Judging in the Public Realm

A Kantian Approach to the Deliberative Concept of Ethico-Political Judgment and an Inquiry into Public Discourse on Prenatal Diagnosis

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This thesis discusses how to enhance the public discussion of moral and political questions. Enhancing public ‘deliberation’ is desirable since it provides citizens with influence, it enables coming to an understanding, and it ensures legitimacy. The concept of ethico-political judgment, with its two conditions, is elaborated on as an ideal that suggests how we should deliberate. In order to understand how we actually deliberate, an empirical inquiry into the public discourse on prenatal diagnosis and screening in the Netherlands and Sweden is conducted. On the basis of Kant’s ethics and his theory of the faculty of judgment, the two conditions for public deliberation are developed. These conditions are the giving of and asking for normative reasons as well as aiming at impartiality of judgment. Normative reasons are prescriptive, universal, and internal and these are related to Kant’s ethics. Impartiality is related to Kant’s ‘enlarged thought’, to think from the standpoint of others, as well as Kant’s practical philosophy. We need to think from the standpoints of others in order to consider whether or not the principle of our action applies to all. Four thematic foci in the public discourse on prenatal diagnosis are investigated – the unborn life, attitudes toward the disabled, implications of new choices, and the limits of medicine. My conclusion is that – if we wish to enhance public deliberation on the basis of the two conditions of ethico-political judgment – we should deal with both interpretive differences over universal principles and varying representations of ‘the other’.