The Problem of Guilt: Rethinking the Problem of Dirty Hands
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The Problem of Dirty Hands, as I understand it, is the problem that sometimes the wrong thing is the right thing to do. In other words, one ought sometimes to violate one’s moral principles for the sake of achieving some morally important end.¹ This problem is one often faced by actors in the political arena. For instance, ought political leaders sacrifice the lives of innocent civilians if there is no other way to defeat a horrid despot? Or should public officials sometimes be willing to torture suspects in order to determine the location of a bomb that is set to go off in a heavily populated area? Some theorists, when faced with such cases, deny that moral principles categorically forbid the killing of innocents or torturing: In other words, they deny that taking the lives of innocents and torturing in such cases is a committing a wrong. Others maintain that one ought never to kill the innocent or torture –that no end, however morally important, can make such acts the right thing to do in any sense. Either way these theorists deny that there is a problem of dirty hands.

In his classic article, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” Michael Walzer maintains that there is a genuine problem of dirty hands. Sometimes public officials ought to compromise their moral convictions in order to obtain some more desirable political end, e.g. the security of the state. Walzer, moreover, proposes an extremely interesting and influential response to the problem: the proper response of moral public officials is to be bad—that is, to compromise their moral convictions for some clearly more desirable political end—provided they feel guilty about their compromise. Moral public officials are the ones that are sometimes willing to get their hands dirty as long as they feel guilty about their dirty

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hands. Walzer gives two reasons why it is important that public officials who have dirty
hands, even for good reasons, nonetheless feel guilty. First, their guilt indicates that these
officials have sufficiently strong moral convictions so that they won’t violate their principles
lightly. Second, in so far as the guilt-ridden politicians are disposed to confess their
violations of moral principles or to willingly subject their decisions to public scrutiny, guilt
serves as an informal mechanism of public accountability.

Walzer’s response to the problem of dirty hands captures a kind of ambivalence that
many of us in fact feel about the desirability of having political actors who are willing to do
what needs to be done—that is, to lie, cheat, steal, and maybe even kill provided there is
some sufficiently important political good at stake. In particular, Walzer’s idea that such
political actors can be moral, provided they feel guilty about their moral compromises,
captures our own admiration for those who are willing to sacrifice their moral integrity for
the sake of the greater good.

I agree with Walzer that the problem of dirty hands is a genuine one: sometimes
political actors ought to sacrifice their own moral integrity in order to achieve some
overriding moral good. As Ruth Grant noted, “It is possible, after all, to be too good.”2 I also
agree that a political actor’s tendency to feel guilt over compromising her moral integrity can
be an indication both of that person’s moral character and of her being a preferable political
actor. However, Walzer’s discussion of the problem of dirty hands is incomplete in crucial
respects. It is incomplete because in recommending that we identify moral political actors by
their disposition to feel guilty, he fails to recognize adequately the indispensable role played

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in a just policy by political actors who refuse to compromise their moral integrity, even for some more desirable moral end.²

In this paper, I offer an account of an overlooked dimension to the problem of dirty hands, one that complements Walzer’s discussion of this problem. I argue that democratic citizens must judge a political actor’s dirty hands not only by the integrity of the agent and his or her feelings of guilt but also by the impact of the dirty-handed decision on the ethical climate of the political arena. My concern here is with the vulnerability of a polity to political corruption—that is, how moral compromise can weaken a polity’s commitment to ethical values. Moreover, I’m particularly interested in the moral compromises that democratic political actors may need to make in order to make democratic institutions function. My fear is that the ethical commitments that sustain and provide normative legitimacy to democratic institutions can be weakened by an unqualified acceptance of Walzer’s view of the problem of dirty hands. A just polity needs both political actors who are willing to sacrifice their own moral integrity for the greater good, and political actors who refuse to compromise their moral integrity. Moreover, democratic citizens need to admire both kinds of political actors, and recognize the complementary roles the two play within their polity, if the problem of dirty hands is to be managed properly.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first explains Walzer’s understanding of guilt and its role in identifying the kind of political actor we would have confront the problem of dirty hands. In the second section, I spell out several problems with Walzer’s approach—most importantly, the unacknowledged debt Walzer possesses to political actors who are unwilling to violate their moral principles. I illustrate these problems by drawing on the experiences of Jane Addams.

³ Of course, such actors are not likely to agree with this characterization of their decision. For them, no moral
Part I: The Importance of Feeling Guilty

For Walzer the problem of dirty hands pervades political life: whoever participates in politics will confront the problem of dirty hands. In fact, Walzer describes the problem of dirty hands as “a central feature of political life, one that arises not merely as an occasional crisis in the career of this or that unlucky politician but systematically and frequently.” So it isn’t surprising that Walzer’s understanding of the problem of dirty hands underlies much of his own thinking about particular political issues. In particular, it underlies his extremely influential work on just war theory. And it will prove helpful to assess this work in light of the shortcomings of his treatment of the problem of dirty hands.

On Walzer’s view, the problem of dirty hands is not just a problem, but a paradox. Sometimes political actors ought to violate their moral principles in order to achieve some morally overriding end. But how can the wrong thing be the right thing to do? Citizens should not try to eliminate the paradox, or even soften the problem, of dirty hands, either by denying that political actors who violate their moral principles are really doing the wrong thing or by denying that genuine good ends can morally require despicable acts. Rather, citizens should embrace the paradox, and seek what solace is available by choosing political actors who are willing to get their hands dirty and will feel guilty for doing so. These political actors, after all, are morally admirable, because they are willing, heroically, to sacrifice their moral integrity for the sake of the greater good.

To specify the political actors we should prefer, Walzer differentiates political actors by their methods for making decisions. Walzer divides political actors into two broad
categories: consequentialists, who ignore the demands of morality and make decisions based on the demands of expediency; and absolutists, who live strictly according to their moral principles. Consequentialists would, of course, not be willing to admit that they counsel the ignoring of genuine moral demands. They counsel choosing the action that has the best expected consequence, and maintain that consequences alone suffice to determine what is right. Absolutists, in contrast, agree with Walzer that the morality of actions is not determined solely by consequences, but part company with him on the question whether morally important consequences can ever morally require political actors to violate moral principles. Walzer contends that the political actor that we should prefer is neither a consequentialist nor an absolutist – rather, one who is willing to compromise what she recognizes as a genuine moral principle for the sake of a sufficiently weighty moral end.

Crucially, Walzer endorses political actors who are willing to violate their moral principles in the face of pressing political realities provided they feel guilt over this violation. Walzer takes the presence of such guilt as manifesting the commitment to morality suitable for political actors:

His willingness to acknowledge and bear (and perhaps to repent and do penance for) his guilt is evidence, and it is the only evidence he can offer us, both that he is not too good for politics and that he is good enough. Here is the moral politician: it is by his dirty hands that we know him. If he were a moral man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that they were clean.

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5 Guilt is appropriate only if one thinks, correctly, that one has done something wrong. So Walzer’s proposal that guilt over dirty hands is a sign of a moral political actor implies that that actor recognize that he has violated a genuine moral requirement.

6 Ibid., 167-168. my emphasis.
To the extent that the presence of guilt indicates that an agent recognizes that he or she has violated a moral norm, guilt serves as a good indicator of an actor’s commitment to the violated norm. For Walzer, a political actor’s awareness of her wrongdoing and the guilt she feels from getting her hands dirty speak to her qualification for her job.

Walzer endorses a particular kind of guilt—namely, one that motivates the political actors to take responsibility for their wrongdoing. Walzer rejects as inappropriate other types of guilt – such as the "protestant" or Weberian guilt, a feeling that prompts the subject to wallow in her own wrongdoing. Instead Walzer endorses a feeling of guilt inspired by Albert Camus, guilt that motivates actors to submit their actions to public judgment and to accept punishment if found guilty of wrongdoing. Public officials who have Camus-type feelings of guilt are likely to confess their wrongdoing or resign after violating their moral integrity. Camus-type guilt is the proper response to the problem of dirty hands in part because it promotes accountability. Having public officials who feel Campus-type guilt about their dirty hands is one way that the public can be served by public officials willing to violate their moral commitments for some more desirable political end, while at the same time having some assurance that those public officials are constrained by morality.

Walzer’s account of the importance of guilt offers one method for negotiating the problem of dirty hands. In particular, he manages the paradox of the problem of dirty hands by ascribing to the preferable political actor the recognition that in dirtying her hands, she violates genuine moral obligations (after all, to feel guilt is to regard oneself as having violated genuine moral obligations) but also the recognition that violating those obligations was the morally right thing to do. Recognizing, in this way, the legitimacy of these two

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7 Here Walzer recognizes how guilt can paralyze political actions. In this way, Walzer seems to agree with Hannah Arendt that “anxiety and guilt, the antipodes of self-esteem and the insignia of mental illness, are the disintegrators of thought, the distorters of values and the paralyzers of action” [Hannah Arendt, “Organized
opposing moral claims is crucial to managing the problem of dirty hands properly. For such political actors avoid the threat of paralysis posed by an imperfect political world – to be sure, at the cost of compromising their moral integrity, and bearing the resulting burden of guilty feelings.

It is important to emphasize that Walzer’s conclusion about guilt rests on the assumption that political actors have a well-founded confidence in their own judgment. Walzer writes that, “The politician has, or pretends to have, a kind of confidence in his own judgment that the rest of us know to be presumptuous in any man.”\(^8\) Walzer constructs the problem of dirty hands in a way that the person who confronts the problem of dirty hands “knows” what the morally best option available is. In this way, Walzer’s description of the problem of dirty hands is to some extent reassuring both to politicians and to citizens. For it represents political actors who face the problem of dirty hands as knowing what is the right decision. But in doing so, Walzer overlooks cases in which politicians are unsure about the effects of their decisions or operate with misguided moral assumptions.\(^9\)

Walzer is certainly right that having politicians confess the ways they violated their moral principles and submit their actions to public scrutiny (as a result of their guilt) can preserve moral resources in the political realm. Without such confessions and the public affirmation of the moral principles that these politicians needed to violate in order to serve

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9 Political actors do not possess the certainty about outcomes that Walzer ascribes to the agents facing the problem of dirty hands. We don’t know that torturing a terrorist will provide the needed information—indeed, even whether the person has the needed information. To the degree that there are clear cut cases in which there are two morally reprehensible choices with one clearly better alternative, Walzer’s analysis of the problem of dirty hands might be right that we want a political actor who is willing to violate her moral integrity for politically desirable ends. Dennis Thompson is right to emphasize that democratic citizens are complicit in (and thereby share the guilt from) the dirty handed decisions of their politicians [Political Ethics and Public Office (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987)]. However, Walzer’s analysis about the importance of guilt is less instructive for other types (and more common types) of dirty-handed decisions: decisions in which actors are uncertain about the consequences of their choices.
the public, politics could succumb to callousness and cynicism, and moral convictions could be banished from political life completely. To the extent that guilt indicates that an actor is committed to moral principles, having political actors who feel guilty about violating their moral integrity is reassuring. The presence of guilt provides some security to vulnerable citizens and punishes to some extent those political actors who violate their own moral integrity.

Part II: An Alternative Approach to the Problem of Dirty Hands

Walzer approaches the problem of dirty hands from the perspective of the individual decision maker. But viewing the problem from a broader perspective, one that attends to the situation of the polity as a whole, reveals that a morally healthy polity, in fact, needs absolutists, and not just Walzerian compromisers, in the political arena. I will argue, in particular, that absolutists play two crucial roles in the life of a morally healthy polity. First, they serve as moral exemplars who, by living out their commitment to moral principles, strengthen other citizens’ commitment to their moral beliefs. Second, absolutists can provide political cover that improves the negotiating positions of those who compromise their moral integrity for desirable political ends.

Walzer’s approach to the problem of dirty hands focuses on certain tensions within individual political actors – namely, those between the moral principles they hold and desirable political ends they want to bring about. His examples include the politician who must accept the bribe in order to win an election and the politician who must order the torture...
of a terrorist in order to save innocent lives. Both examples are instances in which political actors must struggle *individually* with their own consciences. Such actors are in an important sense left alone with their decisions, bearing sole responsibility for making the decision (although these individuals will, to the extent that they suffer Camus-type guilt, submit their actions to public scrutiny). This individualistic approach to the problem of dirty hands ignores the cumulative effects that individual dirty-handed decisions can have on the polity as a whole. Here we need to distinguish two kinds of effects: first, the weakening of ethical commitments, both of public officials and in the polity as a whole (the problem of moral corruption); second, the narrowing of the scope of available policy options in ways that curtail the realizing of ethical commitments (the problem of bad choices).

Noticing these bad effects that individual dirty-handed decisions can have on the polity as a whole puts us in a position to see how a morally healthy polity requires absolutists, as well as Walzerian moral compromisers. In particular, the presence of absolutists is needed to mitigate both kinds of bad cumulative effects that individual dirty-handed decisions can have. Indeed, as we shall see, in mitigating the problem of moral corruption, absolutists help preserve the possibility of moral action in the political arena. Addressing the problem of moral corruption adequately requires looking beyond the individual consciences of political actors and recognizing the distinctive contributions that absolutists make to the proper functioning of a just polity. I call this alternative approach to the problem of dirty hands, one politicians is sufficient for negotiating the problem of dirty hands properly, nevertheless, Walzer ignores how the actions of other political actors can be crucial to tempering and even eliciting those feelings of guilt.
that recognizes how a morally healthy polity needs diverse political actors,\textsuperscript{11} ‘the division of moral labor’ approach.\textsuperscript{12}

In pursuing my division of moral labor approach, let me begin by elaborating how absolutists can help instill and strengthen moral commitment within a polity. Those who live according to moral principles, refusing to compromise them even in the face of great hardships, can serve an important pedagogical role in the life of a polity. Sometimes, we come to comprehend fully what is morally at stake only when we witness how much people are willing to sacrifice for their morals. For example, Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} describes how a slave killed her child rather than have that child grow up in slavery. The intense moral horror of slavery is made more vivid by the slave’s sacrifice. Sacrifices, especially those made very publicly, can also draw attention to the righteousness of some causes. Consider the sacrifices made by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the service of the civil rights movement. King’s willingness to go to jail and to expose himself to the violent hatred of fellow citizens drew wide attention to the cause of civil rights. These sacrifices encouraged many people to reflect critically on their views about race, and come to understand race issues from another, and more morally adequate, perspective. In these ways, people’s willingness to make sacrifices for their moral ideals can inspire others to rethink and deepen their own moral commitments.

For our purposes, it is especially crucial to see that absolutists can serve as moral exemplars, inspiring others by example to resist the temptation to abandon their moral commitments. By living according to their moral principles, absolutists can prevent our

\textsuperscript{11} At this point, I am unclear about the extent to which a just politics needs consequentialists. For this reason, my argument focuses exclusively on the need for absolutists. One reason for this focus is the fact that the primary method of analysis—cost-benefit analysis—of consequentialists is so readily found in the political arena.
capacity to feel guilt from being dulled—in other words, they can stave off the problem of moral corruption. Indeed, moral principles become empty, unless they are occasionally lived in the face of adversity. When regularly compromised for the sake of expediency, moral principles lose their normative force, and talk of morality is more easily dismissed as “mere” rhetoric. Of course, some humans may be properly inspired by simply reading or hearing about certain moral commitments, but (and I would hazard to add, most) others require evidence that moral principles can be put into practice. Moral principles are likely to retain their vivacity for a polity only if some members of that polity refuse to sacrifice their moral integrity, even for the sake of highly politically desirable ends.

A real life example of the problem of dirty hands can help clarify how absolutists can serve as valuable moral exemplars. Consider the effect Leo Tolstoy had on Jane Addams. Jane Addams was a wealthy, white, Protestant woman who actively advocated for poor Italian, Greek, and Eastern European Jewish immigrants living on the West Side of Chicago.13 During a visit to Russia, Addams met Tolstoy. Tolstoy, who had himself given up his wealth for the lifestyle of a peasant, questioned Addams’s relatively privileged lifestyle. He charged that her lack of manual labor corrupted Addams’s political work with Chicago’s poor. Tolstoy’s accusations aggravated Addams’s guilt over her privileges and prompted her to temporarily put aside her political work in order to bake bread. This example shows the way one absolutist (Tolstoy) can prick the guilty consciences of others. Addams soon came to reject Tolstoy’s absolutist stance, describing his recommendations to

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12 Here I borrow Andrew Sabl’s terminology. See his *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. especially pp. 44-45. See also Arthur Applebaum, *The Ethics of Adversaries*. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this terminology. 

13 She was active in promoting a number of different causes ranging from the abolition of child labor, to the establishment of factory laws, and to achieving women’s suffrage. Addams actively lobbied for various legislation aimed at improving her new neighbors’ living and working conditions. Jane Addams is, perhaps, most famous for taking up residence in the West Side of Chicago at Hull House. By taking up residence on the
bake bread as "more logical than life warrants."\textsuperscript{14} She struck a Walzerian compromise, choosing to sacrifice her moral integrity in service of her political work on behalf of Chicago’s poor. Nonetheless, she reported that Tolstoy’s life “haunted” her.\textsuperscript{15} His absolutist example served her, and her contemporaries, as an important source of inspiration:

It seemed to me then that we were all attracted by this sermon of the deed, because Tolstoy had made the one supreme personal effort...to put himself into right relations with the humblest people, with the men who tilled his soil, blacked his boots, and cleaned his stables. Doubtless the heaviest burden of our contemporaries is a consciousness of a divergence between our democratic theory on the one hand, that working people have a right to the intellectual resources of society and the actual fact on the other hand, that thousands of them are so overburdened with toil that there is no leisure nor energy left for the cultivation of the mind. We constantly suffer from the strain and indecision of believing this theory and acting as if we did not believe it, and this man who years before had tried ‘to get off the backs of the peasants,’ who had at least simplified his life and worked with his hands, had come to be a prototype to many of his generation.\textsuperscript{16}

Addams emphasizes the importance of Tolstoy’s example, his being “the prototype to many of his generation.” His life was the “sermon of the deed” that revealed how compromises

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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{15} Allen Davis, \textit{American Heroine}, (New York: Oxford University, 1973), 139.
\textsuperscript{16} Jane Addams, \textit{Twenty Years at Hull House}, 157-158. emphasis mine
can strain one’s integrity. Those who set an example prick the consciences of political actors who are burdened by guilt in ways that remind them of the value of their moral convictions. By acting according to their convictions, and being willing to sacrifice opportunities to advance policy goods for those convictions, absolutists like Tolstoy make vivid what political actors with dirty hands should feel guilty about. In this way, absolutists can set and maintain high moral benchmarks.

Walzer’s treatment of the problem of dirty hands does not sufficiently acknowledge the important role that absolutists can play in staving off moral corruption. As a result, his proposed way of negotiating the problem of dirty hands – namely, that of preferring exclusively political actors that are willing to compromise their moral integrity for the sake of the greater political good – risks cutting off sources necessary for maintaining our moral sensibilities. For politics can make humans cynical. Making compromises can lead individuals to lose their commitment to political ideals, a commitment necessary to preserve a healthy polity. Ideals lose their resonance when they come to be seen generally as expendable. If more and more political actors accept torturing or bribing for preferable political ends, then the ordinariness and routine nature of these practices can cut off citizens’ moral repulsion. Moreover, public officials who dirty their hands can come to devalue the moral integrity they sacrificed, in order to help mitigate their guilt. This phenomenon of sour grapes poses a danger to Walzer’s treatment of the problem of dirty hands. Dirty-

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17 Similarly, I would argue that accepting one’s dirty hands and its corresponding guilt can weaken one’s moral convictions. Moral convictions are weakened because dirty-handed political actors can see their guilt as sufficient punishment or even as a badge of honor.

18 For an example of how normative arguments can lose their resonance, see Charles Royster’s The Destructive War (1991) New York: Knopf Press. Royster describes the growing acceptability of total war against civilian populations in the US Civil War.

19 For an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of sour grapes, see Jon Elster’s Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Note that the rationalizing effects of guilt does not necessarily emerge from ill-will (though they might) but can also arise from the despair over the policy alternatives or from too much compassion.
handed political actors, though initially guilt-ridden, may not have the moral resources necessary for sustaining the emotional response of guilt crucial to Walzer’s method of negotiating the problem of dirty hands.

Indeed, Walzer’s unacknowledged debt to absolutists runs even deeper. For a striking feature of his approach to the problem of dirty hands is that he characterizes this problem as a paradox that needs to be preserved. To eliminate this paradox, by adopting the outlook either of the absolutist or the consequentialist—is, on his view, to give up on a conception of morality that should inform the political arena. But Walzer fails to see that, on his own account, preserving the paradox also requires preserving political actors’ capacity to feel guilty. After all, on this account the wrong thing can only be the right thing to do, if the wrong doer recognizes that he is doing wrong, and feels the appropriate kind and degree of guilt over his wrong-doing. Thus, unless democratic citizens admire and support absolutists, as well as Walzerian compromisers – adopting a division of moral labor approach – they will not provide the conditions necessary to preserve the paradox of dirty hands and thus for a morality suitable for the political arena. If Addams had followed Tolstoy’s absolutist example, Chicago’s poor would have been abandoned. But, at the same time, without Tolstoy, the progressive movement would have missed an important moral inspiration. In order to negotiate the problem of dirty hands properly, it is necessary to have political actors who unequivocally abide by certain ethical commitments and political actors who are willing to transgress those commitments for desirable political ends. A morally healthy polity needs both absolutists and Walzerian compromisers, just as the progressive movement needed both Tolstoy and Addams. Thus, we should reject a monolithic approach to the problem of dirty
hands—that moral political actors are ones who violate their moral integrity for the sake of more desirable political ends.\(^{20}\)

Let me turn now to the second important role that absolutists can play in a morally healthy polity: expanding the scope of policy debates to enable more morally enlightened courses of action. Political actors who refuse to compromise on their moral convictions can influence the range of options available to political actors. Sometimes, the range of alternatives from which a political actor must choose can be expanded to include morally preferable options when some citizens refuse to compromise their principles. For example, Franklin Roosevelt recognized how pressure creates political options when he said to a reform delegation: “Okay, you’ve convinced me. Now go on out and bring pressure on me!”\(^{21}\) Absolutists should not be understood in oppositional terms to guilt-ridden political actors with dirty hands. For absolutists influence available options—that is, absolutists can play an integral role in creating the alternative that is morally preferable. Guilt-ridden political actors with dirty hands look more “reasonable” and gain political leverage by contrasting their own views to those of the absolutists. To focus on the individual’s conscience, as Walzer does, ignores the ways in which decisions are brought into existence by more than one political actor.

Consider the relationship between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. By articulating a black nationalist position in absolutist terms, Malcolm X made those who were willing to compromise (King) seem more acceptable. Robert Penn Warren described how Malcolm X had a symbolic function of presenting the message of Martin Luther King to the white world. If you didn’t take Martin, then you would have to take Malcolm X and all he

\(^{20}\) A full appreciation of the roles of the absolutists reveals that who is appropriate to face the problem of dirty hands will partially depend on the nature of the issue, on the political context, and on the nature of other political actors.
means. Similarly, James Cone’s in-depth analysis of the relationship between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. concluded that

Martin and Malcolm are important because they symbolize two necessary ingredients in the African-American struggle for justice in the United States. We should never pit them against each other. Anyone, therefore, who claims to be for one and not the other does not understand their significance for the black community, for America, or for the world. We need both of them and we need them together.

I propose to generalize Cone’s point: Having a variety of moral dispositions—those willing to compromise their moral integrity and those refusing to compromise their moral integrity—can expand the negotiating room for political actors who compromise their moral beliefs for political gains. Absolutists can alleviate the problem of bad choices by providing political cover for guilt-ridden political compromisers.

Let me be clear. I am not arguing that the political arena should be filled only with absolutists. Moreover, I admit that absolutists can exercise unwelcome, as well as beneficial, influence on a polity. Recall, once again, how, as my discussion of Jane Addams illustrated, absolutists can have a paralyzing effect on other political actors. Sometimes, there can be too much guilt. Moreover, absolutists can be those who refuse to compromise of values central to democratic institutions as well as those who refuse to compromise on illiberal and horrific principles. For these reasons, I contend that in order to be engage morally in a dirty-handed politics, it is necessary to have a variety of political actors. The synergy among these actors is what allows the paradox of dirty hands to be properly

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negotiated. If we view the problem of dirty hands from the perspective of the entire polity, we can see that absolutists, even those with whom one seriously disagrees, can give values meaning. They provide the animus for the moral convictions that a dirty handed political actors sacrifices and thereby animus for his feelings of guilt. The problem of moral corruption and the problem of bad choices show that a just polity requires political actors with a variety of different political dispositions, not simply those that are willing to bear the burdens of guilt in order to achieve certain political ends.

The division of moral labor approach that I have sketched is one that Walzer does not, in fact, take. His stress on the importance of guilt leads him, quite naturally, to approach the problem of dirty hands from an exclusively individualistic perspective. But it seems to me that the most central, and insightful, elements of Walzer’s treatment of the problem of dirty hands are not only compatible with, but strengthened by, adopting the division of labor approach. In particular, I have in mind his recognition that dirty-handed politicians, provided they experience guilt, make important contributions to the polity and may even be morally admirable. Walzer might well accept my division of moral labor approach as one that complements his, and that yields a friendly amendment to his basic position – namely, that we should favor dirty-handed and guilt-ridden politicians over absolutist ones.