

With regard to the claim that we need to only follow the law, we can say that certainly the law is important, and that the law and ethics are closely related. However, they are not the same. What should we do, for example, if the law is silent on an issue? Or worse yet, what if the law itself is immoral? Again, the study of ethics provides us with a framework to expose these gaps between the law and what is morally right.

Finally, we would point out that public administrators face a host of ethical issues every day, whether they realize it or not. Decisions made by public administrators every day have consequences to the lives of real people. Surely, some understanding of ethics is, therefore, important in dealing with these situations.

Since we have begun by making an argument that the study of ethics is relevant to today's public administrators, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge and address a number of philosophical challenges to the study of ethics.

SUBJECTIVISM

Subjectivism is the belief that there are no "universal truths." This view can be seen most clearly in the philosophical concept of solipsism. Solipsism is the theory which says that the self is all one can really know.

Subjectivism is attractive because the premise seems to be true. We can never really know what it's like to be someone else, and ethics often seems to be merely a matter of opinion. There don't seem to be "proofs" in ethics the way we have formulas and proofs in science and mathematics. However, we would argue that there are proofs in ethics. One can give good reasons based on rational argumentation for why one choice or solution is better than another. Let's look at an example.

Several years ago, one of us was teaching a course in ethics and had given students their grades on the first essay exam.

After class a student approached the professor and inquired about the grade she had received. She said that she had worked very hard and believed that she deserved a better grade. She followed that observation with the statement, "Look this is all really just your opinion anyway. I have always made A's in high school."

Now, suppose that the professor was unable to articulate any reason for the grade he assigned. If the professor said simply that it was his prerogative to assign grades and could not point to specific reasons, you would surely conclude that the professor's actions were arbitrary, capricious, and not "fair." However, what if the professor could say something like this:

I asked you to make a decision in this exam based on a set of hypothetical facts. I asked you to make an argument in support of your decision.

Further, the instructions on the exam stated that you should have a clear and concise thesis statement. And from that thesis statement you should provide substantive premises in support of the thesis in order to reach a logical conclusion. In your paper you told me how you felt, but you failed to support your feelings with a rational set of arguments.

Now further suppose that the professor was accurate in his assessment, and that he was able to provide the student with a model answer that used the method he described above. Would you not say that the professor had acted in a rational and logical manner? Is this not a "proof"? Of course, the student could continue to protest, but such protest would not be rational without any support.

Although proofs in ethics are not as concrete as they are in mathematics, it's important to remember that there are areas of disagreement in the fields of math and science. It's important that we do not employ an incorrect standard. So, we think that we can safely argue that so long as we have an appropriate standard in mind, there are, in fact, proofs in ethics.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

While subjectivism holds that ethics are based in the individual, cultural relativism holds that ethics are based in the group. That is, what is ethical depends on the culture of a given society. This theory again appears attractive because societies do vary widely in their practice.

For example, the practice of bribing elected officials and public administrators in order to secure government contracts and benefits has long been illegal in the United States. In fact, in response to the "spoils system" of government employment that characterized President Andrew Jackson's administration, the United States has continued to move toward an increasingly professional and technically skilled public workforce. Today, at all levels of government, public administrators are largely selected on the basis of merit rather than political connection.

In many other places in the world, bureaucrats remain grossly underpaid, under-skilled, unprofessional, and corrupt. In many third world and "newly industrialized" nations, the acceptance and expectation of bribery of officials is commonplace. Many executives in multinational corporations argue that such behavior is culturally accepted, and therefore, necessary in order to do business in those countries.

The status of women also differs greatly in different parts of the world. In many places, women are not given the same opportunities that men enjoy in either the public or private sector. Again, many people argue that these differences are cultural and we should respect other people's cultural mores and traditions.

Given our respect for diversity, cultural relativism also seems particularly attractive. Further, it seems that it is supported by the anthropological and sociological record. In fact, we can see evidence of this even in American politics and public administration. Although the United States has certain national cultural values and mores, it also has regional sub-cultural values and mores. State governments differ from each other in many respects. Even rules such as those that prohibit nepotism are subtly different from state to state. In fact, one of the advantages of a federal system of government is that it allows for differences among various regions within a nation.