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Administrative Evil

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Synonyms

[Bureaucracy](#); [Ethics](#)

Administrative Evil and the Holocaust

In *Unmasking Administrative Evil*, Adams and Balfour (1998, 2015) develop the concept of administrative evil in connection with the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany during World War II. While the evil – the pain, suffering, and death – that was inflicted on millions of Jews and others in the Holocaust was so horrific as to almost defy comprehension, it can be understood as facilitated by administrative evil. The administrative evil of the Holocaust is now unmasked (although much of it was masked at the time), and it can now be recognized as an instance of administrative evil because “the Nazis did it” and because it occurred well over 70 years ago. The Holocaust occurred in a modernized society and in a culture dominated by technical rationality and largely within and by organizational roles driven by legitimated public policy. While the Holocaust

was horrific and arguably without precedent in human history, ordinary Germans fulfilling conventional administrative roles carried out extraordinary destruction in ways that had been successfully packaged as socially normal and appropriate.

While, understandably, history has focused on Hitler and his henchmen, the brutality of the SS, the Gestapo, and infamous concentration camp doctors and guards, much less attention has focused on the thousands of public and business administrators such as those in the Finance Ministry who engaged in confiscations, the armament inspectors who organized forced labor, municipal authorities who helped create and maintain ghettos and death camps throughout Germany and Eastern Europe, corporations that profited from slave labor, and women who served in roles from secretaries to concentration camp staff members (Kaplan 1998; Allen 2002; Hayes 2004; Lower 2013). Genocide was often carried out in ways that were procedurally indistinguishable from any other modern organizational process. Great attention was given to precise definition, to detailed regulations, to legal compliance, and to record keeping, adhering to the modern, technical-rational approach to public service in every aspect. Many administrators directly responsible for the Holocaust were, from the technical-rational perspective, effective and responsible administrators who employed administrative discretion to both influence and carry out the directives of their superiors. Professionals and

administrators such as Eichmann, Speer, and Arthur Rudolph diligently obeyed orders, followed proper procedures, and were even sometimes innovative and creative while carrying out their assigned tasks in an efficient and effective manner. Ironically, even the SS was very concerned about corruption in its ranks and with strict conformance to the professional norms of its order (Sofsky 1997).

Even within the morally inverted universe created by the Nazis, professionals and administrators performed their duties within a framework of ethics and responsibility that conformed to the norms of technical rationality. Hilberg (1989) pointed out that the professionals were “everywhere” in the Holocaust. Lawyers, physicians, engineers, planners, military professionals, and accountants applied their professional skills to the destruction of the Jews and other so-called undesirables. Scientific experiments were devised that dehumanized and murdered innocent human beings, showing the moral vacuity of the modern model of professionalism, while the vast majority of those who participated in the Holocaust were never punished, and many were placed in responsible positions in postwar West German government or industry as well as in NASA and other public and private organizations in the United States. The need for “good” and reliable managers to rebuild the German economy, and to develop key technologies such as in the American rocket program, outweighed any consideration of the reprehensible activities in which they were complicit.

Given what is now known about the Holocaust and how it was implemented, all professionals involved in public life should be vigilant towards the possibility of administrative evil. For example, the role of the professional civil service and public bureaucracy in the Holocaust should lead the field of public affairs to reconsider Woodrow Wilson’s (1887: 220) classic formulation of the politics/administration dichotomy and his conclusion that, “By keeping this distinction in view, that is, by studying administration as a means of putting our own politics into convenient practice . . . we are on perfectly safe ground,” which he wrote at the end of the nineteenth century before the

horrors of the two world wars. Recognizing the role of administrative evil in the Holocaust makes it difficult to maintain that public servants, in whatever political or administrative context, can find a safe ground, because the public service, whether aware of it or not, facilitated genocide at every stage. As the “final solution” evolved, no part of modern professionalism – education, expertise, ethical standards, scientific methods, bureaucratic procedures, accountability to elected or appointed officials – could prevent or resist the genocide of the Jews. Public servants were both willing and helpless in the face of great evil. This remains true today, because administrative evil wears a mask. Thus all professionals in public life – scholars, students, and practitioners alike – need to reflect on the possibility that their technical-rational ethical standards and professional training may not adequately address the potential for administrative evil.

Public Service Ethics and Administrative Evil

The concept of administrative evil relies on the premise that evil – when defined as behavior that inflicts pain, suffering, and even death on innocent victims – is an essential concept for understanding the human condition and specific ethical issues, including those in public affairs and administration. Administrative evil can be distinguished from other manifestations of evil and ethical failures because its appearance is *masked*, meaning that people can engage in acts of evil unaware that they are in fact doing anything at all wrong (Adams and Balfour 2015). Indeed, ordinary administrators may simply act appropriately in their organizational role, doing what those around them would agree they should be doing – and at the same time, participate in or contribute to what a critical and reasonable observer, usually after the fact, would identify as morally wrong and even evil. In the case of *moral inversion*, when something evil has been redefined convincingly as good, ordinary people can engage in acts of administrative evil while believing that what

they are doing is not only procedurally correct, but in fact, good or ethical.

The mask of administrative evil results from four characteristics of modern society. One is the modern inclination to *unname*, or deny, the utility of the concept of evil, a premodern concept that does not resonate with the scientific-analytic mindset. The second is found in the structure of modern, bureaucratic organizations, which diffuses individual responsibility and requires the compartmentalized accomplishment of role expectations in order to perform duties on a daily basis. The third characteristic is found in how the modern culture of technical rationality – a way of thinking and living that elevates the scientific-analytical mindset and the belief in technological progress over all other forms of rationality – has analytically limited the framework for formulating and implementing public policy, so that moral inversions are now more likely. And the fourth is the ongoing production of “surplus populations,” that is, large numbers of people who are denied the basic rights and protections of citizenship in a stable political entity.

During the twentieth century, the Holocaust and other eruptions of evil and administrative evil (such as the genocides in Bosnia and Kosovo) showed that the assumptions and standards for ethical behavior in modern, technical-rational systems often failed to prevent or mitigate evil in either its subtle or its more obvious forms. Conventional public service and business ethics – and professional ethics more generally – in the technical-rational tradition draw upon both teleological and deontological ethics and focus on the individual’s decision-making process in the modern, bureaucratic organization and as a member of a profession. In the public sphere, deontological ethics serve to safeguard the integrity of the organization by helping individuals conform to professional norms, avoid mistakes and misdeeds that violate the public trust (corruption, nepotism, etc.), and assure the accountability of public officials in a constitutional republic. At the same time, public servants are encouraged to pursue the greater good by using discretion in the application of rules and regulations and creativity in the face

of changing conditions (utilitarian ethics). The “good” public servant should avoid both the extremes of rule-bound behavior and the undermining of the rule of law with individual judgments and interests. Public servants operate within a partly tacit mix of different ethical orientations, with the mix often shifting from one situation to the next. Public (and private) organizations depend on at least this level of ethical judgment in order to function efficiently and effectively and to maintain public confidence in government (and business). At the same time, these ethical standards of an organization or profession are only safeguards, not fail-safes, against unethical behavior and administrative evil. Nor do they necessarily help individuals to resolve tough moral dilemmas that are often characterized by ambiguity and paradox in rapidly changing times.

The historical record suggests that the individual conscience is very weak relative to that of legitimated authority in modern organizations and social structures more generally, and that conventional ethical standards do too little to limit the potential for wrongdoing and even evil in modern organizations. And, despite the extensive literature on public service ethics, there is little recognition of the most fundamental ethical challenge to the professional within a technical-rational culture: one can be a “good” or responsible administrator or professional and at the same time commit or contribute to acts of administrative evil. Administrative evil warns that individual administrators and professionals, far from resisting administrative evil, are most likely to be either helpless victims or willing accomplices. The ethical framework within a technical-rational system posits the primacy of an abstract, utility-maximizing individual while binding professionals to organizations in ways that make them reliable conduits for the dictates of legitimate authority (Vanderburg 2000), which is no less legitimate when it happens to be pursuing evil policies or practices. An ethical system that allows an individual to be seen as an effective or even good administrator or professional while committing acts or contributing to acts of evil is thus lacking in moral content, or even morally perverse. When administrative evil can be unmasked

and understood, public servants should question the notion that ethical behavior always means following procedures and doing things the right or acceptable way. Norms of legality, efficiency, and effectiveness – however “professional” they may be – do not necessarily promote or protect the well-being of individuals, especially that of society’s most vulnerable members. Further, new patterns of institutional and public corruption in the twenty-first century, from the prison of Abu Ghraib to institutions on Wall Street and global refugee crises, create conditions that seem likely to increase instances of administrative evil.

Critical Perspectives on Administrative Evil

Not everyone agrees that administrative evil belongs in the lexicon of public affairs and administrative ethics. Dubnick (2000) offered a critique grounded in the positivist tradition of research that takes a dim view of nonscientific concepts such as evil and of research that does not conform to the standards of empiricism (in effect, a defense of the primacy of technical-rationality). Frederickson (2012) argued that a focus on administrative evil detracts from the good that is done by public servants and institutions and that a useful framework for public service ethics needs to be built upon what should be done rather than on what should not be done, and exceptional events like the Holocaust, so that public administration can fulfill its vital role in society: “A preoccupation with evil diverts public administration from these challenges and does little to elevate public service.”

Moreno-Riano (2001) employs the theoretical perspective of Eric Voegelin to question whether technical rationality is the primary causal factor for administrative evil, arguing that both are the result of modern civilization’s failure to take seriously metaphysical questions of existence, freedom, and human dignity as important dimensions of organizational reality. Likewise, the literature on organizational spirituality (Garcia-Zamor 2003) seeks to bring such considerations into the forefront in workplaces as an antidote to evil and

the basis for more ethical and humane organizations. Other recent literature broadens the application of the concept of administrative evil to more specific settings, including organizational culture, power, and the professions (Jurkiewicz 2012).

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important contribution of administrative evil to public affairs and administration can be found in expanding the boundaries of ethics with the realization that ethical failures sometimes consist of something other than failure to comply with the norms of technical-rational public policy and administrative practice, which are often simply assumed to be ethical. In this view, public administration certainly encompasses, but is not centered on, the use of sophisticated organizational and management techniques in the implementation of public policy and consists of more than how to progress as an “art, science, and profession.” Practitioners and scholars of public affairs, and other related fields and professions, need to recognize that the pathways to administrative evil, while sometimes built from the outside by seductive leaders, often emanate from within and can lead any professional down a surprisingly familiar route: from focusing on the job at hand, to a moral inversion, then to complicity in crimes against humanity. While the concept of administrative evil does not preclude the possibility of ethical organizations, it does suggest that public administrators must also, and primarily, cultivate a historical consciousness and awareness of surplus populations and the potential for evil on the part of the state and its agents: a societal role and identity infused not just with personal and professional ethics but also with a social and political conscious – a public ethics – that can see beyond the mask of administrative evil and refuse to act as its accomplice.

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