

Private, public and political morality

When people choose a political life, they must follow an ethic distinct from private morality



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Though related, political, public and private morality are not identical. They may come from the same source, but are distinct. This point has been noted in the Western tradition since at least Machiavelli. But its lineage in India is ancient.

Ethics in three domains

Take, for example, Asoka who spoke of *Dhamma* (ethics) in three distinct domains. First, interpersonal morality. Each of us has special obligations to our children, spouse, parents, teachers and relatives. We have a duty towards those under our special care, including the aged, ‘servants’, animals and, occasionally, strangers. Asoka distinguished this private ethic from what might be called intergroup morality in public life. Crucial here is harmony between different religious-philosophical groups generated by the exercise of *sayamam* (self-restraint). He particularly emphasised the importance of *vacagutti* – controlling one’s tongue to be critical of other groups only if there is good reason to, only on appropriate occasions and always moderately; also, to praise one’s own group, only when there is good reason to, only on appropriate occasions and always moderately. Neither hate speech nor speech glorifying oneself was acceptable as part of public morality – a point very relevant in our times.

Asoka then distinguished private and public morality from power-related political morality specifying what rulers and the ruled owe one another. Subjects owe obedience to their king. But the ruler too owed something to his subjects: to ensure *jahnatha*, the good of all (including all living species), and *janasukham*, happiness not only in this life but also in the afterlife. To achieve this, rulers and their officials must display *damdasamata* and *viyohalasamata* (impartiality in meting out punishment and in politico-legal acts more generally). This sums up the core of Asoka’s political morality: a commitment to justice, to impartiality.

What then is the difference between private/public morality and



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political morality? While in one’s personal life, in our dealings with those with whom we have close daily encounters such as our family, friends or ‘servants’, we can’t help but be partial, and while in the larger public domain, where we face people with different religio-philosophical sensibilities, we can’t entirely escape some degree of partiality to our own world view, the political domain requires the impartial or just use of power for the good of all.

Family, civil society and state

Two thousand years later, the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel made similar points, although in a different way and in an entirely different context. He distinguished three spheres of human life: family, civil society and the state. The family, Hegel claimed, was the smallest community in which its members do not even distinguish themselves from one another. Their identities are fused. A family is bound by emotional ties, by mutual love and affection. Members take pride in each other’s achievements and feel a strong sense of shame at the other’s wrongdoing. Morality here is guided by unarticulated feelings.

The family is different from another sphere of life that Hegel designated civil society but should more appropriately be called ‘market society’. Here, each person acts as an individual with a sharply defined sense of her own interests which are distinct from, compete and may even clash with the interests of others. No one is tied to the other by bonds of love or affection. Since there is no community but only an aggregate of individual interests, there is no commonly held ethic either. Competitive

life is governed by coercive legal rules to regulate the pursuit of self-interest. At best, each individual devises her own personal, subjective moral maxims.

Finally, Hegel spoke about a third domain where people once again see themselves as members of a large political community, as citizens of a state. Citizens in a political community must be bound together neither by feelings nor by self-interest but by a commitment to common values discovered by public reason – values such as political freedom, solidarity, shared traditions and cultural heritage. Morality in this domain requires that we overcome our loyalty to blood relations, not pursue only our private interests, and commit instead to using power grounded in shared principles. Love and hate are largely imposters in this domain where consensus is forged by the use of public reason. Its democratic version requires that, guided by values of openness, equal respect and justice, we deliberate and help each other arrive at impartial laws and public policies, acceptable in principle to everyone in the polity.

Furthermore, those who wield political power must realise that what they do has enduring consequences affecting the lives of an incalculably large number of people. This brings with it enormous public responsibility which derives in no small part from the fact that they have at least temporary legitimacy to use force against ordinary citizens. They have, at their disposal, an apparatus of violence simply unavailable to heads of families or members of civil society. Powerful politicians, therefore, must show great care and sensitivity to the appropriate use of

force and violence.

Private and political morality

One important implication of the difference between private and political morality is this: it is sometimes believed that moral scrupulousness in one’s private life automatically guarantees high moral stature in political life. This simply does not follow. Those wielding public power may refuse to enrich themselves, their family or friends, and resist from obtaining sexual favours. But such ‘cleanliness’ need not entail scrupulous political morality. What use is personal incorruptibility if the politician is partial to or discriminates against one particular community, abandons public reason, smashes dissent to concentrate power in his own hands, makes arbitrary use of force, and lives in the illusion that he is greater than all the institutions that surround him? What if he begins to believe that he alone possesses the truth or knows the good of the entire community? And precisely because of the moral restrictions he has placed on his personal life, feels released from any restriction on the use of power in the political arena? In short, a person who is profoundly moral in his private life may brazenly violate all norms of political morality – undermine justice and public reason. Conversely, it is entirely possible that a person who has morally slipped in his private life (cheated on one’s spouse, enriched himself) respects the integrity of public institutions, is acutely sensitive to the moral costs of violence, shows a deep commitment to justice, and upholds reason-based democratic norms.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not suggesting that politicians are free to abandon private morality. But we often find comfort in the illusion that there is one simple, seamless morality, reflected equally in private and in public. In fact, most humans are complex moral agents. It would be wonderful if our private and political moralities were perfectly aligned and we achieved the highest moral standards in both. But in a non-ideal world we can only hope that when people choose to lead a life in politics, they will at least follow minimum norms of political morality even as they fail to be scrupulously moral in their private lives.