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Ethics – Society – Politics

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Martin G. Weiss
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Environmental Citizenship: New Challenges for Political Philosophy and Political Ethics

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Applied ethics is no longer regarded as a mere application of doctrines whose foundation has already been outlined in ethics. Instead, Düwell, i.e., identifies new and critical questions in bioethics which need to be discussed in various types of applied ethics: questions about the moral status of living beings, questions regarding the worth or dignity of entities, and the relationship between nature and humankind in general terms (Düwell 2008: 100 ff). Moreover, applied ethics does not only serve to generate special principles for various fields of application. Instead, it has also become a driving force in going back to basic concepts in ethics. An example in case is the debate about “doing” and “refraining from doing” which has had an impact on theories of action; another example is the debate about the beginning and the end of life which has had an influence on the interpretation of personhood (Birnbacher 1995; Leist 1990, 1990a).

Applied ethics has not only developed methodologically, but has also gained influence on society and on politics, but – more or less – through commissions which contribute to debating solutions and demands in specified areas of research. This way of delivering knowledge and of presenting it to society is an *indirect way* of transforming the public will. Experts present their well-reasoned opinions in committees and thereby contribute to informing both the public and members of political institutions. Yet, it is not a declared aim to transform political principles themselves; nor is there the desire to present a new version of political ethics which incorporates principles of applied ethics. The argument which I shall discuss in this contribution is that some factors might contribute to changing this situation. As a consequence, *indirect concern* might be completed by a strategy of *direct concern*.

In this contribution, I shall proceed in three steps. I shall *first* present an example which shows that applied ethics has already started to inform political philosophy. The example stems from debates which build the bridge between environmental ethics and political philosophy. *Secondly*, I shall discuss some of the implication which approaches in “environmental political philosophy” have. In particular, basic principles in political philosophy are questioned through these recently developed approaches. This second section also aims at elaborating new dimension of applied political ethics. *Third*, I shall give some ideas about how this new strategy might contribute to transforming both political ethics and the former strategy of indirect concern.

1. Environmental citizenship: an example of applied political ethics

In political ethics, citizenship is not elaborated as a descriptive concept. Instead, it relates to a bundle of normative ideas about what persons are in a position to claim for themselves as members of a nation state or another political community and what their duties are. Moreover, recent theories on citizenship try to transcend the nation border,

i.e. by developing concepts of cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2007; Beitz 2000; Pogge 2002).

Quite recently, some authors in the field of political philosophy have discussed a new concept citizenship which was labelled “environmental citizenship” or “ecological citizenship” (Bell 2005; Dobson 2003; Hailwood 2005; van Steenberg 2004). They intend to build a bridge between environmental ethics and political philosophy. These authors argue that our planet is currently facing a serious of ecological challenges, among them climate change. Even though these events in themselves do not have an impact on concepts of citizenship – this direct link is undermined by what has been called a “naturalistic fallacy” –, the authors claim that the ecological crises contribute to the claim that political concepts need to be overhauled. In particular, the negligence of natural living conditions in theories of political philosophy needs to be corrected. In particular, nature cannot be regarded as part of the “circumstance” of or “conditions of application” for political theory.

Three systematic ways to interpret the relationship between mankind and nature in political philosophy anew have been elaborated – each of them explicating a distinct idea. *First*, some authors have argued that rights to natural resources must be regarded as human rights. In particular, current approaches to human rights can be completed by a list of *rights to the environment* (Tim Hayward 2005, 2007). This idea also contributes to a significant transformation of concepts of human rights. *Secondly*, Andrew Dobson argues that what is needed is a concept of citizenship which can respond to global ecological challenges. Instead of rethinking citizenship in terms of basic rights, a post-global concept of citizenship also implies responsibility regarding a frail nature (Dobson 2003). *Third*, some authors have recently argued that the justification of principles of justice on the basis of a contractarian model needs to be overhauled (Bell 2005). Instead of focusing on persons as right-bearers, a new approach serves to embrace at least animals with person-like capabilities; moreover, some authors argue that the relation between persons and the natural environment needs to be overhauled on a systematic level (Nussbaum 2006).

All three lines of thought are controversial. It is not the realm here to give a conclusive portray of the arguments which have been exchanged regarding all three proposals. Instead, I shall focus on the central issue in this contribution. Therefore I shall ask what these proposals imply regarding the methodological and theoretical challenges in “applied political ethics.”

2. What environmental political ethics implies

The *first* thing to notice is that none of the proposals for revising the concept of citizenship are at the surface of political ethics. Instead, each of them implies a – more or less – deep shift regarding the normative interpretation of citizenship and, moreover, basic normative principles. It is

also not clear, whether or not environmental rights can be said to be in one line with other basic rights at all. Adding environmental rights to the list of citizenship rights also has a severe impact on the role of environmental rules within the legislative bodies. In particular, some proposals imply that citizenship rights and corresponding duties need to be detached from the nation-state. A post-global notion of citizenship even goes further than more general proposals in cosmopolitanism in that it addresses duties in one line with rights (Dobson 2003).

Some proposals for establishing systematic bridges between ecological ethics and political philosophy have the effect that some of the most fundamental justificatory principles will be called into question. Even though the contractarian model has received manifold critique, recently by proponents of civic republicanism (e.g. Pettit 1997), it is still fundamental in sorting out basic political commitments. Yet, Nussbaum argues that the contractarian model needs to be transcended in favor of ideas about justice which also embrace animals and their chances to lead a good life (Nussbaum 2006). In short, the revisions of citizenship which have been proposed by authors who wish to draw a close line between applied ethics (environmental ethics) on the one hand and political ethics on the other side go to the heart of the normative concepts.

Secondly, each of the revisions also implies a new understanding of “application” in terms of “applied political ethics”. As for Dobson’s argument, i.e., it is obvious that he sees the necessity of reshaping citizenship from the scratch (Dobson 2003). He also says that politics cannot adequately respond to these challenges unless the need for answering to ecological demands is built into the concept of citizenship itself. In this, he introduces a new meaning of “applied ethics” in the realm of political theory. It is his goal to argue against “application” in terms of just confronting an elaborated theory with new questions and challenges. In particular, he rejects the view that scarce resources belong to a set of constraints to an already elaborated theory on political justice. His proposals are not about the “circumstances of justice” (Rawls 1971: 126ff), but instead about a set of goods which are at the centre of negotiations about fair principles of distribution.

In this respect, authors who work on green citizenship are in one line with authors in applied ethics who think of applied ethics as a field of research which responds to particular challenges, but works through a set of moral principles which do not origin from those challenges, but rather provide genuine answers to them.

Thirdly, recent approaches to environmental citizenship also throw a new light on the controversial relationship between ethics and political philosophy. Both disciplines do not understand themselves as prescriptive in that they aim at prescribing what is right – authors in both fields rather provide arguments. Whether or not persons wish to follow the arguments is still up to them. Yet, political philosophy needs to be even more “neutral” in formulating basic principles than ethics is allowed to be. Authors from the camp of political liberalism even refrain from giving moral recommendations. Even when moral rightness could be demonstrated, the moral demands still need to be implemented through a democratic process. Therefore, rightness must be completed by consent; otherwise an ethical principle

cannot be implemented. Yet, authors who work in the field of environmental citizenship actually appear to reject this additional step. They say that green citizenship implies a list of environmental rights and of duties, or at least virtues (see Hailwood 2005). It is this turn which I shall discuss in the final section.

3. Applied political ethics as related to principles of political philosophy

Even though political philosophy presents itself as a diverse field of debate, some core insights can be regarded as critical to a theory in that field of research. *First*, ethical principles are not recommended for implementation in political communities primarily because they are right, but rather because citizens agree with it or at least have no reason to willfully rejecting it. This is one version of *the principle of legitimacy* (Scanlon 1998). *Secondly*, political philosophy is focused on core issues which – following Rawls – belong to the level of core issues of constitutions (Rawls 2005: 227 ff). Even though this strategy of limiting the scope of theories of justice is controversial, it is uncontroversial that political principles should not impinge on the realm of private choice unless it is a consequence of protecting basic rights of another person or goods whose political meaning could be proven. This is *the principle of self-constraint of the nation state*. *Third*, the good life and ethical decisions should not be dictated by the state; instead, forming a lifeplan which implies private ethical decisions is a central principle in liberal societies. This is *the principle of permissiveness*.

At first glance, theories of environmental citizenship tend to override all three principles. They say that citizens need to care for the environment and that this care needs to be implemented on the fundamental level of rights and duties. Whether or not this implementation is right will not be decided upon by the citizenry. Moreover, choosing environmental principles or not is not part of the lifeplan or the choice of individuals, but should be part of the very concept of citizenship. Yet, there are two different options to interpret this insight.

On the one hand, the result can – of course – be interpreted as a clear case against applied political ethics, at least regarding our example of “environmental citizenship”. In order to inform political bodies, the established, old way of committees who inform the political body and the public is the better and the only reliable practice. *On the other hand*, this conclusion might be drawn too hastily. Similar to developments in applied ethics, it looks as if applied political ethics cannot be regarded as consisting of a canon of political philosophy on the one hand and attempts to build in principles of application on the other hand. Instead, it might be argued that applied political philosophy needs to work on new principles and also needs to overhaul both its core issues and its theoretical framework – at least to some degree. The examples which were discussed in section one and two might serve as examples for first tentative steps into that direction. Instead of giving this direction up, it would be helpful to intensify debates about the underlying principles and concepts.

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