

Ethics in Politics; a Comparison between Machiavelli, Qur'an and Ali

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Abstract

The subject of “ethics in governing and ruling” has always been of interest to scholars and thinkers of all societies. Ethics in politics or ethical politics is still a controversial issue among great thinkers of political and moral philosophy. Having a short look at the theories of philosophers from different schools about the relationship between ethics and politics, and having made a comparison between Plato, Aristotle, Marx, and Machiavelli, this article tries to describe and present the viewpoint of the Qur'an and 'Ali ibn Abi-Talib about the matter. This article shows that the principal ruling method recommended by Niccolo Machiavelli, which is practically accepted by all rulers, and that is instrumentality in statebuilding –an approach represented by the saying “the ends justify the means.” Whereas, the Prophet of Islam's son-in-law, his closest companion, and his chosen successor; 'Ali ibn Abi-Talib, has explicitly rejected this idea, and the holy Qur'an has allowed using a forbidden method just in case of "saving one's life," which is quite humane.

Keywords: political ethics, Machiavellianism, religious government, political Fiqh, Qur'anic teachings, Nahj al-Balagha.

Introduction

One of the noteworthy and challenging issues in the doctrines of political theorists, which has a direct appearance in the political practices of governors, is that to what extent the actions of a governor are bound by humane ethical principles, and what ethical limitations predominate in governmental procedures.

Being discussed under various subjects as; ethics in power, ethics in leadership, or political ethics, this is a key issue in the Theory of Power, which could not be perceived as a complete theory, so long as this question remains unanswered. In other words, along with questions such

as 'Why should there be leadership?' and 'Who should be the leader?', what also needs to be discussed is 'how should a leader rule?'

Karl Raimund Popper looks at the issue more seriously. He is convicted that by expressing the problem of politics in the form 'Who should rule?' or 'Whose will should be supreme?', etc., Plato created a lasting confusion in political philosophy. He says:

It is clear that once the question 'Who should rule?' is asked, it is hard to avoid some such reply as 'the best' or 'the wisest'... (Popper, 125).

Having observed all possible responses to this question based on philosophical attitudes, communism, socialism, tyranny, racism, democracy, etc., he asserts that it is pointless to answer this question.

But if we approach political theory from a different angle, then we find that far from solving any fundamental problems, we have merely skipped over them, by assuming that the question 'Who should rule?' is fundamental. For even those who share this assumption of Plato's¹ admit that political rulers are not always sufficiently 'good' or 'wise'..., and that it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely (id. 126).

He adds this preface to his statements that to produce a realist and practical political theory, we should prepare for the worst leaders, and hope for the best. Eventually, he arrives at the conclusion that:

[It is inevitable] to replace the question: 'Who should rule?' by the new question: 'How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?' (id. 126).

His chief idea is that we should not get involved in this useless discussion of 'Who should be the ruler?' or 'Is a certain class² qualified to rule over the society?', and we should rather concentrate on and discuss that 'How should a ruler –whoever it may be –rule, and what principles should he follow?'

¹ Plato believes that the "best" and "wisest" should rule.

² Jurists, workers, nobles, philosophers, etc.

Ethics

Ethics is proposed in various spheres with many definitions enlarging or shortening its borders.

Sometimes it indicates the values residing in religious, rituals, or common beliefs of a certain society in which a person lives, and sometimes it suggests a collection of values, and spiritual and pleasant affairs which are considered favorable for a person. The first one is called 'ethics', and the second, which is personal merits and virtues, is called 'morality' (Kaykha, 24-25).

The terminological meaning of ethics among those majored in this field is a permanent disposition of character (*Malakah*) which makes a person act accordingly without hesitation. *Malakahs* are those attitudes which do not disappear easily, contrary to those attitudes which disappear rapidly(*Hal*).

In his book, *Tahdhib al-'Akhlaq wa Tathir al-'A'raq*, Ibn Muskuyah says:

A disposition is a kind of *Hal* (temporary attitude) which leads a person to certain actions without hesitation and thinking –a *Hal* which is acquired through habit and practice and might be generated by thinking. Then it occurs successively, until it forms a disposition of character (*Malakah*) (Ibn Muskuyah, 51).

It could be, therefore, asserted about ethics that; firstly, the emphasis is on the stability and resistance of dispositions and attitudes –those which are rather stable and do not change easily.

Secondly, ethical behaviour (both virtuous and wicked) is rooted in dispositions of character, and, similarly, is hardly ever changeable.

Thirdly, the word 'ethics' has two applications: sometimes it indicates dispositions of character, and sometimes it describes the very ethical behavior practiced by a person, though it may be preceded by thinking and consideration. The second usage is more common, inasmuch as the common understanding from the sentence 'such and such person has good ethics', is that he has good behavior.

The major point in this definition is the stability and solidity of ethical dispositions, which could be noticed in the statements of all ethics scholars. In their opinion, ethical dispositions –including

vice and virtue –are rooted in dispositions of one's character (*Malakah*), and would hardly ever change. One's behavior and conduct are owed to these internal dispositions.

Another point is that the term 'ethics' has two applications: 1. Dispositions of character (*Malakah*), 2. Ethical behavior.

Politics

Expressing the definition of politics, 'Ali-Akbar Dekhoda has introduced several definitions, and proposed equivalents such as; to watch over the state, to rule over citizens, to rule and manage and judge, to manage citizens, advice, expedient, foresight, sulk, and formidableness (Dekhoda, Vol. 28, P. 741). Then, at the mention of concepts such as; social politics, physical politics, virtuous politics, governmental politics, household politics, international politics, and so on, he describes governmental politics as:

Governmental politics, which is a branch of practical philosophy, is the knowledge of the interests of a crowd who are gathered in a city or country based on cooperation, survival, and the improvement of personal life. And it has two parts; one is related to the state and government which is called political science, and the other belongs to divine religions and rulings and the instructions of prophets, which is called the knowledge of *Nawamis* (divine rulings) (id. Vol. 28, P. 741).

Politics, as a specific term, means all the affairs related to government, and the management and determination of forms and purposes of governmental activities. A governmental affair is an attempt to preserve or acquire power, or to impose governmental power with respect to various purposes and intentions ('Ashuri, 212-213).

It is clear that in this article, the term 'politics' means to rule over citizens and to impose power upon the members of the society in accordance with their social welfare. Thus a ruling attitude regardless of common welfare is excluded, although it is perceived as politics in a general sense of the term.

The Connection between Ethics and Politics

Ethics and politics are linked by the employment of ethical theories to arrange political relations between political elements, and of course more importantly, what concerns political philosophers is the arrangement of relations between political units and people (Dabbagh, 85). The connection between ethics and politics should not be taken as similar to the connection between two separate working or scientific spheres, since the kind of questions and problems dealt with in ethical philosophy are also presented in a way in political philosophy.

Two fundamental questions of political philosophy could be discussed in ethical philosophy in the sense that they are related to ethics; first, "Who should rule?", and second, "How should one rule?". These are two old questions which were presented ever since government and politics were discussed in political philosophy. These questions are connected with ethics since they are concerned with norms, and thus the relationship between ethics and politics began, because ethics is a system based on norms, and these norms are also discussed in politics, and therefore, ethics and politics are connected (id. 86). Throughout history, various approaches are reported concerning the connection between ethics and politics. From one point of view, four types of relations between ethics and politics could be introduced (Islami, 100-101).

1. The Theory of Two-Level Ethics

This theory suggests double standard ethics in personal and social lives. According to this viewpoint, ethical rules are absolute and unchangeable in personal life, whereas social and political interests need to precede ethical rules in social matters. A good politician, therefore, should not conform to ethical rules, rather they should employ any unethical means when social and political interests call for them. Bertrand Russell supported this approach.

Aristotle was the first to introduce two-level ethics, though surprisingly, he did this with regard to citizens and not to those in power. He believed that a man could obviously be a good citizen without possessing virtuous traits (Nadirzadah, 80-81).

Bertrand Russell also believes in such double standard ethics and separates the two aspects; ethics as a social unit such as law, and ethics as a matter of personal conscience. He perceives personal ethics to be generated from religious beliefs, and the development of social ethics from political teachings, and says:

Society would not survive without civil ethics, and its survival would be in vain without personal ethics. To preserve a good and favorable world, therefore, both civil and personal ethics are necessary (Fuladwand, 308).

Russell considers social ethics a part of social system. Of course he studies this ethical standpoint as a motive for obedience (Russell, 187).

This theory is also called ethical dualism. What Russell presents as social ethics and considers as necessary for the survival of society is more of the rules which are often founded for a better management of society, and not the ethics meaning a collection of behavior codes based on values (Islami, 197). The devotions of a person to another, for instance, is considered favorable and ethical, nevertheless, the devotion of a government to another government as opposed to national interests is not ethical. Or an individual could donate his property to others, but a government could not donate its national income to another. From this standpoint, individual ethics are evaluated through absolute ethical criteria, while social ethics are in accordance with national interests and welfare. This idea is confirmed by the saying that individual ethics are merciful, but social ethics are consequentialist.

Still, this theory is questioned by the uncertainty of the borders between individual and social ethics. It is not clear that what principles Bertrand Russell suggests to make a distinction between these two. And this proves that it is a self-originated theory. Does affection and mercy include helping poor countries? Or how could it be ordained that it is permitted to aid the weak country when a powerful one has invaded it?

2. The Theory of Ethics' Adherence to Politics

This viewpoint is usually the outcome of a Marxist-Leninist approach to society and history. From a Marxist point of view, history is but class conflicts; classes that are born through mode of production, and after a while, they will raise their antis within themselves, and then they will vanish and replace themselves with a productive class which raises its anti. Each class produces its special outcomes, and is the appearance of society and reflection of economic production.

In this view, there is no absoluteness, and everything, including ethical and artistic concepts and even science, is classified. According to this idea, ethics and other social appearances are

unconditional followers of politics and revolutionary act; they gain value through them and are justified by them, while revolutionary act and politics themselves need justification (Pontara, 100-101).

Discussing ethics, Lenin says:

Our ethics is gained from the advantages of proletariat class conflicts. ... For us, there exists no ethics generated outside society, and such ethics is but deception. ... And when people inquire us about ethics, we say that for a communist, the whole ethics finds sense in relation to that iron discipline and in the conscious struggle against exploitation (Pontara, 100).

This theory perceives ethics, politics, and all cultures as superstructure of the society, and suggests that no originality should be ascribed to ethics, and that whether the behavior of a class is ethical depends on its historical position. A single act, therefore, could be ethical for one class, and unethical and anti-revolutionary for another (Islami, 190).

Marx also says explicitly that all beliefs and opinions –whether political, religious, or ethical – are the outcome of a certain stage in the evolution of society's economic bases. Thus a feudal society considers peasants' loyalty and obedience to masters a highest virtue, while a capitalist society needs the mobility of workforce and expansion of openings, and therefore, freedom ... especially the sale of workforce which is a major ethical concept. He always describes ethics (together with religion and law) as a form of ideology which conceals bourgeois prejudices. Not only does he condemn bourgeois beliefs in ethics, but he also aims at ethics itself.

Marx and Engels claim that by showing the relationship between ethical ideology and class interests, the material interpretation of history "destroys the very basis of moralism". And it is noticeable that when an imaginary critic charges communism with demolishing ethics instead of reforming it, not only does the communist manifesto not reject it, but it says; likewise, the communist revolution is a complete and radical dissociation with all traditional beliefs and views (Kamenka, 18-22).

Having a consequentialist view, this theory sacrifices all that was known as ethics through history for its revolutionary purpose. The Marxist account of ethics, which spread through the

third international, was a significant source of the increase in political immorality in the twentieth century.

3. The Theory of the Separation of Ethics from Politics

This theory suggests the separation of ethical act from political act. The chief idea of this theory is that a distinction should be made between ethical rules and political obligations. According to this opinion, an ethical act is based on values and norms, while politics deals with realities, gaining profit, and observing advantages. These two are indeed separated by nature, and therefore, the engagement of ethical issues with political matters causes disturbance to profit and loss of advantages. The prominent Greek thinker, Thucydides, has argued this approach explaining the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, 336-337).

This theory, which is also called Political Realism (Islami, 172), has an unreasonable view on ethics and politics. It regards politics as free from ethical concerns, and has a shortsighted and materialist look over political life. According to this theory, ethics asks us to tell the truth even though against ourselves, not to violate rights and not to employ humans as tools, to always do justice, not to lie or deceive, not to conceal the truth, and so on, whereas politics requires disregarding some ethical principles, and basically, every political practice begins with immorality and trampling over ethical virtues; no political practice is possible without dirty tricks. From this point of view, politics is but to gain, expand, and hold on to power, and these would not be fulfilled without sacrificing ethical standards, and there exists a mass of trampled ethical virtues underneath every political act (id. 173).

The separation of ethics from politics is a fundamental issue of political philosophy which has been presented, without boundaries, in all civilizations, among which is Arthashastra by Kautilya in old Indian literature whose contents is extremely resented by contemporary readers, since the author holds that; the true politics is the one which is able to impose its authority and power, and which does not care about the means it has employed to impose authority (Nadirzadah, 77).

This theory was known, before anyone else, by Machiavelli. Believing that there are virtues and vices in human nature, very cunningly and without crossing worthy ethics and traits out, he advises rulers that they should make use of any means which settles the foundation of power,

along with keeping up appearances and showing that their conduct is founded on ethics and virtues (Kazimi, 113).

The essence of this approach is to preserve power, for it is based on the assumption that there would be no order and justice without power. Politics is centered on this type of power, and all conflicts of political life are linked with power, and nothing has a greater impact upon politics than power. Ethical rules and standards, therefore, are inconspicuous, rejected, or naturally useless in political arena. Political ethics is different from individual ethics, and what is admirable in the latter is not necessarily so in political ethics.

This viewpoint is well-known in western political doctrines such as Machiavellianism, and such personages as Hobbes and Machiavelli were among its followers and supported it. Machiavelli states in his book *The Prince*:

Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word (Machiavelli, 102).

Based on his statements, Machiavelli believed that; since a prince cannot openly disregard ethical rules, he ought to employ duplicity and insincerity. He considered political power as the basis for the persistence and continuity of government, and explains how a governor should deceive and suppress to profit his state and power.

Therefore, politics, meaning to gain and preserve power, conquers the purpose, and religion and ethics are reduced to simple and dependent means. This presents Machiavelli's profound immorality that he wants ethics away from politics, asserting that "the ends justify the means" and that the employment of all means is legitimate to settle and manage the country.

During many centuries, this approach has had horrible and criminal consequences, and has encouraged contemporary politicians and dictators to follow these teachings, of which instances are the expansion of oppression, violation of people's rights, and disrespecting their honor and

dignity in a domestic sense, and starting war and bloodshed in the international sense of the matter, and hundreds of other inhumane acts.

Today 'Machiavellian' is how we describe someone who lies and cheats simply to gain and hold on to power (Phillips, 1). Machiavelli has unethical suggestions In *The Prince*:

Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them. And I shall dare to say this also, that to have them and always to observe them is injurious, and that to appear to have them is useful; to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite (Machiavelli, 104).

4. The Theory of the Unity of Ethics and Politics

In this theory, individual ethics and political ethics are considered inseparable, since they are two branches of wisdom and seek human salvation, and therefore, they follow same rules (Neumann, 43-44).

According to this approach, both political means and political purposes should be ethical (Ranjbar, 15). In this opinion, all that is ethical in individual life is so in society and politics and with regards to politicians, and all that is unethical for individuals is also considered unethical for the state. Thus, no government is allowed to employ any unethical means in its policies claiming that it is necessary. There are no exceptions to this rule. Here, ethics is a preface and prologue to politics and politics is the strategic means of the realization of ethical virtues (Islami, 208).

Plato supported this approach. In Plato's philosophy, everything, including human and the state, has a Form, and politics intended to bring back human beings to its ideal state and Form.

According to Plato, human beings seek both finite and infinite Good. Finite Good, including wealth and power, causes conflict and struggle, and ends in the foundation of states like tyranny, oligarchy, or democracy. On the other hand, infinite Good, such as wisdom, beauty, and virtue, does not lead to conflict and struggle. The utopia is founded to make grounds for acquisition of wisdom and virtues. So as a practical philosophy, politics is mixed with ethics. The ideal

governor (the philosopher king) knows reality and leads the society towards balance, justice, and virtue (Bashiriyah, 86).

Qur'anic teachings are undoubtedly classified under this theory. According to Qur'an, every action should be accomplished through right and admirable paths, and a sacred intention does not justify evil, vicious, and unacceptable means. Using the example of going into a house, Qur'an says:

... It is not piety that you come into houses from their rear; rather piety is [personified by] one who is God wary, and comes into houses from their doors, and be wary of Allah, so that you may be felicitous (Al-Baqarah, 189).

This verse has twice stressed righteousness, and has commanded that everything should be done righteously and piously, which clearly implies the prohibition of employing vicious means to achieve a purpose. Qur'an commentators consider this verse to mean that every act, whether religious or non-religious- should be practiced through the right path, and not through the stray and contrariwise (Makarim, 2, 12).

Only when humans' life is in danger and observing common rules and standards leads to a human's death, Qur'an allows rules and standards to be overstepped. Following many cases of counting social principles and the necessity of observing them, Qur'an says:

... But should someone be compelled [to eat them lest he die], without being rebellious or aggressive, there shall be no sin upon him (Al-Baqarah, 173).

... While He has already elaborated for you whatever He has forbidden you, excepting what you may be compelled to [eat] (Al-An'am, 119)

... But should anyone be compelled [to eat some of that which is forbidden] by hunger, without inclining to sin, then Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful (Al-Ma'idah, 3).

This attitude is based on a monotheistic approach to all aspects of the universe, in which man should observe ethical standards in his individual and political life. This approach is perspicuous in the life of prominent Islamic personages. Ethical politics is quite objective in the life of the

Shi'ite's first Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi-Talib. Imam 'Ali perceived ethics and politics to be united both in theory and practice (Bihruzlak, 40-41), and says:

Certainly the best man before Allah is he who loves most to act according to right, even though it causes him hardship and grief rather than according to wrong, even though it gives him benefit and increase (Nahj al-Balagha, 182).

Following to the Battle of Siffin, in which Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan defeated Imam 'Ali employing cunning and deceit, Imam 'Ali disapproved a victory through deceit and said:

By Allah, Mu'awiyah is no better a politician than I, but he is devious and criminal. And I would be the most cunning person were it not for the obscenity of deceit. But every deceit is recorded as a sin, and every sin is a kind of heresy, and there will be a flag with every deceiver with which he will be recognized on the Day of Resurrection (id. 318).

Confronting his opponents, Imam 'Ali was advised by his counselors to deal with them severely and violently, and to ban them from governmental financial services. But Imam 'Ali disapproves and rejects this approach towards the opposition, and says:

Do you command me that I should seek support by oppressing those over whom I have been placed? By Allah, I won't do so as long as the world goes on, and as long as one star leads another in the sky. Even if it were my property, I would have distributed it equally among them, then why not when the property is that of Allah (id. 183).

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