THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHIC AND POLITICS ACCORDING TO ABDUL-KARIM SOROUSH, A CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN PHILOSOPHER

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Abstract. The relationship between ethic and politics has for centuries been concerned many moslem and non-moslem thinkers, each trying to offer definition and explanation about it based their own ideas and concepts. Abdul-Karim Soroush, as one of major thinker with worldwide fame, has presented many studies and researchers with their central point focused on justice and freedom. From his point of view, politics is ethical only when it establishes justice and freedom in society and in order to justice being established in a society, we should have a democratic system, so that we could have suitable laws and guarantees to those laws being enacted in the society. Soroush introduces the ethics argument like Western thinkers in benefitting the people and writers. At the present time, there is no commonly-accepted standard for evaluating ethics. Hence this review as a library research has been written as an introduction and survey on Dr. Abdul-Karim Soroush’s views on ethics and politics.

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Introduction. Relationship between ethic and politics. Endeavors to relate government with ethical virtues has a long precedent in theoretical ideas of political thinkers or philosophers, for example, precepts of conduction concerning liberating China’s society from Ruler’s ethical decadence and their injustice, that contain recommended. Moral virtues to both rulers and the people (Johen, 1996). Plato too has considered faith in ethic and justice as human virtues. He believes that what adorns men is their being virtuous, and that human’s happiness is significantly correlated with ethics (Mosca & Bhutto, 1984). Aristotle also believes that the most responsibility of a government is ‘improvement of citizens’ moral defects and inculcating sensual virtues in them (Jones, 1983; Buster, 1997).

Christianity had also been a moral creed and through the dominance of the Church over the government, the two phenomenal of ethics and politics are so interrelated that they cannot be separated (Kazemi, 1997).

Saint Augustine (1972) with introducing the theory of God’s City considers moral virtues as the classification standard of such a city. He regards justice as the highest virtue (Bloom, 1994). Machiavelli’s realpolitik (1998) was a type of politics completely separated from religious considerations and justified any methods that served a government’s power and its safety.

Machiavelli (1998) has not emphasized a ruler’s ethical character, but has attempted to present an ethical picture of a ruler in subject’s eyes. The utilitarian approaches seen among the Enlightenment thinkers, like Jeremy Bentham can be seen as a type of following a Machiavellian government (Bowring, 1962).

They view keep the principle of power of the government regardless of ethical motives, because preservation of rights and bringing about happiness for people is the virtue which a government should always fulfill. Bentham...
asserts that government’s duty is elevating society’s happiness through encouragement and punishment. According to his view, virtue is desirable only due to the pleasures resulting from its practice, and vice is undesirable merely because it causes pain. Similarly, ethical virtue is good only because of its tendency to supplying physical benefits, and ethical vice is bad due to that of creating physical harm.

The concept of moral government has been largely used in Hegel’s political literature. The ‘complete’ government in his political thinking manifestly refers to the moral concept of government. In his view, the government is neither a mere set of laws independent and detached from practical likes of citizens nor a political structure representative of present interests and likes in whole; instead it is formally an ethical institution which includes moral likes of individuals in its form of laws political structures. To explain the contemporary ideas in the moral origin of government nowadays two schools of realism and idealism should be referred to his theory of political realism has no interest in observing ethical principles in the scene of politics, although it attempts to morally justify its activities. Moor (2010) stated that universal ethical principles could not be applied on government’s practices in their abstract and general forms, rather those principles should be passed through specific time and place filters. National governments, in pursuing their own interests are under the dominance of types of ethics that are different from the ethics of individual’s in their personal relationships. Mixing and blurring individual ethics with government ethics means hazardous on national catastrophe.

What caused powerful support of realistic philosophy in the present century, was in fact their reaction to the tradition of abstract idealism and moralism. Idealists were trying to depict a utopia in their mental universe that was often unattainable and caused human communities to stop endeavor in fantasy of such a universe and then lose most of their benefits.

Moral Criteria in Politics. As mentioned above, if we want to pass over the theoretical and abstract discussions and come to real practical ones on the ethic/politics relationship, we have to evaluate the degree of morality of politics.

Justice. We believe that the system of social norms is just which regards of equal rights all members of the society and calls each individual to guaranteeing happiness and freedom of one another. But this is the modern view and definition of the concept of justice. In order to have a more general definition of justice, it should be mentioned that allows everyone to live according to their nature. In modern societies, our perception of justice represents social norms of those comminutes. Equality – equality as an ideal principle- emphasizes equality of humans in needs of welfare facilities, social respect, and social mobility. Equality could not be achieved just by equal shares of utilizing material and social possibilities. Equality can be comprehensively established when individuals enjoy, equal with others, society’s general facilities, according to his wishes. This means that every individual should be equal with others utilizing available possibilities and opportunities of the society. Equality enables the individual to create his future and social identity in whatever ways he likes on the bases of his own abilities, talents and perseverance, and attain a position equal with that of others. In Islamic view, too justice is the most important and most central concept of ethic, and is called ‘the main chain of political arguments’. It is also one of the widely accepted moral values, and ‘the most fundamental concept in philosophy of ethic and politics’ (Eslami, 2005).

Freedom. Concerning the relationship between freedom and politics ethics, there are two diverse lines of thoughts. Some thinkers consider establishment of freedom as result of politics becoming moral. They believe that if counsel could be thought of in turning politics as moral and placing in authority, those politicians devoted to moral parameters then, consequently, we would witness freedom too. But other thinkers believe that incidentally freedom is one of the criteria that measures the degree of morality of politics. That is to what extent a society respects individual freedoms, especially freedom of speech and freedom of criticizing the practices of the government. In a despotic society which autocratic and totalitarian methods overwhelm morality and freedom, both freedom is absent and morality of politics and that of society are decadent and corrupt. The appropriate ethics of a society based on epistemological and anthropological and ontological could only happen in a society enjoying degrees of freedom, flattery or other vices have no way in it, and morality and oral values are dominant in it. Freedom is on those components on which especial attention is paid in discussion on the politics / ethic relationship.

Law-abiding. Law in basic rights terminology, are theorems that specify ways of human conduct in the social life, that is, do and do not of men in individual and social lives (Langroudi, 2000). Therefore, law is general and distinct principle regulated from a source possessing social power and credit, and for all living within that authority source there are arranged rights and responsibilities which all, strong or weak, are required to observe and comply to consequences of disobedience.

Method. A brief Introduction of Abdul-Karim Soroush. He calls his views New Kalam and his Kalam creed as Neo-Mo’tazeli. During continuous ad rather long years spent on study and research, he has experienced change and development in his thinking and ideas. The works written earlier after Islamic Revolution and in his youth contain specific points of ethic argument, such as Science and Value (Soroush, 1982). Here in this book on philosophy of ethics, he investigates the relationship of science and claims of Marist ethics, and also those ethical theories based on Theory of Evolution of species. He also introduces the idea that there is no scientific ethic moving and developing a long side science itself. In his words science being the large company of present day. In refuting Marxist scientific/ evolutionary ethics, he resorts to the words of Hurne in that values are not logically born out of sciences, that is, should does not arise from ‘being’. This point is also seen in Soroush’’s late works. In fact, he is after rejection of non-religious ethics, and by affirmation of religious ethics that its principles and do’s and do not’s are offered by a metaphysical power. We are neither communists nor believing in moral nonsenses of scientific and evolutionary ethic, nor believing in edicts of
historical materialism and its predictions and mistaken interpretations being scientifically permitted, nor regard ourselves in need of those empty valueless products. We do not promise a future guaranteed by ‘sellers’ of science, we rather invite them to divine love and compassion.

His Idea on Politics and Government. He wrote, politics is essentially the theory of power and theory of its distribution and control. Perhaps introduction of Soroush’s points of view on politics. What he offers in discussing politics, are power and way of controlling it. In his opinion, it is not a new or important matter if we regard politics as the way of running a society, this interpretation of politics has as old as the human history. Not what should be focused upon by thinkers in understanding through what method these policies will be enacted by the government and what are the positions of people, justice, and freedom in such a management method. For this reason, we should necessarily deal with Soroush’s view concerning the government in discussions on his political viewpoints. He states the moral-ness as the most important aspect of a government. For example, in democratic and free government as an ideal one, announces that: “Government’s responsibility is nothing more than creating a democratic environment for mental development.” In the same interview, although he defends the Cultural Revolution (Ponarta, 1991) and being about the replacement of God-orientation instead of human-orientation, however; cannot tolerate the direct intervention of government in all affairs, debating for widening the field and creating appropriate backgrounds for moral development and growth of the society. This emphasis on morality and government’s role there in strengthening or weakening moral virtues are evident in his other interviews.

In his opinion the only worthy government in the world is a democratic government that its inherent morality is the reason of its merit and virtuousness. The fundamental principle of democracy is “Don’t allow anything to other people if you do not like it to be applied to you yourself (Bashiriyeh, 2009). In his view, it is in such a moral setting that law will be effective and also respected, its form and character will be consent and harmony, and democracy will reveal it major role in wiping out corruption. Dictatorship and totalitarianism are corrupt and void in form and essence. And if democracy is not tied with an invigorating morality from within, will be a mere soulless form. On the other hand, it should be realized that the best support for ethic is religion. Religions are moral allies, the best guarantee for preservation of democracy, and a religious society sensitive to corruption and righteousness could be a better observer and judge of rulers’ practices and misuses of their power. Soroush in another book, presenting another fact on democracy and supplementing the above-mentioned point of view, writes:

True democracy requires higher moral standards, therefore; in those religious traditions in which their deities would not deem obligatory these standards obligatory, democracy could not be achieved. Having parliaments or voting systems is no guarantee for democracy. Rather for its establishment, improving tendencies toward values and realities such as God, man, knowledge, justice, power, wealth, and so on are highly necessary.

The other major book which includes many issues on the ethic/politics relationship, is Power Rhetoric, Justice Rhetoric. This book contains his most central debates on the ethic and political issues. Here he states a condition as the central one for all types of governments as well as religious governments. Even in a religious government, the government should not impose an official interpretation of the religion on people, that is should pay attention to the religious people and their values, not insulting them. The government should not impose on official reading on its subjects, saying that they should understand the religion in this or that way, otherwise, being considered on outcast of the religion. This experience, unfortunately, has been in Islam’s history, causing many damages. Therefore, within a religious school of thought individuals should have toleration, the first institution observing this toleration is the government itself. The government should practically teach toleration to people and never impose a definite interpretation of a religion on them. Soroush believes that the above principle is a universal one, and moral political power must necessarily comply with that principle:’’ political power should neither employ force and coercion, nor set up other obstacles such as poverty or ignorance in the society.” Therefore, the best criterion for judging the legitimacy of a system- apart from the popular satisfaction that doubtless is a prerequisite condition- is finding out whether a system leaves any options for the people; whether it allows choice possibilities from equal options or not; whether bravery, righteousness, or knowledge is praised and strengthened. These are very clear criteria that are useful ones both for evaluating political, social, and economical system roots could be recognized from their fruits. In fact, government in any framework, religious and non-religious, gains it legitimacy and moralness from its power being restricted only to people’s advantages.

Discussion. Morality in Soroush’s Points of View. As mentioned earlier while discussing political problems, the central theme of Soroush’s debates during many successive years has been analyzing moral problems. In fact, he is renowned as a religious thinker and political intellectual through his ethical studies and arguments. This focus and emphasis has been to such an extent that in nearly all his idea morality has been prominent. He employs the three key words of ethics, despoticism, and civil society side by side, maintaining that what distinguishes a civil society form a totalitarian or despotic one is the concept of ethic:” the role of ethic in societies is to such an extent that we accept the civil society because it is more moral. Non-civil society does not growth of morality. We reject despoticism because it is immoral and in a society afflicted by despotsisms, the growth of morality is impossible, in such a society human personality will not be fulfilled all individuals turn out to be slavish and servile without true personalities. Nut, in contrast, we favor non-despotic society and highly esteem it because it better allows moral development. In Soroush’s view, ethics and government are two inseparable issues and if detached from each other, there will be neither justice nor people’s rights.

He regards ethics and ethical principles as fixed unrelated to religion or ideology. Ethical orders, in his viewpoints, are universal, unrelated to the origin of their originators. However, in political issues and on the topic of
government, he himself challenges this principle, talking about individual and communal differences. This issue will be referred to later in the essay. Similarly, he regards positively the idea of ethics being secularized, deeming it as a happy coincidence. Perhaps we could claim that the most important development in ethics and precedent values of development which occurred and thus freed modernism and bourgeoisie making possible their progress was secularization of ethics. This becoming ‘worldly’ and secular had two important and distinct aspects, each born and realized gradually and in proportion to growth of modernism.

The first aspect being ethics duty of worldly happiness (not just happiness in the world to come or only natural development), the next was recognition of bad and undesirable facets and dimensions of human existence and utilizing them in founding a new world. According to Soroush, ethical systems could be evaluated and criticized from the stance of methods and ends. It is possible that in a system, there will be methods, to reach specific goals, in contradiction with the very ends which are pursued, for instance, if a system has given to priority to piety, righteousness, and mutual respect between their fellow-humans, but prescribes every kinds of methods to achieve those goals, there is a fundamental paradox in such a system. With mere claims or credit, one cannot select values and assert their attainment. Among selected values (the sum total of ends and methods to achieve them) there should be no contradictions. One cannot claim philanthropy trying to attain welfare and freedom of subject, but at the same time justify torture, every sort of manslaughter, deception, inflicted upon people. In such instances, one could usefully employ logic and experience in order to discover the latent contradictions with a system. The discovery of lack of harmony and internal contradictions of a discord value system enables one to decide on the practicality of a system and most doubts could be quickly and efficiently dispersed by them in cases of approval or disapproval of systems.

Soroush views ethics to be either worldly or absolutely the other-worldly, and there will be no science of ethics comprising both facets. Worldly science of ethics means ethics that serves the moral needs of this world. Morality plays a major role in our lives, and as we know, when the law stops, the role of ethic begins. The law implies the minimal morals we need it in a society, less than that is not possible. This minimal degree is only enforced and, legally authorized, and punishments are specified for disobedient. However, ethics is not limited to the law, having a wide scope. As the scholars in ethics have reasoned the whole ethics could not reduce to law, because then both die. The law brings about some kind of coercion in contradiction with the voluntary and compulsion moral practices. In sum, we need ethics in addition to having laws, ethics plays the role in management and society of communities which the law is unable to perform.

The Relationship between Ethics and Politics in Soroush’s view. In his opinion verdicts of a government should be for benefiting people or repelling harms from them. In that case, it is a moral government. The central issue; however, in analyzing the ethic/politics relationship in his views is that he considers observing justice as the essential and special duty of a government. In fact, all his debate runs around the main point that if justice is eliminated from the government, none of the other moral indices will be present. He deems the government neither moral nor non-moral preserve. It means that, in his views, rulers’ activities in individual lives and their piety (observing personal ethics by rulers or politicians in general) will not have strong effects on the morality of their governments. To clarify this point, a part of his book Power Rhetoric, Justice Rhetoric is referred to below:

“Machiavelli wrote that the government or the authority/power is beyond moral good or evil and it is the rulers who define the very good/ evil in ethics. This interpretation is very harsh and coarse and must be softened a bit. Perhaps it would be better to say that Machiavelli’s judgment would have been that morality of the power or government goes beyond personal good or evil. Good and evil, virtue and vice or merit or weakness in personal ethics which we are quite familiar with in the world we live, truly affirms Machiavelli’s point of view. He maintained that chivalry or non-chivalry cruelty is an absolute value; neither justice nor injustice, gentleness can be helpful the ruler show this, ruler should apply it. Only one thing is absolute: Preserving the power. Then consequently the ethics of keeping the power is born in pursuit of this goal.

Soroush points out the reason for totalitarian systems being non-moral in depriving bravery and courage from their people: In a totalitarian system in which there is centralized power and its social-political structure is molded in such a way that as if there is a slope, deals terror and deprives courage. It is the system in which men could not express themselves and turn into abnormal and distorted creatures, because external pressures render expressing courage an impossible act. The power of wrath forces of violence is not merely related to war or Jihad. Courage, intellectual courage as well, self-expression, refuting superstitions, and offering new theories demand bravery. How many good points of views have been kept untold in our past history for their expressions? What are actually expressed are only a small percentage of what could have been expressed and thought out by the individuals. The large percentage of opinions either could not find opportunities for being expressed or the speakers lacked that moral courage to utter them. In totalitarian societies which have slopes and unequal levels, thinking is predetermined by this same slope; therefore, thinking brains remain isolated and suppressed, any remarks face intimidation by rulers and those in the top level of the hierarchy.

One of the main factors in turning societies non-ethical is considered to be the heavy and vicious presence of despoticisms. Despotic system is not only coercive but it is also an essentially anti-moral and vice –inducing system. In such atmosphere passion of morality completely leaves the scene, passion of power and interest gains ground. In a despotic system, individuals only think about their immediate interest, neglecting long-term personal and communal profits. Near-sightedness and seize the day temper, negligence of past and future, ignoring history and lack of inwardness are pestilences of all despotic systems afflicting their officials too. Flattering, worshiping authorities, telling
lies, bribery, backbiting prevail instead. The social roots of all vices listed by ethics scholars could easily be sought out in the soil of despotisms.

By quoting Lord Acton’s famous statement that “Power bring about corruption and absolute power, absolute corruption”. Sorouh deals with the issue that concentrating of power in one individual result both in moral decadence of the ruler and makes the society non-ethical (2007). When power is accumulated, moral vices are brought about for the ruler himself, which even his justice cannot prevent them. That is why instead of having a just ruler, we are in need of having a just structure, and only in that case the corruptibility of power can be remedied.

When someone has an increased amount of options, he is deprived from one specific option that is option of exerting justice. Sorouh maintains that if we desire to witness moral development in a society, powers and authorities should completely stand a side as spectators, letting thinkers and scholars in the field of theory and thought to differentiate and strengthen or refute each other. In fact, until the power intervenes in all affairs of the society, we could not witness a moral society.

After saving Sorouh’s point of view on ethics and politics (2002), it is necessary to deal with justice and freedom as the most important moral indices according to him.

Sorouh’s viewpoints about Justice (2007): According to Sorouh justice is “a superfluous virtue”. “superfluous” does not mean being useless, but rather it means that justice is not something added to “other virtues”, but it is the very set of virtues talked about in ethics.

From this standpoint, justice is considered as the index of moral-ness of politics, which controls the power and prevents the government from inflicting. In justice on people power needs justice for being controlled. The most important curb and grip laid on power is the curb of justice. And justice is the summit of moral virtues, at the same time it is the apex of political virtues too. This is where ethics and politics intertwine. Religion in a religious community can build a very moral and healthy relationship with politics by boosting the idea of justice. The most important role that could be play by religions is not setting up division away. People separating them into various sects, which in the end could place them in opposition and quarrel with one another. Rather the role played by religions is a moral support for boosting justice.

Universal Sorouh concept, well-known to everyone. But many definitions could be presented from it: “we have a theological committing definition of personal justice” being avoidance of deadly sins and not insisting on committing minor sins, and so a just person is someone who new commits deadly sins and avoids minor sins as far as possible. This definition is, incidentally, a very good definition.

The definition justice within humans’ self and their existential country’s perception supplied by scholars in ethics in brief is: if the faculties of “rage” and erupt so that they overwhelm the faculty of “reason” these will be earthquakes and insecurity in the realm of spirit. Justice and temperance will emerge. When we have a dominant control ruler called faculty of reason that tame and rage and lust, allowing them opportunities to function only as far as is legible. Justice is the field within which intellectual judgment can take place daily. According to this definition, a “just” person is he who reaches the true propositions quicker and more easily and better and easily discovers the truth. By having ethics and moral virtues, we are in possession of justice that is to say whole set of moral virtues is the very concept of justice. Apart from moral virtues we have no other virtue called justice. Because in fact if one is devoted to observing moral virtues, he could be called just person.

Similarly, if a society is committed to observing moral virtues, it could be called a just society. In this sense, justice does not stand beside other moral virtues or added to them; justice is a very whole set of virtues. In other words, justice is not a name of a natural function (like eating, sleeping, running, etc.), it is rather the title and attribute to which any natural function can be applied, for example, eating in a just manner unjust eating; jus speaking, and unjust speaking and so on.

According to Soroush, the most important element that political philosophers of the ancient times from Plato until now have thought out to control power has been a great and sacred moral-political concept, namely “justice”. Justice is a wide and umbrella term branching out into and dominating two larger branches of “practice” and “theory”: moral branches and politics branch. The value and virtue which dominates both the field of justice politics and ethnic is the virtue of justice. Justice controls the political power. On the other hand, it defines moral virtues. That is why some scholars in ethics assert that what is included under the title of moral virtues, originates from justice, that is to say, any good action could be called just and any evil one unjust. For instance, loyalty is just. But loyalty is unjust, etc. justice has many definitions, by on it two elements there is consensus among all philosophers: the first element is truth, or in my own words “knowledge of truth”, meaning having truthful information from own element. The second element “honesty” as if the definition of justice is to be taken as full filing rights, you should define human’s worldly rights in such a way that no other worldly reservations would damage them and should not transfer the compensation of inequalities to another place. Of course, these are some thinkers who consider establishing social justice as impossible, for example, the logic of liberals and above all the great German economists.

Freedom and Political Ethics in Sorouh’s viewpoints: Freedom and justice, according to Sorouh run parallel to each other, neither can exist without the other. Quoting John Rawls (1971) believes that however we define justice, it should include some degrees of freedom, in fact should not tolerate despoticism”. In fact, freedom is one component of justice and one of its merits. If justice is good, it is because justice encompasses freedom, freedom being one of its progenies. But as Sorouh told earlier, men find out freedom more tangible and concrete, and when faced with it, it can be seen and savored better than justice, which is more delicate and latent than freedom. The freedom that men attain under the auspices of governments, was mostly due to order and quietude created by the governments. The pious and
mystic scholar like Ghazalli in surveying the government, wants just this role of organizing and creating quietude from a government and nothing more, and even mostly ignoring the worldly benefits of the issue (Lakzaii, ). Ghazalli asserts that we need rulers, kings and laws, so that quietude should run in the society, and through this quietude, the pious people could worship God and mysticism too could achieve its own religious experiences.

Soroush continues, as I told, freedom in humans means that they become what they must and could. This is the meaning of freedom, and whatever hinders it, indicates that man is in chains and is deprived. And of course one of the ‘ladders’ of spiritual progress and development of man is his knowledge. In Soroush’s viewpoints, political freedom is a right of man. But moral freedom is an obligation. It is politically part of our rights to be free and enjoy political freedom. So we could express our idea and appoint our own elected rulers to posts for power, and be able to question and criticize their conducts; so that we could express our idea in all diverse social and political stages and have political participation. These are part of all humans and citizens’ rights. But ethically, we have not only the right to be free, but our duty is to be free.

Conclusion. In this essay, we surveyed Dr. Soroush’s views on the relationship of ethic and politics in three sections of views on politics, views on ethic, and the moral indices of politics. He regards a minimal government as the ideal one which exerts the least interference in people’s lives. Soroush, in fact, recognizes the creation of such a minimal government as the first step for becoming ethical of politics. About ethic, he supports worldly ethics which pursues the most pleasure for the most individuals. This ethics has only one condition and restraint in that humans should learn to favor to others what they themselves like. Of course, there is one law/ruler too: if someone does not comply to this principle spontaneously, there is some device to force him to obey. On the relationship ethic/politics, he believes that politics should possess two principles in order that it could be deemed as moral. The first principle is observing justice and the second one political freedoms of people should be guaranteed. In the absence of these two principles, politics could not be regarded as moral. Justice according to Soroush, is a virtue in itself and freedom is also an important moral principle that can make other ethical principles possible and viable.

References

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