The Politics of Moral Capital

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Plantin 10/12pt *System* Poltype® [VN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Kane, John.
The politics of moral capital / John Kane.
p. cm. – (Contemporary political theory)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0 521 66336 9 – ISBN 0 521 66357 1 (pb.)
1. Legitimacy of governments. 2. Political leadership – Moral and ethical aspects. 3. Political stability. 4. Trust. I. Title. II. Series.

JC328.2.K36 2001
320'.01'1 – dc21 00-066693

ISBN 0 521 66336 9 hardback
ISBN 0 521 66357 1 paperback

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> Friendships that are acquired by a price and not by greatness and nobility of spirit are bought but not owned, and at the proper moment they cannot be spent. Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Politics is about power, and power has attractions and uses independent of its necessity for achieving legitimate social goals. It is not surprising, then, that one often encounters in the political realm acts of selfish ambition, venality, mendacity and betrayal. What is more, even the best-intentioned players are often forced from the straight and true path by the cruel exigencies of politics, so that ordinary standards of decent conduct are oft more honored in the breach than the observance. Yet the Machiavellian game must be seen to be about something larger than gain, ambition and survival. Political agents and institutions must be seen to serve and to stand for *something* apart from themselves, to achieve *something* beyond merely private ends. They must, in other words, establish a moral grounding. This they do by avowing their service to some set of fundamental values, principles and goals that find a resonant response in significant numbers of people. When such people judge the agent or institution to be both faithful and effective in serving those values and goals, they are likely to bestow some quantum of respect and approval that is of great political benefit to the receiver. This quantum is the agent's moral capital.

Since moral capital thus depends on people's specifically moral appraisals and judgments about political agents and institutions, it must be distinguished from mere popularity. Popularity may, indeed, be based in part on moral appraisals but is very often based on quite other sources of attraction. It is possible to be popular while lacking moral capital, or to possess moral capital while not being particularly popular. Moreover popularity, it is usually assumed, may be bought, while moral capital may not. Like popularity, however, moral capital has genuine political effects. It is a resource that can be employed for legitimating some persons, positions and offices and for delegitimating others, for mobilizing support

and for disarming opposition, for creating and exploiting political opportunities that otherwise would not exist.

It is not, of course, the only resource that can be so used. In the constantly contested arena of politics, political leverage and political ascendancy can be gained by a variety of means – an efficient electoral machine, a surety of numbers in the party or legislature, the support of key players, occupation of a political office and consequent access to institutionalized levers of power, the possession of timely intelligence, a superior organization capable of coherent action, powers of patronage, an incompetent or divided opposition, a record of success, a booming economy. Such factors make up the stock of what we usually call an agent's *political capital*. They are the things to which we ordinarily look when we seek to understand political processes and outcomes. Moral capital displaces none of them but is usually entangled with each of them, for it generally undergirds all the systems, processes and negotiations of political life. Often, its crucial supportive role is not clearly seen until it is lost and individuals or institutions face consequent crises of legitimacy and political survival.

This book, then, uses the concept of moral capital to investigate one aspect of the real force and movement of moral judgment in political life. Its theoretical premise is (to reiterate) that politics seeks a necessary grounding in values and ends, and that people's moral judgments of political agents and institutions with respect to such values and ends have important political effects. It thus rejects overly cynical views, both popular and academic, that typically suppose politics to be an inherently amoral realm. In such views, moral judgments in politics are thought to be at best naıve and irrelevant, at worst hypocritical and pernicious. Or if moral judgments are relevant at all, they are understood to be formed beyond the realm of politics itself and applied to it – forced on it, as it were – from the outside. The action of politics is conceived to be, in this respect, akin to the action of markets, whose sole internal principle is the amoral law of supply and demand. If effective demand exists for slaves, drugs or child pornography, suppliers will invariably arise to meet it. When people judge such forms of trafficking immoral or evil, they adopt an ethical vantage point outside of the market itself; to prevent the trade they must impose external controls on market forces. But politics, I argue, is not like the market in this respect. Moral judgment is neither exterior to nor irrelevant to politics, but intrinsic to it and in principle inescapable.

Even so, it can scarcely be denied that what might be termed "realist" or Machiavellian views of politics have considerable force, for they seem so often to provide convincing descriptions of the way politics actually

works. For it is true that the political environment, even at its mildest, is tough and unforgiving of weakness or excessive scrupulousness. Acknowledging this, I must begin my essay by describing more fully how the field of politics can be understood in such a way as to allow the concept of moral capital genuine purchase.

Politics and legitimacy

Politics is the pursuit of ends. It is about what is to be done, how it is to be done, by whom it is to be done, and with what means it is to be done. It is, in other words, about *policy* – the making of socially directive decisions and the allocation of the resources and instruments necessary to carry them out. The ultimate aim of political competition – inter-personal, inter-party or inter-national – is therefore the control of policy. Political power is the power to determine policy and thus to dispose of social and material resources (including human beings) in certain ways and for certain ends rather than in others. It is also the power to distribute political resources – honors, offices, authority – in particular ways rather than in others. The first end of politically engaged people is therefore to gain command of (or access to) political power in order to control (or influence) the decisions that are made. This involves, on one level, a struggle for personal position among allies and rivals sharing essential aims, and, on another, a contest for political advantage among people with opposed objectives. These political objectives may be either narrowly specific or broadly general. At their broadest, they may aim at the preservation of existing social, political and distributive arrangements, or at their reform and restructuring, or even at their complete dismantlement and replacement (to cover the traditional spectrum from conservatism to revolutionism).

While politics aims at ends, the political process is endless, for life is endless and the possibility of change and challenge always present. Change may be exceedingly slow, permitting islands of historical stability, or it may be very rapid, throwing even long-prevailing social and political relations into flux. Though political action generally strives for stable ends, it necessarily occupies uncertain ground between the existently real and the conceivably possible. Its aim may be preservation of the already existent or, alternatively, its alteration. Thus political ends may embody present interests or may envisage the annihilation of such interests and the creation of altogether new ones (and there is nothing to stop a nihilistic politics from pursuing the extermination of all human interests whatsoever).

Political ends and interests are seldom uncontested, and champions of

opposing ends and interests must be either accommodated, neutralized or defeated. Though compromise is possible – and indeed sometimes lauded as a central political virtue – the game is generally played to be won, particular outcomes being determined by the fluctuating balance of political power and the relative exercise of political skill. Compromise – the settling for less than all one wanted – marks an acceptance that opposing forces are too strong to be utterly defeated and too weak to be utterly victorious. Politics is contestation, and contests are about winning and losing, even if wins and losses may often be only partial. This emphasis on competitive action toward ends makes *effectiveness* a key political value. As the good hammer is the one that efficiently drives in nails, the good politician is the one that achieves some reasonable proportion of the ends that he or she intends, promises or deems necessary. But if winning is all, or almost all, in politics then those who are excessively squeamish about means surely do not belong in the game. Losers may cry "foul" when rough means are employed, but once the final whistle has sounded the result will generally stand, leaving outright losers nowhere. In vicious forms of politics, they may be physically annihilated and thus not even live to fight another day. Even in liberal democracies, where consensually accepted, institutionalized limits on political practice usually prevent such vicious outcomes, the principles of end-driven politics remain constant within these constraints.

The basically vulgar emphasis on winning and losing inevitably has a somewhat vulgarizing effect on anything touched by politics. If effectiveness is key, then it follows that everything will tend to be assessed in terms of its value as political capital (capital being, by definition, a resource for the achievement of further ends). Thus moral standing, because it can be as useful a resource as any other, invariably assumes the form of moral capital in politics. In any human enterprise where sound character and dedication are deemed necessary for the effective achievement of common goals, it is natural that moral standing will tend to take the form of moral capital. Problems arise, however, if moral standing starts to be treated as *primarily* a means to further ends. In ordinary life we presume that moral character is a value-in-itself, something that governs both the ends we choose and the means we think it proper to adopt in pursuit of them. Moral character equates with self-respect, and moral standing with public respect, either of which are put at risk when treated mainly as a currency for acquiring other things. We devalue character by commodifying it, and generally deem it a cause for shame and regret to attain some desired end at the expense of our good name. "What profiteth it a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Yet the political version of Jesus' question is surely "What profiteth it a

politician if he keep his purity and lose his advantage?'' Everything in politics – including moral reputation – is liable to be assessed for its potential as a means for securing political advantage. Political practice, that is, tends to invert the usual order, causing moral characteristics to be judged for their utility rather than for their intrinsic significance. Extreme forms of politics, in which the political realm attempts to swallow up social and private spheres, go even further and deny any intrinsic significance to moral character independently of political action and commitment.

The ''all's fair'' tendency of competitive political life often evokes cynicism that creates difficulties for any politician seeking moral capital. The politician who attempts to establish a moral reputation *for the sake of* its capital value faces a difficulty akin to that of the salesman. Salesmen seek our trust in order to sell us something, but their need to sell us something undermines trust; politicians seek our respect in order to further their political ends, but their need to further their political ends provokes suspicion and forestalls respect. The honor of politicians having so often proved as hollow as their promises, their reputation as a class has frequently tended to fall, like the salesman's, to the level of the scoundrel or the hypocrite. ''Get thee glass eyes,'' cries Lear, ''and like a scurvy politician, seem to see the things thou dost not.'' The suspicion arises that the entire realm of political action is one where honeyed words and high-sounding phrases cloak raw self-interest, its real driving force.

Raw self-interest may be conceived in terms of power understood as an end-in-itself, as though all politicians were, covertly, megalomaniacal Dr. Dooms bent ludicrously on world domination – and indeed, given the centrality of power to politics this is a possible pathology into which it may fall.[1] Alternatively, the notorious tendency of power to corrupt may lead to the presumption that all who seek power are interested only in feathering their own nests – and certainly cases of institutionalized corruption, occasionally on a spectacular scale, are easy enough to find. More generally, a dominant strand of Western political thought (often labelled ''realism'' or, latterly, ''rational choice theory'') is characterized by what might be termed *methodological* cynicism, for it purports to explain all political phenomena by reducing them to the amoral, quasi-mechanical clash and adjustment of rationally pursued, but essentially selfish interests – and who would deny that interests, both individual and collective, are often selfishly asserted and defended in politics?

Were any of these forms of cynicism universally and sincerely adopted,

[1] See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, André Deutsch, 1986), pp. 124–133.

it would be impossible that moral capital could play any genuine role in political life. Yet it does, and not because people are too weak-minded to be constant in either their cynicism or their rational self-interest, or so liable to be misguided by passion that they foolishly fall into indulging hope, trust and a desire for justice. It is merely because no human action and set of human arrangements can ever be placed *in principle* beyond the reach of the moral question – beyond, that is, the demand for justification in general terms. Political action always presumes such justification.

Every claim and counterclaim, charge and countercharge of political debate attests the inescapability of the moral question in politics. The language of political argument is always and inevitably highly moralized (though not necessarily "moralizing"). This is not because politicians are hypocrites, but because the ends of politics must always present themselves as morally justified according to some set of standards or other. Even where politics becomes pathological or corrupt, those seeking power face an urgent political need to justify themselves in general terms. "The strongest man," wrote Rousseau, "is never strong enough to be master all the time, unless he transforms force into right and obedience into duty."[2] Political power can never merely assert itself, but must establish its moral legitimacy and thus, at the same time, the non-legitimacy of actual or potential challengers. The same necessity confronts all interests that assert themselves in the political arena: they must first constitute themselves, at the very least in the eyes of their supporters, as *legitimate* interests, arguing not just the contingent existence of their desires but the rightness and justness of their claims and demands.

This is not a morality that is either prior to or external to an amoral political realm and imposed upon it from without. It is a morality intrinsic to the very idea of politics, for politics must always deal with questions of legitimacy.[3] If politics is the eternal pursuit of ends, it is also the eternal pursuit of legitimacy. When a regime proclaims its legitimacy, it argues that existing structures of society and government, their manner of distributing power, the general ends and interests they encompass, are morally and practically justified. The more generally these claims are accepted (or at least acquiesced in) by the governed, the more stable is the regime.

Yet in the end-driven processes of politics, there is a perpetual tension between the implicit demand for justificatory reasons and the permanent temptation to use any means at hand, including coercive power, to

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968), Book I, chapter 3, p. 52.

[3] This is the essential point made by Bernard Williams in "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," paper delivered to Law Society, Yale University, May 1997.

achieve designated ends. Power's ideal is no doubt to have its existing form accepted as unchangeably given by God and Nature, to have legitimacy built in, so to speak, to the very fabric of social and political relations. This has hardly been possible in the West since early modern times, when religious and political dissent, economic expansion and the forces of the Enlightenment cracked the medieval citadel of unified faith. Indeed, as Pratap Mehta has pointed out, it is now hardly possible anywhere, since dissent and demands for reasonable justifications are no longer peculiar to the West but ubiquitous around the world.[4]

Faced with this necessity, power has seldom felt confident enough to rely solely on the strength of rational argument and unforced consent. Indeed, one can offer a generalization that reliance on moral persuasion declines in proportion as a political order succeeds in accruing power and has, consequently, more and different means available for consolidating itself. Power has many traditional ways of maintaining and enlarging itself that do not depend on moral reason but rather on the arousal of motives such as fear, suspicion, envy or greed – for example, military subjection, rigid organization, techniques of divide and rule, the judicious employment of terror, the use of patronage or pork-barreling bribery. Regimes and movements may also try to bind subjects by emotional rather than rational means, for example by fostering love or awe for nation, monarch or party leader.

As for reasonable justification, power frequently acknowledges the need for that in a negative manner, by attempting to control the processes of consent formation and by constraining the ability of the governed to question and criticize. Bureaucratic rule by decree (of the kind anatomized by Kafka), for example, evades justification by creating an atmosphere of absurdity in which people feel themselves the helpless playthings of an arbitrary fate that robs reason of meaning and therefore of political purchase. Totalitarian governments combine ruthless suppression of opposing opinion with indoctrination and the use of terror while building isolating walls round the community to prevent contamination from outside. And even in "open," liberal democratic regimes where "the people" are expected freely to consent to policy and to help choose their governors, and where critical opinion and debate is not just tolerated but in principle encouraged – even here the resources of power are frequently used to monitor, manipulate and channel public opinion so as to manufacture consent.[5]

[4] Pratap B. Mehta, "Pluralism after Liberalism?," *Critical Review* 11 (1997), pp. 503–518.

[5] See, for example, an interesting analysis of the manipulation of "public opinion" in Amy Fried, *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997).

Yet all the crude or ingenious techniques and strategies that attempt to elude or manipulate consent and foster acquiescence attest to the central significance of legitimacy in political life. The problem of legitimacy may be met by offering rationalized justifications or by the manipulative use of power or (usually) some combination of these, but it must be met.

Ideology and moral choice

As well as the perennial tension between justification and coercion, we must note a further significant tension within the notion of political justification itself. This is a tension between the demand for moral certainty and the existence of pervasive rational doubt. The end-driven practice of politics demands conviction and commitment, at least among an activist core, but moral reason cannot, according to modern thinking, provide the level of certainty that such conviction demands. In a world no longer squarely anchored in universally recognized ultimate foundations, any attempted legitimation is always potentially vulnerable to someone else's delegitimation, one's own certainties are always challenged by the incompatible certainties of others. The temptation is to claim that one's political commitments are somehow uniquely, objectively grounded in reality, therefore undeniable, not a matter of moral choice at all but of mere rationality. This stratagem lends a certain repressive, totalitarian air to even "moderate" political discourse.

It is a tendency that can be most clearly seen in the *ideologies* which, in self-conscious modern times, have been the principal vehicles for political end-values. Ideologies can be described as structures of argument and explanation that assert a set of political values, principles, programs and strategies allegedly deduced from arguments about religion, metaphysics, history, sociology, humanity, economics or justice. Though ideologies thus typically offer responses to philosophical, theological and social-scientific questions, ideological thought does not constitute a form of pure rational inquiry. Its descriptive claims are never disinterested. However elaborately ideologies may be supported by rational argument, they generally present their prescriptions as dogmas, political articles of faith, rather than invitations to further examination. This is precisely because political practice requires not dispassionate inquiry but sincere, usually passionate commitment. Ideology is, in other words, a vehicle of value more than of knowledge, geared not to contemplation but to an effective practice that must feel itself sufficiently assured of its own rightness. It must provide the moral force of legitimation without which political practice founders in a puzzlement of will. It demands a finality and certainty that is foreign to the kind of inquiry in which questions of fact

and value may always be reopened for rational scrutiny (where, indeed, certainty about both, or about the possibility of deriving unquestionable values from facts, is taken to be intrinsically problematical). It is not endless doubt and openness that an ideology needs in order to be effective, but conviction and closure.

Liberal ideologies might seem to be the exception here, for they tend to emphasize principles that are congruent with those of pure intellectual inquiry – toleration of variety of opinion, freedom of speech, and suspension of judgement in value matters. Yet the "ifs," "buts" and "on the other hands" of intellectual debate simply will not serve to get the vote out in a liberal democracy. Such a form of government can be seen as institutionalizing a consensually agreed principle superior to all ideologies and intended to tame and civilize the conflict between them. Democratic governance and the rule of law put constraints on the contestants and set limits to acceptable political behavior. The liberal democratic regime acts, so to speak, as the moral character of the polity, governing the political means that may be employed and also determining, to some extent, what may be regarded as acceptable ends (forbidding, for example, the destruction of democracy and the rule of law). Within this principled consensus, however, political action still requires certainty of purpose and commitment. There is always much at stake in a political contest, and constantly to defer or withhold judgment is to condemn oneself to political sterility.

Omnipresent doubt combined with the need for certainty causes ideologies to present their normative prescriptions not as choices to be made in the light of reasonable argument about values and goals, but as matters of *necessity*. The message tends to be that opposition is less a matter of reasonable disagreement than of downright irrationality. In fact, there is a strong tendency for political positions making the necessity argument to claim that they are not ideological at all, the label "ideology" being reserved for opposing views that somehow fail to see the objective necessity indicated. Here the term ideology, in addition to implying a politically ordered program, is freighted with the pejorative meaning of "false consciousness" given it by Marx. Opposing arguments are refuted by relativizing them, that is, by alleging that they are not a product of reason but of deterministic social and historical forces – thus conservative values express the social conditioning of an aristocratic class, liberal values the particular interests of a mercantile order, and so on. The contrasting objective "necessity" of one's own position may be founded on any of several bases – "scientific" rationality, an inexorable historical progress, the irresistible force of nature, inevitable economic development, or plain "common sense." Such arguments may come, what is more, from the

economistic Right, the technocratic Center or the revolutionary Left. Marxism may, for example, spring most immediately to mind when historical necessity is mentioned, but the doctrine is equally evident in neo-liberal responses to the globalizing market. It was Margaret Thatcher, after all, who coined the acronym TINA (''there is no alternative'') as the motto of her reforming New Right government. It was a dogma that received theoretical expression in the liberal triumphalism of Francis Fukuyama when he proclaimed that the fall of communism marked the ''end of history.'' Fukuyama argued that the market was the most ''natural'' form of economic organization and that ''the logic of modern natural science would seem to dictate a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism.'' The only opposition he could conceive to a univerally triumphant, ''rational'' capitalist order was the *irrational* opposition of history's ''last men'' (a concept borrowed from Nietzsche) who, bored with material plenty and peace, would want to drag the world back into history, warfare and squabbling.[6]

Such rhetorical tactics, as well as a means of disarming opposition, are an attempt to evade modern doubts about the possibility of deriving any certain moral position from any set of asserted ''facts'' – that is to say, of getting an objectively prescriptive ''ought'' out of an objectively descriptive ''is.'' The tendency has been to collapse the two categories together and regard imperatives for action as somehow inscribed in the very fabric of descriptive reality.[7] If ''is'' and ''ought'' are indistinguishable, then action will follow automatically from a correct understanding of reality and obviate the need for moral deliberation and choice. This was the idea at the heart of Marx's famous unity of theory and practice,[8] but it can also be found in the conservative philosophy of Michael Oakeshott who argued that, in intelligent, unselfconscious practice within a living political tradition, ''there is, strictly speaking, no such experience as moral choice.''[9]

Mutually contradictory necessities tend, of course, to cancel each other out and raise suspicion about all such assertions. Claims that political consent and commitment follow automatically and unproblematically from ''correct'' understandings of reality beg too many questions to be taken seriously. Since I assume that the possibility of moral capital is

[6] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1992), pp. xv and 312.

[7] For an excellent analysis on these lines, see Bernard Susser, *The Grammar of Modern Ideology* (London, Routledge, 1988).

[8] See my ''The End of Morality? Theory, Practice, and the 'Realistic Outlook' of Karl Marx,'' *NOMOS XXXVII: Theory and Practice* (New York University Press, 1995), pp. 403–439.

[9] Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 79.

based on the reality of moral judgment and moral commitment and therefore the possibility of moral choice, it is important to stress the falsity of all necessitarian arguments. The real nature of political commitment is always moral – a moral commitment to particular ends believed legitimate or valuable and inevitably also to other people with whom one shares such beliefs. The free moral character of political-ideological commitment is evident from the behavior even of determined ideologues who deny altogether the authenticity of moral language and thought, and also from their treatment of colleagues who have strayed from their allegiances. Consider the typically contrasting consequences of a change in pure intellectual belief, say in science, and of a corresponding shift in political allegiance. It is no doubt painful for a researcher if a long-cherished scientific theory is authoritatively overturned by new evidence, for it may have been at the core of a whole structure of belief, not to mention of a career. But the morally culpable course here would be to resist, for exterior motives, the adjustment of one's beliefs. A corresponding shift in political allegiance following a sincere alteration of belief, on the other hand, inevitably courts accusations of treachery.

The frequency of charges of betrayal and "selling out" reminds us that the point in politics is not just to bind oneself to beliefs about values and ends, but to bind oneself *faithfully*. I take this notion of faithful service to be the main hook to which moral capital attaches. Morality presumes moral choice, an identification of values argued to be worth defending or pursuing and directions held to be worth taking. Moral capital is credited to political agents on the basis of the perceived merits of the values and ends they serve and of their practical fidelity in pursuing them. It is only thus that the breed of "scurvy politicians" is redeemed if it is redeemed at all. Embarked on an ever-treacherous sea, politicians are forced to tack and trim and alter course, sometimes to lighten a leaky craft by abandoning a precious cargo of solemn promises, even to deal with the devil himself if that is the only way to make headway. But if they can keep their enterprise afloat and hold some sense of true direction toward the destination which alone justified the risky voyage, they will sometimes be rewarded with a reputation that enhances their political influence and effect.

Moral capital and moral ends

The end-driven nature of politics means that fidelity to professed values and goals must always be tied to effectiveness or, to put it another way, that character must be tied to political skill and *vice versa*.[10] Being a saint

[10] See Erwin C. Hargrove, *The President as Leader: Appealing to the Better Angels of Our Nature* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 180.

in politics is meaningless unless goodness is combined with the skill to achieve goals that others judge valuable. Even personal integrity, however fine in itself, is seldom enough in politics. A reputation for integrity, absent skill or ungirded by some larger principled commitment, can be easily destroyed amid the inevitable maneuvers, bargains and discarded promises of politics. Deviations and compromises are forgivable, even acceptable, however, where the compromiser is visibly, ably and consistently committed to particular goals and principles. Tactical retreats and digressions are legitimate if they are clearly for the sake of such larger ends. Because politics is end-driven practice, it is only in faithful commitment and effective practice over the long term that political players can expect to gain the moral credit that will sustain them among their colleagues, their followers and even their opponents, and thus solve that plaguing dilemma of the salesman mentioned above. But what must be the nature of the ends that thus give rise to moral capital?

"Politics is the pursuit of ends; decent politics is the pursuit of decent ends," wrote Leo Strauss, adding that "The responsible and clear distinction between ends which are decent and ends which are not is in a way presupposed by politics. It surely transcends politics."[11] Strauss claimed that the task of identifying eternally valid "decent" ends belonged to a small class of classically oriented, great-souled philosophers whose purity of purpose, largeness of mind and contemplative training placed them above the conflicting ideological opinions generated by opposed interests and allowed them to discern deep and enduring philosophical "truths." Whether such a condescending class exists, and whether it could effectively influence the denizens of the political realm even if it did, are debatable points. Strauss, at any rate, points to an important question for a study of moral capital in politics, namely: must the investigator express or imply a view of what constitutes a properly moral (or "decent") political end if he or she is to identify genuine instances of the phenomenon? It goes without saying that in all political contests each side argues the rightness of its own position and wins support on this differential basis. The ends to which politics may be put are very numerous and often incompatible even within a single culture, never mind from culture to culture.

For one species of ends – the venal – this is scarcely a problem. Though the rhetoric of politicians generally centers on values and principles, their practice may descend to the level of selfish competition and grubby deals that have nothing to do with the wider goals that found their political legitimacy. It hardly matters what values are proclaimed and betrayed;

[11] Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York, Basic Books, 1968), p. 13.

hypocrisy is always vulnerable to immanent critique which, by revealing the disparity between word and action, morally undermines the hypocrite. Regimes given over to such hypocritical practices forfeit moral capital and soon begin to lose their legitimacy in the eyes of their own constituents. Much more serious for the current project than the sometime ascendancy of selfishness and hypocrisy, however, is the extreme diversity of political ends that may be asserted and pursued with perfect moral sincerity. Since moral capital comes into being only through the judgments of people persuaded that a cause or party or person is morally right or morally inspired, it will exist wherever people may be so persuaded, whatever the content of the moral views. In a world unmoored from certain, divinely ordained foundations, the greatest danger is therefore less the exercise of an amoral, irresponsible freedom than the freedom to conceive of any end at all as moral and any means toward it as right.

The totalitarian movements of the twentieth century constituted a limiting case that proved conclusively there is no inherent restriction on what might be adopted as a political end and no necessary limit to the ruthless means that might be employed in achieving it. They showed that it was possible to conceive and carry out the destruction not just of a particular legal and political system, but of the nation state itself, of laws as such, of whole bureaucratic structures, of whole social classes and entire categories of people defined by race, nationality or state of health, and to eliminate any activity pursued independently for its own sake (even chess!) that might undermine an individual's total subjection to totalizing power.[12] And for the most part, the initiators of totalitarian rule pursued their aims in the name of some grand moral imperative – the Aryan domination of the sub-human races of the world or the final establishment of pure socialist equality. There is no doubt that Hitler regarded the goal of racial domination which produced his murderous policies towards Jews and other groups as a moral imperative; indeed, he thought himself a moral hero for undertaking a dirty but necessary task that few others could stomach.[13] A core of Nazi functionaries certainly regarded the programs of euthanasia, deportation and extermination, even when these progressed at the expense of the war effort, as "ethical" necessities.[14] There is no doubt, either, that millions of Germans were responsive to such claims.[15] Even the doctrine of destruction which was

[12] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 322.
[13] See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London, Hutchinson, 1969), p. 46.
[14] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 429.
[15] This appears to be an implication of the controversial book by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, Knopf, 1996).

such a feature of Nazi ideology had moral appeal for people in 1930s Germany, who desired nothing more than the destruction of a social-political regime characterized by hypocrisy and ineffectuality, whose last shred of legitimacy had been stripped in the crises of the 1920s.

It may thus have been a savage morality that Hitler embodied but it was formally a morality nonetheless, and insofar as he won approval and devotion partly on the strength of it he must be taken as showing, in his terrible way, the potential power of moral capital in politics. Certainly, no one could fault his fanatical commitment nor his political effectiveness. It is also true, of course, that it is impossible, when one is not under the thralldom either of bitter despair or of totalitarian power, to find Nazi morality rationally intelligible. Such moralities are able to persuade deeply disgruntled people of the good of evil policies, or rather that doing good for oneself and one's kind requires doing great evil to one's enemies, however arbitrarily defined. This is only to make the point that the quality of our moral judgments about leaders, parties and policies implies at the same time a judgment on ourselves and the manner in which our own moral capacities may be affected by our fears, anxieties, prejudices and desires. A sometime tendency (notably in America) to distinguish a populace that is by definition virtuous from a political elite that is invariably corrupt, radically falsifies the reality of the interrelationship between governors and governed, leaders and led. As Machiavelli noted, it is not just princes that may be "corrupt" and "corruptible," but whole populations.[16] The possibility of the demagoguery that shadows democratic politics attests to the ubiquitous existence of baser impulses that, rather than what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," may be tapped by unscrupulous politicians capable of gracing sordid desires with a mask of seeming virtue. They provide the opportunity for what in contemporary parlance is called wedge politics, the technique of dividing electorates by creating scapegoats and hate objects on the basis of categories such as race, receipt of welfare, religion and so on – human caricatures that, as Joseph McCarthy (a master of wedge politics) said, dramatize the difference between Them and Us.

It is also true that all political movements of a totalitarian tendency end up subverting the capacity for free moral judgment that is the essential condition for the formation of moral capital. Whatever reliance the famous totalitarian leaders placed on moral appeals on their way to power, once power was achieved their aim was to paralyze the ability of their populations to think in properly moral ways at all. This they achieved through ruthless indoctrination, terror and the consolidation of a social-

[16] Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1970), Book I, Discourses 16–18, pp. 153–164.

political organization that determined people's effective reality. The role of the absolutely obedient individual was neither to understand nor to judge, but blindly and selflessly to do. All manifestations of individual initiative or independent thought and action had to be ruthlessly expunged. Even sincere commitment to the regime and its goals became suspect insofar as it denoted an independent will. The basis of all social trust between individual and individual was destroyed as each person (merely by virtue of having a capacity to think and therefore to change his or her mind) was turned into a potential suspect, every neighbor into a perpetual spy. The result was the production of morally incapacitated human beings who would accept the commission of huge evils and even help to operate the engines of extermination provided evil was routinized as a duty attached to an ordinary job.

The suffocating leader worship characteristic of totalitarian masses, intentionally fostered by the "cult of personality," is a manifestation and function of this curtailment of moral freedom and moral sensibility. It cannot be identified with the free grant of moral capital which it is the intention of this book to analyze. For moral capital to be a political phenomenon worthy of study, we must assume that people are capable of making relatively unforced judgments about the worth and rightness of political values and goals, as well as of the fidelity, sincerity and effectiveness of political actors and organizations who embody and pursue these goals; and, further, these judgments must be deemed capable of political effect insofar as they underpin allegiance, loyalty and service to persons, causes and parties. One might say, indeed, that moral capital operates in a political system in inverse proportion to that system's use of extrinsic power to engineer submission, loyalty and belief.

No hard and fast line can be drawn here, however, and one may rather assume a spectrum of possibilities. On the one end, even totalitarian regimes (which can be cultural-religious as well as political) preserve some overarching moral ideal that serves to legitimate the domination they practice; on the other, even the most open and democratic systems use power, as we have noted, to influence belief in more or less subtle ways. Many contemporary writers rely on such a principle to argue that power produces its own reality in our liberal democracies just as surely as in totalitarian regimes, so that the apparently free assent of individuals to their own domination is explicable in terms of social coercion.[17] (Bernard

[17] For example, Michel Foucault's claim that "truth" is an effect of systems of power: "Truth and Power," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984), pp. 51–75. See also Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 237: "The force underpins the legitimacy as the legitimacy conceals the force." This is a form of critique traceable to Marx, of course, but beyond him to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in the *Social*

Williams has formulated the general type of this argument as a "critical theory principle," which states that "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified.")[18] It is also true, on a more mundane level, that all political systems need to instill their values in the populace, and what we in Western countries call "civics" or "political education" can seldom be wholly distinguished from indoctrination. Moreover, the legions of propagandists, spin doctors and vested interests reveal the power of money and technique to manipulate the opinion of a populace who often tend anyway to "like not with their judgment, but their eyes." We need not assume, therefore, that we can always simply differentiate in practice values irrationally inculcated and values rationally adopted.

Despite this, it would be foolish to deny the reality and importance of choice. In non-totalitarian environments there is generally a fairly wide range of moral positions actively competing for attention and allegiance as well as a permanent battle engaged for the enlargement of the sphere of genuine deliberation. We must take seriously the existence of leaders and would-be leaders, parties, causes and movements who cannot simply command obedience but must win and maintain support, at least in part on the strength of their expression of and service to principled goals and commitments. If moral capital is a genuine political resource then it is one based more on an attractive than on a compulsive power. Therefore, though it is impossible to put a limit on what people may be persuaded are moral ends worth struggling for, I intend to limit my inquiry here to values and ends that can be broadly characterized as "decent." By this I mean ends capable in principle of dispassionate assessment and affirmation (even if one does not in fact affirm them), whose general acceptance is explicable in terms of intrinsic moral appeal rather than dependent on a sociological-psychological analysis of the acceptor.

Having introduced this element of "bias" into my study, it does not follow that it is either possible or necessary to provide a definitive list of decent ends and values that alone may form a proper basis for moral capital. That would be absurd, since even decent ends non-coercively chosen are infinitely contestable and liable to conflict. Think, for example, of the inherent tension between the values of freedom and order which different people try, in good faith, and sometimes in quite different circumstances, to resolve in quite different ways. More than that, moral argument in politics is very often about the proper *means* to ends rather than about "decent ends" as such, and evil can be done as readily in the

Contract (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986), pp. 51–52, explains the slave's acceptance of the rightness of slavery in such terms.

[18] Bernard Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," p. 10.

name of genuine good as in the name of a perverted goal. Indeed, the tragedy is more poignant when zealotry subverts decent aims. "The ardour of undisciplined benevolence seduces us into malignity," as Coleridge said, writing of Robespierre, leading us into "the dangerous and gigantic error of making certain evil the means to contingent good."[19] Yet there can often be genuine doubt in this matter that is not easily settled. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King both sought the liberation of black Americans, but one argued the necessity of violent resistance and separation, the other of peaceful protest and integration. Both attracted adherents who believed the superior argument lay with their own movement.

As Max Weber put it, "the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice."[20] The play of moral capital in politics is most clearly seen in the contest between alternative and conflicting choices.

[19] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Introductory Address, Addresses to the People* (London, no publisher named, 1938), p. 32.

[20] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber* (London, Routledge, 1970), p. 152.