THE ETHICAL GROUNDING TO 21st CENTURY PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Neil R. Vance and Brett V. Trani*

ABSTRACT. It is never ill timed to examine the ethical grounding of public leaders. Among all social science disciplines, public administration seems to be most prominently concerned with ethics. ASPA conferences consistently feature ethics. However; it does seem an especially appropriate historical moment to revisit the moral reasoning of both elected and appointed officials. In this article, we examine basic ethical processes and specifically consequential reasoning, and find the over-reliance on “ends justify the means” type thinking problematic. Specifically, any “noble” government end can be used to justify any means, short of the abhorrent. We then turn to Abraham Lincoln, an exemplar of utilitarianism, as a contrast to this more prevalent and distressing form of decision making.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is not a new topic in public administration, and the amount of information on the subject demonstrates the importance of ethics in the field. For instance, a recent article examined the impact of New Public Management on ethics and found that the framework for NPM has a definite impact of the ethical decisions of administrators (Maesschalk, 2004). Currently, ethics seems an especially urgent aspect of public administration. Whether it is a national leader invoking a “war on terror” or a local city manager proposing an inefficient transportation plan, the consequences are almost always cited as the main reason for an action.

Religion or some other value-based rationale may be cited as well, but many times, the reasoning can usually be traced back to

* Neil R. Vance, D.P.A., and Brett V. Trani, an MPA student, are a Senior Lecturer, and a Research Assistant, respectively, School of Public Administration and Policy, Eller College of Management, University of Arizona. Neil R. Vance’s research interests are applied ethics, leadership and white collar crime.

Copyright © 2008 by PrAcademics Press
how the consequences affect one personally. The most common form of this is the use of focus groups or polls. Convictions are not found in principles or virtues but in prospects for re-election. In this article we do not argue against consequential thinking, which is an extremely appropriate form of reasoning in the 21st century. Rather we support a more demanding form of consequential thinking which includes the considerations of Utilitarianism, as it would bring public administrators back to their actual duties, namely deciding how to maximize the good of a diverse and complex population. Just as importantly, the environment of public administration in this century is wildly different than it was even ten years ago. Today’s globalized world demands a more comprehensive form of thinking to realize the impact a decision may have throughout the globe.

APPLIED ETHICS

Ethicists and moral philosophers generally agree there are three major theories in applied ethics. While most would concur that there is not a single correct approach, we tend to have inclinations toward one approach rather than others. The three approaches are Character-based ethics (Aristotle 340 BC - virtue ethics), Rule-based ethics (Kant 1785 – deontology) and Results-based ethics (Mill 1863 – utilitarianism). (Savra, 2007)

In recent years, there has been a resurgent interest in Virtue Ethics. According to Aristotle, good traits of character are called Virtues and as such, Virtue Ethics focuses on what makes a good person, rather than what makes a good action. Recently, contemporary authors such as William Bennett have appropriated the notion of Virtue Ethics.

The advantages of Virtue Ethics are that it is intuitive and personal. It is intuitive because it makes sense; our character is central to our ethical choices and personal in that it is a reflection of our individual, unique circumstances. The weaknesses of Virtue Ethics closely mirror the advantages. The personal nature of Virtue Ethics makes it relatively difficult to obtain a consensus and even more difficult to resolve ethical conflict. In application, an elected or appointed official might view truth telling as a Virtue and as such would be resistant to lying, despite the fact that lying could bring about great good for the society in question. Alternatively, civility
could be a person’s Virtue and as such, s/he would be reluctant to confront another even when extremely necessary.

Rules-Based Ethics and Consequence-Based ethics focus on the action and not the person. In Rule-Based ethics, the right action is that allowed by the rules and the wrong is that forbidden by the rules. According to Kant, ethical rules are more than compliance with policies. Ethical rules are those that can be universalized; his Categorical Imperative applies to all and therefore is extremely demanding. The advantages of Rule-Based ethics are that they are clear and help to coordinate behavior. The weaknesses are that they can be complex and demanding. In application, an elected or appointed official could be so strongly obedient to rules that s/he is indifferent to an obvious situation of suffering or need. The lack of flexibility in adhering to the rules can become problematic in today’s highly complex political world.

It is Consequential or Results-Based ethics that is the central concern of this article. In results based thinking, formally called teleology, there are two dominant lines of thinking, “Ends Justify the Means” and Utilitarianism. Both consider the consequences as the basis for determining the right action. In Classic Utilitarianism, Bentham and Mill pioneered the moral insight that consequences count. In Utilitarianism, the important consideration is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is caused. No one’s happiness is counted as more important than anyone else’s; each person’s welfare is equally important. Therefore, right actions are those that produce the greatest possible balance of happiness over unhappiness, with each person’s happiness counted as equally important (Rachels, 2007).

From the happiness philosophical stance, comes the Principle of Utility; the greatest good for the greatest number. Practically speaking, this requires measuring/calculating the relative benefits and burdens for all members of society at all times. In any situation, one should identify all of the consequences of that action for human happiness, weigh the total impact of each option on happiness and select the option that best satisfies the principle of utility.

The important aspect of Utilitarianism is its inclusiveness. It is the consideration of all. It is this requirement to be comprehensive that distinguishes it from the more common form of teleological
reasoning, “The Ends Justify the Means.” In this reasoning, a “noble end” can be used to justify almost any means. Examples are a policeman withholding exculpatory evidence on a presumed guilty person or a civil servant manipulating data to convince a skeptical funding body. The more demanding, inclusive considerations of Utilitarianism would argue against these actions.

Another aspect of “The Ends Justify the Means” that produces even more parochial ethics is the justification can often be traced to the self as beneficiary. In the above examples, a “guilty person” is jailed but the policeman might also consider the likelihood of a commendation or promotion. Or the civil servant might see a pay raise as a collateral benefit. “The Ends Justify the Means” can easily become Ethical Egoism, where self absorption, gratification and justification become the real reason for consequential reasoning. Utilitarianism and its requirement to think about the greatest good for the greatest number discourages such ethical egoism (Hinman, 2003)

Utilitarianism in public life has one great benefit; its impartiality, and one great weakness; it can be overly demanding. A Utilitarian legislator whose daughter has cancer would be required to vote against cancer funding if that funding would yield less utility than the alternatives. As impersonal and demanding as the previous example is, Utilitarianism is not without its advocates. Peter Singer, the Australian ethicist at Princeton, recently proposed that Bill Gates could give more of his money than he famously did. Practically, the greatest benefit of the Utilitarian mode would be the requirement that all should at least be considered. This consideration would certainly influence all public decisions, international and domestic, even if deontological and virtue ethics were part of the moral reasoning (Singer, 2006).

It seems, however, most consequential thinking in public life is less inclusive than Utilitarianism. “The Ends Justify the Means” reasoning seeks to use an admirable goal, such as the spread of democracy, to justify decisions that are not in the best interest of the whole. Other than the parochial approach, the most notable deficit of this approach is that while it seems objective it invariably tends to benefit the self or Ethical Egoism. Take the earlier example of the legislator whose daughter has an incurable disease. What if the legislation was for an extremely rare disease that only infected 500
individuals worldwide? Under the banner of consequential thinking, he could lead a campaign to use public funds for research, when the real intended beneficiary was his daughter. (The distinction here is the use of public funds. A private foundation supports the research related to the very rare Neiman-Pick Type C pediatric disease).

LINCOLN AS EXEMPLAR

When looking for a real-world example of strict utilitarianism in practice, one needs look no further than Abraham Lincoln, who famously ended slavery in the United States. A common perception of this act is that Lincoln inherently knew that slavery was evil, or perhaps believed that religion would guide him in his choices, so he ended slavery for these reasons, which would fall under Rules-Based ethics or Ethical Egoism. This article argues that Lincoln employed a very strict form of Utilitarian thinking to maximize the good for the most amount of people. Indeed, Lincoln stated multiple times that if he could end the civil war and save the Union without freeing the slaves, he would have done so (Masters, 1931).

Before Abraham Lincoln was ever given the power to abolish slavery, he engaged in a series of debates with Stephen A. Douglas in various towns across Illinois. These debates foreshadowed the growing importance of slavery and helped set the stage for Lincoln’s presidential bid of 1860. It is clear from these debates that Lincoln had examined the subject of slavery extensively and had come to believe that the United States could not exist in such a fractured state (Diggins, 1984). He saw the storm of slavery on the horizon, and the popularity he gained in his losing bid for a Senate seat would propel him to the Presidency in 1860 (Riddle, 1948). This was also the first hint that he possessed the strict mental discipline to make the strenuous ethical decisions that would lead to the Emancipation Proclamation.

In Abraham Lincoln’s case, religion was not a guiding force but an intellectual mystery that had little bearing on his monumental decisions while in office. Some would say that he issued the Emancipation Proclamation and freed the slaves out of a devout belief that God wanted it so, but from his recorded musings on the subject, this is clearly not so. Taken from a piece of personal writing, Lincoln has this to say about his conception of God:
In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God can not be for, and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party...I am almost ready to say this is probably true – that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds (Carwardine, 2003, pp. 226-7).

Therefore, he could not justify the release of slaves in South solely by stating that it was God’s will, and that he, as President, was the one who understood best what God wanted.

Despite his inability to understand the design of a higher power, Lincoln did not exist in a religious vacuum but was instead surrounded by religious thought at every side (Diggins, 1984). Certain religious factions, far from being impotent portions of the electorate, held a huge amount of sway in local and national politics. It was impossible for Lincoln to avoid the subject of religion, yet he did not preside over the country with religious doctrine or attempt to promote his ideas as the will of god.

As Lincoln took office, there were murmurs throughout the country that he would soon act upon his own ideals, those of a backwoods abolitionist, and issue an order to free the slaves. It is safe to say that had Lincoln acted upon an innate desire to abolish slavery, he would have had the support of a great many Americans. History is replete with instances of politicians crafting policy based on their ideals and world views rather than considering what would derive the most good for the populace. So why would Lincoln refrain from issuing an edict that would have been both popular and extremely newsworthy? He could have easily freed the slaves on paper, provided a boost for his flagging Northern army, and dealt with the backlash by isolating himself from any contradictory viewpoints. The answer lies in his ability to look past short term gratification and see that in the long run, restraint was of the utmost importance to both satisfy his electorate and also heal a Union divided. Lincoln’s delay in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation shows that he understood the situation he was in, and would have to wait longer until he could reap the most benefit from such a huge action.
Displaying the timing and understanding of the long term stakes, he issued the initial Emancipation Proclamation on September 23rd, 1862. More telling than the document itself were the events and musings of Lincoln leading up to that day. As Lincoln discussed his impending document with two members of his cabinet he stated that he “had come about to the conclusion that it was a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union, that we must free the slaves or ourselves be subdued...Extraordinary measures” had become vital “to preserve the national existence” (Carwardine, 2003). There is no talk here of doing what Lincoln thought best for the individual slaves, nor what he wanted to do as a man of Christian faith. Instead, he looked beyond the there and now and realized that to preserve an institution as great as the United States of America, it was now time for him to use any means available to him. At this point, the good of the country and its citizens from North and South depended upon Lincoln to make the correct choice, and he did so by freeing the slaves, which rallied the North and undermined the power of the South. In making the correct choice of action at the right time, Lincoln demonstrated his firm grasp of results-based ethics and his ability to understand the world in the long term.

We do not make the argument that Lincoln was so strict a utilitarian that his every action and decision was based on this demanding form of ethics. However, in a decision that clearly impacted so many lives and promised profound changes for the country as a whole, Lincoln exhibited an amazing restraint. With his political power in question, brother killing brother and religion overshadowing his every move, he was able to put his own convictions aside to make the best decision for the most people.

CONCLUSION

More than ever, the 21st century will require our ethical decision to be inclusive. The one global economy necessitates our economic decisions to be more than national ones. For instance, an issue such as global climate change can only be affected by comprehensive actions by many involved parties. Indeed, political issues (immigration, trade etc.) can no longer be addressed in a national vacuum.

While it is easy to say that officials should subject themselves to more rigorous decision making, there are of course other areas that
must be examined as well. It has been shown that competence in one’s field can lead to more stringent ethical decisions, so it is equally important to allow officials the tools to make the best decisions for the most people (Macaulay & Lawton, 2006). Therefore, there is always more that can be done on an individual level to help improve ethical decision making.

Lincoln has not escaped the notice of all modern politicians. In a recent interview, Newt Gingrich, a historian by training, observed the inclusive characteristics of Lincoln’s utilitarianism. Gingrich observed:

I was fascinated by Holzer’s portrait of Lincoln spending three months at the Springfield state library, pulling together the definitive argument about the Constitution, the Founding Fathers and slavery, turning it into a 7,300 word speech, giving it once in New York, once in New Hampshire and then going home.” Gingrich says, “I was struck by the sheer courage of the self-definitional moment that said, ‘We are in real trouble, we need real leadership and if I’m who you think we need, here’s my speech.’ And he doesn’t give another speech for the rest of the year” (Easton, 2007, p. 87).

While a leader such as Abraham Lincoln does not come along very often, leaders today in the public sector can use him as an example of what to strive for. Every decision cannot be subject to the strict guidelines of Utilitarianism but this type of thinking can and should be referenced when making decisions that affect multiple parties. Public leaders can no longer use this reduced form of thinking, the “ends justify the means” type decision making.

There is reason for hope for more ethical considerations in public administration. The March annual conference of ASPA has a major session on administrative ethics called “Going Beyond Individualism” a theme that is certainly consistent with utilitarianism.

Finally, with respect for politics and government hitting historic lows in many countries, a stricter adherence to utilitarianism could inspire more confidence in public figures. As the general public becomes confident that their elected officials are making decisions for the good of the populace, they may become more interested in the political process as a whole. This is one of the most important outcomes of this type of Utilitarian thinking, the trust that people will
gain in the democratic process. No longer will one have to question
the motives of elected officials, and while agreement is not the same
as understanding, the average citizen will not have to wonder why a
politician chose to vote as he or she did. And that is something that
everyone will appreciate.

REFERENCES
Longman.
The University of Chicago Press.
Changing the Principles of Public Service.” *Public Administration
Reforms on Public Servants' Ethics: Towards a Theory.” *Public
Company.
McGraw-Hill.
Rutgers University Press.
Savra, J. (2007). *The Ethics Primer for Public Administrators in
Government and Nonprofit Organizations*. Sudbury, MA: Jones
and Bartlett Publishers.