

THE ETHICS OF BUREAUCRACY

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Vic Napier

Walden University

When examining bureaucracy and ethics it is important to begin by establishing a few facts about bureaucracy and the purpose of the examination. First, although it is popular to vilify bureaucracy such assertions are usually out of place. Bureaucracy is nothing more than a means of organizing and managing people and is subject to the same kinds of analysis as any other kind of organizational theory. While bureaucracy might be subject to criticism it is important to determine whether its shortcomings are inherent in its structure, result from unrealistic expectations or are simply groundless. Second, modern bureaucracy is a product of the rise of the municipal growth in the late 19th century. The intent behind its adoption by government was to eliminate widespread political corruption and efficiently organize state and local government services.

Woodrow Wilson first articulated what would become American government bureaucracy in a 1887 scholarly paper advocating the study of public administration (Wilson 1887). Wilson's paper came during an era of stunning growth in which the population of the United States was expanding at startling speed. Contrary to popular myth the bulk of this influx of people was concentrated in large municipalities instead of the wide open spaces of the American West. The resulting demand for basic social services created a state of crisis in a number of American cities (Kennedy 1987). Simply picking up garbage and delivering drinking water was a huge challenge for emerging metropolises like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Wilson held that American society and government had become mature enough that intellectual efforts should shift from the examination of government principles to addressing the management of public policy at the functional level.

Bureaucracy addresses issues of political corruption as well as delivery of public policy. Although the United States Constitution has been in existence since the beginning of the Union

and states enacted their own constitutions modeled after it, very few municipal charters specifically limited or delegated authority. At the local level the power of political officials was often unchecked, leading to interlocking systems of corruption, such as Tammany Hall and Boss Tweed in New York, the ward based machine politics of Chicago, and bribery as an accepted city practice in St. Louis (Steffens 1904).

The Progressive Movement, a populist political trend that straddled about twenty years on either side of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, was largely a product of the outrages of political corruption of the era. Limitations on the autonomy of public officials was widely accepted as a cure for much of the corruption in American cities, but how to enact that limitation was a matter of debate.

The answer came from industry. From our 21st century perspective, we tend to forget what a challenge the Industrial Revolution created for the organization of workers and production. For the first time huge factories demanded that the efforts of thousands of workers be focused on a particular outcome – not just once, but routinely, three shifts a day, every day. Never before had such a challenge presented itself, and it demanded creative and innovative solutions.

Fredrick Taylor (1911) addressed the challenges of bringing organizational order to modern industry with his philosophy of Scientific Management. Taylor's ideas were revolutionary in their time, but sound like common sense. They can be summarized around five main points:

1. Shift responsibility for the organization of work tasks from workers, tradesman, and artisans to professional managers.

2. Use modern scientific methods to analyze work and determine the best way to accomplish tasks and achieve goals.
3. Measure the natural attributes of workers and assign them to jobs that best match those attributes.
4. Train the worker in the specific skills that most efficiently complete a task.
5. Monitor the efficiency of workers and intervene with training, discipline, and rewards to maintain the highest level of efficiency and productivity.

Building on Wilson's paper on public administration and influenced by Taylor's ideas about organizing factories, German sociologist Max Weber (1968) held that bureaucracy is the structure by which government can best execute laws at the functional level. Bureaucracy would give structure and rationality to the execution of public policy in the same way that Scientific Management uses science to bring structure and efficiency to the operation of large manufacturing plants. Weber identified six characteristics of bureaucracy:

1. There are established permanent areas of jurisdiction that are organized by regulation, laws, and administrative rules.
 - a. Regular activities of bureaucracy have objective definitions and therefore become official duties.
 - b. Authority is explicitly defined according to established rules.
 - c. Specific skills qualify people for employment in particular specialties in the bureaucracy.
2. A graduated series of authorities are organized in a hierarchy, and a system of superior and subordinate offices in which higher authorities monitor and supervise lower authorities is officially designated as the structure of the organization.

3. Management is based on written records documenting the execution of official duties. This provides transparency, or the ability to verify that official public duties are free from private or personal activities.

4. Duties are based on well-defined and specialized knowledge and skills. Functional activities are the product of expert skills, usually learned through intensive and ongoing training.

5. A fully functioning bureaucratic office demands the full time attention of those who work there, limiting the distractions of competing personal interests.

6. Management is the result of following specific rules and procedures that are exhaustive, stable and amenable to learning.

Bureaucracy removed the autonomy of government officials in delivering public services. It effectively separated the law-making role of government from the public administration role. This removes elected officials from the administration of laws and replaces them with an organization of specialists who are bound to established routine that is documented at every step.

This system of bureaucracy was effective in ending much of the political corruption of the late 19th century, but it created other ethical challenges. As a tool of government, bureaucracy makes the execution of government policy very efficient, even when those policies incorporate the most repulsive of human evil. Bureaucracy was an indispensable tool in administering the Holocaust, Stalin's Purges, and China's Cultural Revolution. How then, do ethics manifest itself in bureaucracy?

According to Marvin Brown (1989), there are two broad approaches to organizational ethics – individualist and collectivist. In the individualist approach, individuals are held to account for their actions, and judgment and punitive actions are meted out in response to

behaviors deemed by authorities to be inappropriate. This differs from the collectivist perspective in which ethics is seen to reside in a community of individuals. Although individuals may act inappropriately, they do so in the context of a larger social structure that influences and mediates their behavior.

Although Browns' analysis might make sense when applied to business organizations, it does not adequately address bureaucratic ethics. One of the principles of bureaucracy is the separation of official duty from personal agenda. A fundamental principle of bureaucratic organization is to separate the individual, (and their ethics), from their official duties.

Thompson (1985) takes on the challenge of ethics as it applies to bureaucracy. He divides the issue into two realms – the Ethic of Neutrality, in which bureaucrats act on behalf of the organization in order to serve the needs of society; and the Ethic of Structure, in which the organization itself is responsible for ethical decision-making, and that individuals can only be responsible for the direct results of specific actions. Thompson sees problems with both.

In the case of the Ethic of Neutrality Thompson identifies three criticisms

- The assumption that bureaucrats do not (or cannot) exercise moral judgment negates the possibility of external review. The contention that policies are right and just simply because the organization says they are violates the principles of liberal democracy underlying the legislative system that creates the legal environment in which bureaucracy lives.
- The assumption that working in a bureaucracy implies consent with its actions, regardless of the ethical considerations that may result is flawed. People working in bureaucracies are no better able to leave their jobs than people in any other kind of organization are. At any rate, leaving a job out of principle only opens a job for an unprincipled job seeker.

- Decisions and policymaking in bureaucracies are both ethereal and incremental.

The nature of bureaucratic policymaking makes it difficult to pinpoint when an ethical Rubicon is crossed.

Thompson also examines the ability to register dissent in bureaucracies and finds severe limitations. Overt dissent requires the support of widely accepted standards outside the organization, which creates a situation in which dissent can only be possible if it follows the form of bureaucrats joining a chorus of criticism that is already being expressed. He concludes that the only forms of effective internal criticism are covert – surreptitiously sharing documents with other organizations, for example.

Thompson criticizes The Ethic of Structure on three fronts as well.

First, a basic assumption of shared culpability exists in common law, and proportionate responsibility is not recognized. In every other aspect of life, we are held responsible for the results of our actions or our knowledge of the actions of others. The fact that others may share our knowledge of wrongful behavior does not dilute our responsibility. “Responsibility is not a bucket in which less remains when some is apportioned out” (Thompson 1985, p. 450). Further, Perkins (1969) tells us that “moral quality of an intent may be determined by knowledge ...of pertinent facts” (p. 630). Bureaucracy stands alone in contending that individual bureaucrats are immune to shared moral culpability action simply because of their membership in an organization.

Next, Thompson takes on the idea that individual intention is no match for organizational outcomes. He contends that intentions are difficult to define even in the best of circumstances, and for this reason the focus should be on results. For example, the Philadelphia Police Commissioner Joseph O’Neil did not intend to destroy 61 homes, leave 250 people homeless,

and burn to death six adults and five children, but that is the result of the assault he commanded in 1985 against the group MOVE (Stillman 2000).

Finally Thompson addresses how organizational roles can insulate bureaucrats from ethics. As an example, he holds up New York City Mayor Abraham Beame, who denied responsibility for deceptive municipal accounting practices because he was no longer the city controller who initiated the practices. “Public officials are blamed for an immoral (or incompetent) performance in one role, but appear to start with a clean slate once they give up the old job and take up a new one. This recycling of discredited public figures is reinforced by the habit of collapsing personal responsibility into role responsibility” (Thompson 1985, p. 451).

Thompson is a Harvard professor who writes scholarly articles about public administration for an academic audience. Hans Sherrer is a social activist with a different audience and perspective. In his essay *The Inhumanity of Government Bureaucracies* (Sherrer 2000), he brings the reality of bureaucratic ethics shrilly to forefront by citing psychological studies and concepts.

Sherrer points out that the work of Stanley Milgram (1963, 1964) supports the contention that the uneasy relationship between bureaucracy and the ethics of personal responsibility easily leads to institutionalized immorality. He points out that Nazi atrocities were carried out most often by ordinary people from a variety of nations and backgrounds who believed they were acting within lawful limits as they assisted with the management of the Holocaust. Only in retrospect, and through the analysis of the victors of the Second World War, were the ethical implications of the role of bureaucracy examined.

Sherrer also addresses the relationship of behaviorism with bureaucracy. Because behaviorism focuses entirely on what is observable and measurable it is more concerned with

what is acceptable within a setting rather than the absolutes of ethical treatment. This myopia led to decades of institutional abuses involving punishment procedures in bureaucratic mental health institutions that were resolved only in the 1960's and 70's, and led to the "positive programming" reform movement of the 1980's (Scheernberger 1976; Donnellan 1988; Mills 1998). "...the explicit rejection of human autonomy and the role of consciousness in human behavior is ingrained in bureaucratic systems and in the thinking of those who administer them" (Sherrer 2000, p. 253).

Sherrer also points out that the bureaucratic principle of impersonality lends itself to the dehumanization of non-conformists, both inside and outside the organization. He asserts that the psychological concepts of social distance and affiliation come into play in bureaucracies as a means to ensure internal conformity and to demonize outside groups. "One of the best known examples of mental separation is the dehumanization of Jews during the 1930's by Nazi propaganda that portrayed them as the human incarnation of rats and mice" (Sherrer 2000, p. 255).

Although Sherrers perspective can be criticized for its stridence and contemptuous tone, it balances the more reserved voice of Thompson, and reminds us that the administration of public policy has a personal dimension for human beings. Both perspectives are necessary in order to develop an accurate understanding of the advantages and dangers of bureaucracy. This goes beyond scholarly pursuits and academic inquiry and touches on something far more important. A fundamental duty of people living in a democratic society is to preserve that democracy; challenging the way government does business is an honored and essential aspect of citizenship.

“I confidently trust that the American people will prove themselves ... too wise not to detect the false pride or the dangerous ambitions or the selfish schemes which so often hide themselves under that deceptive cry of mock patriotism: ‘Our country, right or wrong!’ They will not fail to recognize that our dignity, our free institutions and the peace and welfare of this and coming generations of Americans will be secure only as we cling to the watchword of *true* patriotism: ‘Our country—when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right.’”

Carl Schurz, former US Senator,
Anti-Imperialistic Conference,
Chicago, Illinois, October 17, 1899
(Schurz 1913, p. 119-20)

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