

Politics without Ethics: A Seemingly Impossible Possibility

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ABSTRACT

Many people denounce politics as a nasty game- devoid of morality, principles and standard. Many people laude the idea of detachment of politics from ethics as a plausible idea to sustain and be successful in the business of politics. Politics is picturised as a jungle where stabbing at the neck is the rule of the show. Spare Gandhiji who tried to make a bridge between politics and ethics. This paper is a humble attempt to establish the candid connection between the two. The paper excavates the moral groundings of politics as a human enterprise. Doing that, the paper also rebuffs the consequentialist claim of moral justification. The utilitarian moral justification stresses on consequence as the ground for moral justification. By that it pats for the end rather than moral worthiness of means. The end justifies the means is the saying. However, this disconnection has brought innumerable damage for politics as well as contemporary world. Therefore, it is necessary to find the moral groundings for both the end and the means.

Key Words: *ethics, consequentialism, deontology, end and means.*

Aristotle declares that man is a political animal. That means indulgence in political affairs is *raison de tre* for human beings. His declaration delineates the undistinguishability between human affairs from that of political affairs. So at the outset, political affair is a humane affair, performed by human, for humans. On this light, we can now in a position to define politics. In common parlance, politics is that part of human affair that is essentially relative to their political behavior or especially relationship between state and citizen. Politics essentially sets power structure, studies its shades, and critically examines its strictures. But a natural question creeps from above discussion that: why do human behave politically? Aristotle might have ended the debate by simply thumping up the answer that it is the nature of human beings. The question however does not stop here. The most plausible answer may be to say that it is essential to realize a good life. This is also true about Aristotle who treats the study of politics as a branch of practical knowledge, of knowing what political action to adopt to deal with a particular set of circumstances. Human actions may be of two types: individual and collective. Politics engulfs both. At many time human beings design unique strategies to make their life more meaningful. At other time their action embraces many other similar individuals to accomplish their shared desires. Therefore, a close scrutiny shall disclose that only few human actions are purely individual actions. Hence many people think that human life is nothing but a political life.

To many, politics however, is not understood in this broader perspective. For them, politics is a very close restrained human affair related only to government. Therefore, people who are closely or directly associated with public administration are said to be doing politics. This is quite a narrow view about politics. For many, politics bears a pejorative meaning too. By this, they mean any unethical action is politics. If a someone makes a conspiracy in order to achieve selfish desires, he or she is said to be indulging himself or herself in politics. Any unethical action used for attaining conceived desire is politics. But what about an action that is meant for political desires? Does it come under politics in this semantic world? To answer these questions, we have to delve into the conceptual world of ethics.

But before that, let's spend some more time on the restricted meaning of politics. In its restricted meaning politics is solely a governmental affair. It aims at formulating certain norms according to which some political moves are designed. In this regard, Aristotle considers politics, as arising in organized states that was an aggregate of many members from different tribes, religion, interest and tradition. From this we can assume that for Aristotle politics is a collective action meant for collective effort. Given the fact that human beings have to live and accordingly move their strategies through the collectives, it is evident that most part of their actions is group oriented or other oriented. Therefore, Susila Ramaswamy very aptly puts "politics arises from accepting the fact that different groups with different interests and traditions could coexist simultaneously within a territory under common rule. This means the presence of different truths and degree of tolerance towards recognizing and accepting these making governments possible and also necessary for mediating between rival interests through negotiation, accommodation and conciliation.

Politics brings together under the aegis of government, different groups each with their interests so that they can and will speak freely and thereby achieve order.” From this we may presume that even though politics in its restricted meaning emphasizes on governmental affairs, all these are simply means for a broad norm, i.e., to assimilate groups through cohesive actions to realize many desires.

Like Aristotle and Arendt, Oakeshott describes “politics as an activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements compose a single community (1956:12). For him politics is an activity of mutual relationship to attain the best self. From all these, what we can conclude is that though political actions are defined through a narrow lens of governmental arrangement, it divulges this private public demarcation. Political action determines the validity of individual action, while individual actions provide necessary impetus to political activity. The truth however remains that both our collective action through politics and our individual action through ethics (if at all) aim at realizing a good life. Politics without ethics (is not defined yet) cannot be distinguishable.

Till now we were defining ethics as a set of individual actions to lead a good life. There we found that since both ethics and politics have a common goal, i.e. to realize a good life: at least from this point of view, politics and ethics cannot be distinguished. Now onwards, we shall see that ethics is not merely a set of individualistic thought to realize individualistic goals as many people seem to believe. It is out and out social or group oriented. The etymology of ethics proves our point empathetically. The word ethics comes from the root word ‘ethica’ which means custom or tradition. The other name of ethics is moral philosophy. The word ‘moral’ again is originated from the root word ‘mores’ which means also custom or tradition. Therefore, ethics is a systematic study of human custom or tradition. Of course, here I do distinguish ethics from morality. Ethics is a study of morality. According to etymology, it is a study of group morality. Because custom is generally conceived as a group habit or intentional or repeated action of a group. In this regard William Frankena puts utmost clearly where he distinguishes morality from prudence or etiquette. For him prudence is associated with individual deliberate action while etiquette is associated with something descriptive attitude of a group. But ethics has to be somehow related to a larger audience and has to be normative. In this way, Frankena mulls away the individualistic notion of ethics. Frankena however does not distinguish between ethics and morality but from his standpoint we can conclude that ethics is also a study of collective action which politics does. Therefore, politics cannot be distinguished from ethics, since both studies collective action. The most probable repurcation towards this would be that, if politics and ethics are indistinguishable then are they same? Here we have to delve into ethics in detail.

Many people conceive ethics as a system of some objective and universal rules which are either dependent on religion or designed mysteriously to which we have nothing to do but participate. In this regard I have to invoke Peter Singer’s view on ethics where he rebuffs ethics to be dependent on religion. Peter Singer himself invokes Plato’s argument where Plato tempts to show that something is good not because it is prescribed by god as people believe but the other way around. Something is good therefore god prescribes it. But on the other way, some people think ethics to be relative to society and culture which also raises many eyebrows. If something is good but one society or culture does not propagate it, it does not turn into bad, if something is good it has to be good cutting across societies or cultures. Peter Singer therefore rejects relative nature of ethics and propounds that ethics has to be universal in nature. But for theory making, Peter Singer emphasizes on rationality the most. Ethical rules should not be created in vacuum. They would be applied in actual societies, concrete situations by living people. Therefore, ethical theory has to be created in proper rationalization. Ethics is not therefore some settled, predesigned set of rules which are thrown upon us. But they are created here and now, every day in and day out. But making of ethical theories has to be rational deliberation. The question however remains that why should we make ethical theory. Ethical theories aim at ensuring good life to humanities. Politics as a system of study borrows these ethical deliberations and through its tool of political institutions tries to realize them without which people cannot live their fullest life. Therefore, politics without ethics becomes empty, blind. Therefore, politics without ethics is impossibility.

Many people consider politics not as a study but activity, deliberate, strategic to fulfill some vested interest. For them politics is that game where to attain power is the aim. Even then also, if politics is an activity to attain some goal, then it has to be rational. For, irrational activity may frustrate one’s goal. Since politics is a public activity, without rational deliberation, politics loses its edge. Since we saw that morality is nothing but act of rationality, political activity has to be moral, otherwise it itself ceases to be politics and turns to be blunders of fools.

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Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other

~ Abraham Lincoln