

# A Primer on Ethics in Public Administration

## WHY STUDY ETHICS?

All of us who have taught ethics for any length of time have had a student who asks the question, "Why should I study ethics in public administration?" As degree programs have become more specialized and technical skills more highly valued, it's a fair question to ask.

The study of philosophical ethics sometimes presents students and practitioners of public administration with more confusion than clarity. What relevance do some ancient Greeks and the more modern ethical thinkers have to today's world? Courses in public finance and accounting, human resources management, public policy implementation, and statistics seem more relevant in the modern world than the obscure and seemingly subjective field of ethics. Finally, many students and practitioners of public administration believe that the law is an adequate minimal standard of behavior, and that if one simply follows the letter of the law, that should be sufficient.

These are fair questions but challenging to answer. We believe that a basic understanding of philosophical ethics is relevant today. There are, quite simply, what we term "perennial issues" that have faced societies from the earliest times. These perennial issues are the questions of knowledge, conduct, and governance. These are the issues that philosophy attempts to answer, and surely these issues are as important for students and practitioners of public administration today as they were for societies throughout history.

Moral philosophy is an activity that allows individuals to think critically about what we can know, how we should act, and what type of governance is best for us. To this end, ethics allows students and practitioners of public administration the opportunity to evaluate competing options and arrive at the best decision.