**Action in realist political theory: character and political virtues instead of „dirty hands”**

If a contemporary political realist maintains that political theory should contribute something to the evaluation of political actions, she finds herself at the problem of appropriate standards. If she chooses deontological standards, her approach can easily fall back into some kind of „political moralism” (Bernard Williams) or „ethics-first view” (Raymond Geuss), which uses extrapolitical standards to constrain political action, and thereby effectively eradicates the autonomy of politics – one of the cornerstones of realist political theory. On the other hand, following Machiavelli’s consequentionalist remark „let a prince have the credit of conquering and holding his state, the means will always be considered honest, and he will be praised by everybody” could open up the doors to violence and political adventurers.

From the viewpoint of political actors, Michael Walzer famously called this impasse between consequentionalist and deontological considerations the „problem of dirty hands”. While he tried to offer a solution based on something like the Catholic confession, both his way of posing the problem and his solution remains highly debated along several lines. One prominent and current strand among Walzer’s critics are those approaches which bring virtue ethics into play as a better ground to conceptualize and evaluate political conduct. This sort of critique has been articulated in the broader literature on political ethics (most recently e.g. by Berry Tholen and Demetris Tillyris), as well as in the narrower field of contemporary realist political theory (most notably by Mark Philp, Andrew Sabl, and William Galston). These approaches claim that instead of combining the consequentialist and deontologist viewpoint, shifting the perspective this way could not only evade some theoretical shortcomings of Walzer’s argument, but also dedramatize the „dirty hands” view on political action, and at the same time preserve the autonomy of politics that is so important to political realism.

My paper tries to review these virtue-ethical approaches and their Williamsian origins, and investigate their contributions to a realist conceptualization and evaluation of political action. More specifically, I will address the following interconnected problems: in which sense do they dedramatize the Walzerian picture of political action and political actors; how do they view the moral dilemmas that politicians face; and to what extent can the Williamsian focus on character and integrity soften the „hyperrealistic” view that politicians should get used to the dirt on their hands, while at the same time present alternatives to some possibly problematic points of the Walzerian model (e.g. to the oscillation from a value-pluralist to a value-monist perspective, and to the role of guilt).