Reversibility: A New Concept for Policy Studies in International Relations

We face a series of existential problems in 21st century international politics (environmental degradation, global migration, and the weaponization of nuclear material, to name just three), whose successful tackling demands radical imagination and suggests thinking beyond the box. Indeed, we are demanded to think beyond, and in radical alternatives to, those understandings of politics and policy strategies, which seem to have caused these problems in the first place. The famous Einstein-quote suits here well, saying that: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Interdisciplinarity is hereby a keyword of our times, also requested as irreducible condition by many important funding agencies, promising to lead to new concepts, insights, and empirical solutions through the synergetic effects of research approaches and methods.

In this vein, I suggest to merge the two disciplines of political philosophy and policy studies with the aim to develop an understanding of politics and respective novel policy guidelines, which help to enhance radical imagination and alternatives. Such merging results in the concept of reversibility, which is well-established in the natural sciences and in economics, but is a novel concept for the study of politics. Reversibility recommends the malleability or pliability of political action and policies with the awareness, however, of never being able to overcome contingencies, ambivalences, and inadvertent consequences of our political action. Reversibility also functions as an *a priori* reflection and ethical constraint for political action and policy-making, which demands humility facing ever-existing uncertainties and inadvertent consequences of politics. But only in the reversibility of policies as an institutional mechanism, preventing the implementation of irreversible politics, *and* as an ethical virtue of humility towards the unpredictabilities and indeterminacies of policy-making, as two main features of the political process proposed by policy studies, lies responsible political action. It is responsible precisely as, and only if, it accounts for the contingencies and uncertainties of our world, hence only abides by the criteria of responsibility if reversible.

With the notions of indeterminacy, uncertainty, and contingency of the political and human world, political philosophy comes into play. With, for example Hannah Arendt – who has carefully observed that modern politics has been traditionally, and one must say still is, obsessed with stability, thus excluding contingency and acting upon the human world which is assumed as static, given, and open to our wonts – we must realise that our political systems and our natural environment is indeed fragile and finite. Thus, we thus must act politically with care and the awareness of permanent uncertainties and contingencies. In fact, policy-making and policy-implementation has to account for the latter as the conceptual triangulation of Critical Theory, Classical Realism, and neo-Aristotelian prudence, suggest.

The concept of reversibility leads to the development of a clear further research agenda in close cooperation with policy-makers, be they state, intergovernmental, or NGO actors. Such a research agenda includes questions such as: How does a concept of reversibility translate into policy design and policy implementation? What are institutional mechanisms, which prevent consequences that harm contingency and take effect when, and as soon as, such consequences occur? Are such institutional mechanism accompanied, supported and facilitated by an ethical habitus of reversibility?

I suggest for illustration one example of reversibility in practice. This example is the law case "State of Hawai'i and Ismail Elshikh vs. Donald J. Trump" that declared Trump's executive order "Protecting the Nation from Foreign

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Terrorist Entry into the United States" from January 27, 2017 as unconstitutional (see Case 1:17, CV 00050-DKW-KSC from March 15, 2017) and based its dismissal on the argument of the avoidance of 'irreparable' and 'irrevocable' consequences for large parts of the American and of migrant populations. This judgement and its justification seems guided by a self-aware and ethical reflection on humanity linked with the unforeseeable nature of policy consequences on people and humanity itself (see the self-reflections on the judgement 28/43; 32/43; 38/43). Thereby, the decision addresses both identifiable, already manifested consequences and rectifies those with possibly irrevocable consequences in the future. Both, already manifested and possible future consequences are specified, for instance, with regard to irrevocable impacts for the University of Hawaii and for Higher Education in general (see on "intangible impacts" [17/43]), with regard to "irrevocable damage on personal and professional lives" [18/43; 28/43; 40/43] as well as with regard to future uncertainties for international travel [20/43]), tourism, and family union.

The concept of reversibility thus seeks to encourage and further the synergy of scholarly expertise, concretely between political philosophy in IR and policy studies, in cooperation with policy-makers for the management of international and global problems, rethinking the ways we conceive of politics and the human world and how to tackle, if not solve current challenges.

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