Responsibility and Competence in Political Ethics

Author:
Dr. Ryoko Asai

Co-Author:
Prof. Iordanis Kavathatzopoulos

Abstract
At present, our society is globalized, chaotic, changing, and also highly affected by individualization. That is, it is more difficult for our society to reach goals or conclusions collectively as one nation or one society. Under the situation, society needs political leaders to gather individual values, interests and opinions, and to take a lead in making collective decisions in the proper manner. Political leaders are required to have ability of making decisions and acting in the best way for society. Their responsibility is high even for future generations. According to Weber there are two categories of ethics pertaining to politics and to political leaders. One is the "ethic of ultimate ends" and the other is the "ethic of responsibility". "Ethic of responsibility" of political leaders is considered as a critical element. It is perceived as a kind of ability to consider possible social options and their impact, and also to take responsibility of their consequences in the future. In this context, it is very well compatible to the idea of ethical competence. It binds together philosophy and modern empirical research on ethical decision making, opening up for interventions like training and education for political leaders.

Keywords:
Ethics, Freedom of choice, Good, Liberty, Public/private sphere, Responsibility, Value
society needs political leaders to gather individual values, interests and opinions, and to take a lead in making collective decisions in the proper manner. Political leaders are required to have ability of making better decisions and acting in the best way for society. Their responsibility is high even for future generations. This study explores the ability of making an ethical decision in politics from the perspective of liberty and responsibility.

The link between public sphere and private sphere
Nowadays many of us suppose that we can have individual liberty as deserved and take individual choice normally. Because of that, when nation and society introduce a new policy which might restrict liberty or our freedom of choice we feel antipathy to them or react sharply against them. In liberal society, which is filled with individualism and liberalism, individual liberty and freedom of choice are important elements serving as a secure foundation for society. It would appear that society is underpinned and shaped based on the belief in individual liberty and the aggregation of individual choice. In other words, each individual person could confer a kind of legitimacy on society through the process of exerting a personal choice.

However, diversification of values and practice among the people under excessive individualism has been criticized and warned for by many scholars. That is to say, when people seek personal interest, right and gain relying on freedom, society strongly shows the utilitarian tendency justifying the pursuit of individual self-interest. Consequently, social ties connecting people to society and other people are ruined and solidarity steps back (Bellah1985). And the weakened solidarity would ruin not only our society but also individual persons lives because it is difficult for society to ensure liberty and individual freedom of choice fully. In communitarian view, community is considered as the public sphere where respects personal dignity, and it is not overwhelmed by force of arms and undue political pressure (Bellah1985, Yamawaki 2004).

In the concept of public/publicness, public sphere is perceived as equal to private sphere and private sphere is not subordinated to public sphere (Arrent 1998, Bellah 1985, Yamawaki 2004). Publicness makes it possible for us to ensure tireless dialog and communication with others, and also to approve our personal choice socially based on
shared values. Therefore, through the interaction between public sphere and private sphere, we could affirm our personal dignity and integrity.

In liberalism, politics and legislation that govern right, duty or justice belong to public sphere, and private sphere contains the pursuit of personal happiness, economic activity, religion, and family life. In order to protect basic human rights against unjustified political involvement, such as the protection of privacy or private property rights, and also to seek freedom and justice, dualism or the clear distinction between private and public has great significance and influence on people. However, in actual life, it is very difficult to divide our life into public and private sphere clearly. For example, economic activity is unable to escape from influence of economic policies, religion sometimes takes charge of people’s social life and affects them, and people require social treatment or social policies to aid poor families and prevent child abuse. In other words, public sphere and private sphere interact constantly and compliment mutually. Our life is inseparably inked to both spheres. We cannot ignore publicness under the name of individual freedom and choice, nor can society diminish human rights and liberty through the exercise of public authority.

However, individual liberty is established on nation or society. In enjoying liberty, selfish and arrogant decision which disrespects others and society would not be tolerated socially. Even if others accept such a decision reluctantly, contrariwise, the decision maker might be disadvantaged. Good for one is not always good for others. In order to make a proper decision and maximize liberty and interest, the decision making process is required to consider publicness and shared social value/expectation as well as individual liberty. When we accept ethos supporting society and ensuring dignity and integrity, we enjoy and exert liberty to the full (Sacki 2004). Political leaders are expected to be in the forefront of interaction between public sphere and private sphere, and also to lead people and society to a “better” decision-making. Thus political leaders need to have a continuous dialog not only with others but also with themselves.

**Abstruse balance between positive liberty and negative liberty**

Political leaders belong to public sphere for governing society, and at the same time they also live as an individual person in private life. However, they continuously
reciprocate between public sphere and private sphere and their personal choice could affect them as a political leader more or less. Because of those, even when they live personal life, their existence assumes the character of public. According to Ortega, “public life is not solely political, but equally, and even primarily, intellectual, moral, economic, religious; it comprises all our collective habits, including our fashions both of dress and of amusement” (Ortega y Gasset 1993:11). It means that public life and private life do never exist independently of each other. While diverse interests and the stakes swirling under individualization and globalization, there is a risk to produce the socially vulnerable/minority in the pursuit of personal interest preferentially or through devotion to expedient decision-making. The utilitarian concept of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” has generated social minority and evoked social risks whenever “the greatest happiness” is redefined socially.

No matter how much elevated personal choice based on liberty is to a greater thing, and no matter how much emphasized self-responsibility is as important, society cannot avoid bearing the ultimate responsibility for liberty. Even though society seemingly does not need to be in charge for individual liberty, it is impossible to ignore social members without any involvement. For instance, one journalist goes to the dangerous area to report on the civil conflict. S/he knows risks of being caught up in the ravages of war beforehand, and society warns against traveling to the region. However, s/he decides to travel the dangerous zone based on individual liberty and personal choice, and happens to be kidnapped by terrorists. How does society handle with the problem? Is it really possible for society to abandon him/her under the name of self-responsibility? At least, society tries to investigate the detailed information and get him/her back from terrorists. Actually we’ve seen those situations over and over in the past, especially through media. Individual liberty is ensured by society and liberty assumes some degree of public character in a sense.

On the other hand, it would not be tolerated that society pursues governor-side liberty strongly and forces people to accept unilateral idea and policy. This situation corresponds closely to apprehension that is concerned based on the concept of “positive liberty” by Berlin (Berlin 1979, Hardy 2002). Although positive liberty is necessary in freedom and society, there could be risk of accelerating extreme political idea and
dominate society such as totalitarianism. In governing society, political leaders need to handle “negative liberty” positively and sensitively, and balance positive liberty and negative liberty in order to protect and enhance national interests and people's well being.

How do political leaders take the abstruse balance in liberty? As long as they involve politics as a political leader, their existence as a citizen assumes some degree of public character in a sense. Under difficulty distinguishing public and private, even their private decision might have influence on public policy making. How do they make a proper decision for themselves and society?

**Means and ends in decision-making**

Pluralistic interests and values are mixed globally and society is exposed to relentless fear of confrontation and conflict today. The skill of making an appropriate decision needs to be acquired not only by individual person but also by society itself. Society’s skill of decision making is contingent on each political leaders’ skill of making a decision, and it could be understood as consolidated ability of political leaders. We need to consider how political leaders get the skill to make a decision and what the skill constitutes of.

When we aim to decide something, the process of making a decision is conducted based on individual value judgment under the influence of custom, common sense, traditional norms and so on (Saeki 2004). Since individual value judgment is very personal, there is fear that some people make a decision in self-seeking and self-righteous manner. However, asocial or dogmatic decision is dismissed out of hand in most cases. Because personal choice, which is ensured by liberty, is essentially made for achieving good or common good in society (Plato 2007, Nagai 2011). Society assumes ultimate responsibility even for personal choice, as noted before. It is very difficult for self-indulgent or asocial decision to be accepted by others and society without social validity and social approval. Therefore, our personal decision-making tends to contemplate for good intentionally or unintentionally.

Values support good, and liberty and justice serve to achieve good (Saeki 2004). People
have different values and change the weight of values in the context of their own situations. In order to avoid value conflict, relativism was introduced proactively into society and tried to give each value the same weight of social respect. However, under the situation where diversified values mix, people focus on their own values and abandon any interest with others’ values, instead of conflicting each other. On the other hand, once they feel unfair in the social treatment for their value, value conflict directly comes out into the open. This means that relativizing values is exacting and tricky. To attain good as an ultimate social ends, shared values deriving from history, custom, common sense and so on could contribute to agile and proper decision making. However, when asked about the definition of good, it seems to be elusive and ambiguous.

Globalization, permeation of individualization and highly developed technologies impel diversification of individual values, and shared values are treated as something equivocal. It means that shared values as the cornerstone of decision-making might be on the point of dysfunction without the well-suited skill to make a decision. It would become more obvious when thinking of the present conditions in our decision-making. People and society make a decision in order to get liberty, to bring justice, or to be democratic. Liberty and democracy are considered essentially as means to approach the state of good. However, those means change into the ends to achieve. We lose the ultimate ends and make the means into the ends. For example, we know the history of many wars and conflicts for gaining liberty and some still ongoing at the moment. What did happen after the wars and conflicts? New ones for getting ‘new’ or different liberty replaced old ones.

**Ethical competence as actual practice**

How do political leaders make an appropriate decision under increasingly complex conditions in decision-making? Not everyone is able to be a political leader. Select people have a stake in making society work, and gain power that has influence on decision-making. How are political leaders differentiated from the rest? Select people are defined as “the man who demands more of himself than the rest, even though he may not fulfil in his person those higher exigencies”(Ortega y Gasset 1993). And also they could “make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties”
(Ortega y Gasset 1993). Moreover, they could do justice to the responsibility that power imposes on them, and need to have three important qualities: passion (Leidenschaft), a sense of responsibility (Verantwortungsgefühl), and a sense of proportion (Augenmaß) (Weber 2004). Consequently, they aspire to ethically oriented actions based on those qualities, and fulfill their responsibility in order to attain good as the ultimate ends.

Weber adverted two different ethical maxims: an “ethics of conviction” and an “ethics of responsibility” (Weber 2004). One standing upon an ethics of conviction would feel responsibility for pure conviction. However, as long as the action derives from pure conviction, s/he has little interest in accepting the blame for an undesirable consequence. In an ethics of conviction, there is a risk of restricting or invading personal liberty, just like when one pursues positive liberty extremely. On the other hands, one based on an ethics of responsibility assumes responsibility for foreseeable consequences of actions. What matters to political leaders is the future and responsibility for the future (Weber 2004). Therefore, political leaders pursue the ends through future forecast and decision-making backed by an ethics of responsibility.

What is the decision-making on the basis of responsibility? In decision-making, political leaders need to respect values those are cultivated socially such as custom and common sense, and also to examine all the angles of present situations and future. Furthermore, the means and the ends in their political actions need to be legitimatized. However, it is easy to imagine the situation where “the use of morally dubious or at least dangerous means” is required in order to achieve the ultimate ends (Weber 2004). For example, society puts down a dangerous incursion by force to protect society and citizens. There is a tension between the means and the ends, and a risk to cause a critical issue ethically. When the means and the ends do not recognize properly, the tension would raise high and bring an unexpected result to society at last. Therefore, ethics is the actual practice to support decision-making, and the cornerstone for legitimizing the decision-making and the decision. Whereas, political leaders play different roles in public life, such as a representative of citizens, a political party member, a member of some committees, a minister of the government and so on. In order to make a proper and consistent decision in different commitments, they need to exert ethics (“ethical competence/skill”) as the actual practice tailored to different decision-making levels and
its procedures those are categorized into personal, group, organizational and political levels (Kavathatzopoulos, Coghill & Asai, 2014; Coghill & Kavathatzopoulos, 2014).

**References**


