In 1981, Roger Fisher, a professor at Harvard Law School, suggested an innovative approach to preventing the apocalyptic nuclear war that might result if president were overly willing to use nuclear weapons. In Fisher's argument, the nuclear codes ought not be enclosed within a briefcase kept at the president’s side, but instead embedded in a small capsule surgically placed under the heart of the aide who carries that briefcase. The briefcase itself would hold a butcher knife.

If ever the President wanted to fire nuclear weapons, the only way he could do so would be for him first, with his own hands, to kill one human being…. He has to look at someone and realize what death is—what an innocent death is. Blood on the White House carpet. It’s reality brought home. (Fisher 16)

Bizarre as this idea is, Fisher's point is that the president ought to truly feel the reality of what it means to kill an innocent human being before he launches a nuclear missile. Fisher is concerned that the ease of launching a nuclear attack "holds what is

²⁶ Scarry’s argument in *Thermonuclear Monarchy*, briefly, is that the mobilization of an army engages public involvement in the process of war and thus requires democratic consent. She understands this level of consent as required by a number of foundational sources, including the social contract theory and the Second Amendment to the US Constitution. In her view, the ability of the president to conduct nuclear war with only a metaphorical “push of the button” evades this crucial requirement of public consent.
involved at a distance": the president has only to say a few words in order to precipitate nuclear war (Fisher 16). What Fisher wants is for the president to really feel the moral injury involved in taking an innocent life, a microcosm of the horrors the president will unleash if he launches a nuclear attack. He wants the president to understand his hands as dirty—echoing Hoederer's phrase, literally up to the elbows in blood and filth. Fisher’s hope, that is, seems to be that the moral immediacy of taking an innocent life will successfully alert the president to the terrible costs of war, and will therefore lead him to reach for the nuclear codes (or, rather, the butcher knife) only when absolutely necessary.

Obama, of course, is not actually reaching for the knife. Nevertheless, his pained awareness of his own responsibility and dirty hands act as Fisher's knife does, making brutally clear the moral burdens of war. As a result of his own awareness of those burdens, the president will be very reluctant to kill, even when drone technology obstructs the formation of public opposition to conflict.

When theorists of democratic peace consider the harm done to the democratic public by war, they generally focus on material harm: harm to enlisted friends or family members, harm in the form of the financial burden of taxation or debt. Yet Obama's anguish suggests that we might also consider the possibility of war as a moral harm to the public, along the same lines as the moral harm done to the leader as a possible alternative mechanism to prevent war. Michael Walzer, for example, describes the Vietnam War as "moral torture" for American dissenters: understanding themselves as morally entangled in their country's actions, it was morally painful to
them to have the United States involve itself in a conflict they viewed as both unjust and ill-fought (Just and Unjust Wars 303).

If, as was the case during the Vietnam War, citizens view themselves as morally affected by their country's unjust use of force, this may move them to rally against the conflict just as would material harm in "blood and treasure." In a situation where material harm is less present, as in the case of drone warfare, a people's sense of moral harm might maintain some degree of opposition to wars perceived as unjust or morally harmful. Clearly, however, this opposition would depend on the extent to which citizens genuinely viewed themselves as morally affected by their country's unjust actions; if they felt that their nation's prosecution of a war were no concern of theirs, then they would have no reason to organize. First, therefore, a citizen must understand their country as somehow involved in a moral wrong; second, they must consider themselves as morally involved in that wrong to some extent.

Obama's shouldering of moral responsibility as a tragic, dirty-handed politician, however, undermines citizens' ability to see themselves as morally involved. As noted, Obama's self-presentation evokes the Grand Inquisitor's total assumption of all moral consciousness, shifting any sense of moral responsibility for the drone program away from the people and onto his own conscience. The administration thus discourages citizens from studying the morality of the drone program, suggesting that citizens rely instead on the president's superior moral judgment. As a result, this narrative of Obama's anguish deflects any serious engagement on the part of American citizens with the question of their shared guilt or
responsibility for drone strikes. The president has taken on this burden, so why need we as citizens be concerned?

From the perspective of democratic peace, this dynamic is worrying insofar as it removes yet another check against democratic war-making. If drones remove the cost of bloodshed from armed conflict, Obama's self-presentation removes the moral cost that warfare wreaks on a democratic people. Thus, even more responsibility is placed on Obama's shoulders: he must be even more careful in his reasoning on drone strikes and even more certain that his anguish checks excesses, because he cannot rely on the people's sense of moral wounding to foment public opposition to the use of force. Yet insofar as this locates even more responsibility within the solitude of Obama's conscience, it is problematic for all the reasons discussed above.

This reasoning on moral costs and democratic peace suggests another crucial implication of the dirty hands narrative as used by Obama, perhaps the most worrying. In this chapter, I have argued that the moral narrative of dirty hands both shapes the institutional structures that guide political action and influences our public response to those structures. I wish now to close by positing that this narrative also shapes how we as citizens think of ourselves as moral beings.

By positioning the leader as an isolated, anguished, tragic politician and by ignoring the presence of the democratic community, the dirty hands narrative makes citizens willing to sign away their moral awareness and responsibility on particular issues—in the case examined here, on the question of drones. Yet unlike the Grand Inquisitor's childlike subjects, democratic citizens are morally aware and autonomous individuals, and therefore are complicit to some extent in the actions of their leader.
and country. To ignore our moral entanglement with the moral issues raised by drones is, therefore, to refuse to engage with an issue that seriously affects our moral selves. It may be comfortable to feel that there is no need to worry about such issues, that the president is considering these questions for us; this spares us from either the exacting requirements of moral anguish, if we ponder the morality of the drone program and consider it necessary yet dirtying of our hands, or from the moral responsibility of organizing political opposition to the program, if we consider the American use of drones to be unjustified. Though the narrative of the tragic politician pushes us away from these moral considerations, this level of moral awareness and responsibility is inextricable from democratic citizenship.
CONCLUSION

When I first began to consider the drone program as a topic for serious academic inquiry, there existed very little publicly available information on the subject and, perhaps as a result, very little public discussion. As I write this in April 2015, the program is undeniably still shielded by a high degree of secrecy, but the Obama administration’s (very) gradual release of information has created a level of public conversation on drone strikes that I did not anticipate when I began my research. As an indicator, the Pew Research Center’s database of global attitudes toward US drone strikes shows a steady decline in Americans’ approval for drone strikes from 2012 to 2014, and a steady increase in disapproval within that same period of time. While the study’s importance should not be exaggerated, given that it currently includes only one data point per year and has taken place over a comparatively short timespan, it is nevertheless indicative of a crucial shift: notably, between 2013 and 2014, Pew shows a drop of almost ten percentage points in American approval for drone strikes, with disapproval rising by the same amount (Global Indicators Database). This change in public opinion reflects the increased public conversation on the questions of morality and legality surrounding drone strikes. As Americans consider the issues at stake, many have changed their minds about the drone program and have decided that they no longer approve of it.

I had originally meant to draw my argument to a close with a call for public conversation on drone strikes as a means of reaffirming ourselves as morally aware and autonomous citizens, and thus of refusing to cede our moral responsibility to the president. Now that such a conversation is already taking place, this exhortation
seems less necessary. This is not to say that the problems I have identified with the drone program have been solved or even adequately addressed by the Obama administration—far from it—but rather to say that the current level of public discussion on drones indicates an unwillingness to accept President Obama’s attempted consolidation of moral awareness, to an extent that I cautiously find heartening.

Much of the current public discussion, however, is narrowly focused, and has not engaged with the larger issues that lie behind the drone program and which I have addressed in this thesis. To begin with, drones may be only the tip of the iceberg. The development of robotic technology continues to disrupt traditional understandings of justice in and of war: it is now fairly well accepted among those who study and work on military technology that autonomous weapons—that is, weapons capable of selecting and attacking targets without human intervention at any point—are a serious possibility for the future of warfare.¹ Detractors of such weapons and of semi-autonomous weapons, in which a human is to some extent kept “in the loop,” argue that this technology presents issues similar to those raised by drones. Killing may become “too easy” in a profound sense, not only by enabling low-cost wars but also by making possible a form of killing that undermines or even evades human responsibility.² If an autonomous weapon kills an individual, no human being is responsible for that death in the normal sense of the term. Such an erasure of responsibility, the argument goes, dulls our moral feelings: we lose our sense of the

¹ See, for example, Singer, *Wired for War*, especially chapter 6.
² For a discussion of levels of autonomy in weapons technology, see Sharkey, “Towards a principle for the human supervisory control of robot weapons.”
value of human life and our sense that a wrong has been done when a life is intentionally taken. Thus life itself becomes cheapened and killing grows easier.³

If this concern speaks to a real danger, the development of autonomous weapons will create a situation in which the narrative of the leader’s anguish as a check on killing will become even more apropos. Following the model of Obama’s involvement with the drone program, the moral anguish of the leader could be used to reaffirm the presence of human moral feelings in wartime, legitimating military use of autonomous weapons by reassuring the public that human morality and responsibility remained very much present. As weapons technology develops, therefore, we should remain aware that the dirty hands narrative can lend itself to use as a tool for the legitimation of potentially dangerous and poorly regulated methods of warfare. To put it another way, the democratic difficulties raised by drone technology are not going away; if anything, they will only become more pointed.

Returning from the future to the present day, my analysis of the influence of the dirty hands narrative on the drone program is also useful in weighing possible regulatory reforms, by which the program might be institutionalized and shifted away from the solitary realm of the president’s conscience. As part of the public conversation on drone strikes, one of the main topics has been the question of institutional reforms; as I noted earlier, the Obama administration apparently discussed potential reforms internally before the 2012 presidential election, and John Brennan appeared to reveal that the administration had struggled with these questions in his Senate confirmation hearing for his position as Director of the CIA

³ Mark Gubrud, an early opponent of autonomous weapons, has made a variation of this argument. See Gubrud, “The Principle of Humanity in Conflict.”
(“Nomination” 124). As of March 2015, however, no reforms appear to have been implemented—though, because of the secrecy surrounding the program, it is of course difficult to be entirely certain.

The role of dirty hands in shaping perceptions of the program—that is, both the public perception of the program and the administration’s own understanding—suggests an important possible route for reform. If the cultural influence of dirty hands has primed us to accept the narrative of the dirty-handed, tragic politician as a legitimate approach to conceptualizing moral responsibility, and thus to accept the role of the anguished leader’s conscience as a legitimate check on an otherwise unrestrained program, any effort to implement an institutional check on the drone program will need to somehow grapple with this narrative of dirty hands. At risk of stating the obvious, there exist two possible approaches: either an effort for institutional reform can attack the narrative of dirty hands and attempt to explicitly or implicitly disprove its relevance and the legitimacy of its approach, or it can instead choose to work with rather than against the narrative, channeling its power into a means of ensuring institutional accountability. As my previous chapter—indeed, the bulk of my thesis—has already done the work of elaborating on the limitations and dangers of the dirty hands narrative, I want to focus here on the possibility of shaping a narratively appropriate form of institutional oversight. Because of the cultural resonance of the dirty hands narrative, working within that narrative rather than against it may allow us to more effectively address its limitations.

During Brennan’s confirmation hearing, proposals repeatedly emerged for some form of a “drone court,” a judicial or quasi-judicial entity that would review the
executive’s decision-making on targeted killings (“Nomination” 7, 122-125). These proposals garnered a surprising amount of political attention and media commentary. Though the question of how such a court would function remains very much ambiguous, one of the most common suggestions has remained that of modeling the court on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, or FISC (also known as the FISA court after the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, by which it was established). FISC reviews warrant requests issued by the government to acquire “foreign intelligence information,” when the target of surveillance is either a “foreign power” or an “agent” thereof. Given the sensitive nature of the material it handles, the functioning of the court is highly secret, holding closed hearings and keeping its records inaccessible to the public (FISA Sec. 104[a]).

FISC recently came under political fire in the wake of Edward Snowden’s massive leak of classified intelligence information, particularly for its perceived role as a “rubber stamp” for government surveillance: throughout its history, the court has almost never turned down a government request for a warrant (Donohue 49). Following these revelations, recommendations flooded in on how best to restructure FISC to better protect individuals’ privacy. One of the main suggestions focused on the incorporation of some semblance of an adversarial process into the proceeding, given that FISC had previously only required the government to state its case for a warrant, without hearing opposing views. Some commentators described a possible role for a “devil’s advocate,” an individual designated by FISC or by the executive branch to present counterarguments against given warrant requests (McManus). To

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4 As of 2013, FISC had a 99.97% approval rate for warrants for “electronic communications intercepts.” Laura Donohue also notes that FISC had (again, as of 2013) never turned down a warrant request for business records and tangible goods (Donohue 49).
an extent, President Obama incorporated this suggestion into his widespread surveillance reforms following the Snowden revelations, instituting a panel of public advocates to advise FISC in certain cases (“Review of Signals Intelligence”).

Over the course of Brennan’s confirmation hearing, Senators Dianne Feinstein and Angus King both independently referenced and supported the possibility of creating a FISC-style court for drone strikes. Such a court would provide an institutional check on the drone program yet, like FISC, allow secrecy on these classified matters of national security. These proposals for a drone court modeled on FISC were endorsed by many commentators, though with significant confusion as to how such a court would actually function: would a court review names placed on the kill list, or step in to gauge the legality of the strikes themselves? Ought it review proposed strikes *ex ante*, or already conducted strikes *ex post*?5

Given the public antipathy toward FISC as a “rubber stamp” in the absence of any adversarial process, any drone court seeking to bolster the drone program’s legitimacy would likely need to incorporate some level of adversarial process.6 It would, therefore, be modeled on FISC *including* proposals for a FISC “devil’s advocate” figure. This notion of a devil’s advocate for a potential drone court is the key point on which I mean to focus as a method of utilizing the dirty hands narrative to facilitate reform.

The dirty hands narrative focuses on the individual moral struggle of the politician, as borne out entirely within the solitude of the politician’s conscience. The devil’s advocate acts as a means of expanding this moral struggle *within* an

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5 For alternate approaches, see Vladeck (suggesting a court to review damages claims *ex post*) and Brooks xviii.
6 See, for example, Guiora and Brand 26.
individual’s conscience to a moral struggle between individuals. Just as Hugo does for Hoederer, the devil’s advocate allows the anguish within the archetypal politician’s conscience to play out as a debate in the real world, rather than within the closed interior of the soul.

The crucial difference between a system relying on a devil’s advocate and a system relying on the politician’s conscience is, of course, that the presence of the devil’s advocate allows for processes of dialogue, deliberation, and reason-giving between individuals. As I described in the previous chapter, processes of reason-giving ideally constrain action by strengthening arguments, generating improved reasons for action, and eliminating or reformulating those actions for which there exist insufficient reasons. However careful or rigorous a given thinker may be, this process cannot adequately take place within the individual conscience. We are incapable of perceiving the presuppositions, biases and shortcomings in our thinking as keenly as can an interlocutor.

A drone court incorporating a devil’s advocate role would retain the centrality of anguished decision-making characteristic of the dirty hands narrative, but would adapt this narrative to a dialogic and adversarial system, as opposed to the version of the narrative in which anguish appears only within the individual conscience of the leader. This model of a drone court incorporates the narrative of dirty hands, but transforms it into a shape more appropriate for a liberal-democratic system of government. It encourages a process of reason-giving within an institutional structure of accountability, rather than relying on the leader’s unknowable anguish.
This proposal addresses important issues arising at a number of levels. Practically, it offers a possible avenue of institutional reform for the drone program that engages with the dirty hands narrative, perhaps making this approach more attractive than other reforms that would disregard the dirty hands narrative entirely. A drone court, that is, would maintain the familiarity of the dirty hands narrative along with its emotional weight. Less of a change in thinking would therefore be required to gain public and administration approval for this proposal than if the dirty hands narrative were discarded completely. Second, this incorporation of deliberation and debate into the dirty hands narrative suggests a possible approach to dirty hands that is more compatible with democracy—not only in the sense of enabling the institutional constraints central to constitutional democracy, but also with respect to the intersubjectivity and plurality central to democratic life.

On this latter topic, we might usefully look to the experiences of drone pilots. As drone technology has become more prevalent, a common worry has emerged that drone pilots have developed or will develop a “playstation mentality”: as the story goes, operating a drone becomes analogous to playing a video game, with the drone pilot losing the sense of moral gravity appropriate to their power over life and death. The few drone operators who have gone public with their stories, however, present a very different picture. In their telling, instead of placing pilots at a remove from the act of killing, drones enable a heightened closeness. The pilot can watch the individual that they will ultimately target for weeks before taking the shot, giving them a strange sense of familiarity with the “target”; similarly, drone pilots are often

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7 Somewhat strangely, “playstation mentality” seems to have become a term of art. See Kill or Capture 217, Enemark 86, Alston and Shamsi.
tasked with loitering over the aftermath of a strike to gain additional intelligence information, watching funerals and deaths (*Kill or Capture* 217; Power).

Though drone pilots are not placed at physical risk—such is the foundation of the democratic peace argument against drone warfare—there is some evidence that this intimacy with killing incurs serious psychological risk. The most publicly outspoken ex-drone pilot, Brandon Bryant, has been open about his diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, and a study by the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center has indicated that rates of mental health diagnoses such as PTSD and depression are comparable between pilots of drones and pilots of manned aircraft (Power; Otto and Webber 5-6). Interestingly, there has been some suggestion that drone pilots’ stresses may be particularly well-characterized by the psychological term “moral injury,” describing the psychological damage incurred when soldiers at war engage in an activity so contradictory to their moral beliefs as to damage their sense of themselves as moral beings (Matthews; Shay; Litz et al). Brandon Bryant, for example, has been diagnosed with moral injury along with PTSD (Power).

Moral injury as a term is strikingly similar to my term “moral wounding,” which I have used to describe the tragic politician’s feelings of damaged moral integrity upon engagement in evil. The similarity is telling. Just as Obama’s anguish indicates that the drone program has not made killing easy, the drone pilot’s anguish also emphasizes the moral difficulty of killing. The phenomenon of drone pilots speaking out on the topic of their own anguish is interesting on a variety of levels—for example, as a further rebuke to the notion of drones as a danger to democratic

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8 A handful of other Air Force also show high rates of stress among drone pilots, but suggest that this stress is primarily attributable to long hours and the psychological difficulties of fighting a war while remaining physically “at home.” See Chappelle et al., Ouma and Chappelle.
peace, insofar as pilots are at risk of psychological if not physical harm—but it is chiefly important here as a reminder of the essential insufficiency of Obama’s narrative of anguish. Compelling though the president’s anguish may be, he has not and fundamentally cannot shoulder all moral responsibility and moral awareness relevant to the use of drones for targeted killing. However much Obama as an individual agonizes over whether or not to add an individual’s name to the kill list or whether to take a particular shot, the drone pilot at the other end of the chain of command may feel a similar sense of moral anguish.

Drone pilots’ experiences of moral injury or wounding also remind us that even those actions that ostensibly emerge fully formed from the struggle of a solitary conscience, like Athena from Zeus’ skull, in fact morally engage a broad network of individuals. President Obama agonizes over a name on a kill list or a particular drone strike, but the missile does not fire itself. A multitude of actors are involved in the targeting process, including various administration officials and lawyers who might give their approval along the way and ending with the team of drone pilots who ultimately fire the shot. Each one of these individuals might well have cause to feel moral wounding, just as the president does. Indeed, Jeh Johnson, at the time the General Counsel for the Department of Defense, reportedly said that “If I were Catholic, I’d have to go to confession” after approving a particular drone strike and watching it play out in real time over video feed (Kill or Capture 210).

This recalls my earlier point on the moral involvement of citizens with their government’s actions. We do not exist in isolation; most actions taken by political leaders entangle the moral selves of others to some extent, especially when they are
taken in the name of the citizens. In the case of the drone pilot or of Jeh Johnson, the moral involvement in question is a matter of actually committing the action—pulling the trigger, as it were, or pushing the button—or of being part of a mechanism through which that action is committed. The private citizen’s moral involvement, on the other hand, is a matter of existing within a polity in whose name and for whose safety those actions are taken. Clearly, these are different forms of entanglement in action, with effects on the moral self that might differ in degree or in kind. Yet these situations all point to the unavoidable fact that our worldly projects necessarily bring us into contact with others, and that those others are morally affected by our actions either as participants or as beneficiaries.

This observation returns me to a notion that I introduced early in this thesis, that of the “love of the world” possessed by the paradigmatic tragic politician and reflected in his care for “the world as it is” (to use Obama’s own language). This concept evokes the tragic politician’s regard for human beings even in their frailty and failures, the attention that he gives to the consequences of his actions rather than to the abstracted world of pure principle, his love for his city over his soul. In using the term “love of the world,” I intentionally reference Hannah Arendt’s concept of *amor mundi*, which Elisabeth Young-Bruehl describes as Arendt’s rejection of *contemptus mundi*—that is, the philosophical tradition of disdain for the material world in favor of a life of contemplation (Young-Bruehl 324). Building on Young-Bruehl, we can begin to understand Arendt’s *amor mundi* as a recognition of our collective human existence as essentially grounded in the world, and therefore flawed
because the world is flawed. As worldly beings, we cannot achieve the illusory perfection of pure contemplation.  

Similarly, Marieke Borren reads Arendtian _amor mundi_ as reflected in a care for “the public and common intersubjective world” (Borren 240). Borren’s reading draws on Arendt’s highly particular understanding of the political space as necessarily created by intersubjective relationships, deriving from the essential fact of human plurality, or, as Arendt famously put it, “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (*Human Condition* 7). This understanding of the political realm is likely the origin of Arendt’s description of collective responsibility, described in an earlier chapter: as political beings, we exist within a “web of human relationships,” and thus are morally affected by the actions of others (*Human Conditions* 184). To exist within a political space is to be “never merely a doer but always and at the same time a sufferer,” that is, someone whose world and self are to some extent shaped by the actions of others and thus by forces beyond any one individual’s control (*Human Condition* 190).  

We can more clearly understand Arendt’s description by imagining what the opposite of her vision would look like: that is, the essentially antidemocratic (and, to Arendt, antipolitical) “activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end,” such as in the profound “isolation” of tyranny (*Human Condition* 220, 203). This type of activity, which Arendt links to Plato and thus perhaps to _contemptus mundi_, removes all unpredictability and

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9 Thanks to Sonali Chakravarti for her help formulating this characterization of Arendt’s thought.
10 Arendt, of course, uses a highly specific definition of “action” as a particular kind of political activity in which we can only engage in concert with others. For clarity’s sake, I have done my best in the following few pages to use “action” in a sense consistent with Arendt’s use of the word as a term of art.
messiness by creating a situation in which the individual in power ostensibly retains total control, free of the unstable influence of others’ actions (Human Condition 223-227). These efforts destroy the political realm as such, the intersubjective and worldly space within which the democratic polity comes into existence.

To love the world, in Arendt’s sense, is therefore to embrace the world in its messiness, its confusion, its imperfectability, and to understand that all these qualities are essentially tied to plurality and to democratic life. It is to embrace a democratic vision of politics as founded on collective action and conversation.

The dirty hands narrative that I have described in this thesis is, in some ways, in deep tension with Arendtian *amor mundi*. Although the tragic, dirty-handed politician embraces the messy and ethically irrational world in all its shortcomings, his solitary decision-making more closely recalls the antidemocratic isolation of Arendt’s lone “master of his doings.” This contradiction is further emphasized by what I have identified as the deeply antidemocratic nature of the tragic politician archetype, which ignores and subverts the moral presence of the democratic public.

I wish to close by suggesting that Arendt’s love of the world offers an alternative model of conceptualizing the dirty hands problem, one that refigures the narrative of dirty hands in a manner appropriate to democratic life. That is, we might think of the guilt of dirty hands not as something to be wrestled with within the conscience of an isolated leader, but as something with which the democratic polity should collectively engage—given that, as I have argued, citizens’ presence within the political community, not to mention the presence of the officials who help formulate and carry out a given policy, entangles the moral selves of all these
individuals with the dirty-handed actions of their leaders.\footnote{This proposed narrative also points to a possible method of thinking about the proper punishment for dirty-handed actions. Walzer points to Camus’ \textit{Just Assassins} as arguing that such actions must bring down public punishment upon the actor, in order to reestablish the deontological wrongness of the action. My reasoning here, however, suggests that a more appropriate method of grappling with dirty-handed actions would necessarily engage the entire political community—which the prosecution of an individual political leader or even a collection of government officials simply would not do. Indeed, such a prosecution might easily reinforce that same dirty hands narrative whose dangers I have described in this thesis, by once more focusing attention on the figure of an isolated leader (Levy 50). Instead, we might consider reparations—the financial burden of which would be shared by all citizens—or a truth and reconciliation commission such as that established by South Africa in the wake of apartheid. Indeed, Antjie Krog’s chronicle of her experience reporting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggests that such commissions can act as a powerful means for citizens to grapple with their moral involvement in the actions of their leaders or nations.} This formulation of the dirty hands narrative does not enable the tragic politician’s efforts to shift all moral responsibility onto his own shoulders, but rather encourages citizens’ and officials’ efforts to engage seriously with their own moral involvement in wrongdoing. It is a narrative compatible with processes of deliberation and discussion among public officials, as suggested by my vision of a possible drone court. In other words, this narrative incorporates the intersubjective involvement of democratic life that is central to Arendtian \textit{amor mundi}, and ceases to focus on the figure of the isolated leader. In fact, the “web of human relationships” implied by \textit{amor mundi} tells us that no worldly leader is in truth isolated. Like anyone else, the leader exists in a human context; however lonely he may feel, his actions inevitably engage with others.

What I want to propose is not to transcend the dirty hands narrative but rather to transform it. I do not wish to deny the “ethical irrationality of the world,” at least in the world as it now stands; in a Kantian world of perpetual peace, we may achieve a politics within which only good comes from good and evil from evil, but we cannot expect this to be true for the foreseeable future. Rather, I seek to emphasize that while doing good through politics sometimes requires us to engage in evil, the narrative through which we currently consider this engagement is not the only means by which
to think about the problem of dirty hands. We can retain the idea of dirty hands—
which serves as a useful and emotionally resonant means of conceptualizing the
moral difficulties of acting in an uncertain and imperfect world—while moving away
from our previous focus on the figure of the tragic politician. In this way we reach an
understanding of the political world that is, as Weber says, “genuinely human and
moving,” and all the more moving for being so deeply human.


Schneider, Emily. Personal interview. 7 Aug. 2014.


Wittes, Benjamin. Personal interview. 24 July 2014.


