Sample of a Student Paper with Inserted Comments

This is an example that combines commenting approach #1 and #5. The student writer has inserted marginal comments to ask for feedback from a peer reviewer. The reviewer has responded to the writer’s questions directly and has also written a “head comment” and additional marginal comments that offer focused suggestions for revision. (The reviewer’s marginal comments appear in bold text.)

S.

I honestly enjoyed reading your paper. I think it had excellent structure and brought up a couple of very interesting points. I disagreed with the point of view you took on the subject but yet I found your argument to make logical sense. I understood the line you took on Eichmann and the fact that it was challenging makes the effort even more commendable.

The main focus of your revision (as you correctly identified through your comments) is your second body paragraph. The argument you attempt to make in that paragraph is a little tricky and is complicated a little bit by a quote that I didn’t see as directly related. Re-read that paragraph; I think you will understand what I am talking about. Also keep in mind that it’s important to link this point back to your main argument – that might help you iron out some of the issues in the coherence of the argument.

Finally, to do with word count (as suggested in one of my final comments), removing some matter from your intro is a good place to start. Summarize a little less or do so more succinctly. Also, try and paraphrase one or two quotes, that might help you save some words and express the ideas a way that adds to the strength of your central thesis.

Hope this helps, good luck with final editing.

S

Guilt and Dirty Hands

What happens when a person’s agency is taken away, and to what extent can they be held accountable for their actions? Michael Walzer addresses this question in his essay “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands.” According to Walzer, politicians sometimes have a right, even a duty, to do things that are ethically wrong when they are faced with a moral dilemma. As a political actor, Nazi transportation expert Adolf Eichmann could have attempted to use Walzer’s argument to defend himself during his trial for his part in the death of thousands of Jewish people, but to use this argument Eichmann would have to prove that he meets the criteria of two crucial components of
Walzer’s theory of dirty hands. First, Walzer argues, in order to have dirty hands the actor must be acting for the good of others; second, he must acknowledge his guilt. The fact that Eichmann could claim he feels guilty and argue that he was doing what he thought was best to promote the “good” motives of the Nazi’s, shows the possible loopholes Walzer’s argument could present to enable the unjust political actor to escape punishment.

Walzer argues that there are many instances in which, “a particular act of government […] may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong” (Walzer 161). In Walzer’s model a political actor is justified in breaking moral laws because he has an ethic of duty to answer tough political questions without referencing his personal moral beliefs. If Eichmann used Walzer’s argument, he could claim that he was acting on behalf of all Germans to achieve their political goal. As Ardent claims, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, [and] they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (Ardent 276). If Eichmann does not consciously know that he is doing something wrong, and truly believes that his acts are to achieve what is best for all, then he could claim his hands are simply dirty and he is not guilty of doing any more than fulfilling his duty as a political actor.

Furthermore, Walzer’s model requires that a political actor who breaks the moral code understands his guilt and is perceived as guilty. Although Eichmann does not appeal to the guilt requirement of Walzer’s argument, Ardent claims when, “for whatever reasons, even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed” (Ardent 277). This guilt requirement of dirty hands creates a problem when dealing with people like Eichmann who are not truly achieving a greater good for all, but who could either feign guilt under Walzer’s model to escape punishment or claim they are only doing what they believe is truly correct. Eichmann could have argued he did not need to feel guilt because dirty hands classify his actions as simply duties of his job.

Although Eichmann can’t actually claim that he has dirty hands because he is not facing a genuine moral dilemma, the possibility that he could appeal to an ethic of duty to commit moral wrongs shows the weakness of Walzer’s model. If one can do anything in politics because they face a tough moral decision, when is the politician supposed to be held accountable? Ardent argues, “…guilt and innocence before the law are of an objective nature, and even if eighty million Germans had done as [Eichmann] did, this would not have been an excuse for [him]” (Ardent 278). Walzer’s idea of dirty hands comes dangerously close to permitting this argument and allowing politicians to commit any immoral act so long as their aim is “good”, which leaves the door open for immoral men to escape punishment for unspeakable wrongs.