A BRAVE NEW NETWORKED WORLD: VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MANAGER

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Abstract

As twenty-first century public sector managers face the brave new world of global networks, NPM techniques, and virtual networked organizations, twentieth-century moral and ethical approaches to decision making appear inadequate and potentially troublesome. The editors of this special PAMIJ symposium have selected several articles from the e-journal Global Virtue Ethics Review that highlight the ethical difficulties present in this new world, and offer opportunities and palliatives available for public sector managers as they enter this new and uncharted venue.

Introduction

As Mark Twain once said, "To be good and virtuous is a noble thing, but to teach others to be good and virtuous is nobler still—and much, much easier." (as quoted in Bowman, 1991, p. 1). Perhaps the founders of the e-journal, *Global Virtue Ethics Review* (GVER), would have found Twain's aphorism less and less true during the early and mid-1990s, particularly for public sector ethics education and the managers that are trained in such courses. For example, in quoting Mark Lilla, Kathryn Denhardt (1991) noted that public sector ethics education has emphasized analytical methods rather than moral principles and that students in such courses engage in "...peculiar sort(s) of philosophical discourse which allows them to make

sophisticated excuses for their actions without preparing them to act responsibly" (pp. 92-93). Although this reluctance to engage in moral discussion initially seemed due to an over reliance on the modernist concept of "reason," in the early and mid-1990s such concepts were further complicated by the introduction of postmodern approaches to ethical reasoning (e.g., Fox and Miller, 1996). The results of these modernist and postmodernist approaches to ethical reasoning left public sector managers bereft of the traditional signposts that could guide their actions in increasingly complicated situations. Individuals attempting to break out of this self-defeating approach to ethical reasoning justifiably feared being accused of moralizing, seeking authority for themselves, or (in the education setting) moral indoctrination (Denhardt, 1991, p. 93).

The rapid growth of information technology, the Internet, virtual networked organizations and increasing acceptance of New Public Management (NPM) techniques all combined to make reestablishing the moral signposts previously removed all the more important. These new public sector organizations, some global in configuration, replace the traditional command and control organization hierarchies with a series of networked relationships both inside and outside the organization (e.g., Lynch and Cruise, 2001). NPM techniques also present potential operational and ethical problems for the public sector manager in terms of responsiveness to elected leaders and responsible actions in general (O'Toole, 1997; Cope, 1997). H. George Frederickson, in his book *The Spirit of Public Administration* (1997) suggests that our inability to think "governmentally and to be governmental" is leading to increasing problems of corruption and ethical lapses for public managers. Frederickson cites, among other things, the move from the traditional hierarchical organization to the networked enterprise-driven organization as causes for this situation.

It is in this context that Thomas D. Lynch (at Louisiana State University) and Willa Bruce (at the University of Illinois at Springfield) discussed the need for a forum in which to discuss ethics and ethical reasoning in the public sector. In cooperation with Jack Rabin at the Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg and the Southern Public Administration and Education Foundation (SPAEF), GVER was launched in 1999. As the need for rapidly addressing ethical issues in networked organizations was cited as a major impetus for beginning GVER, the new journal would launch as one of the growing number of

e-journals on the SPAEF.com web site. In his opening editorial for volume one, number one Tom Lynch noted…

> …as the content of this issue indicates, we believe that our professions need a literature that contributes to our joint understanding of ethics, virtue ethics in particular, and ethics in the context of a global community. As we end the 20th century, the world is coming increasingly together and we need to think of ethics in a global context. Ethics guides us individually but it also informs us in terms of our organizations and government policies. Increasingly, we need to see a better harmony among our visions of ethics so that we can have a common basis to make our rules and policies. I believe that we can look especially to our religious and philosophic literature, and find the basis for a common approach to ethics that is acceptable to nearly all the traditions of this world. However, that is only possible if we search for it and actively dialogue among ourselves as to what that common approach might be. (1999, p. 1)

In this same inaugural issue, Lynch also noted a particular desire to develop a virtues approach to ethical reasoning to meet the needs of global networked organizations…

> …in approaching ethics especially from a professional perspective, there are three accepted views on ethics: deontological, teleological, and virtue. Although virtue ethics is quite old as it dates back to Aristotle, the other approaches have dominated what at the end of the 20th century is considered professional ethics. Each approach has its value, but as editor I think that the literature on virtue ethics is particularly underdeveloped and thus the reason for this journal. Although this journal will cover all aspects of ethics and morality as they inform us on how to conduct professional activities, we are trying especially to be a place where authors can write about and find material on virtue ethics. (1999, p. 2)

In this special issue of *Public Administration and Management-An Interactive Journal*, we have chosen to highlight four articles we believe provide a précis of the goals and direction the founders of GVER envisioned. Each article, in a unique and particular way,

addresses the promises and problems that virtue ethics present the public sector manager working in global networked organizations.

How did we make these choices? We wanted to present articles that would acquaint readers with some of the current thoughts about virtue ethics. We tried to answer these questions: if we knew nothing about the topic, what would catch our attention and encourage us to read something about it? What would acquaint us with some of the basic concepts, history, and current state of activity in reasoning with virtues in ethics?

We feel that these four selections provide the best answers to our questions. They are elegantly written, interesting, and a good introduction to virtue ethics. They tackle the issues of how we approach our new global societies, how we sustain individuals and communities, how we govern those communities, and how we enhance our desire for a safe, stable world.

Our first selection, *Applying Spiritual Wisdom*, is co-authored by Thomas and Cynthia Lynch. Their premise is that, in our attempt to separate God and government, we have denounced all references to and examples of spirituality and spiritual wisdom. Secular thinking has proven to be inadequate for dealing with the continuing challenges of the public sector, and will continue to be inadequate for the governance of our global communities. Thus, we must look elsewhere for guidance. Lynch and Lynch propose that a search through the philosophical and religious teachings of the world will lead us to spiritual wisdom which "crosses cultures providing a global source of knowledge that instructs us on proper behavior and attitude" (1999, p. 80). While they do not support a particular religion, their investigations have led them to the concept of the golden rule as "the essence of global ethics" (1999, p. 84) because it is found in many faiths of the world. To support their position, they discuss such diverse topics as the post-Enlightenment paradigm shift, the Progressive Movement, the Information Age, and the Book of Proverbs. They conclude by proposing a way to utilize the golden rule for managing our individual and collective lives as we move further into the 21st Century.

James Gazell also discusses a global ethic based on the golden rule in our second selection, *The Provenance and Development of a Global Ethic*. While Lynch and Lynch do not specifically define the

golden rule, Gazell writes that it is "doing onto others as they would do onto you or mutually abstaining from harmful actions" (2000, p. 293). His article is a detailed history of the movement among various religions, business and international groups towards the recognition of a need for a global ethic in our increasingly interconnected world. Gazell examines the political, economic, environmental and religious forces that are influencing the movement, and analyzes charters and statements that have been promulgated by various groups working toward the development of a global ethic. In his conclusion, he lists seven dimensions, based on the golden rule, which he feels will lead to the establishment of a global society and a consensus on a global ethos. According to Gazell... "this consensus seeks to increase the likelihood for the survival of life on earth in all its forms" (2000, p. 317).

Our third selection continues with the theme of a global ethic. In *Globalization, Moral Justification, and the Public Service*, Charles Garofalo reviews the concept of public justification, which focuses on the value choices of bureaucrats. Several questions are examined: what are those values, how are they chosen, and what should they be? Garofalo presents a universal, unified ethic, which is defined as "a concatenation of the major ethical strands in philosophy-deontology, teleology and virtue" (2000, p. 348). This unified ethic is proposed as a framework to guide the decision-making efforts of administrators, to answer the questions about bureaucratic values, and to "provide a moral foundation and moral legitimacy to global dialogue and decisions" (2000, p. 350).

Our final selection is David Farmer's *P.A. Eth-Talk: Is It Ethical?* Farmer defines P.A. eth-talk as "study and discussion of Public Administration ethics" (2000, p. 3). Although pleased with what he sees as the "ethical revival" (2000, p. 3) in American public administration, he cautions against the subject of ethics being taught as just another tool or technique for public administrators. He writes that eth-talk can be harmful to the field of public administration unless we distinguish between "healthy" and "dysfunctional" ethical study and discussion. By examining a variety of philosophical literature, including St. Augustine and John Rawls, he presents and discusses three criteria for healthy eth-talk: 1) a recognition that ethics is not conclusive nor certain, and may include paradoxes in action and decision-making; 2) a realization that public administration, in order to incorporate a more "comprehensive

practicality," must focus more attention on macro issues and large societal forces (2000, p. 8); and 3) a re-thinking of how one goes about sharing one's ethical viewpoints with others.

To paraphrase the quote by Mark Twain noted at the beginning of this article, virtue is hard to achieve in one's own life but much easier to achieve in someone else's life. These four articles from the first two issues of *Global Virtue Ethics Review* give a good sense as to the difficulties of addressing ethics in all venues in the global networked world of the 21st century. The authors have noted the limitations inherent in the modernist and postmodernist perspectives that have dominated ethical reasoning and approaches in public administration in the 20th century. Moreover, these articles explored the potential of a virtues approach to moral and ethical reasoning as an alternative to the limitations inherent in the 20th century paradigms as well as the potential of virtue ethics to restore to 21st century public sector managers the signposts necessary to function both morally and ethically in a global networked environment.

However, much more needs to be written and much more dialogue needs to take place. *Global Virtue Ethics Review* is now completing its third year online, and the founding editors of the journal, and the authors of this symposium, invite you to join in this dialogue.

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