

Can goodness be taught? How? Though committed to ethical concerns in the teaching and practice of public administration, this article warns how little basis there is for an evidently burgeoning confidence in the ability to prepare others to do good actions. Yet skepticism is not despair, and ethical reflection is surely required. Ethics may, paradoxically, be both the easiest and the most difficult element of public administration to teach. This article examines the possibilities of teaching a "vulgar ethics" of public administration.

VULGAR ETHICS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Ethics is both the easiest and the most difficult element of public administration to teach. It is the easiest because students are naturally drawn to the good. They desire to praise good actions and blame bad ones, to do good actions, to seem to themselves good persons. In this, they are like the rest of us. In the proper circumstances — though it appears that those circumstances are often distressingly fragile — only monstrous persons abhor the good or are utterly indifferent to distinctions between morally good and bad behavior. Moreover, those who study public administration professionally in the United States tend to be especially attuned to concern for the common good.

Ethics is the element most difficult to teach because we can hardly ever reasonably assume that we have succeeded in our goal: making a difference in how students will behave in their actual public administration responsibilities. We can teach *about* goodness, but we do not know that we can teach goodness. "The education of the ruler, of the political agent,"

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Tussman (1960) wrote, "is still our greatest unmet educational challenge" (p. 103). We persist out of faith.

MORAL KNOWLEDGE, MORAL ACTION

How much we hope from schools!¹ In 1987, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) added reference to ethics to its official standards, requiring that "the common curriculum components shall enhance the student's values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically and effectively." In 1988, the cochairs of a NASPAA Working Group on Ethics Education formally proposed that university programs preparing people for careers in public service "provide explicit curriculum coverage for all students that enables and encourages them to act ethically." In its October 1988 report, the Working Group on Ethics Education recommended that "programs adopt a separate required ethics course" in addition to integrating ethics explicitly into a number of core courses. Must one applaud this admirable sensitivity to ethical issues in a discipline stained at times by too zealous technicism, or must one stand in awe at being commanded that, during their brief and busied presence with us, we shall enhance the ethics of our students?

Can school study induce moral change in ordinary people? Ironic Socrates allowed that he was "too poor to give money to the Sophists, who are the only professors of moral improvement" (Plato, n.d., p. 97) and challenged men richer and older than he, if they had skills in the moral education of young people: "Who are they who, having been inferior persons, have become under your care good and noble?" (p. 98). If, so far as one can estimate, churches and priests fail as often as not in truly gentling human nature, whether or not they work aided by the authority of the state or with heaven and hell in their armamentarium, why should schools and professors expect to do any better?² We may induce a sense of moral exhilaration in the classroom, but evil one day insinuates itself in so prosaic a form that there is no time for warning. Or temptation maddeningly sweetens itself. Or one seeming good conflicts with another, or embrace of a partial evil is necessary to avoid a worse. Hampshire (1989) persuasively argued that there is no single proper conception of a good life or a good person but rather many forms of moral goodness, including the distinctive (Machiavellian) choice between the gentle purity of political innocence and the purposeful courage of political experience, both of which may be praiseworthy. Teachers may seek to be moral guides,

but we can at best be confident of our professorial ability to convey a bit of knowledge.

PHILOSOPHY, REGIME KNOWLEDGE

What knowledge might lead to moral action?³ Whatever one's sense of the connection between knowing the truth and being good, all of us must be uneasy with any supposition that learning the history of philosophy or being able to recite with subtlety the key arguments pro and con for a standard set of basic issues leads to virtuous action. Even powerful original philosophical capacity assures nothing. A recent review of a book on Martin Heidegger starts from two "incontestable" facts: "first, that he remains one of the century's most influential philosophers and, second, that he was a Nazi" (Sheehan, 1988, p. 38). Philosophers, yes; kings, depending on local custom; philosopher-kings, not proven. Philosophy offers too little warranty for actions. In a skeptical account of ethics teaching in public administration programs, Lilla (1981) would "send the philosophers home," for their theorizing is too abstract. We should "admit that moral education will take place, much as it always has, through examples and even a bit of 'indoctrination' in the virtues of democracy" (p. 17). Moral education calls for democratic habits taught with authority. Lilla warned that "students preparing for public service today are not receiving what can be called moral education, something akin to religious education which inculcates virtuous habits" (p. 4). Public administration before the triumph of public policy analysis, genuinely if perhaps informally, taught a democratic ethos appropriate to public administrators in a democratic government, he argued, rather than relying on a would-be rigorous, abstract philosophical method. (One should add that the philosophy which comes off so badly in his analysis is a particular contemporary style of philosophizing.⁴) Lilla's brilliant essay, though not cast in the language of the constitutional founders' authority and regime values, is closer to that spirit than to the call for philosophical reflection.

The "regime values" argument for learning well the founding of the United States in constitutional debate, rather than studying philosophy as such, focuses on a particular substantive knowledge. Its particularity may be a strength, but the link to good actions is presumably problematic and imperfect. Addressing himself especially to professional managers, Hart (1988) wrote: "Issues like racism or sexism, malfeasance in office, or lying under oath should never arise in America because the Founding