

Violence, Political Evil, and Simona Forti's *New Demons*: A Counter-Genealogy of the Dostoevsky Paradigm

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Abstract

Simona Forti's *New Demons* documents how recent philosophical inquiry into the problem of moral evil has relied upon a cluster of concepts inherited from Fyodor Dostoevsky. Forti names this the 'Dostoevsky paradigm' and identifies its influence in such thinkers as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas, thus demonstrating that the problem of evil resides at the very heart of twentieth-century critical philosophy. In this article I show that, parallel to the tradition which Forti traces there exists a separate tradition that turns on the problem of *political* evil, which first emerges in Max Weber's essay on 'Politics as a Vocation'. I contend that Weber reverses the Dostoevsky paradigm in important ways and ultimately locates the origins of political evil not in the nihilistic desire to oppress others, but in the violent means that all State politics must rely upon. I go on to document how two influential political thinkers, Hans J. Morgenthau and Michael Walzer, inherited the theme of political evil from Weber and, in doing so, incorporated Weber's particular version of the Dostoevsky paradigm into the respective disciplines they helped construct. I conclude by returning to Forti's overarching project and her plea for philosophy to break free from the Dostoevsky paradigm.

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the July 2005 London bombings, Tony Blair tells us that he felt compelled 'to paint the contrast in the boldest letters imaginable. Good politics versus evil. Stark. Simple. Undeniable to all but the deranged'.² Blair's candid assertion bears witness to the unmistakable fact that in the protracted war of terror on terror, the language of evil continues to be a powerful rhetorical operator. The omnipresence in today's political discourse of the language of evil raises numerous questions: from what archive do our leaders draw when they mobilise the imagery of evil? How can one explain its persistent effectiveness at stirring the humours of the body politic? More fundamentally: what role does the signifier of evil fulfil in our collective social consciousness? How has political evil been thought in the long and wicked twentieth century?

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the editors, and especially to German Primera and Mike Lewis, for their encouragement and their generous editorial work; to Michael Neu, who pointed me in the direction of Michael Walzer; to the anonymous reviewers, whose incisive feedback helped me improve this piece considerably; and, finally, to Simona Forti, whose enthusiastic response to an early, crude version of this article inspired me to pursue this topic further.

² Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010), 569.

How have its thinkers articulated it with such categories as ethics, violence, and punishment?

Simona Forti's work on critical conceptions of evil offers a fruitful theoretical framework with which to approach these questions. In her *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today*, she develops a genealogy of a particular philosophical conception of evil which she baptises the 'Dostoevsky paradigm'.³ By tracing the contours of this paradigm in the Russian writer's novels and documenting its echoes in the critical projects of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Primo Levi, Forti demonstrates how a certain conception of evil underlies and orients the critical tradition we have inherited from these authors. I shall contend that in her preoccupation with a tradition that, in keeping with Dostoevsky's formulation of the problem, conceived of evil as an *existential* and *ethical* problem, Forti risks overlooking a tradition which runs parallel to the one she reconstructs. This latter tradition poses the question of *political* evil and first emerges in the writings of Max Weber, who, also drawing inspiration from Dostoevsky's writings in formulating the problem of evil in politics, similarly becomes heir to the Dostoevsky paradigm. However, Weber reverses the relationship between power and evil that structures this paradigm and, in doing so, plots a distinct course for the paradigm which at points intersects with the trajectory documented in *New Demons*, but never fully aligns itself with it. When Weber's version of the Dostoevsky paradigm is probed, and its influences on twentieth-century political thought traced, what comes into focus is an entire network of reflections on violence and evil in politics that went on to exert a palpable influence first on several discrete disciplines of political thought, and then on US foreign policy.

In what follows, I shall reconstruct Forti's argument in *New Demons* in order to highlight the philosophical stakes of her endeavour, and to sketch a more detailed picture of the Dostoevsky paradigm, while recounting the genealogy she traces. I then turn my attention to Weber's essay, 'Politics as a Vocation' to consider how he inflects the Dostoevsky paradigm. I do so by identifying the links which Weber forges between politics, violence, and evil such that these categories come to exist in a triangular relationship, which in turn prepares the ground for some novel problems concerning the necessary ethos of the politician. I go on to indicate what influence Weber's rendering of the Dostoevsky paradigm has exerted on twentieth-century political discourse. To this end, I turn to Hans J. Morgenthau – the founding father of classical realism in International Relations – and Michael Walzer – who revived political theory's concern with 'just wars', – both of whom inherited the Dostoevsky paradigm from Weber and in turn bequeathed it to the foreign policy of the United States of America.

³ Simona Forti, *New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today* [2012], trans. Z. Hanafi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

Forti: The Dostoevsky Paradigm

Forti's *New Demons* proposes that it is crucial for contemporary critical philosophy to once again construct an analytical lexicon capable of explaining political evil. As Forti puts it, 'we cannot and should not stop talking about evil'.⁴ For her, the stakes are high:

A lot, if not everything, rides on the problem of suffering. Or more accurately, everything depends on whether suffering continues to be a *problem* for us, and in what way. In philosophical terms, it all depends on what significance we attribute to that ultimate phenomenological given – *the fact of pain and suffering* – which, even after its various stratifications of meaning have been deconstructed, remains before our eyes. This is not a question of the inescapable reality that inherently accompanies the finitude and vulnerability of our lives but, rather, what Emmanuel Levinas calls 'useless suffering', which is *produced* out of human relations, and which propagates with varying intensity and range on the basis of the social and political context.⁵

In other words, if philosophers are to understand the existence of suffering and the power structures by which it is unevenly distributed, and if, moreover, they are to grasp that so much human suffering is 'useless', they must develop what might be termed an 'analytics of evil'.

Accordingly, *New Demons* sets itself a twofold task: on the one hand, it seeks to understand how, for much of the twentieth century, philosophers will have approached the problem of evil; on the other, it seeks to uncover the flaws in this approach in order to replace it with a more suitable one. The first half of the book traces the genealogy of what Forti terms the 'Dostoevsky paradigm'; the second turns to the writings of Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Jan Patočka in search of an alternative conception of evil. For Forti, these two tasks are crucially linked, for an adequate account of evil can be formulated only when the limits – and the 'political repercussions' – of previous conceptions of evil are known.⁶ In the remainder of this article I engage only with the genealogical aspect of Forti's project since it might be said that my intervention takes shape as a counter-genealogy.

How does Forti see the history of the Dostoevsky paradigm? According to her genealogy, the conception of evil that underpinned much of late-modern continental thought first became possible with the Kantian turn, but reached its fullest expression in Dostoevsky's vivid and chilling portraits of the psychology of evil. It was especially through *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, she argues,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

that the Russian writer bequeathed to twentieth-century philosophy a compelling understanding of the psyche of the wicked and the evil that it brings forth. This is how she constructs her argument.

Before Kant made his presence felt on occidental thought, the problem of evil was primarily a theologico-metaphysical one: how can there be evil in a world authored by a God who is at once benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent? From Augustine's *Confessions* to Leibniz's *Theodicy*, evil (or 'sin') had been considered the offspring of human free will, foreseen but not willed by divine Providence.⁷ This problematic turned on the origins of evil in the world, and was entirely concerned with reconciling theological doxology on God's benevolence with the factual existence of sin and suffering. The attempt to absolve the Author of Nature from having willingly brought evil into the world – which Leibniz famously termed 'theodicy' – eclipsed any concern for the *psychology* of evil.

It was Kant who turned the moral philosopher's gaze towards the *act* of evil. Because his Copernican revolution had brought into sharp focus the moral law as a self-contained, transcendental category, evil could now appear as a facet of the subject's interiority. In other words, evil became thinkable in terms of the will's relationship to the moral law and to bodily incentives, rather than in terms of the relationship between divinity and humanity. For Forti, then, the critical turn thus made possible a seismic shift in the philosophical questioning of evil. '[T]he problem ceased to be purely a theological and metaphysical concern, while the relevant question shifted from "Where does evil come from?" to "Why do we commit evil deeds?"'⁸

However, Kant failed to recognise the implications of the shift he had enacted. In his desire to acquit the autonomous will of any desire for evil, he distinguished between evil and wickedness, a distinction that allowed him to attribute the former to an error of Reason and to deny the possibility of the latter. Because his system cannot suffer the view that Reason desires evil, Kant dissolved rather than explored the problem he had rendered possible. Ironically, by formulating something of a *logodicy*, the philosopher from Königsberg repeated the gesture of the pre-critical metaphysicians whose thought he had precisely sought to vanquish.

Yet Kant's restatement of the problem of evil soon proved fruitful. It was, according to Forti, F. W. J. Schelling who took up Kant's challenge and articulated a view that Kant could not fathom: that '[t]he will to evil for the sake of evil exists'.⁹ Schelling arrived at this position by reconceptualising human freedom in relation to God's being, arguing that *evil stems from the human desire to be God*.

In Forti's view, however, Schelling made this thought conceivable, but failed to give it its due substance. The possibility of the *will to evil* had been

⁷ See *ibid.*, ch. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. Emphasis omitted.

expressed, but the evildoer was to remain a mute until Fyodor Dostoevsky finally made him speak.¹⁰ Indeed, Forti finds the emblematic expression of a philosophy of evil in the Russian author's portrayal of revolutionary nihilism. His most diabolical characters – especially Pyotr Verkhovensky, Nikolai Stavrogin, Alexei Kirillov, and, in a different manner, the Grand Inquisitor – are 'the transhistorical models of an exemplary scene of evil'.¹¹ This scene is one in which the deliberate wickedness of particular diabolical personae can bring evil into the world, thus producing widespread oppression, suffering, and ultimately death. Here is how Forti describes 'Dostoevsky's phenomenology of radical evil':

[radical evil] is something that can never be reduced to the mere inclination of the subject, or to the simple result of a single, wicked action or intention. Only by interacting with everyone else do the protagonists engender the prism of radical evil. [...] Each of them gives free rein to his own particular negative power: base instincts, cunning, pride, or envy as the case may be. But they all share the same experience of trespassing, of breaking down limits, and of violating the order of the elements. The lead role is played by absolute free will: freedom of the will taken to an extreme. Each of the protagonists, driven by his own forces, becomes delusional with omnipotence – an omnipotence that was once a divine attribute and is now turned into a human feature.¹²

For Forti, the psychology of the wicked is only one half of the primal scene of evil. The picture is completed only once the wicked demon's Other has been accounted for: the defenceless, innocent victim. This is why, in Dostoevsky's novels, violence against children is an oft-recurring theme: the relationship between the wicked violator on the one hand and the tormented or abused child on the other epitomises the gesture of oppression, 'with an all-powerful perpetrator on the one side, faced by the total powerlessness of the victim on the other'.¹³ For Forti, the paradigmatic example of this relationship can be found in the chapter from *Demons* where Stavrogin confesses to having led a child to commit suicide – a chapter that was originally suppressed by Dostoevsky's publisher due to its shocking contents.¹⁴

¹⁰ A disclaimer on the gendered language employed in this article. All of the authors I here take as my object of study (as distinct from Forti, who is my interlocutor) are men and write exclusively about men (both in their grammar and in their politics). Here I follow their lead and use masculine pronouns in an attempt to be at once true to their discourse and candid about the biases underpinning it.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35. Emphasis omitted.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40. Emphasis omitted.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 39f.

This, then, is what Forti calls the Dostoevsky paradigm. It is a conceptualisation of radical evil that situates evil in the delusional nihilism of a demonic perpetrator who brings his wickedness to bear on a powerless victim, thus providing an answer to the question that Kant first posed – ‘Why do we commit evil deeds?’ The view that evil resides in the relationship of oppression between an absolute demon and an absolute victim was, as *New Demons* shows so elegantly, accepted and developed in a variety of ways by Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, and Primo Levi.

My intention is to bolster Forti’s contention that Dostoevsky bequeathed to twentieth-century thought the philosophical tools with which to think evil. I do so by tracing a genealogy which runs parallel to the one which her book maps out. However, mine is also a gesture that troubles and complicates Forti’s account. As I shall demonstrate, whilst the trajectory outlined here relies upon and prolongs the Dostoevsky paradigm, it simultaneously throws some of the paradigm’s constitutive assumptions into disarray. What I shall bring into focus, then, is a particular inflection of the Dostoevsky paradigm; a constellation of concepts and theses regarding the origins of *political* evil that provided much of twentieth-century political thought with its questions and the tools with which to approach them. This story starts with Max Weber’s Russophilia.

Weber: Politics and/as Violence

It is well known that Weber was an avid reader of the great Russian novelists. He especially admired Leo Tolstoy,¹⁵ whose writings he routinely cited in his sociological work. In addition to providing him with tools for sociological analysis, Tolstoy’s novels also spoke to Weber’s ‘innermost experiences’, as his wife, Marianne Weber, reports¹⁶, addressing as they did his anxieties concerning death, the disenchantment of the world, and his own religiosity.

But there was one problem which Tolstoy could not assist Weber in addressing: the problem of political evil, or, more accurately, the problem of *the evil of politics*. This problem became increasingly acute as, in the 1910s, Europe’s empires were marching steadily towards world war. Once, Tolstoy’s religiously informed pacifism had earned him Weber’s admiration; now, on the eve of cataclysm, it started to appear as something of an absurdity. Thus, in ‘Between Two Laws’, a short piece published in February 1916, Weber declares

¹⁵ See especially Edith Hanke, *Prophet des Unmodernen: Leo N. Tolstoj als Kulturkritiker in der deutschen Diskussion der Jahrhundertwende* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993) and Paul Honigsheim, *The Unknown Max Weber* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000).

¹⁶ Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. H. Zohn (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988), 466.

the pacifism fashionable at the time, 'truly the worst cant ever to have been proclaimed – quite naïvely – from any tea-table'.¹⁷

In his view, a pacifist politics, especially one that is grounded in the New Testament, must be wholly consistent on pain of hypocrisy: 'In this case one has to be as consistent as Tolstoy. Nothing less will do'. The allusion is to the Russian author's decision, late in his life, to abandon his estate and live the remainder of his life in accordance with the ascetic ethic he had been preaching for so long. For Weber, the pacifist must, if he is to be consistent, renounce *all* social life, as Tolstoy did:

The position of the Gospels is absolutely unambiguous on the decisive points. They are in opposition not just to war, of which they make no specific mention, but ultimately to each and every law of the social world, if this seeks to be a *place of worldly 'culture'*, one devoted to the beauty, dignity, honour and greatness of man as a creature of this earth. Anyone unwilling to go this far – and Tolstoy only did so as death was approaching – should know that he is bound by the laws of this earthly world, and that these include, for the foreseeable future, the possibility and inevitability of wars fought for power, and that he can only fulfil the 'demand of the day', whatever it may be, within the limits of these laws.¹⁸

This short, polemical piece contains the basic contours of what Weber, in his influential essay, 'Politics as a Vocation', would go on to describe as a distinction between two forms of ethics: the ethics of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) and the ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). I now turn to this remarkable essay, for it is in the final few pages of this piece that the Dostoevsky paradigm is introduced into political ethics.

'Politics as a Vocation' was first presented as a lecture in January 1919 to a crowd of Bavarian students. Weber's aim is well known. He means to subject to sociological analysis the manner in which politics, by which he means the leadership of the State,¹⁹ has become a vocation (*Beruf*) – in the sense of both *profession* and *calling*. The text moves from a detailed consideration of the first of these two meanings, politics as a profession, to the second, politics as a calling. For Weber, the two questions are intimately related, because what it means to have politics as one's vocation becomes clear only once the exact nature of political leadership is understood. Naturally, then, his first step is to inquire into the specific characteristics of the State as 'a *political* association':

¹⁷ Max Weber, 'Between Two Laws' in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, eds. P. Lassman & R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹ Max Weber, 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', trans. R. Speirs in Max Weber, *Political Writings*, 309ff.

In the last analysis the modern state can only be defined sociologically in terms of a specific *means* which is peculiar to the state, as it is to all other political associations, namely physical violence [*der physischen Gewaltsamkeit*]. [...] Violence is, of course, not the normal or sole means used by the state. There is no question of that. But it is the means *specific* to the state.²⁰

This definition has immense ramifications. By axiomatically defining political activity as the leadership of the State and by defining the modern State as ‘that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory’, Weber tethers the practice of politics to the use of physical violence.²¹ To practise politics is, *by definition*, to exert violence on one’s fellow humans.

Having identified the problem of modern politics in these terms, Weber turns to the *legitimacy* of State violence. In his view, there are three sources of legitimate rule – that is, three phenomena which lead people to submit wilfully to the violent machinery of the State: tradition, charisma, and legality.²² The remainder of ‘Politics as a Vocation’ is an interrogation of the second phenomenon, for it is in the personal charisma of political leaders that ‘the idea of *vocation* in its highest form has its roots’.²³

After devoting many pages to an inquiry into the sociological significance of the emergence of the professional party politician, Weber finally turns his attention to the second meaning of the term ‘vocation’: ‘what kinds of personal qualifications does [politics] presuppose in anyone turning to this career?’²⁴ At this point the tone of Weber’s prose shifts noticeably, to the point of becoming positively lyrical. It is in these pages, amidst numerous references to his favourite Russian novelists and abundant employment of such terms as ‘evil’ and ‘diabolical’, that Weber inscribes the Dostoevsky paradigm into twentieth-century political thought, even as he gives it a distinctive twist. Let us see just what this amounts to.

The question of a vocation for politics is not merely a question of skills and capabilities – it is also, and more importantly, an *ethical* question. The politician deals in power, making his a career which is at once attractive and perilous. Attractive because to wield power is to rise above the vacuity of everyday existence; perilous because if the politician lacks a sense of responsibility he might become blinded by the ‘instinct for power [*Machtinstinkt*]’.²⁵ Weber explains: ‘The sin [*Sünde*] against the holy spirit of [the politician’s] profession

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 310–311.

²² See *ibid.*, 311–312.

²³ *Ibid.*, 312.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 352.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 354.

begins where this striving for power [*Machtstreben*] becomes detached from the task in hand and becomes a matter of purely personal self-intoxication instead of being placed entirely at the service of the "cause" [*Sache*].²⁶ Although he may appear to be strong and forceful, the intoxicated politician's actions 'merely lead into emptiness and absurdity'.²⁷ Plainly, the allusion is to nihilism, for it is when power is divorced from a cause and when the handling of power is not informed by some kind of 'faith' or 'belief' that power itself comes to be an object of 'worship'.²⁸

When presented in these terms, Weber's analysis fits squarely within the Dostoevsky paradigm: hunger for power, self-intoxication and vanity are responsible for bringing evil into the world. Nihilism meets the instrumental use of power and produces suffering; Pyotr Verkhovensky as politician.

However, this is not where the problem of evil in politics reaches its culmination. Because for Weber all politics necessarily entails the strategic deployment of violence, the question of political ethics must be rearticulated accordingly: is political action 'subject to "the same" ethic as every other form of activity? [...] Can the fact that politics operates with a quite specific means, namely power, backed up by the use of *violence*, really be a matter of such indifference as far as the ethical demands placed on politics are concerned?'²⁹ The implications of posing the question in this manner are vast. Now the problem of morality no longer hinges on the *intentions* of the politician, but on the *means* he employs: that is, on violence.

In order to bring the problem of political ethics into focus, Weber introduces his famous distinction between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. (Seen from this angle, the articulation of this distinction can be viewed as originating in Weber's attempt to rethink the Dostoevsky paradigm.) The ethics of conviction is grounded in noble intentions and demands that one never betray one's moral principles. Although his name is not mentioned, here the allusion is to Tolstoy: 'What about the ethics of the *Sermon on the Mount* then?'³⁰ In terms that bring to mind Weber's war-time polemic on pacifism cited above, he goes on to insist that 'the meaning of the sermon (if it is not to be reduced to a banality) is precisely this: we must accept it in its entirety *or* leave it entirely alone'.³¹ But because Tolstoy's pacifism – which, Weber adds, normally 'expresses a kind of dignity' – rejects *all* use of violence, the politician has no recourse to it: 'For while it is a consequence of the unworldly ethic of love to say, "resist not evil with force" [Matt. 5:39], the politician is governed by the contrary maxim, namely, "You *shall* resist evil with force, for if you do not, you are

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 354.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 355, 354.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 357.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 357.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

responsible for the spread of evil”³² Weber reaches the same conclusion he had reached before: when one is confronted with the evil of the world, Tolstoy can be of no assistance.

Pacifism, of course, does not exhaust all possible forms of the ethics of conviction. Tolstoy’s may be the only *logically coherent* version of such an ethic, but, ‘[i]n the real world’, actual adherents of an ethics of conviction do not always shy away from using violent means to realise their noble intentions.³³ At this point, when the ethics of conviction and the willingness to use violence coincide, the peril inherent within politics rises to the surface. Where can an example of such a politician be found? ‘Those of you who know their Dostoevsky will recall the scene with the Grand Inquisitor, where the problem is dissected very acutely’.³⁴

What Dostoevsky recognised is that it is *not* true that ‘only good can flow from good, only evil from evil’.³⁵ It is this basic insight that such politicians as the Grand Inquisitor lack. This is pivotal because politics, being the realm of violence, provides fecund ground for evil to erupt. ‘The early Christians [...] knew very well’, writes Weber in a crucial passage,

that the world was governed by demons, that anyone who gets involved with politics, which is to say with the means of power and violence [*Macht und Gewaltsamkeit*], is making a pact with diabolical powers [*diabolischen Mächten*], and that it does *not* hold true of his actions that only good can come of good and only evil [*Bösem*] from evil, but rather that the opposite is often the case.³⁶

To practise politics is to wield power and violence;³⁷ by implication, all politics is diabolical. Here, evil is no longer constructed as that which comes into the world only when the politician is a demon. Instead, *politics* is that which is ‘diabolical’, and for this reason it can only negate an ethics of conviction, which ends up corrupted and destructive. Weber draws this lesson from *The Brothers Karamazov* and, in doing so, turns the Dostoevsky paradigm on its head even as he adopts it. Indeed, although he subscribes to the Dostoevsky paradigm by insisting that nihilistic power-hungry politicians – the Verkhovensky amongst us – produce evil, he adds that in the realm of politics, those who desire to follow a *pure* ethics – the Grand Inquisitors – likewise bring evil into the world.

³² *Ibid.*, 358.

³³ *Ibid.*, 361.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 361.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 362.

³⁷ Note that the German ‘*Gewalt*’ covers a much broader semantic field than does the English ‘violence’: the former can also mean force, strength, control, and, significantly, power.

It is, then, Dostoevsky who allows Weber finally to formulate the central problem of political ethics:

Anyone wishing to practise politics of any kind, and especially anyone who wishes to make a profession of politics, has to be conscious of these ethical paradoxes and of his responsibility for what may become of *himself* under pressure from them. He is becoming involved, I repeat, with the diabolical powers that lurk in all violence.³⁸

So who does have a 'vocation' for politics? If, on the one hand, the nihilistic politician produces evil and if, on the other, the politician who cannot bear to abandon his convictions does the same, then the only way to avoid political evil is to combine both forms of ethics. Alluding to Martin Luther, Weber sketches his ideal politician:

it is immensely moving when a mature person (whether old or young) who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the real consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. [...] In this respect, the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being [*den echten Menschen*] who is *capable* of having a 'vocation for politics'.³⁹

In the concluding fragment, Weber declares, dramatically, that this type of politician 'must, in a very simple sense of the word, be a hero [*Held*]. [...] Only someone who is certain that he will not be broken when the world, seen from his point of view, is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer it, and who is certain that he will be able to say "Nevertheless" in spite of everything – only someone like this has a "vocation" for politics'.⁴⁰

In summary: the Dostoevsky paradigm is a conceptual cluster which posits that at the root of evil stand absolute demons who bring their wickedness to bear on innocent victims. Weber troubles this paradigm even as he adopts it. In his search for an answer to the question of political ethics, he mobilises Dostoevsky to show that in the realm of politics, the root of evil lies precisely in the desire to be an absolute *angel*. 'Politics as a Vocation' displaces several of the paradigm's elements, forges a series of new links, and finally yields a significantly altered conceptual cluster, wherein the realm of politics is a realm of evil. In this realm, only a reluctant 'hero', who is neither a demonic nihilist nor a naïve pacifist, can successfully steer the infernal apparatus that we call the State.

³⁸ Weber, 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', 365.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 367-368.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.

Although Weber died a year after delivering the vocation lectures, his authoritative voice was to echo throughout twentieth-century thought. ‘Politics as a Vocation’ left a deep impression on countless thinkers and on several branches of political theory, including those dealing with the nature of politics, the psychology of the politician, and political ethics. Through this influence, Weber bequeathed to these branches of political theory his own inflection of the Dostoevsky paradigm. In the remainder of this article, I shall document the afterlife of Weber’s views in two specific sub-disciplines of Anglophone political theory: International Relations (hereafter: IR) and Just War Theory.

Morgenthau: The Ubiquity of Evil

Hans J. Morgenthau’s legacy is by no means inconsiderable. Being the first proponent of what is known as ‘classical realism’, he is considered one of the founding fathers of IR as a distinct discipline. As is often the prerogative of disciplinary pioneers, Morgenthau helped shape realism’s — as well as IR’s — agenda along with its central categories. However, his impact reached well beyond the confines of Academia: besides having exerted direct influence on the presidential administrations of Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson, several illustrious actors on the stage of international politics, including Henry Kissinger, have declared their intellectual and personal debt to him.⁴¹

Although Morgenthau’s realism is a comprehensive doctrine about the nature of politics, it is grounded in one foundational assumption: politics is not about the collective pursuit of the absolute good, but about ensuring that humanity’s natural tendency towards destruction and evil is neutralised as much as possible.⁴² The implications that he believes follow from this basic insight are of little import to my current purposes; rather, my interest lies with the structure and origin of this contention. As I shall demonstrate, this understanding of politics rests upon a series of claims about humanity’s innate proclivity for evil, which Morgenthau draws from Weber’s ‘Politics as a Vocation’. The upshot is that via Morgenthau, Weber’s version of the Dostoevsky paradigm was carried over into IR, where it continues to hold sway.

Morgenthau’s 1948 *Politics Among Nations* is uniformly considered to be the *Urtext* of classical realism.⁴³ It is a muscular volume that primarily deals with

⁴¹ See Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Kenneth Thompson & Robert J. Mayers (eds.), *Truth and Tragedy: A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984). See also Henry Kissinger, ‘A Gentle Analyst of Power: Hans Morgenthau’, *Political Science & Politics* 13:4 (1980): 531–532.

⁴² For a general introduction to Morgenthau’s doctrine, see Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), ch. 6.

⁴³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* [1948], 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006).

practical questions, providing a comprehensive doctrine of *applied realism*. However, *Politics Among Nations* remains silent on the more fundamental philosophical considerations that underlie and inform its doctrines. Morgenthau opens the volume by acknowledging the 'six principles' he is working with,⁴⁴ writing that realism,

believes that the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature. [...] This being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realised but must at best be approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts. [Realism], then, sees in a system of checks and balances a universal principle for all pluralist societies. It appeals to historical precedent rather than to abstract principles and aims at the realisation of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good.⁴⁵

In *Politics Among Nations* – and by extension in the entire realist edifice that was erected upon it – these reflections play the role of axiomatic statements. But whence did they come? What are the philosophical moorings of these sweeping claims about human nature and about the nature of politics? With what philosophical charge is the notion of 'the lesser evil' laden? Answers to these questions must be sought in Morgenthau's lesser-known essay entitled *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, published a year before *Politics Among Nations*.

Scientific Man vs. Power Politics, Morgenthau's first published monograph, is a critique of a certain rationalist understanding of humans, politics, and science. This brand of rationalism, on his reading, holds that science can objectively and exhaustively understand our social world and can, consequently, venture to change it for the better. What renders such rationalism invalid is its failure to give due weight to the biological tendencies that inhere in all humans. These tendencies make it so that *all* humans strive for domination over others, the result of which is that *any* utopian political project based on a rationally projected ideal society is bound to come to ruin. Morgenthau's hope is that once it is acknowledged that all humans naturally lust after power, we can finally abandon our misguided desire to construct the ideal social world and instead devote ourselves to curbing the destructive tendencies that inhere in all political conduct. This view is rooted in a particular understanding of human nature, one which posits that reason is subservient to irrational passions: 'Reason, far from following its own inherent impulses, is driven toward its goals by the irrational forces the

⁴⁴ Morgenthau added the chapter entitled 'The Six Principles of Political Realism' to the second edition of *Politics Among Nations*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

ends of which it serves', that is, by 'the irrational forces of interest and emotion'.⁴⁶ Another such 'irrational force' is the instinct to dominate others, that is, 'the *animus dominandi*, the desire for power'.⁴⁷ Every member of the human species is subject to this desire. We humans naturally desire to oppress; we are all of us demons.

It is when he starts to discuss the implications of humanity's innate will to power with respect to political ethics that Morgenthau reveals his debt to Weber's 'Politics as a Vocation'. Although he fails to quote or reference the text even once,⁴⁸ he clearly intends to pay homage to it by appropriating its terminology and by emulating much of its argumentative strategy. Let me reconstruct Morgenthau's version of Weber's argument.

Although, for Morgenthau, the desire to dominate others is the cause of much of our behaviour, it is in the realm of politics that this desire becomes acutely problematic, because politics, by its very nature, is an activity which revolves around the governing of others. Indeed, it is *in order to dominate others* that many pursue a career in politics, making the latter to a large extent an *evil* practice:

To the degree in which the essence and aim of politics is power over man, *politics is evil*, for it is to this degree that it degrades man to a means for other men. It follows that the prototype of this corruption through power is to be found on the political scene. For here the *animus dominandi* is not merely blended with dominant aims of a different kind but is the very essence of the intention, the very life-blood of the action, the constitutive principle of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity.⁴⁹

In other words, because the '*animus dominandi*' is an innate trait found in all human beings at all times, *all politics everywhere* is, by its very nature, evil.⁵⁰

For these reasons the practice of politics raises issues which concern morality: 'the political actor has, beyond the general moral duties, a special moral

⁴⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 154–155.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴⁸ There is a sprawling literature linking Morgenthau to Weber's writings on politics. See, for instance, Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, ch. 6, Hans-Karl Pichler, 'The Godfathers of "Truth": Max Weber and Carl Schmitt in Morgenthau's Theory of Power Politics', *Review of International Studies* 24:2 (1998): 185–200 and Tarak Barkawi, 'Strategy as a Vocation: Weber, Morgenthau and Modern Strategic Studies', *Review of International Studies* 24:2 (1998): 159–184. See also Hans J. Morgenthau, 'Fragment of an Intellectual Autobiography: 1904–1932', in Thompson & Myers, *Truth and Tragedy*.

⁴⁹ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 195, my emphasis. Interestingly, Morgenthau cites Jacob Burckhardt in support of his argument – as did Weber in 'Between Two Laws'.

⁵⁰ Thus Morgenthau can hold that his realist doctrine describes the universal laws of politics. See esp. *Politics Among Nations*, ch. 1.

responsibility to act wisely, that is, in accordance with the rules of the political art'.⁵¹ But what is it to act 'wisely'? Morgenthau answers that to act wisely in politics is to choose the least evil among all possible evils. 'Political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil. While it condemns politics as the domain of evil par excellence, it must reconcile itself to the enduring presence of evil in all political action. Its last resort, then, is the endeavour to choose, since evil there must be, among several possible actions the one that is least evil'.⁵² The inverse similarly holds true: anyone who refuses to choose between evils inadvertently produces an even greater evil. In making this point, Morgenthau clearly echoes Weber, and he even draws on the latter's understanding of the ethics of responsibility to drive the point home. Thus he writes that what in the realm of politics is done 'with good intentions but unwisely and hence with disastrous results is morally defective; for it violates the ethics of responsibility to which all action affecting others, and hence political action par excellence, is subject'.⁵³ As Weber did before him, Morgenthau condemns the 'perfectionist' who refuses to abandon his convictions, who 'shrinks from the lesser evil because he does not want to do evil at all' and who 'thus becomes finally a source of greater evil'.⁵⁴

The 'ethic of responsibility' has thus been rearticulated as the art of choosing the lesser evil. Morgenthau concludes his chapter on political ethics with a passage that, both in pathos and in content, patently mimics the concluding paragraph of 'Politics as a Vocation':

Neither science nor ethics nor politics can resolve the conflict between politics and ethics into harmony. We have no choice between power and the common good. To act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgment. In the combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgment, man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny. That this conciliation is nothing more than a *modus vivendi*, uneasy, precarious, and even paradoxical, can disappoint only those who prefer to gloss over and to distort the tragic contradictions of human existence with the soothing logic of a specious concord.⁵⁵

The book's concluding chapter returns to this theme of 'tragedy'. That life is base and politics evil is, for Morgenthau, a tragic fact of life. But once naïve utopian rationalism has been rejected and human nature given its due weight, 'there

⁵¹ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 186.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 202.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 202-203.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

reappears the *aristeia* of man, his heroic struggle to be and to be more than he is and to know that he is and can be more than he is'.⁵⁶

Whilst, in sum, it is plain to see that *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* is heavily indebted to Weber's 'Politics as a Vocation', the former nonetheless offers a considerably more jejune analysis. Whereas Weber's argument is that all *modern* politics is *potentially* evil because it involves the instrumental use of violence, making his an *historical* argument, Morgenthau jettisons the historicity of political evil by insisting that it stems from the human's innate desire to dominate others.

Despite its vulgarity, Morgenthau's realism inherits Weber's version of the Dostoevsky paradigm. Following 'Politics as a Vocation', *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* depicts the political scene as one in which evil abounds, where the desire to be an angel produces suffering and oppression, and only the tragic 'hero' can navigate the treacherous waters of political evil. In Morgenthau's world, it is because deep down we are all as diabolical as Pyotr Verkhovensky that we need a political ethics to instruct us in becoming heroes who curb their innate and evil desires, rather than demons who let these desires wreak havoc upon the world.

Walzer: Dirty Hands and Just Killing

The notion that some wars might be *just* wars and that it is possible to fight one's wars *justly* was a popular theme amongst medieval Christian theologians and early modern jurists such as Hugo Grotius. This doctrine's influence declined around the time of the Enlightenment and lay dormant until, in the 1970s, several moral philosophers in North America showed renewed interest in its categories and problems.⁵⁷ 'Just war' discourse returned with a vengeance: its revival gave rise to a sprawling literature that consists mostly of self-referential, ahistorical, and sterile analyses of the conditions under which the killing of innocents can be justified; a literature that in turn went on to provide the leaders of the Western world with a discourse that renders their acts of military violence 'just'.

Nobody did more to revive the discourse of the 'just war' than Michael Walzer, whose 1977 book, *Just and Unjust Wars* is universally considered to have put the problem of 'just warfare' back on the agenda of political theory. His

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 222. In classical Greek tragedy, the *aristeia* (or 'excellence') is the climactic moment where the hero experiences his or her finest moment.

⁵⁷ Whilst celebratory overviews of the 'just war' tradition are legion, there exist very few critiques of its basic assumptions. One critic who stands out is Michael Neu, for whom there is something 'utterly repulsive' about 'just war' discourse. See Michael Neu, 'Just the Just Death of Just War', *Critical Studies* 1 (2015): 6-13, 13; cf. Michael Neu, *Just Liberal Violence: Sweatshops, Torture, War* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), ch. 5 and Robin Dunford & Michael Neu, *Just War and the Responsibility to Protect: A Critique* (London: Zed Books, forthcoming).

was an explicit attempt to revive the centuries-old 'just war' tradition,⁵⁸ but it was at the same time a contribution to the broader field of moral questions that he labels 'political ethics'.⁵⁹ It is through this broader framework of political ethics that I shall consider Walzer's contribution to political thought. My aim is to demonstrate that his concern with 'just war' is part of a broader philosophical project which pivots on the problem of political evil, a project that inherited its contours, its lexicon, and its problems, together with their solutions, from Weber's version of the Dostoevsky paradigm.

Although *Just and Unjust Wars* is a book about 'political ethics', Walzer spends little time exploring the philosophical foundations of his understanding of political evil. Rather, as Morgenthau had done before him, he erects an argumentative edifice on philosophical foundations which he has prepared elsewhere. In Walzer's case, the decisive text is a 1973 article entitled 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands'.⁶⁰

Walzer's concern in this article is a category of actions in which one has to choose between several morally objectionable options. Walzer proceeds to baptise this 'the problem of 'dirty hands'', borrowing the term from a play by Jean-Paul Sartre.⁶¹ The central contention made in 'Political Action' is that in this category of dilemmas, it is possible to do the right thing, even though doing so will render one guilty of committing a moral wrong.

The problem of 'dirty hands' quickly proves to be particularly acute in the political realm: 'the dilemma of dirty hands is a central feature of political life, [and] it arises not merely as an occasional crisis in the career of this or that unlucky politician but systematically and frequently'.⁶² This is where a familiar conceptual assumption surfaces, one which orients the rest of Walzer's argumentative structure: 'dirty hands' are especially common in political ethics because politics is the domain of *violence*. Indeed, it is because 'the victorious politician uses violence and the threat of violence' that *all* politicians have 'dirty hands'.⁶³ Immediately after having connected politics to violence, Walzer pays homage to the originator of this insight: 'This is a point emphasised and perhaps overemphasised by Max Weber in his essay "Politics as a Vocation"'.⁶⁴

What Walzer calls the problem of 'dirty hands' is the problem of political ethics: given that all politics involves violence, what ethics is required of the politician? To this question, the tradition of political thought has provided three

⁵⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* [1977], 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), Preface.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁶⁰ Michael Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2:2 (1973): 160-180.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

distinct answers, which were formulated most concisely by Niccolò Machiavelli, Max Weber, and Albert Camus. Machiavelli's answer to the problem, on Walzer's reading, was that one must teach politicians 'how not to be good'.⁶⁵ This, he opines, is not a satisfactory resolution of the problem of 'dirty hands' because it fails to inquire about the moral consciousness of a politician with a sullied conscience.

What about Weber's reply to the problem? As discussed at length above, he seeks to confront the problem of political evil by insisting that only 'heroes' who can bear the burden of their sins have a 'vocation' for politics. This 'hero' willingly, though regrettably, resorts to violence, and, as Walzer puts it, '[w]ith full consciousness of what he is doing, he does bad in order to do good, and surrenders his soul'.⁶⁶ But, Walzer asks, what is to ensure that any particular politician is a hero and not a demon? How can one guarantee that a political actor who has dirtied his hands will receive punishment? 'Weber attempts to resolve the problem of dirty hands entirely within the confines of the individual conscience, but I am inclined to think that this is neither possible nor desirable'.⁶⁷

For Walzer, the only adequate solution to the problem of 'dirty hands' is a social one, in which the morality of the politician's actions is judged not by him but by the public; in other words, those with 'dirty hands' are publicly punished for their misdeeds, after which their hands will be clean once again. The impetus for this solution comes from Camus,⁶⁸ whose play *The Just* tells the story of Ivan Kaliayev and his comrades, a group of Russian revolutionary assassins with such moral fastidiousness that they were willing to kill only on condition that they themselves would pay with their lives in return. This ethos, which pivots on a willingness to accept one's due punishment, is what is required of a politician if we are to face up to the inevitability of 'dirty hands' in politics. However, after having proposed this solution, Walzer scrambles to explain that he does *not* think that we should *execute* our leaders after they have dirtied their hands; in fact, he does not even think that it would be possible to punish them in any way, for 'there seems no way to establish or enforce the punishment. Short of the priest and the confessional, there are no authorities to whom we might entrust the task'.⁶⁹ Ultimately, 'Political Action' ends up proposing a highly diluted version of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁸ Whilst it would take me too far afield to reflect on this topic in any depth, it should be emphasised that Camus's overarching philosophical and literary project was, for the most part, an attempt to reckon with the problem of nihilism and the evil it potentially produces. He finds this problem articulated most acutely in the novels of none other than Dostoevsky. Camus, in other words, was another inheritor of the Dostoevsky paradigm, which he gives a distinctive twist in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. In mobilising Camus to compensate for Weber's shortcomings, Walzer thus simply ends up pitting two versions of the Dostoyevsky paradigm against one another.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

Camus's rebellious ethos, one that 'requires us at least to *imagine* a punishment or a penance that fits the crime and so to examine closely the nature of the crime'.⁷⁰ It is in the realm of public *imagination*, then, that Walzer seeks a reply to the problem that grew out of Weber's rendering of the Dostoevsky paradigm.

Just and Unjust Wars and several of Walzer's further writings on war – which, interestingly and ironically, are written in explicit opposition to Morgenthau's realism⁷¹ – assign a fundamental role to the doctrine of 'dirty hands', which is routinely discussed in connection with what he terms the problem of 'emergency politics'. This is also where he starts using the term 'evil', a word absent from 'Political Action'. In war, Walzer reasons, one is sometimes confronted with an evil so infernal that one can only respond in kind, such that one must, for example, bomb cities inhabited by innocent people. 'This is the essential feature of emergency ethics: that we recognise at the same time the evil we oppose and the evil we do, and that we set ourselves, so far as possible, against both'.⁷² In posing the problem in this way, Walzer adapts the Dostoevsky paradigm once more. In war, *one is confronted with an external evil* and the 'emergency politics' that makes it necessary for the wartime politician to sully his hands stems from the need to confront this evil: it is thus for Nazism that Walzer reserves the term 'evil' – a term, moreover, he claims not to use lightly.⁷³

The alteration is this: in war, which is the most extreme of all political scenes, an evil enemy necessitates the deployment of evil tactics. Evil thus no longer originates in politics, as is the case for Weber; nor does it lie dormant in humans' natural desire to dominate one another, as Morgenthau suggests. Rather, evil is *external* to both the politician and politics: 'evil is other people', Walzer – who is so fond of quoting French playwrights – might have said. It comes as no surprise that Walzer's *solution* to the problem of 'dirty hands' likewise relies upon a principle of externality: in other words, he argues that it must be the community that judges and condemns those politicians who found it necessary to dirty their hands in this way.

It is thus by displacing evil that Walzer seeks to dissolve the Dostoevsky paradigm. By detaching evil from both politics and the human, and by locating it outside of humans and their politics, he makes it possible for political actors to absolve their sins. By running the proverbial gauntlet, the politician can 'wash his hands', after which his *name* may remain forever tainted, but his *conscience* will be clean. Plainly arguing against Weber's position, Walzer muses that '[i]t is not the case that when [the politician] does bad in order to do good he surrenders

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 179, emphasis added.

⁷¹ See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, ch. 1, which is revealingly called 'Against "Realism"', and Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), ch. 1.

⁷² Walzer, *Arguing About War*, 49. Walzer likewise employs the term 'evil' to describe a similar problem in *Just and Unjust Wars*, for example on pages 267, 274, 290, and 298.

⁷³ See Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 253.

himself forever to the demon of politics'.⁷⁴ 'Forever' is the crucial discursive operator here: the 'dirt' on the politician's hands turns out merely to be a temporary blemish.

Politics, Evil, and Violence in the Twentieth Century

By way of conclusion, let me summarise the trajectory followed by the version of the Dostoevsky paradigm documented here. It emerges in Weber's 'Politics as a Vocation', which explores the ethos required by the career politician. By defining State politics as the realm of violence, Weber can argue that politics is an inherently evil practice, an insight he attributes to Dostoevsky. By constructing a conceptual cluster that fastens politics to violence, by declaring the practice of politics inherently diabolical, and by calling for a specific ethos – that of the 'hero' – to negotiate political evil, Weber's essay heralds a novel series of problems; problems that orbit the central themes of political ethics, evil, and violence. In Morgenthau's hands, Weber's account of politics becomes twisted into a crude, purportedly 'realistic' doctrine of human nature. Evil, on this account, does not inhere in politics, but in human beings themselves. As a result, political ethics becomes the practice of limiting the evil that humans are naturally inclined to do to one another. Walzer, who inherits Weber's understanding of politics as an inherently violent practice, wonders how politicians might cope with the moral guilt that results from political violence. By looking at the politics of war he seeks to push the problem to its extreme, a move that allows him to reserve the term 'evil' for the (unjust) enemy. Thus, evil is once again displaced: this time the threat is evil, and this evil demands to be fought with evil means. The upshot is that evil has been forced to relinquish its firm grasp on political man: all it can do is *temporarily* soil the politician's hands, after which he may absolve himself of his sins.

This, then, is how the Dostoevsky paradigm has changed since Weber took it up and modified it a century ago: the locus of evil has changed several times. The paradigm's basic contours, however, will have remained the same. Regardless of where the root of evil was sought, the conclusion was always that, owing to its very nature, the practice of politics is marked by the diabolic taint of evil, thus demanding that the politician be of a tragically heroic, masculine, sorrowful character. The continuous displacement of evil within the paradigm's conceptual nexus was therefore inconsequential with regard to the anguished conclusions attached to the fundamental assumption that politics is evil. Post-Weberian thought was also powerless to wrest this understanding of politics free from its origins: over the course of the ceaseless reproduction of this paradigm, Dostoevsky's voice may have been largely forgotten but it has not ceased to orient this imaginary at a fundamental level.

⁷⁴ Walzer, 'Political Action', 178.

Being the influential men that they were, Weber, Morgenthau, and Walzer left their respective marks on twentieth-century North-American politics. Their thought made itself felt in a wide range of academic disciplines; in thinktanks of all persuasions; in several presidential administrations; in cultural consciousness; in policy papers; and, of course, on our leaders' tongues. It is largely as a result of their efforts that the Dostoevsky paradigm still presses heavily upon our political discourse.

Concluding Remarks

The counter-genealogy proposed here has three distinct but related implications for Forti's *New Demons*. First, it reminds us that the genealogical work of reconstructing traditional conceptions of evil cannot restrict itself to critical philosophy alone. Whilst an engagement with the critical tradition is crucial if we are to think evil differently, it is equally important to study what we may call *uncritical* traditions in order to chart the ways in which they have helped shape our present condition. This is painstaking work, largely because the authors discussed here do not understand themselves as belonging to a coherent Dostoevskian tradition or as having inherited a shared set of problems and discourses. As a result, isolating traces of the Dostoevsky paradigm requires careful hermeneutic analyses of texts that, to a critical philosopher, may seem banal or insipid.

Second, it drives home the importance of Forti's overarching project of rethinking evil. In her view, the critical tradition has reduced the scene of evil to a confrontation between malevolent demons and innocent victims, thus failing to recognise the complexities that are involved in the production of evil. What critical thought requires, she argues, is an analysis that can capture the way in which evil comes into existence. 'Evil', she writes, 'is a system in the sense of a tangle of subjectivities, a network of relations, whose threads pull together into a pernicious event thanks to the perfect complementarity between (a few) wicked actors and originators, (a few) zealous, committed agents, and (many) acquiescent, not simply indifferent spectators'.⁷⁵ So long as critical philosophy fails to understand the systemic nature of evil, it risks overlooking the routine exclusion and everyday suffering upon which the continued existence and orderliness of the *polis* is premised.

The particular version of the Dostoevsky paradigm reconstructed here, for all of its differences from the one which *New Demons* addresses itself to, suffers from the same faults. Because it represents evil as an unavoidable element of State politics, of human nature, or of warfare, as the case may be, it is limited to preaching a mournful but heroic acceptance of this fact on the part of those select few with a 'vocation' for politics. Entirely lacking in this picture is an appreciation

⁷⁵ Forti, *New Demons*, 179.

of systemic forms of evil. However, the tradition charted here differs from the one analysed by Forti in that many of the discourses it has produced – of a politics of the ‘lesser evil’, of ‘just warfare’ – primarily serve to *justify* forms of (State) violence precisely by effacing the existence and architecture of structural evil. That is to say, it is precisely the lexicon of evil and the concomitant doctrines of political ethics crafted by such figures as Morgenthau and Walzer that our leaders draw upon when seeking, for instance, to condemn the ‘evil’ of terrorism or to rationalise the extrajudicial and often indiscriminate drone killings carried out all over the world on a daily basis.⁷⁶

Third, this counter-genealogy suggests a range of new themes that the endeavour to rethink evil must take into consideration. For Forti, one of the main shortcomings of the Dostoevsky paradigm is that it locates evil solely in the *individual* perpetrator, while failing to problematise the systemic nature of evil or the relationship between individuals and the system they find themselves in. Thus, a critical understanding of evil must be able to ‘question not so much why we become wicked subjects but rather, above all, how we become obedient subjects’.⁷⁷ This is why, in the second part of her book, Forti turns to Arendt, Foucault, and Patočka, each of whom offers us the tools to think power as networked, systemic, and fluid, rather than individual, one-directional, and repressive.

Yet, the Weberian version of the Dostoevsky paradigm troubles this image somewhat. Indeed, one of the core features of the tradition mapped here is that it precisely does not locate evil in the wicked individual, but rather continually displaces the locus of evil, seeking it first in the domain of politics, then in humanity’s natural inclinations, then in the (fascistic) enemy. Weber’s contribution precisely was to tether political evil to the use of violence, thus making possible, on the one hand, the disarticulation of the Dostoevskian connection between evil and the wicked perpetrator and, on the other, the notion that, in the realm of politics, an ethics of conviction is as dangerous as wickedness.

This implies that in order to rethink evil, critical philosophy must do more than insist upon the systemic nature of evil and the crucial role fulfilled therein by what Forti calls ‘mediocre’ demons – the obedient subjects who contribute to evil systems without necessarily being wicked or malevolent.⁷⁸ Indeed, it must also actively seek to reconceptualise the relationship between evil and politics, attempting first of all to trouble the Weberian understanding of politics as leadership of the State and of the State as the institutional apparatus that has a monopoly on legitimate physical violence. As long as these axioms continue to underpin political thought, it will be easy for political realists and defenders of ‘just wars’ to deny the systemic nature of evil and to justify State violence in the

⁷⁶ For a similar view see Neu, *Just Liberal Violence*.

⁷⁷ Forti, *New Demons*, 9.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.* and *passim*.

face of (external) evil threats. Critical philosophy will have to ask what it is to act politically, what a non-violent or anti-violent politics might be, how politics relates and may relate to evil, and what the relationship is between ethics and politics. In raising these questions, we may turn to the same tradition Forti is in conversation with, as these are precisely the themes that have occupied critical thinkers from Arendt and Foucault to Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero.

If, for Forti, critical philosophy must abandon the Dostoevsky paradigm because, owing to the simplistic dualism it constructs between absolute demons and absolute victims, it impairs our capacity to understand systemic violence, then it seems all the more urgent that the discourse of evil as it is used by triumphalist apologists for State violence is challenged and overcome. These two ventures are closely interrelated, as a persuasive critique of post-Weberian accounts of political evil can be successful only if it is informed by a convincing critical account of systemic evil. Thus it is that the counter-genealogy offered here serves to underscore the urgency of the philosophical project outlined so forcefully in *New Demons*.