Editor's Introduction

Eric M. Rovie
Agnes Scott College
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“We’ll, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them into filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?” (Hoederer, in Jean-Paul Sartre, Dirty Hands, Act V)

While debate about the CONCEPT of dirty hands predates Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1948 play Les Mains Sales (Dirty Hands), it was Sartre who put a long-lasting name to the philosophical problem. As guest editor of this issue of Essays in Philosophy, I am pleased and privileged to present four excellent papers on the topic of dirty hands. Instead of trying to neatly summarize these four diverse papers, I will let the authors speak to you themselves. Instead, let me (briefly) say a few words about the topic and point the readers in a few hopefully helpful directions, and then offer a few words about each paper.

One of the wonderful philosophical nuances about the ‘problem of dirty hands’ is that there are many different definitions of ‘dirty hands’ and heated discussion and debate over whether it is even a problem at all, or merely a part of living in a messy world. In order to set the stage for the work that follows, let me set out at least three commonly used variations on dirty hands:

1. The Expansive View. On this view, one has ‘dirty hands’ whenever one is faced with a moral dilemma, a situation where, whatever one chooses to do, one has violated a moral rule. In these moral dilemmas, one cannot walk away having ‘done the right thing’ under any circumstances. It should be noted here, however, that under the Expansive View, dilemmas that come about because of the intervention of others are included under the rubric of dirtying one’s hands. So, when Sophie is given her awful choice in William Styron’s novel, defenders of the Expansive View will argue that poor Sophie will have dirty hands whether she saves her son, her daughter, or neither, even though the situation was forced upon her. This seems to be the least common view of dirty hands.

2. The Standard View. A more common version of dirty hands, which I’ll call the Standard View, argues that dirty hands is a product of making choices between one’s various assumed roles and responsibilities. Unlike Sophie’s choice, these roles need to

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1 It is, of course, the case that some moral theories will argue that there are no moral dilemmas, because the principles of morality will not allow conflict or will provide some process of adjudicating all conflicts that arise. Kant, famously, seems to deny the existence of moral dilemmas.
be assumed voluntarily. Most often, the kinds of conflicts found in the Standard View generate from tensions between one’s responsibilities at work and one’s personal moral beliefs and values. Variations of this Standard View can be presented for lawyers, business executives, medical doctors, pharmacists, engineers, and lay workers, and usually feature cases where the primary goal of one’s WORK (‘maximize profit for the company’) is in conflict with some personal value one holds dear (‘don’t tell lies’). This view seems to be somewhat common in the general literature about dirty hands, although not as common as the third view.

3. **The Narrow View.** The most common view of dirty hands, made explicit in the presentations by Machiavelli, Sartre, and Walzer, claims that dirty hands is, essentially, a POLITICAL problem, and not a more general problem of role responsibilities\(^2\). The only people who will truly face the problem of dirty hands are political leaders, because only they have to make the really hard choices, the life-and-death decisions, which can leave them stained forever. For political Realists, one might simply adopt a Machiavellian position and argue that dirty hands is simply part of the political process, and not a ‘problem’ or a ‘dilemma’ at all. One need not feel bad for having bloody hands because that is part and parcel of being a political figure, as Sartre’s Hoederer argues. Others might feel less comfortable with simply accepting dirty hands as part of the game (Walzer seems to be reluctant to do so) but the end result may still be acceptance of the harsh realities of the political system, and the acknowledgement that politics does tend to dirty one’s hands.

I do not suggest that any one of these views is the most plausible or philosophically useful one; far from it, in fact. All seem to have some intellectual traction. For instance, I think there is some common-sense value to calling Sophie’s tragically forced choice one that leaves her with dirty hands. But I am also partial to the view that says dirty hands dilemmas occur in many day-to-day situations as a result of conflicting moral duties and roles. However, it does seem clear that dirty hands gets most of its academic uptake from the connection to politics\(^3\), which leads to the Narrow View being the most commonly utilized version of dirty hands in the philosophical literature. Regardless of which view one holds, it quickly becomes apparent that there is some crucial philosophical importance to the problem of dirty hands: either we are faced with deep questions about the nature of irresolvable moral quandaries (The Expansive View), or we are faced with deep concerns about the roles we play in our public and private lives (The Standard View), or we are forced to consider whether politics, the backbone of our world-structure, is an inherently dirty and immoral

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\(^3\) To wit, the only edited collection on the topic, to my knowledge, is called *Cruelly and Deception: The Controversy Over Dirty Hands in Politics*. Eds Paul Rynard and David P Shugarman (New York: Broadview Press, 2000).
business (The Narrow View). All of these options raise questions about the very way we approach the world, and this is the virtue of inquiring about dirty hands.

The authors represented in this volumes may not agree with my taxonomy of dirty hands, but all of them recognize the levels of complexity present in the various approaches to dirty hands, and each of them tackle it in their own unique way. We open with Kevin DeLapp’s “Les Mains Sales Versus La Sale Monde: A Metaethical Look at Dirty Hands,” in which DeLapp asks the crucial question “What does our approach to dirty hands dilemmas say about our META-ethical commitments”? Next, Gabriela Remow looks at the problem of dirty hands from a primarily historical perspective, giving us an idea of how three sentimentalists (David Hume, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke) might evaluate the problem. Then, R. Eric Barnes uses models from game theory to explore an inverse version of the problem of dirty hands, the ‘problem of clean hands.’ In this problem, politicians seeking election have incentives to avoid taking policy stands on issues (thereby appearing to keep their hands clean for the voters) which leads to a dearth of useful information amongst potential voters, and leading to less qualified candidates getting elected. And finally, John M. Parrish takes us deep into the world of the FOX television drama 24 and asks us to consider what happens when the narrative structure of a television show repeatedly bombards the viewer with moral dilemmas and dirty hands scenarios, and explores how this repeated use of these serious situations might lead to a subtle change in the viewers moral values. While each of these authors has a distinct take and approach to the problem, it should be apparent to the readers that the problem of dirty hands is still with us in various ways.

Eric M. Rovie
Department of Philosophy
Agnes Scott College