Perspectives on the Philosophy of Governance

Political philosophers have long mused over the origin and the justification of the state and its coercive power over individuals - seeking to make sure that they act (only) as they should. Business thinkers have worried about the ideal structure for enterprises and about how they can be effective and "well-governed" so that individuals do what they "should" and just that.

There is a common factor in that some relationship is needed whereby the individual carries out actions in accordance with the wishes of another – be that a manager, a company Board or the government. There are variants of this ranging from the action called for being very specific (registering a birth, or moving a rock) to the actor being allowed a considerable amount of freedom but being expected to exercise that within a given set of parameters (e.g. as managers reporting to a Board of Directors) In business this difference may sometimes be seen as the basis for contrasting management and corporate governance, but this choice of terms is from business studies; and the philosophical interest is to consider more abstractly the situation in which there is an actor (agent), an "other" defining what should or should not be done, and the relationship which supports their interaction. Pending further analysis the various patterns will initially be labelled as 'governance' and their manifestations will be reviewed to seek common factors, differentia, and to see how they be reconciled with the wider ontology arising from our concepts of individual and social existence.

The immediate trigger for such an inquiry is that 21st century trends and developments are disruptive for established models of government and governance. This is not unprecedented: disruptive challenges have arisen before and led to major change at political and at socio-economic levels in the two areas already mentioned - as was the case when the "divine right of Kings" was challenged by theories based on how free (non-subservient) individuals can associate in a state (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau etc); and when merchant and industrial ventures acquired size, power and importance that led to them being granted the status of legal persons separate from their participators. (Company Law and later corporate governance, CSR and 'business ethics').

A frequent assumption in discussing governance is that there needs to be a structure such as "command and control" which ensures that the governed do what is wanted. It may however be time to question this assumption. A starting point would be to seek a criterion for being well-governed. Such a starting point might revolve around a defined relationship between a point of decision – whether unitary or distributed (but how?) - and one or more "agents" whose actions are meant to implement the decisions. Thus there may also be scope for innovative models to conceptualise the governance of newly important social phenomena such as social media, mass movements without clear leadership, open source software development communities, and even relatively amorphous terrorist groupings with branding and franchising as key features.

In parallel there is uncertainty, both practical and moral, about the effectiveness of the link between decision taking whether by the original decision takers or by those trying to implement decisions, and the outcomes of resulting action. Often enough the actual effect is not what is intended and various "remedies" have been suggested. Businesses are under pressure to adopt "modern" management techniques to replace dictatorial styles, governments are showing interest in "nudge" approaches for areas where direct control does not work as intended: what are the consequences for governance? Pragmatic considerations and experiment may help resolve what it is best to do for particular cases, but the conceptual basis also needs to be addressed. What is included in the

concept of "governance"? where are the boundaries between creative approaches to governance on the one hand and manipulation and deception on the other? Even if "ends" are thought to "justify the means" how are the ends to be chosen and how are the means to be selected and policed?

Humans governing humans

The talk will attempt to bring together concepts from political philosophy, corporate governance, and management. It will review various manifestations of governance to highlight common factors and sources of puzzlement.

"Human nature" will be considered as a fulcrum on which to leverage theory-building by considering on the one hand our need to deal with people on the basis of reasonable expectations, and on the other our relatively limited ability to predict outcomes even when there is a sincere and skilled attempt to achieve them.

Depending on time, some attention may also be given to the lurking suspicion that theories of governance are part of a discourse that assumes the legitimacy of current power and domination models, and to proposing a clarification of the concepts of law, regulation, governance and governmentality.

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