

The evil of politics and the ethics of evil assignment

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil Author(s): Hans J. Morgenthau

Source: Ethics, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Oct. , 1945), pp. 1-18 Published by: The

University of Chicago Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2988705>

Accessed: 21/09/2010 06: 43 Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>.

JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>. Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [\[email protected\]](mailto:)org. The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Ethics. <http://www.jstor.org>

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND LEGAL
PHILOSOPHY ETHICS VolumeLVI OCTOBER 1945 Number1 THE EVIL OF

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL HANS J. MORGENTHAU a political animal by nature; he is a scientist by chance or choice; he is a moralist because he is a man. Hence, the scientism of Machiavelli and Hobbes is, in the history of mankind, merely an accident without consequences, a lightning illuminating in a sudden flash the dark landscape of man's hidden motives but kindling no Promethean fire for a grateful posterity.

The history of political thought is the history of the moral evaluation of political power. Even when mankind seems to be preoccupied with the science of man's political nature and considers ethics either as an empirical science or not at all, the moral issues raise their voices and demand an answer. The answers, like the questions, are mumbled, ambiguous, and distorted when the scientific prejudices do not allow the moral problems to be seen in their true light and the answers to be given in their true relation to the questions.

Thus it remains for every age, and particularly a scientific one, to rediscover and reformulate the perennial problems of political ethics and to answer them in the light of the experience of the age. Such a rediscovery and reformulation is called for in our time. For a scientific age has attempted to reduce moral problems to scientific terms and has thus obscured and distorted the true meaning of the problems, if not obliterated them altogether. | According to the prevailing school of thought, the aim of moral action is the attainment of the greatest amount of human satisfaction.

Moral action itself is the result of a conscious weighing of anticipated advantages and disadvantages connected with certain actions. Moral

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

conflict, then, is at best a rational doubt as to which of two alternative actions is most appropriate to the desired result. Ethics, anticipating through rational calculation the relation of certain means to certain ends, becomes undistinguishable from science, and moral and successful action are one and the same thing. God, then, is always with the stronger battalions, with the party who wins the elections, and with the biggest bank accounts.

Lack of success, on the other hand, testifies to ethical inferiority, which carries with it defeat in war, politics, and business as just rewards. Action, falling short of the ethical ideal thus conceived in terms of perfect social adaptation, is attributed to ignorance or lack of experience. Consequently, the remedy is found in education and training for "social living in a changing world." Propaganda replaces moral philosophy, and it is only consistent that in the curriculum of our institutions of higher learning propaganda analysis takes the place of moral philosophy.

Verbal allegiance to the nonutilitarian ethical standards of the Hebrew-Christian tradition is still paid in form of moral exhortation from secular and ecclesiastical pulpits. Yet either this allegiance has become a ritualistic tribute to empty symbols which are no longer expected to guide human action or the practical results of utilitarian ethics and the postulates of traditional ethics are supposed to be identical, so that, by practicing the one and preaching the other, the identity of the two ethical systems will actually be reaffirmed and the harmony between ethical standards and human action the more firmly established.

The modern mind can, however, not be unaware of the existence of ethical conflicts which are solved in defiance of utilitarian standards. Great literature is a monument to such solutions, and under extreme conditions even modern man with traditional ethics acts in accordance and against his own "better" knowledge. Yet when he becomes aware of this discrepancy between the acknowledged standards of utilitarian ethics and his own ethical experience, he will resort to one of two extremes.

He will either dismiss his ethical experiences as a psychological oddity, a queer deviation from the utilitarian norm, or he will forswear the utilitarian standards and with them the empirical conditions of human conduct altogether and retire into the realm of pure thought, that is, of perfectionist ethics. Of the former reaction, Professor Douglas Bush gives a striking example taken from a Freshman class at Harvard. Three members of it chose to write reports on Lord Jim.

Conrad's hero, you will remember, was a young ship's officer who, caught in a crisis for which he was unprepared, saved his own life by abandoning the ship when it was supposedly sinking with a crowd of native passengers; haunted thereafter, wherever he went, by the fact of his cowardice and the notoriety of his trial, he finally, in another crisis, put the seal upon his inward rehabilitation by the deliberate sacrifice of his life to his honor.

Well, two of my three young men, normal, decent, well-disposed young men, were quite unsympathetic toward the idea of a man's being tortured by the loss of his integrity and self-respect. Why, they asked, wasn't Jim "realistic," why didn't he forget the whole business and go his way and enjoy life?

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

One wonders how many young men would carry that "realistic" attitude into private and public and international obligations, how many take the chief end of life to be self-centered and untroubled prosperity.

Where utilitarian "realism" does not do away with the moral problem altogether but leaves at least the awareness of, and the uneasiness at, its existence alive, education and other techniques of applied psychology will aid the individual to adapt himself to his social environment; for moral scruples and conflicts of conscience are regarded as a kind of psychotic condition arising from a conflict between the individual and his social environment.

Thus Alfred Adler envisages, as consequence of universal psychoanalytical treatment, a completely "healthy" society, whose members, freed from the emotional disturbances with concomitant with the preoccupation problems of ethics, will forever live in peace with themselves and with one another. | In his contribution to the symposium, *Approaches to National Unity* (New York, 1945), pp. 834-35. THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL 3

II losophy, cannot escape, at least in its The discrepancy between the ethical evaluation of the contemporary scene, consequences of utilitarian philosophy the impact of the spirit of the age. It and traditional ethics is thus overcome might even be said that this belief, while by treating the vestiges of the latter as on the political scene it is compelled a psychological aberration and the for- from time to time to compromise and mer as symptoms of a state of ethical alternates with utilitarian expediency, in

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

health to be fully realized by the com- contemporary religion develops its full plete elimination of the latter.

The same uncompromising consistency and perresult of resolving this discrepancy in the fectionism as well as, concomitant with postulated exclusiveness of one of its ele- it, its three outstanding results: the inments is achieved by confronting reality capacity for meaningful political action, with a system of thought which trans- the temptation to support the powerslates faithfully the demands of reason that-be and justify the status quo, and, into rules of ethics.

Since, however, reali- consequently, the discredit of the systy is dominated by forces which are in- tems of thought leading to such results. different, if not actively hostile, to the In view of the permanent discrepancy commands of reason, an unbridgeable between the assumptions of perfectionist chasm must permanently separate the ethics and the actual conditions of hurules of rationalist ethics from the hu- man action, action in accordance with man reality.

The ethical theory and prac- the former is possible only at the risk of tice of rationalism, in its perfectionist irrelevance or failure or of both. The conmanifestation at least, does not recog- scientious objector is a case in point. He nize the permanency and inevitability satisfies the norms of an ethics which of this chasm. It believes that the reluc- condemns participation in the irrationalitance of reality to conform to the ethical ty of war.

Yet, by doing so, he does not command us due to lack of information do away with war nor does he even influence to moral inertia. Education and hence the incidence of war. If, by refusing moral exhortation will in due course of to participate in war, this is his aim, he time overcome these obstacles, and it fails completely. If, on the other hand, nothing but the cumulative effect of the his only aim is the realization of ethical quantity and intensity of these intellectual perfection in his own person, he may actual influences which will finally bring have realized it. Yet its realization is about the desired result. completely irrelevant if not actually disOf this belief in a perfectionist ethics creditable if the communal aim of the to transform the actions of men by its prevention of war is applied as a yardstick; for it may be regarded by those who are actively engaged in the political modern politics.

This belief is, however, struggle for the prevention of war, not not limited to political life. It manifests only as an individual demonstration itself typically in contemporary religion, , necessarily empty of political results, especially in what is called liberal Protestantism - but also as a particular kind of personal egotism, but also, and most typically, selfishness which cultivates the peace of in modern Catholicism, which, although one's own conscience bought by abstention opposed to liberalism as a political philosophy - tion from meaningful political action.

In 4 ETHICS view of the forces engaged for good or evil, of the ethical and political risks incurred in meaningful political action, the concern of the conscientious objector for the letter of the moral law seems incongruous; his

abstention from meaningful political action for the sake of moral purity seems to miss the point. Yet only a small minority, regardless of their ethical convictions, will at any given time be satisfied for the sake of their ethical conviction either not to act at all or to act irrelevantly and ineffectually.

The common run of men will either exchange, permanently or temporarily, a system of ethics which imposes upon adherence to it the sacrifice of successful action for one compatible with successful action; of this, utilitarian ethics is the outstanding modern example. Or they will interpret whatever the letter of the ethical norms may be so as not to make successful action impossible. This attempt at overcoming the chasm between rationalist ethics and reality is exemplified by certain types of organized religion as well as by all totalitarian political philosophies from Hobbes and Hegel to modern dictatorship.

In its extreme manifestation, organized religion glorifies government as a divine institution and asserts the ethical value of its established order which appears sanctified by its divine origin. While here the cleavage is obliterated by a reinterpretation of the political reality in the light of ethical principles, totalitarian philosophy reformulates ethical principles to fit the political reality. The state as such is, if not the source, so at least the manifestation of morality on earth, and whatever is done in the name of the state partakes of the ethical dignity emanating from it.

Yet even where the desire to obliterate this cleavage does not go to the totalitarian extreme of identifying ethics and politics, there is still in our civilization a strong tendency to minimize whatever discrepancy might exist

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

between the commands of ethics and the practices of politics. This is achieved by either calling attention to the commands of Christian ethics in their most general form without referenceto any concrete political situation or by bemoaning the sinfulness of the world in general, of which politics has its share.

In either case the specificproblem how to be successful in politics without violating the commands of ethics is evaded either by not facing it at all or by not facing it in its specificness. III The main streamof secularthought in Western civilization, in so far as it goes beyond mere utilitarianism, seeks to avoid the pitfalls of perfectionist ethics, for it recognizes the chasm which separates political action and ethical standards. Yet it falls prey to another misunderstanding by setting the political sphere apart from the private one for purposesof ethical evaluation.

This misunderstanding reveals itself in three fundamental attitudes, one proclaiming the permanent exemption of political action from ethical limitations, the second subjecting political action permanently to particular ethical standards, and the third, while recognizing the second alternative as a temporary fact, looking forward to the acceptance, in a not too distant future, of a universal ethical standardof which the private one is thought to be the model. The first attitude is connected with the names of Machiavelli and Hobbes and is known in the history of ideas as “ reason of state. According to it, the state is subject to no rule of conduct but the one which is dictated by its own THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL 5 self-interest. *Salus publici supremum lex.* bound to be less than completely evil

When the statesman who is confronted and can never be without ethical significance with a choice between two actions, the chance at all; for the necessity of justifying one ethical, the other not, of which the acting it in ethical terms carries with it the latter has a better chance of bringing obligation for even the most cynical of about the desired result, he must choose actions to choose his measures so that the latter.

When he acts, however, in a private capacity, he, like any other private individual, must choose the former; superficial, with the standards of ethics for, while political action is free from and thus will lend at least appearance ethical limitations, private action is subjected to the positive ethical claims. These

The individual as such is subject to them. claims may be false, yet they cannot be moral by nature; political society is incomplete and absolutely false, as long as moral and also by nature. as the actor is concerned with the appearance of this conception of his act as just. The actor may be literary rather than practical. Man subordinates all ethical considerations to kind has at all times refused to forego the realization of his political goal, yet ethical evaluation of political action. is act cannot be beyond good and evil, Political philosophy from the Greeks to not even from his own point of view, as our time has started with the assumption that man in the political sphere is of his act with the ethical standards part not allowed to act as he pleases and that of the goal to be

realized. his action must conform to a standard This curious dialectic of ethics and higher than the standard of success.

It politics, which prevents the latter, in has even made this conformity the test spite of itself, from escaping the former's of legitimate political power, that is, au- judgment and normative direction, has thORITY as over against mere usurpation. its roots in the nature of man as both a As the lex Salica put it: " King thou will political and a moral animal. Every man be if thou follow the law. If thou do not is the object of political domination and follow the law, thou will not be king. at the same time aspires toward exercis Political practice, in turn, takes the ing political domination over others. His ethical evaluation of political action for back is bent under the political yoke, granted. The actors on the political yet while he bends down he must be scene, however they may be guided by aware of somebody, at least in his imagi considerations of expediency, must pay nation, who bears the yoke on his be their tribute to these standards by justi- half. Man is the victim of political power fying their actions in ethical terms.

Do- by necessity; he is a political master by mestic measures enacted in the interest aspiration. It is this aspiration which of special groups must be capable of in- drives him toward obscuring the fact of terpretation in terms of the common his political dependence and giving it an good. The moves and counter moves in ethical justification. Political dominat the struggle for political power must be tion, then, appears as a product of naintelligible as a dialectic movement to- ture itself, which, as in Plato, is to be ward the realization of justice.

However justified as a particular case of the divide of positive ethical significance the sion of labor or to be explained, as in individual political act may be, it is Aristotle, by the natural inequality of 6 ETHICS men. Or it does not appear as political domination at all by being presented as the application of an equalitarian principle, such as the social contract or the consent of the governed. The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate government fulfils a similar function of at least mitigating the fact of political domination, in the one case, and of demonstrating its intolerable injustice, in the other.

Thus the people themselves make a distinction between a government which can demand and expect obedience and oppression or usurpation which to resist is a right and may even become a duty. The ethical justification of revolution implies a negative ethical evaluation of the government against which the right to revolution is maintained. It is an ethical distinction which we are making when we distinguish between a ruler and a tyrant, between a political leader and a political boss.

It is a difference in ethical quality to which we are referring when we put in different categories Alexander and Nero, Edward I and Richard III, Napoleon and Hitler. Whatever some philosophers may have asserted about the amorality of political action, philosophic tradition, historic judgment, and public opinion alike refuse to withhold ethical valuation from the political sphere. IV By depriving the political act of ethical significance altogether, the modern age reveals, however, its inability to understand and solve the problem of political ethics with its own intellectual means.

While the perfectionists as well as the utilitarians and Machiavellians obscure or obliterate the problem, it is here faced; yet its solution is founded upon the same misunderstanding of human nature and political society of which all political thinking typical of the age partakes. The argument starts with the observation that man as an actor on the political scene does certain things in violation of ethical principles, which he does not do, or at least not as frequently and habitually, when he acts in a private capacity.

There he lies, deceives, and betrays, and he does so quite often. Here he does so, if at all, only as an exception and under extraordinary circumstances. From this starting-point the argument leads to the conclusion that man acts differently in the political and in the private sphere because ethics allows him to act differently. In other words, there is one ethics for the political sphere and there is another ethics for the private sphere, and the former allows him to do certain things there which the latter does not allow him to do here.

Political acts are subject to one ethical standard; private acts are subject to another one. What the latter condemns, the former may approve. "If we had done for ourselves," exclaimed Cavour, "what we did for Italy, what scoundrels we would have been!" No civilization can be satisfied with such a dual morality; for through it the domain of politics is not only made morally inferior to the private sphere but this inferiority is recognized as legitimate and made respectable by a particular system of political ethics. Hence, the very age that conceived the problem of political ethics in terms of a dual morality has endeavored either to overcome the duality of standards or to

justify it in the light of a higher principle. The attempt at overcoming the cleavage between private and political morality starts with the assumption that the morality of the political sphere, viewed from the standards of individual ethics, is a residue from an immoral age which THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL 7 has been overcome in the individual sphere but still leads a ghostlike existence in the realm of politics.

Political ethics, in other words, is in a retarded stage of development. The particular ethics of political action is the manifestation of what the sociologists call a "cultural lag." If this is so, then the conclusion is inevitable that the forward march of civilization will sooner or later subject political action to the same moral standards to which private action is already subject. A deliberate effort at reform will bridge over the gulf which still separates political and private morality. "We are at the beginning of an age," said Woodrow Wilson in his address to Congress announcing the attainment of moral ends in order to avoid the evil of the means or of doing what would otherwise be evil in order to attain the good of the end. It is the latter alternative, we are told, that we have to choose. For as the means are subordinated functionally to the end, so they are ethically. A good end must be sought for and an evil end must be avoided, in both cases regardless of the means employed. The end taints the means employed for its attainment with its own ethical color and thus justifies or condemns that which, considered by itself, would merit the opposite valuation.

The end which, above all others, is considered to justify whatever means are the declaration of war in 1917, "in which employed in its behalf is the state as

the it will be insisted that the same stand- repository of the common good. What ards of conduct and of responsibility for you would not be allowed to do for your wrong shall be observed among nations self-that is, in behalf of your own limand their governments that are observed ited interests as the end of your actionamong the individual citizens of civilized you are allowed and even obligated to do states. Thus this conception culminates when your act would further the welfare in a perfectionist ethics which tries to of the state and thus promote the comsolve the problem of political ethics by mon good. The action which would minimizing the conflict between ethical make you a scoundrel and a criminal standards and political reality and by there, will make you a hero and a statesobscuring its intrinsic relation to the man here. Cavour's statement, quoted above as an expression of dual morality, existence of man in society. ay be quoted here again; and the justiv fication of means by ends, if limited to It is on a higher level of insight that the political sphere, is indeed identical the cleavage is being recognized as in- with, and only a particular manifestaevitable yet justified in the light of a tion of, the conception of a dual morality higher principle. Here harmony is sought discussed above. not in the reality of actual behavior but Actually, however, the tendency to in ethical judgment.

The harmony de- justify otherwise immoral actions by the rives from the subordination of certain ends they serve is universal. It is only otherwise immoral acts as means to cer- most conspicuous in politics. It has been tain ends in whose moral value the for- said that there are just wars but no just mer partake. Since we are under a moral armies. One might as well say that

there obligation to realize these ends and since are just foreign policies but no just diplome cannot do so without using those in mats.

The particular discrepancy bethemselves immoral means, we are con- tween ethics and political action and its fronted with the dilemma either of re- quantitative dimension cannot escape 8 ETHICS our attention, and we are all vaguely terest. The promotion of the latter is aware of the problem when we read a only incidental, an inevitable step toward the realization of a good of higher dispatch such as the following: Snapped Lady Astor:" Whenare you going to stopkillingpeople? " SaidStalin:" Whenit is no longer necessary. an EnglishnewspaperTo manwho askedhim aboutthe millionsof peasants who had died duringthe collectivization drive, Stalin answered with the questions: " How many died in the Great War? " Over 7, 500, 000. Said Stalin: " Over7, 500, 000 deaths for no purposeat all. Then you must acknowledgethat ourlossesaresmall, because yourwar endedin chaos, whilewe are engagedin a work whichwill benefithe wholeof humanity. " ethical value than the interests of any single individual. The harmony thus achieved between ethical standard and human action is, however, apparent rather than real, ambiguous rather than definite.

In order to achieve it, one must weigh the immorality of the means against the ethical value of the end and establish a fixed relationship between both. This is impossible. One may argue from the point of view of a particular political philosophy, but one cannot prove from the point of view of universal and objective ethical standards that the good of the end ought to prevail over the evil of the means. That the welfare of one group is or is not too

dearly paid for by the misery of another has always been asserted but has never been demonstrated.

The analysis of the artificial and partial character of the end-means relation will make this clear. This relation is artificial and partial in a dual sense. On the one hand, the welfare of the group, for the sake of which the welfare of another group is sacrificed, is an end with a positive ethical quality only for the members of that group and its apologists. The members and the apologists of the other group will look upon its welfare as the end which society ought to promote but actually sacrifices.

What is the end for one group of persons is used as means by another, and vice versa. The means-end relation itself therefore has no objectivity and is relative to the social vantage point of the observer. Kant and Marx have decried the use of man by man as a means to an end, proclaiming the ethical maxim that every man be treated as an end in himself, and the disinherited have taken up the Yet what is called the "ethics of capitalism" offers less striking yet no less typical examples of the same attempt at reconciling action with ethics.

They appear to us to be less striking only because they do not operate in a world seemingly different from our own and in dimensions which qualitatively and quantitatively transcend our own individual experience but are a familiar part of this very experience. The Puritan identification of worldly success with virtue and divine blessings is interpreted as to signify that the means employed on the road to success, whatever they may be, partake of the ethical dignity of the latter.

The belief of "laissez-faire" liberalism that the natural harmony of interests, that is, the common good in economic terms, results from the free interplay of the enlightened self-interest of individuals, bestows upon individual egoism an ethical value which it would not possess apart from its subservience to the ethical goal of social harmony. The ethical life of the individual himself is a continued series of attempts to justify manifestations of individual egoism in terms of an ethically valuable goal and thus to prove that what has the appearance of egoism transcends actually the individual in time.

February 5,

1945, p. 36. THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL 9 cry. Yet from Plato and Aristotle to end justifies all human actions. Among Spencer and Hitler, philosophers and them there may be differences in degree; practitioners of government alike have there can be none in kind. Whatever is maintained the claim that certain men done ad majorem dei gloriam, partakes of are born to serve as means for the ends the sanctity of its ultimate goal. The of others; and this claim the disinherited harmony thus established between eth themselves support once they have risen cal norm and reality is indeed complete. o the top and now determine themselves Yet the solution of the problem is again what is end and what means. apparent rather than real. For the dilem On the other hand, the end-means re- ma which disturbs the consciences of men lation is ambiguous and relative also in and raises this problem in their minds that whatever we call means in view of concerns primarily not the relation bethe end of a chain of actions is itself an tween human action and the absolute end if we consider it as the final point of good but the relation between human a chain of actions.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

Conversely, what we actions and limited human objectives; call end is a point at which a chain of the former presumably evil, the latter actions is supposed to come to a stop presumably good. The question which while it proceeds actually beyond it; in man is anxious to answer is therefore view of this "beyond" the end trans- not, at least not within the context of an forms itself into a means.

All action is end-means discussion, how we can extherefore at the same time means and plain the apparently inevitable evilness ends, and it is only by an arbitrary sepa- of all human action in the light of the ration of a certain chain of actions from absolute good but how we can explain what precedes and follows it, that we can the apparently inevitable evilness of attribute to certain actions the exclusive some, especially political, actions in the quality of means and ends. Actually, light of the relative good they are inhowever, the totality of human actions tended to serve.

Moral unity between different kinds presents itself as a hierarchy of actions each of which is the end of the preceding of actions is here achieved, and the moral and a means for the following. This hier- worth of political action is established in archy culminates in the ultimate goal of view of the end that the action serves. all human activity which is identical A similarly deceptive harmony and false with the absolute good, be it God, hu- moral justification derives from the orimanity, the state, or the individual him- gin of the action, that is, the intention of self.

This is the only end that is nothing the actor. The ethical worth of the acbut end and hence does not serve as a tion is here judged not by its results but

means to a further end. Viewed from it, by the intention of the actor. If the
acall human activity appears as means to tion resulted in evil, if it brought
about war and death and misery for millions, the ultimate goal. the doctrine
the statesmen are not to blame provided In the last analysis, then, that the
ethical end justifies unethical their intentions were good.

Since the inmeans, leads to the negation of absolute tention of the actor is
nothing but the ethical judgments altogether. For if the end of the action as
it is mirrored in the ethical end justifies unethical means, the actor's mind, it
is obvious that the reultimate and absolute good which all course to the
intention of the actor as human activity serves as means to an unifying and
justifying principle is only lo ETHICS a reformulationof the end-means
argument in reverse, which sharesthe latter's weakness.

There is, however, another criticism which applies specificallyto the
justification of political actions by the intention of the actor. A
Frenchproverbsays that in politics there is one thing worse than a crime, and
that is a blunder. In other words, the political actor has, beyond the
generalmoral duties, a special moral responsibility to act wisely-that is, in
accordancewith the rules of the political art-and for him expediencybecomes
a moral duty. The individual, acting on his own behalf, may act unwisely
without moral reproachas long as the consequences of his inexpedient action
concern only himself.

What is done in the political sphere, by its very nature concerns others who
must suffer from unwise action. What is here done with good intentions but
unwisely and hence with disastrous results is morally defective, for it violates

the ethics of responsibility to which all action affecting others and hence political action par excellence is subject. The recourse to good intentions as unifying and justifying principle obscures this social relevance of political action, which, as such, interferes with the life of others in a way in which private action, as such, generally does not.

The well-intentioned political dilettante may indeed work more evil than the illintentioned professional politician, and the test of good intention would destroy rather than clarify the ethical significance of their respective actions.

VI It is the commonmark of all these attempts at solving the problem of political ethics that they try to create a harmony which the facts do not warrant, either because there is no discord in the first place or because the existing discord is final.

All these attempts start with the assumption that the individual sphere is ethically superior to politics. They idealize the individual sphere and erect it into a model, if not of ethical perfection, at least of approximation to it. In contrast with it, political action appears sinister and evil and in need of being elevated to the ethical level of individual action. At the basis of this juxtaposition there is the optimistic belief in the intrinsic goodness of the rational individual and the pessimistic conviction that politics is the seat of all irrationality and evil.

One might note from the outset that the opposition between man and society, individual and political action, is a mere figure of speech in so far as the individual actor is confronted with a collectivity which is supposed likewise to act. It is always the individual who acts, either with reference to

his own ends alone or with reference to the ends of others. The action of society, of the nation, or of any other collectivity, political or otherwise, as such has no empirical existence at all. What empirically exists are always the actions of individuals who perform identical or different actions with reference to a common end.

The most that can be said concerning the moral character of a private as over against a political action is that an individual acting in one capacity may be more or less moral than when acting in the other. Once the opposition between man and society, between private and political action, is reduced to the opposition between different kinds of individual actions, it becomes obvious that the difference in moral character between the two kinds of actions is at best a relative one and is devoid of the absoluteness which contemporary doctrine attributes to it. The examination of the moral charac-

THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL II ter of individual action, furthermore, shows that all action is, at least potentially, immoral and that this immorality inherent in all human action is to a higher degree and more obviously present in political than in private action, owing to the particular conditions under which political action proceeds. The at least potential immorality of human action, regardless of the level on which it proceeds, becomes evident when we measure, not one action by another one (e. g. , the political by the private) but all actions by the intention in which they originate.

Such a comparison shows that our intentions are generally good, whereas our actions generally are not. As soon as we leave the realm of our thoughts and

aspirations, we are inevitably involved in sin and guilt. We want peace among nations and harmony among individuals, yet our actions end in conflict and war. We want to see all men free, but our actions put others in chains as others do to us. We believe in the equality of all men, yet our very demands on society make others unequal. Oedipus tries to obviate the oracle's prophecy of future crimes and by doing so makes the fulfilment of the prophecy inevitable.

Brutus' actions tend to preserve Roman liberty but bring about its destruction. Lincoln's purpose is to make all Americans free, yet his actions destroy the lives of many and make the freedom of others a legal fiction and an actual mockery. Hamlet, aware of this tragic tension between the ethics of our minds and the ethics of our actions, resolves to act only when he can act as ethically as his intention demands and thus despairs of acting at all; and, when he finally acts, his actions and fate are devoid of ethical meaning. He who acts," according to Goethe, "is always unjust; nobody is just but the one who reflects. " The very act of acting destroys our moral integrity. Whoever wants to retain his moral innocence must forsake action altogether and, following Hamlet's advice to Ophelia, " go to a nunnery. " Why is this so with respect to all actions, and particularly so with respect to political actions? First of all, the natural limitations of the human intellect make it impossible to calculate and control the results of human action.

Once the action is performed it becomes an independent force creating changes, provoking actions, and colliding with other forces, which the actor may or may not have foreseen and which he can control but to a small

degree. These factors, which, lying beyond human foresight and influence, we call "accidents," deflect the action from its intended goal and create evil results out of good intentions. "Our thoughts are ours; their ends none of our own." While, however, good intention is corrupted before it reaches its intended goal in the world of action, it may not even leave the world of thought without corruption.

The demands which life in society makes on our good intentions surpass our faculty to satisfy them all. While satisfying one, we must neglect the other, and the satisfaction of one may even imply the positive violation of another. Thus the incompatibility, in the light of our own limitations, of the demands which morality makes upon us compels us to choose between different equally legitimate demands. Whatever choice we make, we must do evil while we try to do good; for we must abandon one moral end in favor of another.

While -trying to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, we will at best strike a precarious balance which will ever waver between both, never completely satisfying either. In the extreme, we will abandon one completely in order to satisfy the other. The typical solution to himself. The person of the actor is solution, however, will be a compromise present in all intended and consummated which puts the struggle at rest without action. All action, on the other hand, putting conscience at ease. bears positively and negatively upon the same incompatibility of two conflicting others.

It does so in a positive sense when contradictory ethical demands, ending in the point of reference of the action in one of these three alternative solutions,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

tended or performedis another person, corruptsgood intentions on all levels of and most actions are naturally of this human actions. Loyalty to the nation kind. Yet even when the action as such comes into conflict with our duties to contains no positive referenceto another humanity. Even though most men will person, this very lack of reference conin our age resolve the conflict easily in nects the action with other persons.

For favor of the nation, the conflict is never- since the moraldemandsfor action which theless a real one, and there are more in- society addresses to the individual are dividuals than the war literature would never completely satisfied, an action let us suspect, who bear heavily under which has no referenceto anotherperson the dual duty to kill in the name of their appears, at least from the latter's point country and to respect in their fellow- of view, as a deprivation, the violation men the image of God. Punishment, of of a moral duty, and thus carries negachildren as well as of criminals, gives tive moral significance. ise to a similar moral conflict between If the connectedness of the self with the duty owed to all men to understand others through his action is inevitable, their weaknesses and to forgive rather the moral conflict between the self and than to judge them and the duty, owed others is no less inevitable. The individto a certain individualor a groupof indi- ual is under the moral obligation to be viduals, to protect them against infriynge- unselfish, that is, to consider the interment of their rights. By killing the killer, ests of others before his own or at least we fulfil the latter duty, while our con- besides his own.

Yet the demands which science keeps asking whether it was the poverty alone puts to our unselfishness killer alone who was guilty or whether are so overwhelming that any attempt his guilt was shared by the one whom he at even faintly approximating unselfish killed and perhaps by all other men as well would of necessity lead to the sacrifice. There is no end to examples of such face of the individual and would thus dissolve conflicts and of the consequent destroy his ability to contribute at least a corruption of good intentions. The certain share of unselfishness to the overdaughter perceives, like Desdemona, overwhelming demands of the world.

The at "a divided duty" between parents and tempt to do justice to the ethics of unhusband. The father must choose between selfishness thus leads to the paradox of between two children, the friend between the ethical obligation to be selfish in two friends, and, finally and above all, how to be able to satisfy the moral obligation a man must choose between himself and the duty of unselfishness at least to a certain others. It is here that the inevitability of evil extent. Hence unselfish (i. e. , good) action of evil becomes paramount. Action intended or performed can never be completely good (i. e. completely unselfish); for it can never completely transcend the limitations of selfishness emanates from himself and refers back to which it owes its existence. Even the THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL action which approximates complete goodness, yet falls short of self-sacrifice, partakes by this falling-short of evil. Once the very logic of the ethics of unselfishness has thus put its stamp of approval on selfishness, individual egotisms, all equally legitimate, confront each other, and the war of every man against every man is on.

There are two reasons why the egotism of one must come into conflict with the egotism of the others. What the one wants for himself, the other already possesses or wants too. Struggle and competition ensue. Finding that all his relations with his fellow-men contain at least the germs of such conflicts of interest, man can no longer seek the goodness of his intentions in the complete absence of selfishness and of the concomitant harm to others but only in the limitations which conscience puts upon the drive toward evil. Man cannot hope to be good but must be content with not being too evil.

The other root of conflict and concomitant evil stems from the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power. This lust for power manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one's own person with regard to others, to increase it, or to demonstrate it. In whatever disguises it may appear, its ultimate essence and aim is in one of these particular references of one person to others. Centered as it is upon the person of the actor in relation to others, the desire for power is closely related to the selfishness of which we have spoken but is not identical with it.

For the typical goals of selfishness, such as food, shelter, security, and the means by which they are obtained, such as money, jobs, marriage, and the like, have an objective relation to the vital needs of the individual; their attainment offers the best chances for survival under the particular natural and social conditions under which the individual lives. The desire for power, on the other hand, concerns itself not with the individual's survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured.

Consequently, the selfishness of man has limits; his will to power has none. For while man's vital needs are capable of satisfaction, his lust for power would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God. "I would," remarked Cecil Rhodes, "annex the planets if I could. I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and so far away." There is in selfishness an element of rationality presented by the natural limitation of the end, which is lacking in the will to power.

It is for this reason that mere selfishness can be appeased by concessions while satisfaction of one demand will stimulate the will to power to ever expanding claims. ". . . ' More! More! "' exclaims William Blake, "is the cry of a mistaken soul: less than all cannot satisfy man." In this limitless and ever unstilled desire which comes to rest only with the exhaustion of its possible objects, the animus dominandi is of the same kind as the mystical desire for union with the universe, the love of Don Juan, Faust's thirst for knowledge.

These four attempts at pushing the individual beyond his natural limits toward a transcendent goal have also this in common: that this transcendent goal, this resting point, is reached only in the imagination but never in reality. The attempt at realizing it in actual experience ends always with the destruction of the individual attempting it, as the fate of all world conquerors from Alexander to Hitler proves and as the legends of Icarus, Don Juan, and Faust symbolically illustrate. By setting in this way the desire for I4 ETHICS over apart from selfishness, on the one hand, and from the other

transcendent urges, on the other, one is already doing violence to the actual nature of that desire. For actually it is present whenever man intends to act with regard to other men. One may separate it conceptually from the other ingredients of social action; actually there is no social action which would not contain at least a trace of this desire to make one's own person prevail against others. It is this ubiquity of the desire for power which, besides and beyond any particular selfishness or other evilness of purpose, constitutes the ubiquity of evil in human action.

Here is the element of corruption and of sin which injects even into the best of intentions at least a drop of evil and thus spoils it. On a grand scale, the transformation of churches into political organizations, of revolutions into dictatorships, of love for country into imperialism, are cases in point. To the degree in which the essence and aim of politics is power over man, politics is evil; for it is to this degree that it degrades man to a means for other men. It follows that the prototype of this corruption through power is to be found on the political scene.

For here the animus dominandi is not a mere admixture to prevailing aims of a different kind but the very essence of the intention, the very lifeblood of the action, the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity. Politics is a struggle for power over men, and, whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal and the modes of acquiring, maintaining, and demonstrating it determine the technique of political action. The evil that corrupts political action is the same evil that corrupts all

action, but the corruption of political action is indeed the paradigm and prototype of all possible corruption.

The distinction between private and political action is not one between innocence and guilt, morality and immorality, goodness and evil, but lies in the degree alone in which the two types of action deviate from the ethical norm. Nor is the distinction of a normative character at all. To hold differently, as the school of the dual standard does, is to confound the moral obligations of man and his actual behavior with respect to these obligations. From the fact that the political acts of a person differ from his private ones, it does not follow that he recognizes different moral precepts in the different spheres of action.

There is not one kind of ethical precept applying to political action and another one for the private sphere, but one and the same ethical standard applies to both, observed and observable, however, by either with unequal compliance. That political action and doing evil are inevitably linked becomes fully clear only when we recognize that ethical standards are not only empirically violated on the political scene, and this to a particular degree, but that it is incompatible for an action at the same time to conform to the rules of the political art (i. e. , to achieve political success) and to conform to the rules of ethics (i. e. , to perform an action good in itself). The test of political success is the degree to which one is able to maintain, increase, or demonstrate one's power over others. The test of a morally good action is the degree to which it is capable of treating others not as means to the actor's ends but as ends in themselves. It is for this reason alone

inevitable that, whereas nonpolitical action is ever exposed to corruption by selfishness and lust for

THE EVIL OF POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF EVIL IS power, this corruption is inherent in the very nature of the political act. Only the greatest dissenters of the age have been clearly aware of this necessary evilness of the political act. A great nonliberal thinker writing in the liberal age, such as Lord Acton, will find that "power corrupts absolute power corrupts absolutely," or he will, like Jacob Burckhardt, see in politics the "absolute evil"; or, like Emerson, in force "a practical lie" and corruption in every state.

VIII The scope of this corruption, which, as such, is a permanent element of human existence and therefore operates regardless of historic circumstances everywhere and at all times, is broadened and its intensity strengthened by the particular conditions under which political action proceeds in the modern nation state. The state has become in the secular sphere the most exalted object of loyalty on the part of the individual and at the same time the most effective organization for the exercise of power over the individual.

These two qualities enable the modern state to accentuate the corruption of the political sphere both qualitatively and quantitatively. This is accomplished by two complementary processes. The state as the receptacle of the highest secular loyalty and power devaluates and actually delimits the manifestations of the individual desire for power. The individual power-hungry for his own sake is held in low public esteem, and the mores and laws of society endeavor to strengthen through positive sanctions the moral

<https://assignbuster.com/the-evil-of-politics-and-the-ethics-of-evil-assignment/>

condemnation of individual aspirations for power, to limit their modes and sphere of action, and to suppress them altogether.

Yet while the state is ideologically and physically incomparably more powerful than its citizens, it is free from all effective restraint from above. The state's collective desire for power is limited, aside from self-chosen limitations, only by the ruins of an old, and the rudiments of a new, normative order, both too feeble to offer more than a mere intimation of actual restraint. Above the state there is no centralized power, beyond the mechanics of the balance of power, which could impose actual limits upon the manifestations of its collective desire for domination.

The state has become indeed a "mortal God," and for an age that believes no longer in an immortal God, the state becomes the only God there is. Yet what the individual is not allowed to want for himself, he is encouraged to seek for the legal fiction called "the state." The impulses which both ethics and the state do not allow the individual to satisfy for his own sake are directed by the state itself toward its own ends. By transferring his egotism and power impulses to the nation, the individual gives his inhibited aspirations not only a vicarious satisfaction.

The process of transference transforms also the ethical significance of the satisfaction. What was egotism and hence ignoble and immoral there becomes patriotism and therefore noble and altruistic here. While society puts liabilities upon aspirations for individual power, it places contributions to the collective power of the state at the top of the hierarchy of values. All these factors work together to stimulate the individual's lust for power and to give

its manifestations a free reign, as long as the individual seeks power not for himself directly but for the state.

What occurs is thus in the last analysis not a suppression of power drives but a quantitative and qualitative extension coupled with a shift in ETHICS direction. That the extension is quantitative is obvious; for, put at the service of the state, the individual's animus dominandi has not only in imagination but in actuality the world as its object. That the extension is also qualitative is less obvious; yet it is the true appreciation of this qualitative element which opens our eyes to the subtlety and at the same time the immensity of the corruption wrought by the transference of the power impulses from the individual to the state. This corruption spreads in two different dimensions. While encouraging the diversion of the power drives from the individual to the state, the latter obscures the quantitative corruption which ensues from this diversion. Political ideologies blunt the individual conscience which tends to become oblivious to the corruption of power in the public sphere while still being conscious of its private manifestations.

The dual morality mentioned above, which justifies what is done for the power of the state but condemns it when it is done for the power of the individual, presents but the positive aspect and at the same time the logical consummation of this obliviousness. In the end the individual comes to believe that there is less evil in the aspirations for state power than there is in the lust for individual dominance, nay, that to the former attaches a peculiar virtue which is lacking in the latter.

Yet not all will experience such a complete reversal of ethical valuation, and even those who do will not do so without retaining at least some vestiges of moral scruples. Their consciences will still be uneasy in the presence of power impulses, and their moral misgivings will seek alleviation. Here is the scene of the ultimate moral corruption through power. For here it is not action that is corrupted or moral judgment which regards as good what it ought to consider evil.

What here takes place is a formidable perversion of the moral sense itself, an acquiescence in evil in the name of the very standards which ought to condemn it. An outstanding example of this blind and naive perversity of moral sense is the condemnation of power politics by most spokesmen of our civilization. There is indeed a point of view from which such condemnation could be intellectually and morally justified, that is, the Augustinian recognition of both the inevitability and evilness of the lust for power. Such is, however, not the position of these spokesmen.

They do not recognize the ubiquity of the lust for power and of its evilness but assume that the power element and its evilness are particularly attached to certain actions, situations, and institutions and that, by reforming or abolishing them, the moral problem of power would be solved. They fight a sham battle which they can never win, and it would not matter if they could. For in a world where power counts, no nation pursuing a rational policy has and a choice between renouncing wanting power, and, if it could, the lust for power for the individual's sake would still confront us with its less spectacular yet no less pressing moral defects.

This sham battle against power politics, however, gives our civilization at least the satisfaction of having paid tribute to its ethical standards and of being able to continue living as though those standards did not exist. It is easy to see why the greatest corruption through power coincides with the greatest shallowness of the attempts to explain this corruption away. Where the lust for power seizes upon the state as the vehicle on which to ride to hegemonial power among the nations, absolute corruption follows in the wake of this drive for absolute power. For here the use of all mankind as a means is not wished for in hapless imagination but worked for in actual performance. Only the greatest moral courage and intellectual penetration could comprehend the full measure of this corruption and still not destroy the faculty to live and act. Here the gulf between ethics and politics has become too wide and too inscrutable for the attempts by the perfectionists, the escapists, and the men of the dual standard at bridging it over and filling it in.

In the face of the evil of power approaching its consummation, it becomes necessary at least to recognize the existence of a problem presented by some kind of contradiction between political power and ethics. Yet, where the occasion calls for the comprehension of one of the great tragic antinomies of human existence, the age has nothing better to offer than a narrow and distorted formulation of the problem and a sentimental and irrelevant solution in the spirit of political reform.

Ix The lust for power as ubiquitous empirical fact and its denial as universal ethical norm are the two poles between which, as between the poles of an

electric field, this antinomy is suspended. The antinomy is insoluble because the poles creating it are perennial. There can be no renunciation of the ethical denial without renouncing the human nature of man. "We," Benedetto Croce quotes an Italian as saying to a German, "with our bad faith, at least keep the intellect lucid, and we remain bad men, but men: whereas you lose it altogether and become beasts." There can be no actual denial of the lust for power without denying the very conditions of human existence in this world. The end of Machiavellianism, which Jacques Maritain's too orderly and too progressive mind sees already in our grasp, is not just around the corner. It is not of this world at all. If it were, salvation from evil itself would be of this world. There is no escape from the evil of power regardless what one does. Whenever we act with reference to our fellowmen, we must sin and we must still sin when we refuse to act; for the refusal to be involved in the evil of action carries with it the breach of the obligation to do one's duty.

No ivory tower is remote enough to offer protection against the guilt in which the actor and the bystander, the oppressor and the oppressed, the murderer and his victim are inextricably enmeshed. Political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil. While it condemns politics as the domain of evil par excellence, it must reconcile itself to the enduring presence of evil in all political action. Its last resort, then, is the endeavor to choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil.

It is indeed trivial, in the face of so tragic a choice, to invoke justice against expediency and to condemn whatever political action is chosen because of its lack of justice. Such an attitude is but another example of the

superficiality of a civilization which, blind to the tragic complexities of human existence, contents itself with an unreal and hypocritical solution of the problem of political ethics. In fact, the invocation of justice pure and simple against a political action makes of justice a mockery and sham; for, since all political actions needs must fall short of justice, the argument against one political action holds true for all.

By avoiding a political action because it is unjust, the perfectionist does nothing but exchange blindly one injustice for another which might even be worse than the former. He shrinks from the lesser evil because he does not want to do evil at all. Yet his personal abstention from evil, which is actually a subtle form of egotism with a good conscience, does not at all affect the existence of evil in the world but only destroys the faculty of discriminating between different evils. The perfectionist thus becomes finally a source of greater evil. Man," in the words of Pascal, "is neither angel nor beast, and his misery is that he who would act the angel acts the brute." Here again it is only the awareness of the tragic presence of evil in all political action which at least enables man to choose the lesser evil and to be as good as he can be in an evil world. Neither science nor ethics nor politics can resolve the conflict between politics and ethics into harmony. We have no choice between power and the common good. To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom.

To know with despair that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgment. In the combination of political wisdom,

moral courage, and moral judgmentman reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny. That this conciliation is nothing more than a modusvivendi, uneasy, precarious, and even paradoxical, can disappoint only those who prefer to gloss over and distort the tragic contradictions of human existence with the soothing logic of a specious concord. UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO