



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Ethics, Civic Life and the Education of Policymakers

Noah M. Jedidiah Pickus, Troy Dostert

The Good Society, Volume 11, Number 1, 2002, pp. 49-54 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gso.2002.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/12238>

# Ethics, Civic Life and the Education of Policymakers

Noah M. J. Pickus and Troy Dostert

In the education of policy-makers, questions of the good society are typically dealt with in the context of courses on ethics. This essay addresses the symposium's focus on what policy analysis means from a good society perspective by examining those courses.\* It draws on a survey of ethics instruction we conducted in early 2000 of the 241 member schools of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. Our survey confirmed that during the last couple of decades, an ever increasing number of schools and departments of public policy and public administration have begun considering ways to introduce ethics instruction into their curricula (Fleishman and Payne, 1980; Menzel, 1997; Pickus and Dostert, 2001).

Despite these signs, it is premature to conclude that ethics and analysis of the good society have become ubiquitous in today's public policy and public administration programs. In the majority of programs a single course in ethics stands alone, against the myriad courses devoted to microeconomics, management, and cost-benefit analysis, the more technical and firmly entrenched components of a contemporary education in public policy and public administration. There is also a good deal of debate on how ethics should be both understood and taught. While issues concerning course distribution and core requirements are important, the more fundamental matter is how ethics and questions of the good society are understood in the first place; indeed, it seems evident that the way these questions are viewed will inevitably condition the emphasis placed on normative and civic considerations in curricula and in policy analysis. It is thus essential that the purposes of today's ethics courses be re-examined to ensure that policy analysts and professionals are able to respond to the distinctive normative challenges facing us in the 21st century. We argue for a more contextual and collaborative approach to ethical analysis, one that pays attention especially to the civic dimensions of public policy.

## Context and Collaboration

The most prevalent approach to teaching ethics traces its origin to applied ethics and the methodology of using abstract frameworks to solve normative quandaries. Courses built around this approach commonly explore a number of different ethical

paradigms, for instance, utilitarian, deontological, or virtue-based theories, and then confront a range of administrative or policy dilemmas. For example, administrative quandaries will often include the "dirty hands" problem, or "whistleblowing"; policy dilemmas typically include issues in medical ethics, welfare policy or social justice issues. Students are then encouraged to draw on the various ethical frameworks they have encountered to arrive

at their own solutions to these dilemmas. Case studies are frequently utilized. The predominant emphasis is on developing the analytical reasoning capabilities of the individual, so that he or she can assess ethical dilemmas, recognize their morally significant features, and bring to bear whatever ethical frameworks ensure the best "fit" in solving them. This approach promises to help policy-makers reduce the context-bound constraints that might obscure features of the ethical situation

that confronts them. It emphasizes that students must remain free to think for themselves and views concerns about the formation of character with suspicion.

Despite its advantages, the ethical awareness approach includes a number of drawbacks. First, because it emphasizes episodic problem-solving so heavily, the ethical awareness approach risks trivializing moral reflection. If ethical challenges are viewed in this manner, they may come to be seen as distractions from the usual business of public administration or policy analysis. A further concern is that the ethical awareness approach may encourage students to see abstract models of ethics as interchangeable; since great philosophers disagree among themselves, each model may seem equally valid. Thus, while students may gain a great deal of moral sensitivity by adhering to the ethical awareness model, they may also more subtly be encouraged to become moral pluralists who are able to speak eloquently to every side of an issue but are committed to none (Lilla, 1981; Ruprecht, 1999). Alternatively, students may become shrewder in their capacity to articulate competing views but less likely to believe that they might change their views as a result of political engagement and moral reflection. Finally, because it tends to emphasize problem-solving over contextual reflection, the ethical awareness approach can downplay the relevance of moral and ethical traditions that shape the public landscape in which

*It is thus essential that the purposes of today's ethics courses be re-examined to ensure that policy analysts and professionals are able to respond to the distinctive normative challenges facing us in the 21st century.*

public administrators and policy analysts must do their work. It can make it easier for students to view themselves as Platonic philosopher-kings and hence justified in implementing ideals derived without taking into consideration the moral perspectives of their fellow citizens.

In contrast, we see the education of policy analysts as being fundamentally about a contextual process of discovering and working with the shared norms and traditions of a particular community. Ethics, in this view, is much more consistent with the notion of a way of life, a set of dispositions and virtues, than it is a set of problem-solving tools to be applied to ethical dilemmas. Our own vision of the ethical reasoner is not so much an analytical problem-solver, but rather an engaged, committed ethical interpreter, able to make sense of a moral dilemma because he or she is embedded within a particular context, having a keen understanding of the ethical situation and the resources available for making a concrete and appropriate response to it. In other words, it is because we are engaged in a network of interactions with others in a particular time and place, and in a particular institutional context, that we can with confidence approach ethical decision-making. The disengaged individual is, therefore, the person least suited for thick, complex, ethical reflection (Lilla, 1981; Jennings, 1991).

A contextualized process of ethical judgment does not preclude grappling with and discerning the applicability of generalizable norms, nor does it preclude us drawing on diverse ethical paradigms where doing so might help open up novel possibilities or solutions to intractable dilemmas. Recognizing the indispensability of contextualization simply helps us to know how we are to proceed in thinking through ethical issues. Such an approach would seek actively to acquaint students with the ethical resources of their polity. Historical reflection on the American constitutional tradition, as well as on the changing nature of public administration, would be valuable in allowing students to situate themselves in a way that resists the temptation to view their role as detached philosophers (Stokes, 1996; Kennedy, 2000). Recent attempts to make sense of the complexity of American political culture, such as James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars* or Alan Wolfe's *One Nation After All*, offer interesting possibilities for acquainting students with the context in which they will shape public policy (Hunter, 1991; Wolfe, 1998).

This approach does not, and indeed should not, entail a preference for singular readings of America that see a continuous or

unbroken historical narrative determining our social and political context. Rather than compel students to embrace a particular understanding of American purposes, it would be better to ensure that they have an appreciation for the manifold traditions at work in shaping American culture and politics and that they are committed to pursuing the public good in a way that recognizes the ongoing viability and relevance of these traditions. Without encouraging this commitment we risk fostering a harmful insularity in our students' ethical reflection.

For instance, courses that present deontological or consequentialist models of ethics in dealing with controversial issues such as abortion or euthanasia and yet leave unexplored the responses of religious traditions to these dilemmas present too

narrow a view. These courses are in danger of reinforcing a conception of ethical reasoning that fails to resonate with major segments of the society. Students learning to be policy analysts may find it easier to address a matter such as abortion from a utilitarian perspective, but if this approach is at odds with the way most citizens view the matter (as is almost certainly the case), this constitutes a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Indeed, a number of contemporary scholars have persuasively shown that by taking seriously the contextual dynamics surrounding public policy dilemmas like abortion, we are afforded a wider range of possibilities for approaching and, perhaps, resolving them. For example, Elizabeth

Mensch, Alan Freeman, and Kathy Rudy have offered approaches to abortion that, by engaging extant moral and religious traditions in American life, enable the search for public policy solutions that move beyond the conflict between all-or-nothing positions (Mensch and Freeman, 1991; Rudy, 1996).

To avoid an uncritical appropriation of particular cultural or ethical resources, the process of contextual reflection must be disciplined by continuous scrutiny. It is thus particularly important that it be carried out as a collaborative endeavor—as a collective attempt to determine and shape the norms by which we would regulate our lives in common rather than an individual pursuit in which students aim above all to “think for themselves” about the good society. This emphasis on collaboration shares a certain affinity with recent defenses of deliberative democracy (Bohman, 1996; Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). By focusing our deliberations on public purposes, we stand a better chance of deriving public policies that are mutually satisfactory and legitimate. Students who appreci-

*A contextualized process of ethical judgment does not preclude grappling with and discerning the applicability of generalizable norms, nor does it preclude us drawing on diverse ethical paradigms where doing so might help open up novel possibilities or solutions to intractable dilemmas. Recognizing the indispensability of contextualization simply helps us to know how we are to proceed in thinking through ethical issues.*

ate the value of deliberation will be far less likely in policy-making situations to assume a privileged ethical standpoint and more willing to engage others in seeking an ethical perspective that is truly shared. This is not to say that more deliberation is always the answer to seeking the public good. Deliberation can exacerbate conflict, and there is no guarantee that a deliberative process can always help us to transcend points of entrenched disagreement. These concerns are important and should prevent us from entertaining illusions about deliberation as providing a cure-all for what ails public life.

We are certainly far from approximating this kind of ethical engagement in American public discourse as it currently exists. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties and risks associated with it, the potential advantages to a process of ethical reflection that is both collaborative and contextual warrant the attempt to encourage our students to pursue it. When that process is successful within the context of the classroom, where students will likely have the best chance to carry it out in a spirit of mutuality and civility, the possibilities for expanding it to nonacademic sites might become more evident. Students who become convinced of the value of renouncing their intellectual “independence” by engaging others in ethical deliberation will be more eager to carry out that deliberation in their professional lives and as citizens generally, as ethical interpreters responsive to a broader community of ethical reflection.

### The Civic Dimension of Public Policy

A more contextualized and collaborative approach to the education of policy analysts can be especially strengthened by paying more attention to citizenship and the furtherance of democratic practices. Policy makers may typically focus solely on questions of efficiency and preference satisfaction, but politics also shapes democratic processes and the character of citizens (which, in turn, affect efficiency and shape preferences). Ethics instruction for the good society should look for ways in which to further the project of self-governance by transforming preferences through public deliberation and by giving citizens opportunities to discover new ideals and to mobilize themselves. Such an emphasis on what Helen Ingram and Stephen Rathgeb Smith have called “public policy for democracy” goes beyond simple invocations of participation as a salve for all of democ-

racy’s ills. It asks students to analyze trade-offs between participation and effectiveness and to consider whether programs designed to increase civic engagement might make policies more effective. It considers a range of strategies for improving democratic citizenship by exploring questions such as whether decentralizing authority will increase opportunities for self-governance or reduce citizen investment in the public sector.

A curriculum that takes seriously the role of public policy in shaping democratic processes will also emphasize the historical dimensions of controversies over the public good as well as the role of experts in expanding or closing down democratic deliberation. It will explore whether obstacles to greater democratic participation are impediments to be overcome or constitutional

structures that have served well the cause of self-governance. Policy experts who are sensitive to these issues will be more likely to take into account the ways in which policy choices may either support or threaten the preconditions needed for democratic citizenship to flourish (Ceaser, 1986; Dahl, 1986; Ingram and Smith, 1993; Landy, 1981; Morone, 1990). Such an approach is especially important in the current era, as crucial normative questions are raised by declining confidence in government, the advance of market incentives as policy tools, the devolution of authority to state and local institutions, and the growth in non-governmental organizations.

These trends call attention to the contrasting ways in which public, private, and voluntary associations shape notions of civic accountability, communal obligation, and individual agency. Much of the revival of interest in the concept of civil society, for instance, is the result of claims that both the market and the state have weakened the social and moral ties that sustain a just and free society (Wolfe, 1989). Hence, our students need to attend to disputes over whether civil society has been in decline, whether state action undermines or engenders the formation of robust voluntary associations, and whether the non-governmental sector will flourish or fade if government support is increased or decreased. Similarly, students need to consider debates over social capital as crucial to whether communal or technical solutions are most likely to prove effective in responding to problems such as crime and education (Putnam, 1995; Fullinwider, 1981; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). And they must ask whether economic decisions should be scrutinized for their effect on civic

*A curriculum that takes seriously the role of public policy in shaping democratic processes will also emphasize the historical dimensions of controversies over the public good as well as the role of experts in expanding or closing down democratic deliberation. It will explore whether obstacles to greater democratic participation are impediments to be overcome or constitutional structures that have served well the cause of self-governance.*

spaces and community identity as well as on material growth and income distribution (Elkin, 1987; Glendon, 1991).

These questions about place, about where public policy is best carried out, extend as well to reconsidering, from a normative perspective, basic questions of geography, citizenship, and sovereignty. Today, institutional developments such as political devolution and supranational evolution, as well as new claims to group representation and cultural rights, vie with the traditional structure of individual membership in a single nation-state (Tamir, 1993; Soysal, 1994; Kymlicka, 1996; Rosenblum, 1998). Perhaps democratic politics depends on some degree of cultural homogeneity, shared affinity, or political loyalty that operate at the national level. Or perhaps democracy works best within a framework of multiple, overlapping, divided memberships and identities. On a wide range of issues, public policy is now shaped by institutional developments and political debates concerning these fundamental issues of governance and identity. Policy makers who are ethically engaged must therefore be familiar with the *many* ways in which *where* they carry out policy making helps form the contours of democratic life.

They must also be familiar with how public policy affects the character of the citizenry and how values are formed and can mediate the effects of policy. Eager to avoid the coercive aspects of such a project, courses in ethics and public policy have often concentrated instead on assessing whether basic institutional arrangements fulfill abstract theories of justice. In recent years scholars and policy makers have, however, begun paying attention to questions of citizenship and civic virtue as it has become clear that, as Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman point out, the “health and stability of modern democracy depends on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens.” Increasing voter apathy, long-term welfare dependency, and renewed racial and religious conflict are among the trends that have recently focused attention on how public policy shapes citizens’ “sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic and religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work with others who are different; to participate in and promote the public good; to show self-restraint” (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994). We cannot, it seems, take for granted that democratic citizens will simply sprout of their own accord. They must be actively fashioned. Hence, policy makers assessing issues as varied as workfare and civic education need to consider what the virtues relevant to the conduct of social and political life are and through which means these virtues may be developed.

*The ethics-across-the-curriculum approach also confronts a practical dilemma. Public policy and public administration programs ask their students to do what few, if any, of the faculty ever try, let alone accomplish. These programs ask students to combine knowledge and skills from economics, politics, and ethics.*

## Rethinking the Role of Ethics in Policy Programs

There is no silver bullet or magic serum that can improve the way in which public policy and public administration programs incorporate a concern for ethics, citizenship and democratic practices into their curricula. A single required course is too much of a quick-fix approach—it tends to load all issues labeled as “ethical” or “civic” onto that course and suggests to students that normative issues can be compartmentalized from the largely technical analysis that policy experts really do. This approach thus sends the message that concerns about the good society are an add-on rather than a defining characteristic of policy analysis. And while there has been greater attention given to efforts

to teach ethics across the curriculum, the extent to which such efforts are in fact being seriously undertaken remains unclear. Most schools indicating that they follow this approach do not have a formal program in place for doing so (Menzel, 1997; Nelson and Van Hook, 1998). Designing such a program must confront the problem that no serious body of knowledge can be added on to others in dollops and spoonfuls. Nelson and Van Hook have recently discussed their experience with implementing an ethics-across-the-curriculum approach (what they call an “ethics matrix”)

within the master of public administration program of the University of Utah. While they are optimistic about its accomplishments and prospects, Dalmas Nelson and Peter Van Hook nevertheless express uncertainty about its effectiveness in influencing “student attitudes and behavior,” as well as the extent to which faculty members are actively engaged with the curriculum (pp. 51, 56–57).

The ethics-across-the-curriculum approach also confronts a practical dilemma. Public policy and public administration programs ask their students to do what few, if any, of the faculty ever try, let alone accomplish. These programs ask students to combine knowledge and skills from economics, politics, and ethics. Yet most of their teachers are trained in only one of these disciplines and receive professional recognition for producing specialized knowledge within that discipline. We should therefore not be surprised if students compartmentalize the knowledge and skills they gain in different courses. They are presented with few models of scholars or policy makers who consistently combine these different dimensions and few venues in which to practice the art of integration.

One possibility for introducing a more substantial ethics and civic life component into today’s public policy and public admin-

istration programs involves designing a series of courses to focus in depth on different dimensions of the policy process. Courses on the civic dimensions of public policy—on participatory and deliberative approaches to policy making, civic virtues and policy effectiveness, the multisectoral nature of political life, and the globalization of domestic issues—would encourage students to explore the issues that are at the heart of the normative decisions made by policy professionals and administrators. Discipline-specific historical courses would also provide advantages. Students given the chance to consider the evolution of their profession and its distinctive features are better able to both understand their public duties and situate themselves within a broader community. By developing additional courses to meet these needs, programs can embody a commitment to providing students with the contextual resources needed to ground their ethical reflection.

Of course, one of the most effective ways to help students think about public policy for the good society is for faculty themselves to engage in it, by drawing connections between different subdisciplines whenever possible, and working together to explore civic and ethical issues with students. Most of the issues we have presented here are deeply intertwined with the fundamental issues confronting economists and political scientists. The changing boundaries between public and private, the growth in globalized economic and political power and simultaneous devolution of authority to state and local government, the increasingly important role of the independent and private sectors, and the consequences of burgeoning demographic and cultural diversity all present challenges for public policy that require both empirical and normative analysis. To meet these challenges requires the specialized research scholars undertake. It also requires scholars and policymakers capable of integrating that knowledge in such a way that frames new questions, bridges disciplinary divides, and advances fresh solutions.

Rather than load this daunting task onto a single ethics course, or spread it thinly across the curriculum, public policy and public administration schools could concentrate their attention and resources on strengthening those areas of analysis that seem most ripe for combining normative and empirical dimensions. This approach encourages faculty to join forces, rather than pitting them against one another. “Ethics faculty” should not be the only instructors in their program who explicitly examine questions of the good society. When students are able to see faculty members from different disciplines coming together to work on issues of civic import, they will be more likely to perceive the promise of a policy approach that encourages engaging a variety of perspectives in the search for shared goals and purposes.

\* We would like to thank Brian Cook, Maura High, Basil Ottley, and Louis Ruprecht for their help preparing this essay and the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University and the H.B. Earhart Foundation for financial support.

Noah M.J. Pickus is the incoming director of the Institute for Emerging Issues at North Carolina State University. Troy Dostert is a doctoral candidate in the department of political science at Duke University.

## References

- Bohman, J. *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.
- Bohman, J., and Rehg, W., eds. *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997.
- Ceaser, J. “In Defense of Republican Constitutionalism: A Reply to Dahl.” R. H. Horwitz, ed. *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986.
- Dahl, R. “On Removing Certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States.” R. H. Horwitz, ed. *The Moral Foundations of the American Republic*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986.
- Elkin, S. *City and Regime in the American Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Fleishman, J., and Payne, B. *Ethical Dilemmas and the Education of Policymakers*. New York: The Hastings Center, 1980.
- Fullinwider, R., ed. *Civil Society, Democracy, and Civic Renewal*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999.
- Glendon, M. *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*. New York: Free Press, 1991.
- Gutmann, A., and Thompson, D. *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Hunter, J. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- Ingram, H., and Smith, S., eds. *Public Policy for Democracy*. Washington, DC: Brookings, 1993.
- Jennings, B. “Taking Ethics Seriously in Administrative Life: Constitutionalism, Ethical Reasoning, and Moral Judgment.” J. Bowman, ed. *Ethical Frontiers in Public Management*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- Kennedy, S. S. “Back to Basics: Citizenship, Public Affairs, and the Constitution.” *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 6 (2000): 267–274.
- Kymlicka, W. (Ed.). (1996). *The Rights of Minority Cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kymlicka, W., and Norman, W. “Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory.” *Ethics* 104 (1994): 352–381.
- Landy, M. Policy Analysis as a Vocation. *World Politics*, 33 (1981): 468–84.
- Lilla, M. “Ethos, Ethics, and Public Service.” *The Public Interest* 63 (1981): 3–17.

Mensch, E., & Freeman, A. *The Politics of Virtue: Is Abortion Debatable?* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993.

Menzel, D. "Teaching Ethics and Values: A Survey of Graduate Public Affairs and Administration Programs in the U.S." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 30 (1997): 518–524.

Morone, J. *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*. New York: Basic Books, 1990.

Nelson, D., and Van Hook, P. "Using an Ethics Matrix in a Master of Public Administration Program," J. Bowman & D. Menzel, eds. *Teaching Ethics and Values in Public Administration Programs*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

Pickus, N. and Dostert, T. "Ethics Education in a Transformed World." Unpublished essay, 2001.

Putnam, R. (1995). "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 65–78.

Rosenblum, N. *Membership & Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Rudy, K. *Beyond Pro-Life and Pro-Choice: Moral Diversity in the Abortion Debate*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Ruprecht, L. *Symposia: Plato, the Erotic, and Moral Value*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Skocpol, T. & Fiorina, M, eds. *Civic Engagement and American Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1999.

Smith, R. *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997.

Soysal, Y. *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Stokes, D. "'Presidential' Address: The Changing Environment of Education for Public Service." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 15 (1996): 158–170.

Tamir, Y. *Liberal Nationalism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Wolfe, A. *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

———. *One Nation, After All*. New York: Viking, 1998.