

Senior Honors Thesis

**~ Convictions and Consequences ~**

What Is Max Weber's Political Ideal and is it a Sufficient  
Guide for Political Action

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## Introduction

It has never been more apparent that people are fundamentally fascinated by politicians. 24-hour television channels dedicated solely to politics make up only the most recent addition to newspapers, radio stations, and nonstop internet coverage; yet they have spawned numerous duplicates and massively influential demagogues. When Republicans failed to retake the Presidency in 2012, the story saturating media outlets had almost nothing to do with issues, and everything to do with the deterioration of the Republican political strategy. Americans eagerly consume the personal histories and agendas of politicians, and political commentary focuses just as much on the political calculations behind the actions of our leaders as it does on the actions themselves. There are core questions that underlie this fascination. Why do our politicians act the way they do? Is there a particular way they should act? In short, what do we deserve, and are we being cheated of it by our elected leaders?

The question of how should the politician act has persisted independent of regime, place, or time. It is the one that generates the most controversy, perhaps because it is so vitally important to politics as a whole. It matters not just to politicians, but also to the citizenry they represent. Max Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" seeks to answer this very question, however interpretations of what Weber regards as ideal are mixed. In this essay I look to answer two questions. First, what exactly is Weber's theory of the ideal politician? Second, is Weber's theory a good one, and is it a sufficient guide for political action? In what follows I will lay out what I believe to be Weber's theory of the ideal politician. Then, I will test this theory against what I think is a significant critique. Ultimately, it will become apparent that while Weber's theory is compelling, it is in some ways incomplete.

## **Part 1 - Weber's Politics as a Vocation**

In order to engage with Weber's theory at all, it is necessary to first outline what I perceive this theory to be. To do this it will be relevant to determine what it is that Weber defines as an *ethic of conviction* and an *ethic of responsibility*, and to what degree he prescribes each ethic to the ideal politician. Interpretation varies in the body of scholarly work done on both these levels. I will begin by drawing the framework from which Weber's two ethics emerge, and settling on an interpretation for each I believe is most supported by the text. I will then address the apparent contradiction within Weber's own work regarding which ethic (or combination of ethics) the ideal politician should subscribe to. The contradiction is made explicit in "Politics as a Vocation", and centers on whether Weber believes the two ethics to be compatible or not. The purpose of what follows is to resolve this contradiction and offer a robust account of the true nature of Weber's political theory. To inform this discussion I will reference the arguments put forward in two scholarly articles written by James Underwood and Bradley Starr.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, I will argue that Weber's ideal politician exhibits an ethic of responsibility instead of a combination of the two ethics.

### **I. The Framework of Discussion**

Weber begins "Politics as a Vocation" by setting the terms for his discussion. He notes that, "What will have to be completely ignored in the present talk will be all questions about the kind of politics that should be pursued, that is to say, the specific policies that *should* be adopted in the course of our political activities. For such matters have no connection with the general

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<sup>1</sup> Underwood and Starr deliver differing interpretations of the ideal politician, each of which relies on a slightly varied understanding of the ethics. Broadly, Underwood argues that the Weberian politician balances both ethics, while Starr interprets the ideal politician as focused on the ethic of responsibility. I draw from these two accounts because they represent the most common arguments advanced in the debate over what Weber takes to be the ideal politician with a vocation, and the two sides of the aforementioned contradiction in "Politics as a Vocation."

question of what politics is as a vocation and what it can mean” (Weber, 32). Weber’s use of the phrase ‘no connection’ may seem to suggest that a vocational politician need not identify with a moral framework, nor engage in ethical deliberation concerning such a framework. However, this is not the case. One of Weber’s essential qualities for the politician is that he is driven by a passionate dedication to a cause.<sup>2</sup> The cause is not one centered on vanity or power-lust,<sup>3</sup> but rather is a cause in the more traditional sense; that is to say, an actionable goal grounded in some ethical interpretation of justice and the ultimate good.<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of Weber’s argument, we are simply assuming that the politician has already identified with such a cause, not that its particular details are irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

An important implication of this is that to engage in politics as a vocation a politician need not necessarily come from a place of objective morality, he must only have a passionate dedication to a cause he has personally identified with. It is based on this understanding that Weber can separate his discussion of the vocational politician from any consideration of what constitutes an objectively ‘just’ or ‘moral’ cause. In the article “Politics as a Vocation, According to Aristotle,” David Morrison best illustrates this point by contrasting Weber’s political theory with those of the ancient Greeks and Stoic philosophers. He writes, “Weber the political sociologist describes as ‘political’ a life which is committed to the acquisition and exercise of political power for some purpose and in the name of some cause, whereas Aristotle the political

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<sup>2</sup> Passionate dedication to a cause is one of three qualities which Weber claims are “decisively important” for a politician. We will revisit these qualities later when we discuss the ideal politician.

<sup>3</sup> “[T]he politician is faced daily and hourly with the task of overcoming in himself a very trivial, all too human enemy: common or garden *vanity*, the deadly enemy of all dedication to a cause....” (Weber, 77).

<sup>4</sup> The evidence for this is apparent throughout the text. Weber directly rejects personal advancement as a cause in his description of vanity (see footnote 3), and submits various examples of causes one could serve (see footnote 5) which embody a dedication to the advancement of something one considers good or right. Ultimate dedication to a cause in itself implies a true ethical belief in that cause on the part of the politician.

philosopher defines the ‘political life’ ideally, as a life devoted to the promotion of the common good properly understood” (Morrison, 222). In Weber’s own words, “...this purpose, this service on behalf of a *cause*, cannot be dispensed with if action is to have any internal support. The *nature* of the cause in whose service the politician strives for power and makes use of power is a matter of belief” (Weber, 78).<sup>5</sup>

In sum, there are two limits Weber has set on the terms for discussion. First, a common or shared understanding of what constitutes the good (what Aristotle refers to as the good ‘properly understood’), is not a necessary prerequisite for the practice of politics as a vocation.<sup>6</sup> Second, politicians with a vocation must have a cause, and there is an entirely separate discussion, (distinct from what constitutes a just cause), to be had about what constitutes appropriate *action* in the ideal practice of politics once that cause has been established. This is the discussion that occupies Weber in “Politics as a Vocation.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. Politics and Politicians

Before Weber can discuss what it means to engage in politics as a vocation, he must define how anyone can expect to engage with politics at all. That is, he must put forth what constitutes the realm of the political.

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<sup>5</sup> Weber elaborates on the varied types of acceptable causes, “He may serve national or universally human goals, social and ethical goals, or goals that are cultural, worldly, or religious. He may be motivated by a powerful faith in ‘progress’...or he may coolly reject faith of this kind; he can claim to be acting in the service of an idea, or he may wish to reject such claims on principle and choose instead to promote external goals of ordinary life. But some belief or other must always be *present*” (Weber, 78).

<sup>6</sup> As above, the only thing necessary is identification with some cause.

<sup>7</sup> “Weber insists that the debate about the “vocation” of politics is ultimately a debate not about whether politics can or should be ethical, but rather about what kind of ethical framework is most appropriate to political life” (Starr, 408).

First, Weber notes that broadly speaking, the exercise of politics is the exercise of any kind of leadership activity.<sup>8</sup> For his purposes however, it is only necessary to consider, “...the leadership, or the exercise of influence on the leadership, of a *political* organization, in other words a *state*” (Weber, 32). Defined sociologically, the state is the communal body that, “...lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory” (Weber, 33). This definition captures the fact that the state, (including the administration and legislative authority of it), is based on the premise that it is the only source of legitimacy, (or right), when it comes to the use of physical violence. All its authority is in some way based on its right to enforce said authority, and any individual can only use violence in a capacity previously authorized by the state. Since we know that politics is the exercise of leadership activity, and a state is an entity that monopolizes the legitimate use of physical violence as a means of power, it follows that to engage in politics within the state means, “...to strive for a share of power or to influence the distribution of power, whether between states or between the groups of people contained within a state” (Weber, 33). In sum, the relationship inherent to the state is that of a group of people exercising leadership, (or power), over another group with the basis of their power grounded in the ability to commit violence without violating basic justice.

The nature of such a state is such that it is composed of many types of people who engage in politics. Weber’s final task is therefore to narrow his scope down to the specific type of politician who is the focus of the paper. We will remember that to engage in politics is to seek to influence the distribution of power, “between and within political structures” (Weber, 39). In a contemporary Western Democracy there are many ways of doing this, each associated with

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<sup>8</sup> “What do we mean by politics? The concept is extremely broad and includes every kind of independent leadership activity” (Weber, 32).

varying degrees of intensity and responsibility. For instance, we all engage in politics, at the very least, when we cast our votes in local or national elections. Surely this is an important process, but it is not subject to the same procedures and responsibilities of, for instance, a United States Senator. While the average voter is an “occasional politician,” the senator, who makes politics the “primary task of [his] life” (Weber, 39), is a full time politician and the subject of Weber’s discussion.

Finally, given the depth of power of the full-time politician over others, it is appropriate to ask what qualities a politician should have to be qualified to lead.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note here that we have not yet approached Weber’s discussion of what should guide the action of politicians. We only seek to understand the qualities a politician must have to have the ability to follow Weber’s advice regarding action. Weber goes out of his way to identify three “decisively important” qualities.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Three Essential Qualities for the Politician**

First and as we have already stated, a politician must have passionate dedication to a cause. As Weber puts it, “Passion in the sense of a *commitment to the matter in hand*” (Weber, 76).<sup>11</sup> Second, a politician must have a sense of *responsibility* to the cause he is passionate about, such that the cause, “is made the decisive guiding light of action” (Weber, 77). Taken together, these first two qualities ensure that passion for a cause is translated to commitment for the

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<sup>9</sup> Weber phrases the question as follows, “What qualities does [a politician] need to do justice to this power...and hence to the responsibility it imposes on him?” (Weber, 76).

<sup>10</sup> “We can say that three qualities, above all, are of decisive importance for a politician...” (Weber, 76).

<sup>11</sup> Weber is careful to distinguish his definition of passion, which is something to be felt at the core of one’s being and to be the guiding light of politics, and not the more technocratic idea of commitment to a cause. He argues, “...if politics is to be an authentic human activity and not just a frivolous intellectual game, commitment to it must be born of passion and be nourished by it.” (Weber, 77).



advancement of that cause in the mind of the politician. Third and finally, a politician must have a sense of *proportion*. This, in a sense, is the assumption of rationality, or rather the ability to act rationally, in the face of irrational impulses. In Weber's words, "[what is needed] is the ability to allow realities to impinge on you while maintaining an inner calm and composure... in short, a *distance* from people and things. For the heart of the problem is how to forge a unity between hot passion and a cool sense of proportion in one and the same person" (Weber, 77).

Once again, these qualities are simply are the prerequisites for the politician with a vocation. For example, if a politician cannot identify with a cause, than he cannot be expected to follow advice on how to best exercise politics with respect to a cause. To identify with a cause is therefore a necessary prerequisite for any full time politician who Weber seeks to advise. The same can be said for the other two qualities, (senses of responsibility and proportion). Weber consents that the question he is answering by framing these qualities is an ethical one, "For to ask what kind of a human being one must be to have the right to grasp the spokes of the wheel of history is to ask an ethical question." (Weber, 76). Considering this, although the qualities are fairly intuitive and noncontroversial one might be tempted to argue against Weber regarding their ethical necessity. However, such an argument would be besides the point. In defining these qualities, Weber is certainly making a normative statement about what gives someone the right to hold power, but really the primary function of this section is to identify what constitutes a vocational politician because the vocational politician is the intended audience for Weber's ultimate advice.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In his article on Lincoln as a Weberian politician James Underwood emphasizes the role of the three qualities as prerequisites for practicing Weber's ethics, "Weber seems to say that one cannot practice an ethic of responsibility without having these three qualities. The three qualities are passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion (Detachment)" (Underwood, 342).

In sum, we understand Weber to have framed his discussion around what should guide the actions of a politician, rather than which causes they should choose. We further understand that the politicians he aims to advise are full-time politicians engaging in politics as understood by Weber, and possessing three “decisively important” qualities that endow him with the ability to wield his power appropriately. Finally, we can move on to Weber’s account of what should shape the actions of a politician with a vocation.

### **III. Ethics of Conviction and Responsibility<sup>13</sup>**

How should a vocational politician, as understood by Weber, engage in politics? This is the fundamental normative question that Weber seeks to answer in “Politics as a Vocation” and the topic of this paper. It is of course, an ethical question and according to Weber, there are two possible ways by which a politician’s actions may be *ethically oriented*.<sup>14</sup>

The first way is termed by Weber as an *ethics of conviction*. Broadly defined, an ethics of conviction guides the action of the politician in the same way that a moral code such as the ten commandments would guide the actions of a Christian.<sup>15</sup> As Bradley Starr notes in his article in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, “The ethic of conviction recognizes a given hierarchy of values as the context for moral endeavor” (Starr, 407). A man operating under the ethics of conviction concerns himself solely with justly motivated action, and not with the outcome of such action. As Weber puts it, “With an ethics of conviction, one feels responsible only for ensuring that the

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<sup>13</sup> The purpose of this section is to provide a brief account of the structural features of the two ethics. The following sections will expand on this framework to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ethics, but these core identifiers are basically consistent regardless of interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> “*This* is the crucial point. We need to be clear that all ethically oriented action can be guided by two fundamentally different irredeemably incompatible maxims...” (Weber, 83).

<sup>15</sup> In fact in elucidating the ethics of conviction, Weber makes varied references to Christianity and discusses the ‘sermon on the mount’ at length.

flame of pure conviction...should never be extinguished” (Weber, 84). A simple example is the ethical belief that it is wrong to kill another human being. Regardless of circumstance, a man guided by this conviction will never kill on his own free will. Even if the consequence of not killing another were potentially catastrophic, (say, in the case of a terrorist who will certainly kill countless others if allowed to live), the man is only concerned with upholding this moral value (or conviction) which he holds paramount.

The second ethical maxim Weber defines is the *ethics of responsibility*. Where in the case of an ethics of conviction one is bound solely to do the morally correct action, if one guides one’s action by an ethics of responsibility one, “...must answer for the *foreseeable consequences* of [one’s] actions” (Weber, 83). A man guided by an ethics of responsibility acknowledges morality or ‘value obligations,’ but is not prepared to blindly follow an action performed out of pure conviction if that action has evil consequences.<sup>16</sup> According to Weber, someone practicing an ethic of responsibility, “...feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul” (Weber, 92).

Briefly then, Weber identifies two ethical maxims by which one might guide one’s actions. Someone guided by an ethics of conviction is purely concerned with doing what is just as predetermined by a set of values. On the other hand, someone guided by an ethics of responsibility recognizes tenets of morality but includes a concern for the consequences of his action, assigning himself a certain responsibility for these outcomes.

It remains for us to understand which ethic, or combination of ethics, Weber sees to be ideal for the vocational politician. In “The Structure of Max Weber’s Ethic of Responsibility,”

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<sup>16</sup> “The ethic of responsibility acknowledges value obligations, but assumes the absence of any given hierarchy of values and the inevitability of value conflict as the context for moral endeavor” (Starr, 407)

Bradley Starr argues that the two ethics are fundamentally incompatible, and further that Weber's ideal politician is guided by the ethic of responsibility. Conversely, in *Lincoln: "A Weberian Politician Meets the Constitution,"* James Underwood adopts the viewpoint that not only are the ethics compatible, but that it is Weber's argument that an ideal politician is guided by some combination of the two. In what follows I will begin by outlining the Underwood interpretation of Weber's ideal politician, and present evidence from the text that ultimately contradicts his argument. As we develop a more nuanced understanding of the ethics of conviction and responsibility it will become clear that Starr's interpretation is more consistent with the text of "Politics as a Vocation", and that it is Weber's view that the ethics are incompatible and a politician's actions should be guided by only the ethics of responsibility.

#### **IV. Underwood's Theory of the Ethics as Compatible**

Despite his initial characterization of the ethics as "fundamentally different" and "irredeemably incompatible,"<sup>17</sup> there is a point in "Politics as a Vocation" where Weber implies that there are ways of supplementing one of the ethics with the other. Indeed, the idea that morally valuable actions result in good consequences seems rather intuitive in some respects. This implication that the ethics can, and should, be exercised in unison is made in the closing section of "Politics as a Vocation". In concluding a description of the type of politician whom he would admire Weber notes, "...an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who *is capable* of having a 'vocation for politics'" (Weber, 92).

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<sup>17</sup> "This is the crucial point. We need to be clear that all ethically oriented action can be guided by either of two fundamentally different, irredeemably incompatible maxims: it can be guided by an ethics of conviction or an ethics of responsibility" (Weber, 83).

In “Lincoln: A Weberian Politician Meets the Constitution,” it is this statement on which James Underwood bases his understanding of Weber’s ethics.<sup>18</sup> He outlines two ways in which he interprets there to be a possible marriage between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility in the moral worldview of the politician. Then, he uses examples of Abraham Lincoln’s political career to provide what he perceives as historical examples of such marriage of the ethics. Ultimately, he finds Lincoln to be a prime example of Weber’s ideal politician, a politician who he claims would structure his political action around both ethics.

First, Underwood recognizes the importance of exercising an ethic of responsibility. He acknowledges that a politician with a vocation is not free to indulge in a pure ethics of conviction, and must be concerned with taking responsibility for his actions.<sup>19</sup> However, Underwood also interprets the fact that the politician must have a ‘cause’ as proof that ethics of responsibility cannot dominate decision-making. He explains, “...the politician may serve any one of a variety of worthwhile ends, but he cannot serve merely his own interest. Granting that a politician must have a cause would certainly appear to strongly shape one’s weighing of consequences and reinforce Weber’s point that he who has a genuine calling for politics must exercise in unison both political ethics” (Underwood, 345). When he remarks that an ethics of conviction “shapes” the weighting of consequences, Underwood is essentially asserting that an ethics of conviction strongly informs an ethics of responsibility. In other words, the ethics of conviction limits the extent to which the politician concerned with consequences pragmatically accumulates power, and maximizes the extent to which his actions serve his convictions.

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<sup>18</sup> Underwood refers to the ethics of conviction as the ‘ethics of ultimate ends.’ When quoting Underwood I will replace his terminology with ours in order to avoid confusion, but they both refer to the same idea.

<sup>19</sup> “But Weber’s ‘politician with a calling’ is not generally free to ignore the consequences of his acting in the political world, as could one who follows exclusively an ethic of conviction” (Underwood, 345).

Ultimately, Underwood seems to be saying that there can be no such thing as a meaningful cause without the ethics of conviction playing some role in decision making. Otherwise, the cause itself is inadequate and the politician purely and pragmatically concerned with power.

Second, Underwood argues that a politician cannot possibly foresee all consequences to all his potential actions.<sup>20</sup> When consequences of an action are reasonably unforeseeable, or when a politician is required to take a leap of faith so to speak, Underwood understands the ethics of conviction to play an even stronger role than it does in the weighing of consequences. Occasions in which it is impossible to exercise a pure ethic of responsibility because of unforeseeable consequences to action are, "... occasions when one has no choice but to take a stand regardless of consequences and 'do the right thing,' in other words, act in a way that is in accordance with one's convictions" (Underwood, 345). This is not necessarily to free the politician from responsibility, but rather to provide an alternative course of action which can be leaned on more heavily to the extent that information regarding consequences is unavailable or unclear.

These two arguments accomplish two things for Underwood. First, he presents ways in which he perceives Weber's two ethics can work together in theory, despite the aforementioned statements to the contrary in "Politics as a Vocation."<sup>21</sup> Second, in doing so he argues that Weber's later claim in support of the unison of the ethics is in fact the true indicator of his normative theory of political action.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "...one can never foresee, or control, all consequences" (Underwood, 345).

<sup>21</sup> As when Weber calls the ethics fundamentally different and irredeemably incompatible (see footnote 15).

<sup>22</sup> As a reminder, "In this sense an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is capable of having a vocation for politics" (Weber, 92).

To provide an example of what he sees as Weber's theory in action, Underwood characterizes Abraham Lincoln as exemplifying this ideal combination of Weber's ethics of conviction and responsibility.<sup>23</sup> He states, "In most instances, Lincoln acted in accordance with Weber's ethic of responsibility. Lincoln was acutely sensitive to consequences as is required of one who practices such an ethic. However, he successfully demonstrated in exceptional instances what Weber says a politician with a calling must also on occasion demonstrate, the ability to practice an ethics of [conviction]" (Underwood, 363).<sup>24</sup> For example, in July of 1863 Lincoln signed an order for the Union army to execute one Confederate prisoner for every black prisoner being executed by the Confederacy. Carrying out such an action would be an example of an ethic of responsibility, as the consequences, (preventing the indiscriminate slaughter of black prisoners), are desirable enough to outweigh the moral qualms of executing the Union army's own prisoners.<sup>25</sup> However, Lincoln instead ended up sticking to his convictions, and could not execute the order because his sense of right and wrong gave him an obligation to the 'innocent' prisoners. Through such examples, Underwood claims that not only is it possible and ideal for the politician to balance the two ethics in a way acceptable to Weber, but that it has in fact happened in recent history.

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<sup>23</sup> "Lincoln *could say* in effect, 'Here I stand' and rule out certain acts that in his words would prevent him from maintaining 'some standard of principle fixed within,' regardless of the likelihood that such acts would have good consequences, whether they be contributing to an electoral victory, saving the lives of black prisoners, or maintaining one's commitment to the specific duties and limitations imposed by the Constitution" (Underwood, 364).

<sup>24</sup> As we will find in the next section, Underwood is fatally unclear as to what these "exceptional instances" are according to Weber, and how they apply to his example of Lincoln.

<sup>25</sup> "Such a policy could of course be justified on the basis of its intended consequences, just as could the policy of executing deserters from the military, a policy Lincoln sometimes allowed to be carried out even though it caused him great personal pain. To consider such policies provides an excellent example of Weber's point that those who choose the role of politician must inevitably confront the question of using what he terms "morally dangerous means," means that would appall those who prefer to practice only an ethic of ultimate ends" (Underwood, 352).

## V. Underwood's Inconsistency With Weber

Underwood's thesis of compatible ethics fails to accurately reflect the spirit of "Politics as a Vocation" as a whole. To recap, Underwood's first point equates the ethic of conviction with the effect that the presence of a cause has on the weighing of consequences. In this way, he sees the ethic of conviction to be exercised in unison with the ethics of responsibility whenever a politician with a vocation considers consequences to an action.<sup>26</sup> Underwood's second point is based entirely on the notion that, "...one can never foresee, or control, all consequences" (Underwood, 345), and so therefore at some point one must act regardless of consequences, which is to say one must act with a pure ethics of conviction. Finally, his third point is that the Civil War Executive Order regarding reciprocal executions is a historical example that is consistent with some "exceptional scenario" in which case Weber would allow the politician to exercise a pure ethics of conviction.

In response to Underwood's first point, his mistake is blurring the line between the ethic of conviction and the nature of a 'cause' as put forth by Weber. Underwood takes the politician to be exercising the ethic of conviction to some extent whenever his cause informs the weighing of possible consequences of an action. However, the presence of a cause that functions as a, "...decisive guiding light of action" (Weber, 77), is actually quite separate from an ethics of conviction. In fact, in order to practice an ethics of conviction at all one must already have a predetermined cause. It is the sense of *responsibility* towards that cause that allows the politician

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<sup>26</sup> "Granting that a politician must have a cause would certainly appear to strongly shape one's weighing of consequences and reinforce Weber's point that he who has a genuine calling for politics must exercise in unison both political ethics" (Underwood, 345).



to assign meaningful moral weights to the consequences of action.<sup>27</sup> Therefore the weighing of consequences with respect to a guiding cause is not an example of ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility working in tandem. Rather, it is simply the exercise of an ethics of responsibility, which accounts on its own for the importance of a cause.

Underwood's second point assumes that there exists some degree of uncertainty regarding consequences, (the limit of which remains unclear), where one is justified in falling back entirely on an ethic of convictions. In other words, where one is acting only on convictions and without regard to consequence. However Underwood never fully explains how unsure one has to be, and about what percentage of possible consequences of an action. More importantly however, nowhere in "Politics as a Vocation" does Weber release the politician from a duty to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. It stands to reason then, that even if a politician foresaw only one consequence to his action, and that consequence with a high degree of uncertainty, that according to Weber the politician would still have to weigh that consequence in his mind before exercising action. That is to say, he would have to practice an ethic of responsibility and not an ethic of conviction. Since there is no scenario where a politician can be absolutely ignorant of consequences, (after all every action at the very least has some intended consequence, no matter how improbable), Weber would not justify abandoning an ethic of responsibility before taking an action no matter how uncertain the outcome.

Finally, Underwood's claim that Lincoln's action regarding reciprocal prisoner executions exemplifies some "exceptional scenario" in which Weber would justify falling back on an ethic of conviction is baseless. To start, what sort of "exceptional scenario" this is is unclear, since the

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<sup>27</sup> See section II on Politics and Politicians, where Weber's qualities of passion, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of proportion are outlined as fundamental prerequisites for the vocational politician to even begin to consider an ethic of conviction or responsibility.

consequences are fairly straightforward and so do not fall under the umbrella of Underwood's 'unpredictability of consequences' scenario. So if we take this action as is, we will actually find that first it is not an example of the ethics working in unison, as one ethic is substituted for, and directly contradicts, the other. Second, there is no indication whatsoever that Weber would condone the actions of Lincoln in this scenario. He is more likely to criticize Lincoln's ability to stick to an ethic's of responsibility, and comment on his lack of fortitude for being unable to implement, "morally dubious means" (Weber, 84).

So, Underwood's account of a possible unison between the ethics of conviction and responsibility is inconsistent with Weber.

## **VI. Weber Views His Ethics As Incompatible**

A close reading of "Politics as a Vocation" leads to the conclusion that to Weber the ethics are in fact incompatible, and that the ideal politician practices only an ethic of responsibility. In rejecting Underwood's arguments, we have already touched on some of this textual evidence. In what follows I will complete the argument by explaining how Weber's text leads us overwhelmingly to this conclusion.<sup>28</sup>

It is a given, as we have already seen, that the politician with a vocation is dedicated to service on behalf of a cause. But the reality of politics is murkier than a superficial interpretation of this fact might suggest. Indeed, the result of political activity often fails to do justice to the original motivating cause, and in reality values conflict and obstacles must be overcome in

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<sup>28</sup> As a quick but important reminder, the following section will deal only with proving what is Weber's view, and will not yet dissect his theory with the agenda of finding it valuable by our own standards. Part II of the paper will delve more deeply into what exactly makes the ethic of responsibility valuable to us.

morally dubious ways.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, if politics is to have any meaning at all, dedication to a cause must always have a place in political activity.<sup>30</sup> The conflict then, is how can a politician structure his actions such that a cause is best served? As Weber puts it, “At this point we find ourselves caught up in a conflict of ultimate worldviews, and it falls to us to *choose* between them” (Weber, 79). Here we are told with absolute clarity that there is no combining worldviews, that the individual must choose between them. These ultimate worldviews between which a politician must choose are of course the ethics of responsibility and conviction, and for almost the entirety of “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber presents them as “...fundamentally different, irredeemably incompatible maxims” (Weber, 83).

In his article on “The Structure of Max Weber’s Ethic of Responsibility”, Bradley Starr advances this viewpoint. He notes, “Max Weber’s distinction in “Politics as a Vocation” between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility is best understood as a distinction between mutually exclusive ethical worldviews” (Starr, 407). With the exception of the one statement in which Weber calls the ethics “complementary” (Weber, 92), the rest of “Politics as a Vocation” maintains this understanding of the ethics as mutually exclusive. As if to reemphasize this view, which stems from the “irredeemably incompatible maxims” quote on page 83, Weber states, “It is not possible to reconcile an ethics of conviction with an ethics of responsibility or to decree which end can justify which means, if indeed you wish to make any concessions to this principle at all” (Weber, 86). And yet even this isn’t the end of the evidence we can point to that shows

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<sup>29</sup> “No ethic in the world can ignore the fact that in many cases the achievement of ‘good ends’ is inseparable from the use of morally dubious or at least dangerous means and that we cannot escape the possibility or even probability of evil side effects” (Weber, 84).

<sup>30</sup> “It is entirely true and a fundamental fact of all history...that the ultimate product of political activity frequently, indeed, as a matter of course, fails utterly to do justice to its original purpose and may even be a travesty of it. Nevertheless, this purpose, the service on behalf of a *cause*, cannot be dispensed with if action is to have any internal support” (Weber, 78).

Weber considers the ethics as incompatible. Once again and in equally unambiguous terms Weber proclaims, “[T]here is a profound abyss between acting in accordance with the maxim governing an ethics of conviction and acting in tune with an ethics of responsibility” (Weber, 83). It is therefore abundantly clear that, from the beginning of his argument and then throughout the text, Weber defines the ethics as mutually exclusive worldviews and as such believes we must choose only one to become the guiding light in all of our actions.

In addition, Weber’s clear preference for the ethic of responsibility over the ethic of conviction reinforces the view that the politician must choose between them. To begin, Weber notes that we cannot dispute the fact that there are scenarios in the real world in which morally dubious means must be employed in order to achieve desirable ends.<sup>31</sup> The reality of this realization brings with it the primary problem with acting solely in accordance with an ethics of conviction; or as Weber puts it, “...the inevitable failure of an ethics of conviction in general” (Weber, 85). When a period of crisis comes, for instance the reciprocal execution policy instituted (but not followed through) by Lincoln during the Civil War, practicing an ethics of conviction actively interferes with achieving a desirable end. In a world where the reality is that one must ‘get one’s hands dirty’, the only true effect of an ethics of conviction is to, “...*repudiate every action that makes use of morally suspect means*” (Weber, 85). In short, Weber argues that, “The man who embraces an ethics of conviction is unable to tolerate the ethical irrationality of the world” (Weber, 85).

In conjunction with rejecting the theoretical value of exercising an absolute ethics of conviction, Weber also goes so far as to diminish the sincerity of politicians who claim to do so.

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<sup>31</sup> “No ethic in the world can ignore the fact that in many cases the achievement of “good” ends is inseparable from the use of morally dubious or at least dangerous means and that we cannot escape the possibility or even probability of evil side effects” (Weber, 84).

“Conviction Politicians” declare, “The responsibility for the consequences cannot be laid at my door but must rest with those who employ me and whose stupidity or nastiness I shall do away with” (Weber, 92). Weber wonders how much inner gravity underlies these types of statement, which reject responsibility and some kind of ethical transcendence among the real consequences of their actions. He concludes that there is not very much.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, Weber applauds the strength of character necessary to embrace an ethic of responsibility. For Weber, the ethic of responsibility is the only viable answer to the ethical irrationality of the world. He notes, “With the ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, a man reckons with exactly those average human failings...he has absolutely no right to assume human-kind’s goodness and perfection. He does not feel that he is in a position to shift the consequences of his actions, where they are foreseeable, onto others. He will say, ‘These consequences are to be ascribed to my actions’” (Weber, 84).<sup>33</sup> Further in the text, Weber even goes so far as to interject a personal, sentimental approval of the individual acting under an ethic of responsibility, “By the same token, I find it immeasurably moving when a *mature* human being - whether young or old in actual years is immaterial - who feel the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches the point where he says, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’” (Weber, 92).

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<sup>32</sup> “And if this happens, I shall say openly that I would begin by asking how much *inner gravity* lies behind this ethics of conviction, and I suspect I should come to the conclusion that in nine cases out of ten I was dealing with windbags who do not genuinely feel what they are taking on themselves but who are making themselves drunk on romantic sensations. Humanly, this is of little interest, and it fails utterly to shake my own convictions” (Weber, 92).

<sup>33</sup> The idea of the Ethic of Responsibility as the answer to the reality of moral dilemmas in everyday life will be explored in Part 2 of the paper, when we look towards what is the true value of the ethic of responsibility.

All in all, the vast majority of textual evidence in “Politics as a Vocation” supports the conclusion that Weber did not consider his ethics to be compatible, and preferred that the ideal politician practice only an ethic of responsibility.

## **VII. Resolving Weber’s Contradiction**

It should at this point be fairly obvious that Weber does not consider the ethics of conviction and responsibility to be compatible, and that he prefers the politician exercise an ethic of responsibility. Underwood’s attempts at arguing for compatibility fall flat, and the majority of textual evidence indicates that Weber views the ethics of conviction and responsibility to be incompatible. How then, can we account for the statement, “...an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is capable of have a vocation for politics” (Weber, 92)?

To understand this claim, we must look at the context in which it is being made. This statement comes at the culmination of a paragraph in which Weber describes the man whose ethical path of action he finds very moving. As we have already mentioned, this is a man who, “...[having acted] in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches a point where he says, “Here I stand, I can do no other”” (Weber, 92). This man feels the responsibility for the potential consequences of his actions, and takes that responsibility squarely on his own shoulders. In other words, he acts in accordance with an ethic of responsibility. Even in the paragraph in which it is mentioned then, the claim that the two ethics are not absolute antitheses makes no sense, as Weber has done nothing to indicate that it should be true.

I would propose that Weber is not, in fact, meaning to suggest that the ethics *themselves* are complementary, but that some quality of the two ethics is a shared and valuable one. When Weber writes, “*in this sense* an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses” (Weber, 92), he is qualifying his statement with the phrase ‘in this sense’ in order to avoid this exact contradiction. What does it refer to instead? Weber describes the sentiment ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’ as “authentically human” and moving because it represents a situation that may befall any person at any point.<sup>34</sup> The above statement starting with “in this sense” immediately follows that assertion that at some point every human being will be put in a position where he will be challenged to take some action such that he will be justified in saying “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

The ‘sense’ in which the two ethics are complementary then, is that when the human being is tested, he must have the emotional capacity to *stand* for something, or in other words to take action that is rooted in the ultimate dedication to some cause. To come from a place of conviction is to stand for some moral ideal with completeness in the face of challenging circumstances. To come from a place of responsibility is to comprehend one’s convictions but bear an absolute responsibility for consequences in this same circumstance. Each individual takes a stand rooted to some extent in passion for a moral cause. While the ethic of responsibility should be the ultimate guide for action, a person must be capable of exercising both ethics, capable of devoting his whole moral being to an action. This is the sense in which the ethics can be seen as “mutually complementary.”

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<sup>34</sup> “This is authentically human and cannot fail to move us. For this is a situation that *may* befall *any* of us at some point, if we are not inwardly dead” (Weber, 92).

Admittedly, this is only one interpretation of what is a frustratingly ambiguous and highly contested section of “Politics as a Vocation.”<sup>35</sup> However, the fact that the entirety of the essay is in contradiction with this single statement is a likely indicator that Weber’s true conception of the ideal politician regards the ethics themselves as entirely separate worldviews. So while there may be viable interpretations of this section other than the one I put forth, the argument that this particular statement proves Weber finds the two ethics to be compatible, and suggests they be taken together, is almost certainly not one of them.

### **VIII. Wrap Up**

To conclude Part 1, in “Politics as a Vocation” Max Weber sets out to identify the ideal ethical worldview for the full time politician with a vocation. This politician already subscribes to a cause, has a sense of responsibility, and a sense of proportion. Weber outlines what he perceives to be two mutually exclusive worldviews, (the ethics of conviction and responsibility), from which this politician might choose to guide his action. When practicing the ethics of conviction the individual separates himself from consequences and focuses on taking the most morally correct action, while when practicing the ethic of responsibility he assumes the weight of the consequences of his actions on his soul.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, Weber’s ideal politician is one who is able to absolutely embrace the ethic of responsibility as the guiding light of action.

## **Part 2 - The Problem With Dirty Hands**

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<sup>35</sup> In section 5 of “The Structure of Max Weber’s Ethic of Responsibility,” Bradley Starr submits his own interpretation, which links in Weber’s theories of value rationality and instrumental rationality, which I will not go into due to its complexity.

<sup>36</sup> We will briefly address what it means to do so in the next section.



It has been made clear so far what the two ethics are, what the framework is in which they are to be considered, and which Weber prefers. We know that Weber finds it “immeasurably moving” when a mature human being accepts responsibility for the consequences of his action in the spirit of an ethic of responsibility. But the question remains, why does Weber find it so immeasurably moving? In other words, what makes the ethic of responsibility inherently good, or pragmatically useful?

In what follows I will outline my interpretation of why the ethic of responsibility is useful, and ultimately the best universal guide to political action. I will then present two potential critiques of the absolute application of the ethic of responsibility, using the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent during World War II as a historical illustration of these critiques. Finally, I will examine whether or not the two problems with the ethic of responsibility can be resolved, or if they are simply necessary evils and that an ethic of responsibility universally applied is the best guide to political action.

### **I. The Value of the Ethic of Responsibility**

Much of the usefulness of the ethic of responsibility lies in Weber’s claim that it addresses the inability of the ethic of conviction to handle certain moral, (especially in the realm of the political), realities. There is an overarching theme in “Politics as a Vocation” that it is impossible, especially for the politician, to go through life without encountering some moral dilemma. By moral dilemma we mean a situation in which one’s own personal convictions about right and wrong are tested by some choice in which, for example, one must commit some minor evil in order to achieve a greater good, or perhaps to avoid an even greater evil.<sup>37</sup> Weber entirely

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<sup>37</sup> “No ethic in the world can ignore the fact that in many cases the achievement of ‘good’ ends is inseparable from the use of morally dubious or at least dangerous means and that we cannot escape the possibility or even probability of evil side effects” (Weber, 84).

dismisses the idea that only good results comes from good actions and evil results from evil ones.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, we'll remember that the very foundation of politics itself is rooted in the legitimate use of force to accomplish some end, which at the very least automatically runs up against some very basic historical ethical frameworks (particularly religious ones). In his article on the ethic of responsibility, Bradley Starr captures the central dilemma here perfectly; "This world, then, is permeated with values that obligate human beings, but these values are loosened from any mooring in an overarching hierarchy. Hence, moral seriousness is characterized by inevitable struggle, and it has a tragic dimension that cannot be eradicated" (Starr, 425). In his article "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," Michael Walzer delivers an interpretation of Weber's ethical worldview that is entirely consistent with Starr's analysis, calling Weber's politician with a vocation a 'tragic hero' because he is expected to act despite the irreconcilable conflict endemic to many moral calculations.<sup>39</sup> In short, these moral dilemmas are an unavoidable, and thus tragic, part of the human condition and it falls to us to identify an ethical maxim which addresses them most satisfactorily.<sup>40</sup> And to restate for the point of clarity, the existence of moral dilemmas *are not* dependent on an objective framework of morals outside of

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<sup>38</sup> "It follows that as far as a person's actions are concerned, it is not true that nothing but good comes from good and nothing but evil from evil, but rather quite frequently the opposite is the case. Anyone who does not realize this is in fact a mere child in political matters" (Weber, 86).

<sup>39</sup> "For Weber, the good man with dirty hands is a hero still, but he is a tragic hero. In part, his tragedy is that though politics is his vocation, he has not been called by God and so cannot be justified by him. Weber's hero is alone in a world that seems to belong to Satan, and his vocation is entirely his own choice. He still wants what Christian magistrates have always wanted, both to do good in the world and to save his soul, but now these two ends have come in sharp contradiction" (Walzer, 176).

<sup>40</sup> Although certain ethical theories, such as Kantian ethics as represented in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* reject the fact that there is such a thing as an ethical dilemma, we are satisfied to be operating under Weber's framework, especially because in real life it certainly is very applicable to politicians, regardless of whether or not Kant is correct in a purely theoretical respect. Further, politicians are sworn to respect certain duties, and so ethical obligations outside of what Kant perceives as an objective reality must be dealt with in real life. So we will assume, and not without substantial theoretical and practical evidence, that moral dilemmas exist, or at the very least could possibly exist. The purpose of our argument is to find what are the best ways to deal with them.

the politician's own personal moral convictions. To maintain subjective moral convictions is just as much to hold oneself prisoner to moral dilemma as if one subscribed to some objective moral theory, as value conflict is inevitable either way. The point of this paper and Weber's work as a whole remains to address any moral dilemma that arises in real life out of the subjective, predetermined, and ultimately conflicting convictions of the politician.<sup>41</sup>

When the prospect of irreconcilable moral conflict is taken as inevitable, it is just as inevitable that we dismiss the value of the ethics of conviction as a sole guiding light of action. As Weber notes, in order to achieve good ends the politician must at some point get his hands dirty, or in Weber's words engage in "morally dubious" actions. The problem is, the ethic of conviction concerns itself solely with justifying only strictly moral actions.<sup>42</sup> If applied universally then, the ethics of conviction only has one plausible result, and that is, "...to repudiate every action that makes use of morally suspect means" (Weber, 85), or in other words to eliminate the possibility of dirty hands. This, as Weber says, "...is the inevitable failure of an ethics of conviction" (Weber, 85). But we have outlined this particular criticism before in section VI of Part 1, so I will not spend any more time restating it.

What concerns us now, then, is how exactly does the exercise of an ethic of responsibility meaningfully address this particular moral dilemma. In section VI of Part 1 we have explained that Weber prefers, and is even moved, by the ethic of responsibility; however apart from that we have yet to mount a robust account of the value of the ethic of responsibility beyond the superficially admirable notion that one takes responsibility for the consequences of one's actions.

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<sup>41</sup> Inevitable moral conflict was a cornerstone of Weber's philosophical work. As his wife Marianne Weber puts it in her biographical exploration of her husband's life, "...on its earthly course an idea always and everywhere operates in opposition to its original meaning and thereby destroys itself" (Weber 1975, 337).

<sup>42</sup> "With an ethics of conviction, one feels 'responsible' only for ensuring that the flame of pure conviction, for example, the flame of protest against the injustice of the social order, should never be extinguished" (Weber, 84).

After all according to Weber, “With the ethics of responsibility...a man reckons with exactly those average human failings” (Weber, 84). So wherein lies this reckoning?

The value is certainly not that the ethic of responsibility allows us to calculate what ends can justify what means in a way that absolutely resolves the underlying moral conflict. As Weber states, “...no ethic in the world can say when, and to what extent, the ethically good end can (justify) the ethically dangerous means and its side effects” (Weber, 84). Rather, the value of the ethic of responsibility seems to be twofold.

First, in the case where there exists only a choice between two morally dubious actions or where the politician must get his hands dirty in order to accomplish some good,<sup>43</sup> it has the pragmatic value of releasing the politician from the potential of moral paralysis and giving him recourse to act. It does so by allowing the politician to weigh foundational ethical spheres of value, (the ethical worldviews that make up conviction), against pragmatic, real life goals and benefits in such a way that he might make the best possible decision considering the circumstances. In his book Liberalism and the Origins of European Social Theory, Steven Seidman explains, “In a differentiated order, the tensions and conflicts between individual spheres and competing powers enhance freedom and movement by protecting the individual from absolute control by one institutional sphere or power” (Seidman, 226).<sup>44</sup> Put most simply, the politician is freed by the ethic of responsibility to, (for example in the aforementioned

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<sup>43</sup> These are the primary forms of moral dilemma that we deal with. Essentially they revolve either around avoiding some greater evil by exercising lesser evils, or accomplishing some greater good by exercising these evils.

<sup>44</sup> I will not go into the process of weighing these spheres of value against each other, because for the purpose of our argument it is not the degree of valuation that we are concerned with necessarily. This degree will vary from person to person and depends on interpretation of the details of the matter at hand. What matters is only that this particular weighing, which introduces the importance of results instead of just primary actions, is able to exist. As Starr puts it, “The areas of institutional conflict between spheres of value and internal institutional rationalities are to be regulated, within the ethic of responsibility, just as the basic conflict of subjective social-action rationalities is regulated in the ethical sphere: *by allowing them to provide limits upon each other*” (Starr, 425).

instance of reciprocal executions during the civil war), assign moral weight to the pragmatic value of saving the lives of captured soldiers from the Union Army, and by measuring this weight against the apparent ethical cost of killing innocent Confederate prisoners take the best possible action he can, even if that action is contrary to some basic conviction. In this sense, the ethic of responsibility is pragmatically very useful.

Second and more importantly however, in recognizing means as morally dubious and accepting responsibility for the consequences of those means, the ethic of responsibility solves the problem of necessary morally dubious political action without necessarily resolving absolutely the underlying ethical dilemma. Weber says, “What matters is the trained ability to scrutinize the realities of life ruthlessly, to withstand them and to measure up to them inwardly” (Weber, 91). In other words the ethical dilemma of action will exist, and the solution, if there is one, will be unknown. This state of being, as Weber puts it, is “authentically human” in that no one is exempt from it.<sup>45</sup> But the ethic of responsibility allows us to *withstand* this reality, and deals with the moral ramifications by requiring us to *measure up inwardly*. We do not ignore the moral question at hand, but because we cannot resolve it we must act with the best intentions and accept the weight of the moral burden on our souls. As Bradley Starr puts it, “In such a world, values alone are insufficient to guide us, and yet we cannot become ethical personalities without devotion to values. The ethic of responsibility is Weber’s answer to this problem. In his view, it is necessary that human beings make clear to themselves what is required for moral seriousness in this context. The undertone is unquestionably tragic” (Starr, 430-1). In fact this is really the only reason the we are allowed to weight spheres of value against each other and thus

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<sup>45</sup> “This is authentically human and cannot fail to move us. For this is a situation that *may* befall *any* of us at some point, if we are not inwardly dead” (Weber, 92).

avoid moral paralysis as mentioned in the first benefit. The “weighting” of spheres of value doesn’t strictly solve the problem of morally dubious action, it is only in the act of accepting responsibility that we have any recourse at all in best justifying our action. Although we don’t resolve the ethical conundrum, we address it to the best of our ability by “measuring up inwardly” to the reality of our actions.

But what does it really mean to, “...feel the responsibility [one] bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul” (Weber, 92)? Is this really the most we can measure up inwardly to the problem of dirty hands? Weber is never explicitly clear as to what it means to feel the responsibility for one’s actions on one’s soul, but perhaps it would be unfair to expect him to be. After all, how could one possibly create a checklist of steps that captures the process of feeling responsibility, (something incredibly abstract), on one’s soul (something incredibly intangible)? I think it is enough to take the sentiment at face value. That is, to understand that accepting the weight of responsibility “on one’s soul” represents the greatest possible degree of emotional attachment to a decision and the consequences of that decision. We must tie our very being to these consequences, and take each decision with moral seriousness equal to that which we would feel if we were deciding on an action that would effect someone who is most dear to us.<sup>46</sup> We must have the greatest personal stake possible. If we accomplish this, we do indeed measure up inwardly to the reality of our actions with the proper degree of moral seriousness.

In short, this is the real value of applying the ethic of responsibility to political action. There will always exist moral dilemmas that require the politician to get his hands dirty. When

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed, fewer decisions to go to war might be made if politicians committed their sons and daughters to the war effort.

faced with this reality, *the most we can do* is require that the politician assume the weight of the consequences of his actions on his soul. This has the *ethical* effect of making those actions as “morally serious” (Starr) as possible, and the *pragmatic* effect of allowing politicians to engage in morally dubious action when they deem it necessary to fulfill some duty, or accomplish some beneficial end.

## **II. Dirty Hands and Executive Order 9066**

Before we outline potential criticisms of exercising an ethic of responsibility as the sole guide of political action, it will be helpful to illustrate an example of the ethic of responsibility from history. While the ethic of responsibility will be fully exercised as defined by Weber in the following example, (and therefore maintain its intended benefits as outlined in the previous section), some key areas for concern will become clear and our criticisms will arise from these areas.

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 Imperial Japan executed a surprise attack on an United States Naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The next day, the U.S Congress declared war on Japan. In the months that followed anti-Japanese sentiment escalated quickly in the country as a whole but especially on the West Coast, where the majority of Japanese-Americans and Japanese immigrants had settled. Fear that the Japanese in America were loyal not to the U.S but to their homeland manifested on both official and unofficial levels. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, an official report prepared by a commission established by Congress called the “Roberts Report,” suggested that the Japanese consulate in Hawaii had been the center of intelligence activity prior to the bombing, and exacerbated rumors of Japanese disloyalty among the public in

addition to influencing the subsequent decisions of War Department officials.<sup>47</sup> General John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command and an influential advisor to the President was quoted saying, “[There are] approximately 288,000 enemy aliens which we have to watch and I have little confidence that the enemy aliens are law-abiding or loyal in any sense of the word...Particularly the Japanese. I have no confidence in their loyalty whatsoever” (Ng, 16). The escalation of anti-japanese sentiment and the failure of significant individuals such as Attorney General Francis Biddle and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to provide any meaningful resistance to the evacuation of Japanese citizens culminated in President Roosevelt issuing Executive Order 9066 in February of 1942. The Executive Order authorized the Secretary of War to prescribe certain areas as military zones and cleared the way for the beginnings of Japanese-American internment camps.

The Executive Order was worded as follows, “I [President Roosevelt] hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of war...whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion” (Transcript of Executive Order 9066).<sup>48</sup> While the order didn’t mention Japanese Americans by name, the effect was very much intended to give the military power to

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<sup>47</sup> “Although there seemed to be no direct implication of Japanese American spying, the Roberts Report helped to support rumors of disloyalty among the Japanese in Hawaii and by extension, further doubts about the loyalty of mainland Japanese. Thus, it was likely to have influenced War Department officials in their quest to evacuate and exclude the Japanese population from the West Coast of the United States” (Ng, 16).

<sup>48</sup> United States Federal Government. "Transcript of Executive Order 9066: Resulting in the Relocation of Japanese (1942)." Our Documents. <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=74&page=transcript> (accessed April 21, 2013).



remove Japanese aliens and citizens as they saw fit.<sup>49</sup> Roosevelt was informed by his advisors and, having full awareness of the situation, determined it necessary to sign the order so as to ensure what he felt was useful for the future protection of the country during a time of war. As historian Roger Daniels notes in reference to the final evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans, “The leader of the nation, was, in the final analysis, responsible. It was Franklin Roosevelt, who in one short telephone call, passed the decision-making power to two men who had never been elected to any office, saying only, with the politician’s charm and equivocation: ‘Be as reasonable as you can’” (Daniels, 72).

And so as a direct effect of Executive Order 9066, thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent were placed in internment camps. Shortly after the order, Japanese American citizens were banned from the western portion of Washington, Oregon, California, and the southern half of Arizona, as well as portions of all other states (Ng, 21). After initial ‘voluntary’ evacuation proved inefficient, the government began the forceful evacuation of Japanese-Americans from these military zones and into internment camps of various kinds. In March of 1942 roughly 70,000 U.S citizens of Japanese descent were evacuated to assembly centers where they would remain for an average of 100 days (Ng, 32). Families were told what property they could bring and what they had to leave, and many families were forced to sell personal property or otherwise leave it abandoned. The evacuees were allowed only two suitcases per person, barely anything considering the uncertainty their future held. Evacuees were registered prior to entry of the assembly center, and allotted 200 square feet per couple and minimal amenities, although the reality was that in addition to shortages of supply, “[assembly centers] were not

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<sup>49</sup> “The effect of the order gave power to the military to remove Japanese aliens and citizens according to their needs” (Ng, 18).

meant to be inhabited by humans” (Ng, 34). Walls of pine wood covered with tar paper provided little to no insulation even in some of the more habitable camps, and other camps were often hastily converted horse stables or similar constructions. Protection from the elements was scarce, rations few, and space extremely limited as it was not uncommon for large families to share a 20ft by 20ft room, or even for families of four to live in an 8ft by 20ft room (Ng, 35). In April of 1943, an elderly resident at an internment camp in Topaz was shot and killed when as he approached the outer fences of the camp compound because the guard on duty believed he was trying to escape (Ng, 45).

These were the morally dubious *means* of President Roosevelt, with the stated ends of protecting the country, “...against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities” (Executive Order 9066). The President himself could not have known the true extent of counter-espionage the order would provide, and so to a great extent the potential consequences of his action were uncertain. So did the process of internment actually accomplish any of these goals? Regretfully for the President, they did not. The reality turned out to be that the evacuation of Japanese-Americans in fact had a minimal, to the point of negligible, benefit on counter-espionage during the War, especially considering the enormous costs (both financial and ethical) of the process itself. In 1980, almost forty years after the evacuation of American citizens, Congress established the “Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians” to investigate the effect of Executive Order 9066 and the subsequent internment process. In a report entitled “*Personal Justice Denied*,” the Commission denounced the motivation behind the policy of evacuation as well as its effects. Citing “tremendous human cost”, the Commission noted the fact that there had not been, “...a single

documented act of espionage, sabotage, or fifth column activity [by] an American citizen of Japanese ancestry or by a resident Japanese alien on the West Coast” (*Personal Justice Denied*, Summary). By the time the President made the decision to close down the program in 1944, it had become abundantly clear that there had been, “...no rational explanation for maintaining the exclusion of loyal ethnic Japanese... [and that] certainly there was no justification arising out of military necessity (*Personal Justice Denied*, Summary).

President Roosevelt’s decision to issue Executive Order 9066 with full knowledge of its intended use, (as well as his subsequent decision to issue Executive Order 9102 creating the War Relocation Authority),<sup>50</sup> led directly to the internment of American Citizens of Japanese descent. The result of these actions was the denial of fundamental rights to a select group of American citizens based on their ancestry. These citizens were forcibly removed from their homes often at great loss of property, set up in internment camps not fit for human inhabitants, and even on at least one occasion killed with the intention of constraining them to these camps.

These were the *consequences* of the decision made by Roosevelt to issue the Executive Order, and this decision was made in a manner entirely consistent with Weber’s ethic of responsibility. Roosevelt was presented with a moral dilemma, one arising out of conflicting spheres of value. On the one hand, he was confronted with his duty to uphold the rights of American citizens as outlined by the Constitution of the United States. In the other, he held his duty as Commander in Chief to ensure the safety of the United States from foreign attack. Ultimately, he made the calculation that the potential benefit of saving lives by eliminating potential Japanese spies from the equation merited the suspension of liberties for this particular

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<sup>50</sup> The organization that administrated the evacuation of the military zone and the distribution of Japanese-American citizens among the various types of internment camp.

group of American citizens. Whether or not Roosevelt fully assumed the weight of the consequences on his soul cannot be proven, but it would not be unrealistic to assume that he took the decision seriously and accepted his role in the outcome so we will say, for the purpose of argument, that he did.

### **III. Potential Criticisms of the Ethic of Responsibility**

To recap Section I, the ethic of responsibility “measures up” to the challenge of “getting one’s hands dirty” by accepting that this is the state of affairs in which we live, and that the most morally meaningful way we can address this is by accepting the full weight of the consequences of our actions on our souls, especially when those actions are morally dubious.<sup>51</sup> Although this seems not to be ideal, in reality it is our best possible recourse. In many ways Weber’s point is a good one. After all, when reality makes ethical dilemmas inevitable what more can we possibly do except feel the weight of our actions on our soul to the greatest extent that we can?

However as we can see from our historical example, when we accept the ethic of responsibility as the *universal* guiding light to all political action, we run into certain serious potential problems. In reality, the consequences of one’s actions, especially when one is considering engaging in morally dubious actions, often come with a significant degree of uncertainty. Furthermore, when considering a particularly powerful politician such as the President of the United States, it is certainly not inconceivable that the stakes involved with

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<sup>51</sup> Bradley Starr summarizes this very well, “...moral decision, made in the context of the irreducible conflict of values, itself involves a decision to order values in the given situation, and to reject, accept, or impose costs. In acknowledging this, the ethic of responsibility demands of its adherents that they hold themselves - and allow themselves to be held - accountable, that they acknowledge the ethically creative dimension of their decisions, and that they attain moral clarity as to the ultimate meaning of their action by allowing the rationalities of the various spheres upon which the impact of action will be felt to speak and be taken into account” (Starr, 426).

regard to political action are very high.<sup>52</sup> By prescribing an ethic of responsibility to all considerations of potential action, we are allowing the politician to make subjective, moral calculations about actions whose consequences may be supremely far-reaching and impactful. The calculations are based entirely on his own personal convictions.<sup>53</sup> Is it possible that in making such a subjective decision fully under the ethic of responsibility, the politician may incur disastrous results, or employ means that are at the very least dangerously, if not unacceptably, morally dubious? As we have seen the answer is yes to both.

The two potential problems with employing an absolute ethic of responsibility as a guide for political action can be summarized as follows:

1. It is commendable that the politician feels the weight of the consequences of his actions on his internal soul. However whether these consequences be good, bad, or catastrophic, the citizenry as a whole feels them in reality.<sup>54</sup>
2. Because the ethic of responsibility allows the politician agency in deciding which morally dubious means to use in order to achieve what he perceives as good ends, it places no objective limits on the degree of ‘dubiousness’ of the means, nor does it ensure the intended consequences are ever realized.

In extreme circumstances, the consequences of these failures can arguably be catastrophic. Acting under an ethic of responsibility, a politician would be justified in suspending, or even

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<sup>52</sup> In his essay “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands” Michael Walzer notes the problem of moral dilemmas are often problems of, "choos[ing] between upholding an important moral principle and avoiding some looming disaster" (Walzer, 160).

<sup>53</sup> See part 1 Section II for the qualities of the vocational politician.

<sup>54</sup> In other words, is it really enough for the politician (just one man) to be satisfied with accepting responsibility when his actions may be physically or emotionally damaging to millions in real life?

eliminating, some fundamental freedom<sup>55</sup> in order to achieve a goal which perhaps he feels is worthwhile, but either turns out to not be worthwhile due to miscalculation and the uncertainty of consequences, or is starkly contrary to the convictions of society and only worthwhile to him. And while he has internally assumed responsibility for these consequences, how much moral thrust does this really have when placed upon the real life effect of these consequences on thousands, if not millions, of human beings?

Executive Order 9066 was a fully plausible outcome of a politician acting under Weber's ethic of responsibility, and a perfect illustration of its potential shortcomings. First of all, although Roosevelt may have truly felt the weight of the entirely negative consequences on his soul, this seems insignificant when compared to the fact that tens of thousands of American citizens were denied their basic liberties and suffered physical and psychological pain. Here is the failure of the ethic of responsibility to address the effect of consequences on the citizenry when those effects are entirely negative. As Michael Walzer puts it, "...the crimes of Weber's tragic hero are limited only by *his* capacity for suffering and not...by *our* capacity for suffering" (Walzer, 179).

Secondly, Roosevelt's intention was to briefly suspend civic liberties in order to achieve the benefit of better security. In the first place, he clearly miscalculated because there is little proof that internment resulted in a meaningful improvement in security or counter-espionage efforts. Further, even if he had not miscalculated some people might argue that the action of suspending a civil liberty upon which a society has been built is too morally dubious, regardless of the circumstances. Here is the failure of the ethic of responsibility to place any objective limits

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<sup>55</sup> The concept of what could be considered a fundamental freedom will be addressed later, but for now we will simply say that whatever it is, it is an accepted cornerstone of the society in which the politician acts.

on action, allowing the politician to engage in any possible action as long as it fits his own subjective calculation of moral need and regardless of the uncertainty of potential consequences being realized.<sup>56</sup>

Now that we have outlined the criticisms levied against the universal application of the ethic of responsibility as a guiding light of action, let us examine whether or not they justify any revision to Weber's theory, or perhaps the ethic of responsibility is the best we can do.

#### **IV. Limits of the First Criticism**

In thinking to resolve the first criticism, one might be tempted to say that all that needs be administered is the appropriate punishment for the evil caused by the actions of the politician. That is, in addition to feeling the 'weight' of the consequences on his soul, the politician would also feel the punishment of justice in reality and only therein would he answer fully for the damage caused by his actions. As Walzer states in "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands", "We [might] simply honor the man who did bad in order to do good, and at the same time we would punish him. We would honor him for the good he has done, and we would punish him for the bad he has done" (Walzer, 179). However this solution is problematic both in theory and in reality. From a theoretical perspective, As Weber explains, as an agent of the state the politician is unique in that he exercises the only legitimate form of power. If his use of power is legitimate, it is very difficult under normal circumstances to justifiably punish him for exercising

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<sup>56</sup> Walzer also recognizes this shortcoming, "Since it is concerned only with those crimes that ought to be committed, the dilemma of dirty hands seems to exclude questions of degree" (Walzer, 179).

it.<sup>57</sup> From a practical perspective and regardless of the issue of legitimacy, fear of punishment could potentially paralyze any politician looking to take action with even the slightest degree of moral ambiguity attached to the action itself. Indeed, if the politician were to take some morally dubious (by his own measurement) action in order to achieve a greater good or avoid a greater evil, the remedy to the first critique would require him to hold himself accountable and accept punishment for the action. From a practical standpoint this would surely cause political action to all but crawl to a standstill, as politicians paralyzed by the threat of punishment take no action at all in place of any measure of dubious action.

This first critique of applying an absolute ethic of responsibility as a guide to political action then, is not one that can be made better by some other standard of action. The closest we can come to addressing the inequity between the consequences felt by the politician and those exacted on the citizenry is to demand the politician carry the weight of the consequences on his soul, which the ethic of the responsibility already does. In short, the ethic of responsibility overcomes the first potential criticism we have levied against it because we can go no further in imposing consequences on the politician himself without sacrificing the significant ethical and pragmatic benefits of the ethic of responsibility as outlined in Section I.

## **V. The Second Criticism and a Potential Remedy**

The second criticism, (that no objective limits are placed on the moral dubiousness of action nor are there guarantees that intended consequences will be realized), is in part a substantial one. In what follows I will elaborate as to the basis of the second criticism, and find

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<sup>57</sup> Especially if it is well within the boundaries of some Constitution or legal system. Michael Walzer recognize the reality of this, “In most cases of civil disobedience the laws of the state are broken for moral reasons, and the state provides the punishment. In most cases of dirty hands moral rules are broken for reasons of state, and no one provides the punishment. There is rarely a Czarist executioner waiting in the wings for politicians with dirty hands, even the most deserving among them. Moral rules are not usually enforced against the sort of actor I am considering, largely because he acts in an official capacity” (Walzer, 179).



that while we cannot place some limit on the moral dubiousness of action, we can at least prevent the politician from engaging in morally dubious means when the consequences of his actions are sufficiently unpredictable.

First let's address the concern regarding the limits to the moral dubiousness of actions. In theory, and in practice, states are founded upon some fundamental right, or combination of rights, of the citizens that make up the state. Examples are abundant. In the United States, the Bill of Rights ensures, among other liberties, freedom of speech and of religion. Across the world in Japan the guarantee of certain rights is just as present, including the right not to be forced into involuntary servitude.<sup>58</sup> These are rights that the state guarantees the people. They are considered to be the cornerstones of society, and only once they are secured can further progress be made. If one violates these rights, one arguably unravels the core fabric of the society itself. Theoretical accounts of just states are just as reliant on foundational rights. In John Locke's *Treatises of Government*, he maintains that every individual has a right to their life, liberty, and property. In Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that each man has the right to enter a contract with others. In John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, he claims that in a just society all men would have, "...equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others" (Rawls, 53). The reasoning by which the aforementioned theories are formed is varied, and we will not concern ourselves with which set of liberties is most objectively good, as this is outside the scope of our argument.<sup>59</sup> What is significant is that in these societies where a state has been established, its most fundamental purpose is almost always

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<sup>58</sup> Unless as part of a sentence for a crime.

<sup>59</sup> See Part 1 Section I on the framework of discussion.

to serve to protect a certain pre-determined set of basic liberties. In the United States at the very least, this much is abundantly clear even in the tone of political discourse today.

These are the obligations of the state to the citizenry at large. As illustrated in our historical example, when damage is done to the basic liberties it is incredibly destructive, and arguably damages the legitimacy of the state when that legitimacy is based on a pledge to protect these liberties. If the only criteria for action is that the politician must subjectively determine a particular course of action worthwhile for the achievement of potentially desirable ends, then there is no limit on the moral dubiousness of such action and thus no meaningful moral mandate for the politician to respect the basic liberties of society. This could result in events such as the internment of American citizens during World War II in which security broadly defined was placed, "...far ahead of any concern for the liberty of citizens" (*Personal Justice Denied*, Summary). That one decision made by a single man exercising an ethic of responsibility could override basic liberties which have been made the cornerstone of a society by the people as a whole is something that certainly does not seem desirable, and flies in the face of contemporary Western Democracies.

We might think to at the very least provide some safeguard to these liberties by demanding they be valued above all else by the vocational politician, or that politicians adopt them as their own convictions. For many reasons this would seem desirable. However, it remains an entirely separate discussion. In order to make any normative claims regarding the importance of safeguarding basic liberties, or suggesting that the framework of the ethic of responsibility only be applied to decisions which don't involve these liberties, we cannot avoid making some sort of claim about what constitutes proper action. Basically, we would always be saying that

proper action with regard to these liberties is action in defense of them. Although this may be desirable, we will remember from Part 1 Section I that it is outside the framework of Weber's discussion. He seeks to make no claims regarding good action, as he assumes that the politician being advised is already the servant of a cause. Therefore even on what seems intuitively to be a very basic level, we cannot place limits on the moral dubiousness of action.

We *can* at the very least however, provide some safeguard such that especially morally dubious means are not exercised in vain and thereby address the second part of the criticism regarding uncertainty.<sup>60</sup> As part of the ethic of responsibility, Weber only requires that when deciding to act, the politician is ready to accept the full weight of the consequences of his action on his soul. Weber does not provide any guidelines for determining whether or not to act other than this, and the calculation to engage in morally dubious means is left entirely up to the individual. Let's consider President Roosevelt's decision on whether or not to issue Executive Order 9066. By suspending the basic liberties of a certain group of citizens, he hoped to reap significant benefit in the form of counter-espionage and ultimately national security. Roosevelt considered both national security and civil rights to be part of the same set of basic liberties, and therefore to have relatively equal moral weight. Therefore if assured national security for *millions* of Americans, he will have found it worthwhile to suspend the civil rights of thousands. However we know that no great benefit was actually provided to national security when this suspension actually occurred.<sup>61</sup> Why is this? It is because the consequences of Roosevelt's

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<sup>60</sup> That is, that an ethic of responsibility does not guarantee that predicted consequences are actually achieved. Such uncertainty means one could sacrifice some fundamental conviction, and then not even achieve the intended good end making the action doubly hurtful.

<sup>61</sup> See the "Personal Justice Denied" report. This statement represents the general consensus of the Congressional Committee and of historians who write on the topic. On the highly unlikely chance however that this was not the case in and some benefit was reaped, it was certainly a potential outcome and still relevant to our argument from a purely hypothetical perspective.

actions were by no means guaranteed, and in fact meaningfully *uncertain*. By embracing risk, Roosevelt *gambled* with the civil rights of thousands of Americans.

Uncertainty is the key to limiting the *frequency* of dangerously morally dubious action, or at the very least making sure that when morally dubious action is taken it is not wasted, because it will almost inevitably result in the intended beneficial result. By placing the following restriction on the calculations of politicians practicing an ethic of responsibility, we place the maximum possible limit on the moral dubiousness of actions that is allowable without necessarily prescribing some objective moral theory:

- The more deeply held the moral convictions involved when calculating whether or not to engage in political action, the more risk-averse the politician should be in regards to taking action.

In other words, when the potential damage of morally dubious actions is great, (the actions themselves are highly morally dubious by the measurement of the politician's ethical convictions), uncertainty as to the consequences of those actions should be taken into greater account. When two convictions are of the most profound value possible, (such as when one basic liberty prevents the realization of another), the politician must be extremely risk-averse. Any uncertainty as to whether the consequences of his actions will produce the desired result should be treated with extreme gravity, and the politician should prefer not to engage in the morally dubious action at all. If we demand this, we can at the very least avoid morally dubious action where the consequences of such action evade the original intention of the politician, and the moral sacrifice made in the action is for naught, without necessarily causing political paralysis and eliminating all necessary instances of dirty hands.

In addition to this and on a practical note, we may also insist on risk aversion as a guide to action in order to limit the effects of heuristics on political calculation. Daniel Kahneman’s seminal works in behavioral psychology underline the necessity for our commitment to risk aversion under uncertainty in matters of great moral significance. For example, in “Maps of Bounded Rationality: Psychology for Behavioral Economics”, Kahneman explores the effect of framing with regard to choices in game theory. Classical assumptions of rationality dictate that the rational human being’s preferences are unaffected by changes in the wording of choices if those changes don’t alter the underlying probabilities. This is frequently called “invariance”. The following instance of framing is taken directly from Kahneman’s work, and is called the “Asian Disease” problem. We are asked to imagine that the United States is preparing for the outbreak of a disease which is expected to kill 600 people and two alternative programs, (programs A and B), have been proposed to combat the disease. Let’s assume these programs were presented to a politician with the authority to implement them. There are multiple ways of phrasing them without changing the actual statistical effects of the program, two of which I have taken directly from Kahneman’s paper and are as follows:<sup>62</sup>

Option 1	Option 2
<p>If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved.</p> <p>If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved.</p>	<p>If Program A is adopted, 400 people will die.</p> <p>If Program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two thirds probability that 600 people will die.</p>

<sup>62</sup> Kahneman, Daniel. "Maps of bounded rationality: Psychology for behavioral economics." *The American economic review* 93.5 (2003): 1449-1475.

This is an example of framing. As we can see, the outcomes of Program A and Program B are not altered in the slightest, yet the wording is shifted to greater reflect either those saved or those lost in Options 1 & 2. Kahneman found that when presented with Option 1, a substantial majority of respondents favored Program A, the more risk-averse option. However when presented with Option 2, the majority shifted to favor program B, the risk-seeking option. The Asian Disease problem highlights boundaries to rationality that we experience as part of human nature, and by doing so emphasizes limits to agency. It shows how easy it is to sway a politician towards risk-seeking behavior without changing the probability of outcomes, making it even more crucial that we insist on risk-aversion in the realm of politics when considering especially morally dubious action. If the politician is always inclined to be risk-averse, he will be less likely to be swayed towards risk-seeking behavior by techniques such as framing, and this could offer critical protection from advisors who take advantage of the principles of heuristics to push their own agenda.<sup>63</sup>

## **VI. A Defense of the Remedy**

When we fail to find a way to make the politician more accountable for his actions in order to compensate for the suffering of the citizenry, our one available recourse is to limit this potential suffering to the greatest extent possible by placing boundaries on the actions themselves. In the case of Japanese interment, we find that because the consequences of his actions were sufficiently uncertain Franklin Roosevelt was overly risk-prone in his decision to authorize the creation of internment camps and the evacuation of Japanese-Americans from their

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<sup>63</sup> It is important to note that I am not advocating A over B in the scenario of the Asian disease, as we are unsure what convictions are at stake for the politician involved in the decision. The purpose of this argument is only to show that the politician must constantly remind himself where his values lie, and approach the most deeply held values with the proper attention to uncertainty, attention that should be immune to framing as much as is possible if he is always aware that he must be increasingly risk-averse as the values become more important.

homes. The result was an egregious breach in trust between the state and citizens, and the disastrous elimination of civil rights without any tangible benefits to speak of. If we insist that the politician be risk-averse with regard to calculations made under an ethic of responsibility, we might prevent such miscalculations from affecting thousands of innocent citizens.

It may be tempting to critique this remedy as weak. For example, if one recognizes the basic liberties of society as significant, what does this remedy do to inhibit Weber's "ideal politician" from violating them under an ethic of responsibility? What if there existed a politician whose ultimate cause was to abolish freedom of religion in the United States because he maintained a deeply held conviction that Greek mythology and only Greek mythology contained the keys to ethical truth? Such a politician might value freedom of religion, but ultimately worries that the existence of this freedom is preventing his fellow man from living spiritually fulfilling lives and ultimately considers the good life more desirable than freedom in this sphere. Even if he was risk averse, this politician could take action to abolish freedom of religion under the umbrella of the ethic of responsibility and be fully justified in doing so. How could any theory of "ideal political action" possibly allow for this? Should this politician be stripped of his agency when it comes to modifying liberties set by the Constitution, (or God, the state of nature, the veil of ignorance, whichever justifying mechanism you prefer)? Isn't there something about these liberties that exempts them from the subjectively held convictions of the individual?

This criticism fails to engage Weber within the framework of his discussion. In order for us to value some set of shared convictions above those held internally by the politician, we cannot avoid prescribing some theory regarding the moral good. Even if we were to say, "any liberty agreed upon by the majority of individuals is more valuable than the convictions of a

politician if those convictions are contrary to it,” we would still be making a moral claim about how liberties are imbued with value and forcing the politician to act on the convictions of others, at which point he loses his cause.

In sum, in order to protect society as a whole from the potentially catastrophic consequences resulting from an ethical miscalculation on the part of one politician, we must demand politicians be risk-averse in a manner proportional to the depth of their convictions. Short of providing some comprehensive theory of justice, this is our only possible recourse in addressing the criticism that an ethic of responsibility fails to safeguard against the exercise of an extremely morally dubious action without a guarantee of intended benefit. It is a meaningful addition to the theory of ideal action being guided by an ethic of responsibility; not because it undermines the ethic in any way but instead because it supplements the ethic with the effect of limiting the real-life realization of its potential shortcomings.

## **Conclusion**

Weber’s ethic of responsibility is a deeply compelling ethical maxim for the vocational politician. It is distinctly human, recognizing that when faced with the reality of moral dilemma and the need for dirty hands we must confront it head on and with as much moral seriousness as we can. The ethic of responsibility is the key to this. It does not pretend to offer some objective moral truth regarding justice or the ultimate good, instead it recognizes the tragic nature of political action and allows us to measure up to it inwardly by assuming responsibility for the consequences of our actions. However we cannot ignore that disastrous outcomes can occur when the ideal politician practicing an ethic of responsibility miscalculates. Without submitting



some account of objective morality we can never fully prevent such outcomes, or limit the moral dubiousness of means. What we can do is ensure that to the greatest extent possible, when the politician makes the decision to engage in morally dubious means to achieve some end, that that end is at the very least ultimately achieved. By commanding the politician to be risk-averse proportional to the moral weight of his convictions, we mitigate the risk of miscalculation and ensure that the intended benefit comes from morally dubious means as often as is possible. The more disastrous the potential results of action, (as measured by his own internal convictions), the less likely the politician will gamble on whether or not taking said actions will result in his intended goal. This addendum to the ethic of responsibility seems small, but the effect is not to be understated. Had President Roosevelt exercised such restraint, thousands of Americans might have been spared the pain of sacrificing their deeply held civil rights for no discernible benefit to national security. Just as the ethic of responsibility recognizes our limits to resolve moral dilemmas, so does a policy of risk-aversion recognize the gravity of our inability to predict consequences with meaningful certainty for every political act. In the spirit of the ethic of responsibility, we act in the best way we know how and by doing so can say with great conviction, "Here I stand, I can go no further."

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