The Task of Politics within Morals

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Moral philosophical perspective: I am a moral philosopher or ethicist, not a politician. In this talk I would like to speak about the task of politics in the field of morality from a moral philosophical perspective.

Changing morality made of complex instruments: Many people, including some moral philosophers, think morality consists of moral norms like: 'Thou shalt not lie or cheat!' 'Thou shalt not hurt anyone!' 'Thou shalt be helpful to those in need!' etc. And such norms are simply there naturally. But both assumptions are wrong. For one thing, the system of morality is actually much more complex, encompassing many more kinds of things, and it reaches much further into our actions and social structure. For another, morality is not simply there; it changes historically, or more precisely: we humans create and change it historically.

The two parts of the system of morality: But let's be more specific. According to a basic idea, shared in most philosophical ethics, the system of morality consists of two major parts. The first part is the *system of moral evaluation*, i.e. it is primarily criteria for how we should morally evaluate; in addition, there are exemplary evaluations of many individual objects and states. (Ideally, these evaluation criteria are shared by all people or all members of a society and then form the basis for communal action. In fact, of course, this is not so. But in many social decisions, we do strive to place them on a broadly shared basis of values.) The second part of the system of morality consists of social norms, virtues, but also public institutions such as the judiciary or political decision-making systems and the executive. In general, one can say that the second part of the system of morality consists of *instruments that serve to realise moral values* in the world, to create moral good and to prevent moral bad, i.e. to improve the world morally.

Welfare ethical moral evaluation criteria: Let us first look at moral values and evaluation criteria. The most important conceptions of moral evaluations today are welfare-ethical. The moral value – or as ethicists also say: the moral desirability – of an object, e.g. an action or a social norm, is composed of the individual utilities of this object for all those affected by it. In the simplest case, namely in utilitarianism, the individual utilities are simply added up: Some people have advantages

from the object, others may have disadvantages because of it, all this is added up. In the case of more differentiated evaluation criteria, aspects of distributive justice are also taken into account when aggregating the individual utilities into an overall moral evaluation, e.g. in prioritarianism, improvements for people who are badly off are given greater weight in this aggregation. The resulting aggregated desirability is thus the moral or social desirability; one also says that this moral desirability is the *general good*. The advantage of this kind of evaluation is that it captures everything that has value for anyone, namely everything that is relevant to any individual about the object. The other advantage is that these moral evaluations also capture *only* what is of value to someone; thus obscure values such as something being for the good of the nation or pleasing to the gods are ignored. Moreover, these types of evaluations can take into account aspects of distributive justice such as whether someone is particularly disadvantaged and should therefore be given priority for additional benefits.

Instruments for the realisation of moral values: The rest of my talk will deal with the moral instruments for the realisation of moral values. The most common of these instruments are moral norms. *Moral norms* are social norms that are morally good. Thereby, *social norms* are rules of action that are largely generally followed in a community and whose known non-observance is usually punished. These norms and punishments can be *formal*, legal; the punishments will then be imposed by agents specifically authorised to do so – from verbal warnings to the death penalty. And the norms and punishments can be *informal*; the punishments will then be imposed by any people interested in the functioning of the norm – from frowning to lynching. As said: Such social norms are only moral if their social validity is morally good, i.e. if they are classified as morally comparatively good instruments according to the moral evaluation criteria. Then they also constitute moral duties: That is, someone has a *moral duty* to do an action precisely when this is commanded by a morally good socially valid norm. Moral norms, however, are not the only instruments for the realisation of moral values; morally good institutions are also part of this, from good political decision-making systems to morally good, socially organised health care to kindergartens.

Moral progressivism: Such instruments for the realisation of moral values are not fixed, but evolve historically. The historical tendency of this dynamic is that with these instruments more and more areas of our lives are moralised and improved: less violence, more protection of rights, more care, etc. However, these instruments for the realisation of moral values do not come into being and maintain themselves by themselves. Rather, people have deliberately invented such instruments, proposed and implemented them in the form of social reforms: in discussions with their fellow human beings, political campaigns and struggles, in parliamentary votes, but also, for example, by setting a good example and anticipating morally good norms that are not yet in force. In addition, many make efforts to maintain and support these instruments, for example by informally punishing the transgression of moral norms or reporting them to the authorities, educating others about the meaning of these norms.

Types of moral actions: In addition to the moral duty to follow morally good social norms, there are thus two classes of morally important actions here that are usually overlooked: *1. moral-*

political commitment to improving the instruments for realising moral values and *2. support for moral institutions*. These types of actions cannot be moral duties in the narrower sense just defined because there is no corresponding socially general action and no sanction pressure behind them. Rather, there is here only a moral *recommendation* and demand to act in this way, which is motivationally based predominantly on moral insight and moral commitment. These moral recommendations apply to all people.

Primary task of politicians: But these recommendations apply especially to *politicians*. In complexly organised societies, politicians are at the switching points for reforming or abolishing old norms and establishing new ones and social institutions, but also for the general maintenance of existing norms. Their *task* in the system of morality is then to use this formative and supportive potential to morally improve the moral instruments for enforcing moral values. In other words, they shall enforce and maintain morally better norms and institutions. (Of course, when it comes to questions of personal behaviour, politicians should also lead by example. But that, morally speaking, is not their main task; rather, their main task is moral politics.)

Moral evaluation: What should politicians do more precisely? How should they decide? First of all, they need to morally evaluate potential new measures using the moral evaluation criteria mentioned earlier and thus determine which of them are morally how good, which are better than others. The next step is seemingly to seek to enforce the morally best measures. But it is not that simple, there are at least two limitations here.

Social feasibility of the measures: Firstly, for all citizens moral commitment is always in competition with their personal prudential interests; they are only prepared to make a certain moral commitment. For politicians, this means that they should try to push through the morally best among those measures that are socially feasible, i.e. that are supported by the population; in democratic societies, the re-election of politicians also depends on this. In addition, they can and should try to push the limits of the feasible moral good through appropriate contributions to the discussion.

Limited budget for universalistic projects: Secondly, all action, including moral-political action, is socially situated: We live in social environments for which we have a special moral responsibility. The moral evaluation criteria outlined above are universalistic; for them, all people count equally. If we always try to realise what is universalistically morally best, then in richer countries, for example, there is the danger that most of the morally very good measures would have to be realised outside one's own country, in poorer countries, because there the moral efficiency is greater, one therefore can achieve more of the morally good there than in one's own country through good investments. In this respect, there are limits to universalistic moral commitment, on the one hand, due to the special responsibility towards one's own community and, on the other hand, again due to the limits of the willingness in the population to support such universalistic measures. This means that only a part of the budget of moral commitment can and should flow into truly universalistic projects, as much as the population is willing to contribute. Here, too, politicians can and should – in addition to decisions on the budget of moral commitment – still try to push the limits of the feasible moral universalistic good through appropriate contributions to the discussion.

Summary: I summarise my central theses on the tasks of politics in morality.

1. The moral tasks of politics: The actual tasks of politics and politicians in the system of morality are 1. the moral-political commitment to the moral improvement of the social instruments for the realisation of moral values, i.e. the social norms and institutions, and 2. the support for the functioning of these instruments.

2. Orientation towards moral desirability: The potential new measures must be e valuated on the basis of the criteria for moral desirability.

3. Goal: Enforce morally optimal socially feasible measures: Politicians should then advocate for the one among the socially feasible measures that is morally optimal.

4. Realistic portion of genuinely universalistic commitment: A proportion of the budget for moral commitment that is as large as possible but realistically enforceable should thereby also be used for the genuinely universalistically morally best measures.

Slides

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Morality is changing and consists of complex instruments.

Two parts of the system of morality:
1. System of moral evaluation;
2. instruments that serve to realise moral values in the world.

Welfare-ethical evaluation:
Moral value of p := aggregation of all individual utilities of p.

Instruments for the realisation of moral values:
Moral norms = morally good social norms.
Moral duty to do an action precisely when this is commanded by a morally good socially valid norm.

Moral progressivism:

Types of moral actions:
1. Moral duty to comply to morally good and socially valid social norms.
2. Moral-political commitment to improving the instruments for realising moral values and
3. support for moral institutions.

Primary task of politicians:
enforce and maintain morally better norms and institutions.

What should politicians do?
Moral evaluation of measures with the help of moral evaluation criteria.
Only socially feasible measures, but among them choose the morally best.
Limited budget for universalistic projects.

Summarising theses:

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2. Orientation towards moral desirability: The potential new measures must be evaluated on the basis of the criteria for moral desirability.

3. Goal: Enforce morally optimal socially feasible measures: Politicians should then advocate for the one among the socially feasible measures that is morally optimal.

4. Realistic portion of genuinely universalistic commitment: A proportion of the budget for moral commitment that is as large as possible but realistically enforceable should thereby also be used for the genuinely universalistically morally best measures.