P.A. ETH-TALK: IS IT ETHICAL?

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Abstract

The study and discussion of ethics in public administration can be dysfunctional and even harmful without a sophisticated understanding of the field and ethics. This article stresses that those engaged in discussing ethics should understand epistemology, focus on the practical, and be very circumspect about imposing a particular ethical prescriptive on others.

Introduction

P.A. eth-talk (the study and discussion of Public Administration ethics) can be dysfunctional, and it is harmful to public administration practice and thinking-ethics properly being at the heart of the p.a. discipline-not to identify the criteria that can distinguish healthy from dysfunctional eth-talk. This paper illustrates these two claims by discussing three among the minimal criteria that healthy P.A. eth-talk should meet. Most of this material was published earlier (e.g., Farmer, 1995, 1999). The first criterion is that healthy P.A. eth-talk should be realistic in its recognition of the epistemological nature of the ethical, and that ethics that are unrealistic are dysfunctional. Second, healthy eth-talk should be comprehensively practical, avoiding a constricted view of practicality. Third, healthy eth-talk should incorporate a hesitant posture toward imposing ethical prescriptions on others. A practical implication of this paper is that, wonderful as the ethical revival has been in the pat decade or so in American Public Administration, we should think through the institutional need to distinguish between healthy and dysfunctional eth-talk.

The motive in raising these issues is three-fold. First, the shift toward recognizing the role of the ethical in P.A. and in related fields is accepted as a step forward. (For myself, I rejoice at the growing interest in P.A. eth-talk. My own view is that we cannot live well or think well without making moral judgments.) This shift toward recognizing the role of the ethical, affecting a range of social action disciplines, is exemplified recently in the United States in the revival of interest in social philosophy especially since the publication in 1971 of John Rawls' A Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971); it is also found in the justice emphasis in Derrida (Derrida, 1992) and in the postmodern view of the implosion of the boundaries between the normative, the scientific and the aesthetic (Habermas, 1983). Second, the step – although forward – is a mis-step if it seizes on a version of the ethicizing project that is not realistic about the nature of the ethical, not comprehensive about practicality, and not willing to be hesitant in imposing ethical prescriptions on others. Third, I want to bring these ideas

before a wider audience. This is why I am repeating much – for example – from an earlier version of a paper that became Farmer, 1999, modified by some recent thoughts.

Two caveats should be entered. First, there is nothing wrong with P.A. eth-talk options that do not apply to eth-talk in other action areas, e.g., business or social work administration. The arguments of this paper could be generalized beyond P.A. eth-talk. It applies in any situation where there are differences in opinion about ethics, e.g., in any multi-opinion or multi-cultural situation. My choice to focal on P.A. eth-talk results only from the fact that I am interested in P.A. (Incidentally, use of the neologism "eth-talk" is "inspired" by, and adapted from, an e-mail address used in the ASPA Section on Ethics. However, the adaptation – including a hyphen – is to underscore that the excellent work of that section is not being targeted.) Second, there is nothing in this paper that is intended either to undermine religion or to support relativism. As is noted below, my own skepticism about the capability of human reasoning "on its own" to identify grounded, inter-subjective moral prescriptions is understood to be in the spirit of St. Augustine. I think that, no less than St. Augustine, a religious person could happily accept the skepticism offered here (understanding "skepticism" in its philosophical sense and not confusing skepticism with pessimism) and practice her religion without contradiction. In fact, St. Augustine would have considered anything else as misguided.

Realism about the Nature of the Ethical

Healthy P.A. eth-talk – a sub-set of ethics practiced in administrating public agencies and taught to public administrators – is one that can cope with that I have called "the epistemological indefiniteness of the ethical." A first criterion for healthy ethical thinking and practice is a recognition of the unavailability of inter-subjective grounding and certainty, based solely on the claims of reason. P.A. eth-talk is dysfunctional to the extent that it demands certainty where certainty is elusive. Growing recognition of the inaccessibility of grounding is illustrated in the hermeneutic turn described by Georgia Warnke, and recognition of the unavailability of certainty is supported by philosophers as diverse as St. Augustine and Bertrand Russell. Examples of dysfunctionality in P.A. ethics thinking are provided in the seeking of an illusion of certainty in such forms s core moral values and democratic constitutionalism.

A shift away from attempts to ground ethics is exemplified in Warnke's discussion of what she calls a "hermeneutic or interpretive turn" in justice philosophizing. By the term "hermeneutic or interpretive turn," Warnke means that "many important political theorists no longer try to justify principles of justice or norms of action on what might be called Kantian grounds; by appealing to formal reason, to the character of human action or to the neutral procedures of rational choice" (Warnke, 1993, p. vii). Rather, justifying social and political principles turn simply to showing the suitability of the principles of that society or to showing that the principles express the "meanings of the society's goods and practices, history and traditions." Even John Rawls has switched from offering Kantian or objective prescriptions.

Instead, he now re-states what a society, a community, thinks is justice – what he calls the "settled convictions" of a society. Others taking the hermeneutic turn are Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor; the former speaks about "social understandings" and the latter about "inter-subjective meanings." They re-state what a community thinks is justice. (In parentheses, it is agreed that these thinkers are trying to have their cake and eat it. Wisely, they are shying away from an objective "grounded" prescription and, then unfortunately seeking ersatz grounding in substitutes like settled convictions, social understandings and inter-subjective meanings.) This agreement is offered in parentheses, because the main point is that – despite the ersatz noted – a hermeneutic shift is made by these major thinkers. This shift meshes with the more forthright denial of the possibility of grounding, made by writers like Giorgio Agamben. "The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize" (Agamben, 1993, p. 43).

Earlier the claim was made that this skepticism about the possibility of inter-subjective grounded ethical certainty, derived from reason alone, was in the spirit of St. Augustine's skepticism about the capabilities of unaided human reason. For example, see the section in his City of God on "The disagreements of philosophers and the harmony of the Scriptures." For instance, he begins by saying that "the philosophers themselves… do not seem to have had any other aim in their laborious pursuits than to discover how we should regulate our lives toward the attainment of happiness. How is it, then, that disciples have disagreed with teachers, and fellow-disciples with one another? Must it not be because they sought the answers to these questions as men relying on human senses and human powers of reasoning?" (St. Augustine, 1467/1972, Bk XVIII, Ch. 41).

Philosophy's value, for thinkers like Bertrand Russell, is "largely in its very uncertainty" in knowing (1959, p. 156). For him, " (p)hilosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers. since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves…" (Russell, 1959, p. 161). He goes on to describe the utility. He claims that philosophy can suggest possibilities, which enlarge our thoughts and free us from "the tyranny of custom". Philosophical conceptions can enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich our imagination and diminish the dogmatic assurance that closes off our minds to speculations. In Russell's view, practicing philosophy renders the mind itself greater.

For further illustration of the unavailability of certainty, consider again the large literature on justice ethics and think of its inconclusive outcome (Farmer, 1998). That literature is full of excellent arguments for contrary and contradictory views. Justice is analyzed in such divergent terms as retribution and revenge, as mercy, as impartiality, and as reciprocity. One distinguished thinker argues for a liberal theory of justice (Rawls, 1971); another advances a libertarian theory (Nozick, 1974); and yet another wants to evaluate justice claims on a utilitarian basis (Smart and Williams, 1973). Each competing position has its strengths and weaknesses, and each has its supporters; but surely there is no clear winner. Diverging views are also offered on whether justice is an objective feature of what is; whether justice requires grounding in the divine, or in reason, or in a language or a culture or a way of life; whether

justice needs any grounding; and so on. Some are cognitivsts, and others not (e.g. Singer). Diverging views exist not only on "whether: but also on "how" – for instance, how justice can be grounded in reason.

This inconclusiveness of outcomes, the unavailability of certainty, permeates ethics. Some are consequentialists (thinking about results in such terms as long-lasting happiness or goodness), for example; others are deontologists, denying consequentialism; others argue for or against "balancing up" both options. Each of the alternative has well-discussed weaknesses and strengths. Such inconclusiveness exists throughout philosophy, not only in ethics but also in epistemology and metaphysics. This is to be expected to be extent that it is right to conceptualize philosophy as a "wild science" – a science structured by no decision rules that are beyond questioning, a discipline fundamentally open.

To the extent that it fails to recognize this indecisiveness, P.A. eth-talk is surely dysfunctional. There are two reasons for supposing a measure of such dysfunctionality in P.A. eth-talk. First, it is reported that much teaching of P.A. ethics is not within a philosophical framework (e.g., 18 percent, according to Catron and Denhardt, 1994(; rather, the focus is on administrative ethics or role morality. Too often, ethics are conceptualized as if they could be reduced to a matter of technique. So, it can be lamented that missing from P.A. ethics "is the kind of critical discourse and interchange that typifies a good rousing Philosophical controversy" (Fox, 1994, p. 85).

Second, a significant theme in P.A. ethics literature invokes false groundings that are sought in dysfunctional ethics – in mis-using core values and democratic constitutionalism. For one, core values have been used in P.A. ethical models over the past half-century to provide what is mis-supposed to be grounding. Six or seven such models claim that the public administrator has an ethical obligation to respect the core values of her society (Denhardt, K., 1991).

Yes, societies have core values. Yet it is a mistake to equate a core societal value with an ethical value, i.e., with what ought to be. It is useful to repeat that it was a core value of the pre-1865 Old South that people have a "right" to own others; it was a core value of 1950s America that a woman's place is in the home (Farmer, 1998a). But it should not be believed that there was an ethical obligation – as opposed the best way to get ahead at work and in polite society, responding to public opinion. A societal grip is not necessarily an ethical grip.

Some seek certainty by equating constitutional or regime values with ethical values. Some turn to the Constitution. In response, Plato's story of Socrates encountering Euthyphro bears repeating. Euthyphro lets Socrates know that, motivated by his wish to secure the gods' approval, he (Euthyphro) has laid murder charges against his own father, he thinks that he has done the holy, the right, thing. Socrates then asks (10a), "Is it holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" Turn to regime ethics. Is it ethical because the Constitution says so, or does the Constitution say so because it is ethical?

P.A. eth-talk should not attempt to "rationalize" ethics by making certain what cannot be certain and by making tidy what cannot be tidy at this time – on a kind of bureaucratic model. On the contrary, we can embrace the uncertainties and the untidiness. In picturing justice and ethics, we can admit of paradoxes, of tensions between claims, and of a sea of radical indeterminacy. In P.A. eth-talk, we can accept the realm of the ethical as it is – warts and all.

Comprehensive Practicality

Healthy, P.A. eth-talk is one that is comprehensively practical, avoiding a view that underemphasizes change and the macro and long-range issues of bureaucracy. The urge for practicality, it is being suggested, is too narrow when practicality is understood in such a way that it privileges the status quo and the micro – practicality within the existing system. Yes, important P.A. eth-talk work has been – and continues to be – done in the macro tradition (e.g., see Rohr, 1989; Cooper, 1994). Yes, concern with the micro concerns of ethical situations faced by employees in the existing structure is valuable, and practitioners and students do enjoy hearing the such issues as the "ethical responsibilities of public managers," "tools for personal decision making," and "ethics and the agency" (e.g., Lewis, 1991). The dysfunctionality occurs when there is overemphasis on the micro, when macro eth-talk issues are shortchanged.

The point is whether it is healthy to have a Public Administration – supported by P.A. eth-talk – that can ignore the larger societal forces that may be involved in ("impacting on" or "aided

by," for instance) public administration. Assume that a McDonaldization Thesis is correct, for example; the thesis is "that the fast-food restaurant, especially the pioneering and still dominant chain of McDonald's restaurants, is the contemporary paradigm of the rationalization process" (Ritzer, 1998, p. vii). Assume that the world is increasingly being McDonaldized (e.g., see Ritzer, 1993). Is a Public Administration – and its supporting eth-talk – healthy if it can by-pass such developments that have great significance for P.A. practice, especially the longer-term and more fundamental aspects of macro P.A. practice. On a consequential basis, some will ask how ethical is any such shortsighted isolation from central long-term features of the practical world.

Should not P.A. eth-talk place appropriate emphasis on analyzing deep structures, e.g., in understanding the P.A. preference for the short-term and the micro? Consider the following example of the deep structure of American common law, and then consider the case of P.A.'s short-term and micro proclivity. The current character of American common law has been described as the result of its having been shaped by the elaboration of its "deep structure" in England between 1272 and 1547, a deep structure relevant to justice issues in that part of this structure was its inclination toward the advantage "of the wealthier gentry and its professional cohort in the legal profession" (Cantor, 1997, p. 192). Cantor points to what he sees as examples of deep structure in physics, Greek philosophy, Renaissance Italian art, and modern

medicine grounded in microbiology. Would not understanding of P.A.'s short-term and micro proclivity be deepened if it were assisted by eth-talk that recognized that a deep structure of modern bureaucracy was its shaping as an adjunct of hierarchical royal power? Modern bureaucracy was indeed conceived in the service of the prince, and P.A. eth-talk should surely recognize that the hierarchical inclination that conditions micro and macro decision-making in today's bureaucracy is the heir of this deep structure.

Consider the central claim of this section from another perspective. Does not the practical world present us with at least two opposing world-views or grand societal perspectives that are involved in any understanding of strategies for addressing macro bureaucratic issues – bureaucracy "as a whole"? Are they not involved in the eth-talk that should relate to a macro issue such as the "iron cage" problem described by Max Weber? Does not their existence of the competing world-outlooks underscore the need to seek comprehensive practicality in approaching ethics?

One world outlook (outlook 1) celebrates the economic efficiency of capitalism, and it is supported by concepts and metaphors like the principles of self-interest and Adam Smith's invisible hand. This world outlook encourages the adoption of consumerism as an ideal for public administration practice; the overall motif is the efficiency ethic, an ethic where public administration – operating in a command economy situation – cannot be outstandingly successful. The role of eth-talk in this context is no more than accidental and supportive. It is accidental in the sense that ethics is not central for the furtherance of efficiency. It is no more than supportive in securing the efficiency of the workers who fit into the needs of the machinery of government.

In work outlook 1, the practicality that is valued is that which maintains the current general framework of the existing machinery of government, and the efficiency that is sought is that obtainable within the existing context. The emphasis is tending the machinery of government is on practicality in the sense of activities yielding short-run and micro payoff. Within this outlook the critical ethical question is how the worker and the work can be efficient. So there is an emphasis on ethical issues that have great value for this "fitting in" of the worker and the "efficiency" of the machine. Examples are ethical dilemmas like blowing the whistle, conflict of loyalties and the other day-to-day micro issues. Yes, change toward more ethical micro behavior is being encouraged. But the changes sought are within the existing basic framework. That is, the choice of ethical issues favors retention of the status quo; it favors this narrow understanding of the concept of practicality.

An alternative work outlook (outlook 2) involves a focus on justice or caring, on the liberation of the human spirit, and on a curbing of evil and harm – all of which ideas, for convenience's sake, we will understand for the time being under the term "justice". With a range of often-conflicting prescriptions, one manifestation includes at least the aim of correcting the market's misallocation of "some" or "many" resources. In this outlook, public administration at a minimum is not completely market-oriented. It seeks efficiency only to the extent that efficiency furthers its values.

In world outlook 2, the primary emphasis is on practicality in the sense of moving toward justice, as we have just sketched the term. Practicality is understood as encouraging more fundamental change in public administration and in the larger societal systems and beyond, to the extent that such systems are involved in moving toward justice. It embraces not only the micro but also the macro, recognizing (among other things) that the macro shapes justice considerations in the micro. This is in contrast to a focus, which is essentially limited to the micro ethical dilemmas of fitting into the workplace machine and the short-run ethical issues concerned with the functioning of the governmental machine. In outlook 2, the importance of individual micro choices is not denied. However, the focus also extends to include macro long-range concerns of bureaucracy.

The class of macro ethical issues would surely include, for example, those relating to difference and marginalizing. This would include the marginalizing of people, such as women, children, minorities, and so on. It would also include the marginalization of perspectives and the role of institutional arrangements as marginalizers. In addition to the "iron cage" problem mentioned above, it would include the ongoing antipathy against government (Farmer, 1999a) , and aspects of globalization (the dialectic between globalization and localization).

Such macro study cannot be limited to governmental institutions. For instance, governments operate in a civil society, including the world of corporations and other entities. The ethical aspects of such topics as secrecy or corruption can hardly be studies as if government can be studied as if government were not part of society (e.g., see Knapp Commission, 1973), any more than the size of government can be studied in isolation. Arguably, such macro study goes very wide. It begins with such starting points as that human beings, despite all our aggressiveness, live in groups. From this starting point, Eibl-Eibesfelt (1996) goes on to pose the question of how we manage this. "By what means do we maintain and form bonds with our fellow men, in spite of the 'aggression barrier?'…How do sociability and love develop both phylogenetically (in the course of evolution) and ontogenetically (during the lifetime of the individual)? And how does hate evolve (p. 5) Our discipline's direction may differ from Eibl-Eibesfeldt's, but our scope should not be artificially narrowed.

Healthy eth-talk needs a greater emphasis on issues of justice. This emphasis could well be facilitated by recognizing a distinction between Micro Public Administration Ethics and Macro Public Administration Ethics. Tipping the scales toward the latter in P.A. eth-talk would be consistent with a more comprehensive sense of practicality and greater functionality.

A Hesitant Posture

Healthy P.A. eth-talk should incorporate an authentically hesitant posture toward imposing ethical prescription on others. There should be a hesitant attitude in alterity, the relationship to the moral other. Most P.A. eth-talk-and P.A. in general-has not been influenced by this notion, which is relatively new to P.A. (e.g., Farmer, 1995). Before examining the idea,

we can notice its relevance to any multi-opinioned or multi-cultural situation and we can note what St. Augustine's attitude would have been.

On general relevance to any multi-opinioned situation where no ethical prescription can be determined certainly by an appeal to reason, there is a range of options concerning my attitude toward imposing "my" moral convictions on "you." At one end, I could do whatever it takes (for your "good") to get you to accept my truth-including even varieties of violence and deceit. At the other extreme, I could do nothing-including not even giving you my opinion. Even in a context where intersubjective certainty is unavailable by an appeal to reason (unaided human reason), nevertheless each person may develop sure opinions or convictions (e.g., as did St. Augustine when he converted, falling to the ground in Milan). The question is what is right for me to do when another does not agree with me on a moral prescription that I hold strongly. Should a militant Christian (or socialist) impose her moral values on a militant atheist (or conservative)?

St. Augustine would not have sympathized with my claim asking the militant to hesitate, as we can suspect form his attitude toward the persecution of heretics (e.g., Paolucci, 1962, pp. 184-240). In his Treatise on the Correction of the Donatists, Augustine writes that "For many have found advantage (as we have proved, and are daily proving by actual experience), in first being compelled by fear or pain, so that they might afterwards be influenced by teaching, or might follow out in ac what they had already learned in word?" (Paolucci, 1962, p. 214). Here I part company with St. Augustine.

This section concentrates on one major feature (among the several) of alterity-hesitation. Our inherited-the traditional, Western modernist-attitude in bureaucracy involves a privileging of assertiveness over hesitancy, a valuing of taking charge and requiring the right thing. This privileging is reflected in such features as over-valuation of hierarchy and the standard "impossible to fulfill" incantation on job descriptions that the function of the supervisor is to "direct, coordinate and control all the activities and personnel on the assigned unit." It is reflected in the context of bureaucracy-in our political, legal and cultural practices, for example-in preference for debate and confrontation rather than dialogue and shared exploratory discourse (e.g., see Tannen, 1998). It is a privileging of the predominant attitude of Occidental Christianity over Oriental Confucianism.

Authentic hesitation does not entail inauthentic hesitation, which can be a matter of mere procrastination or mere passivity-a putting off, or a suppressing, of what can be said and done. An authentic version involves genuineness in relating to others and to our epistemological situation. It does not refer to procrastination or passivity about the wishes and ethical prescriptions of others, and it does not endorse (for example) bureaucratic inaction or buck passing in response to the wishes of others. Rather authentic hesitation refers to the style of holding and expressing our own or our group's ethical prescriptions; it concerns hesitation only in the maintaining and imposing of our own (or our group's) opinions about the right thing to be done. ("Group" in this case includes such associations as "my" employment, family, regional, class, religious, social, national or other groups). Nor does authentic hesitation involve denying one's own beliefs or conclusions. Rather, the hesitation in making

one's own (or our group's) claims is, as it were, minimal; it asks the holder to exercise some restraint in the holding and in the imposing. The notion of "hesitation" is subject to significant misunderstanding, a "bad rap" often tied in with linguistic and proverbial associations. Yet it is clear enough that a world with some authentic hesitation is eminently desirable. The question really is-how much and about what?

Justice as authentic hesitation involves both personal and interpersonal openness. It engages these two interrelated sorts of openness-on our part or on behalf of our group-in such terms as cognition, emotion and will. These sorts of openness presuppose certain habitual behaviors and awareness. For example, personal openness presupposes a habit of critical and self-aware thinking behavior and an awareness of the limits of our individual epistemological situation.

Hesitation itself has been a type of secondary theme in Western modernity, in the sense that neighboring virtues have been valued in liberal and other political philosophies. Such virtues include toleration, mutual respect, sympathy, public reason, and full consideration to the arguments of others. The point is that hesitation is not such an outlandish idea as it may at first appear.

Toleration was valued by John Locke, for example, his religious toleration was a limited live and let live attitude developed within the context of Locke's other views that individuals must observe certain constraints in pursuing their self identified interests. Mutual respect, demanding more than the live and let live attitude of toleration, is a civic virtue that has an important role in the thinking of Hobbes, Hegel, Mill and Rawls. Mutual respect was for Hegel required for each to be fully human, for instance, and this is discussed in Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave. Adman Smith wrote of the propensity to sympathize with others. For him, economic life should be seen against a larger background of natural sympathy. Mutual respect for Immanuel Kant was further developed in terms of the notion of public reason, whereby individuals show mutual respect in critical thinking that takes into account the views of others. Public reason as a concept was democratized more fully by writers like Mill and Rawls than in Kant's account. "Full consideration to the argument of others" was advocated by John Stuart Mill. Mill's argument was that experience is not enough to guide life; rather, "there must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted" (Mill, 1961, p. 205). Rawls adopted Kant's approach to public reason. He thinks that public reasoning should take place within "a political conception of justice based on the values that others can reasonably be expected to endorse" (Rawls, 1993, p. 226). His guidelines provide that there should be an open discussion of public issues. There must be a commitment to civility. Also, people should not use a particular nonpublic religion or philosophical position as a basis for a basic justice claim.

For an account of an count of an application to Public Administration in terms of anti-administration, see Farmer, 1995; 1998; 1999b.

The hesitant attitude toward ethical prescription that has predominated in the Western tradition and that is a leading feature of the modernist mind-set has achieved not only minuses (e.g., mass destruction) but also many appreciable pluses (e.g., longer lives, more consumer

goods, great music). The suggestion is that much more could be realized –augmenting the pluses and diminishing the minuses-by incorporating the hesitant attitude in P.A. eth-talk.

Summary

This article suggested that P.A. eth-talk (study and discussion of Public Administration) can be dysfunctional, and it is harmful to public administration practice and thinking-ethics properly being at the heart of the p.a. discipline-not to identify the criteria that can distinguish healthy from dysfunctional eth-talk. The article illustrated these two claims by discussing three among the minimal criteria that healthy P.A. eth-talk should meet. It did so by repeating much that I have discussed earlier (e.g., in Farmer, 1995; 1999). The first criterion is that healthy P.A. eth-talk should be realistic in its recognition of the epistemological nature of the ethical, and that ethics that are unrealistic are dysfunctional. Second, healthy eth-talk should be comprehensively practical, avoiding a constricted view of practicality. Third, healthy eth-talk should incorporate a hesitant posture toward imposing ethical prescriptions on others. A practical implication of this article is that P.A. eth-talkers should think through the institutional need to distinguish between healthy and dysfunctional eth-talk.

Note

1. Much of this material and words in this article have been taken from my previous publications. For example, this article contains such material from an earlier paper, which became Farmer, 1999.

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