

A Review of Perspectives on Frameworks for Ethical Theories in Public Service Life

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Abstract

Given the dynamic and changing interwoven and intertwined internal and external environments impacting on public service life, establishing and promoting a proper ethical foundation in public service life, has in itself emerged as a profound and daunting challenge, a worldwide phenomenon. The role of frameworks for ethical theories – such as teleological, deontological, virtue-based, and learning and growth, is crucial to dealing with this challenge. It is the view of the author that a keen grasp and application of the various frameworks, as well as their various components, could project their viewing and that of their components, not in isolation, but in an interconnected and intertwined manner. This could enhance the clarification of ethical and moral alternatives, as well as facilitate the spreading and diffusion of techniques for ethical reasoning and moral awareness, throughout public service life.

Keywords: Public service life; Ethics; Framework for Ethical Theories

NOTE:

In this article, the terms *ethics* and *morality* are used interchangeably, as well as jointly. (Refer to Rossouw, 2002:3; Bloisi *et al.* 2003:496; Thompson, 2012:417).

Introduction

Like any social phenomenon, the subject of ethics¹⁾ and its underpinning theoretical, conceptual, terminological and situational perspectives are prone to different interpretations. The context and focus of this article is on providing perspectives on frameworks for ethical theories in public service life, based on the assumptions that developing insights into these frameworks, could serve to build and enhance a sound and proper ethical foundation in public service life. Thus, the article begins with a description of public service life and ethics. Then follows a discussion of the various frameworks for ethical theories: teleological, deontological, virtue-based, as well as the theories of learning and growth.

Public service life and ethics

An ideal public service life ought to be grounded in deliverables - such as: *the natural feeling – to serve first or where serving others is a mission of responsibility. One, considers each individual as an end and not as a means, there is commitment to growth and development of people, preservation and enhancement of the welfare of humanity; and the will to do: the right things at the right time and for the right reasons. Being good and doing good is a norm and excellence is a habit, and most importantly, all ends to be pursued and means to be used, must be ethically justified, morally legitimized, and thoroughly reasoned* (Greenleaf 2002; Dierendonch and Patterson 2010). As Singer (in Brewster *et al.* 2008:168), aptly remarks: "Anyone who thinks about what he or she ought to do is, consciously or unconsciously, involved in ethics."

One denotation of ethics, – a static one, is that ethics is a set or a system of rules and standards of conduct or behaviour that public servants should consider and apply in their day-to-day interactions with colleagues and members of the public (Thompson 2012:410). For example, in South Africa public life, the Code of Conduct for the Public Service makes provision for the following: relationship with the legislature and executive; relationship with the public; relationship with employees; performance of duties; and personal conduct and private interests (Code of Conduct for the Public Service in Explanatory Manual on the Code of Conduct for the Public Service 2002:57-64). However, it may be argued that such a static denotation of ethics may not be useful in the changing and interwoven internal and external environments that impact on public service life, and

therefore, to address this challenge, a dynamic denotation is necessary. According to this dynamic denotation, ethics is concerned with clarifying what ultimately constitutes human welfare, and the concomitant kinds of behaviour and conduct needed to promote and sustain it (Chryssides and Kaler 2004:51-53).

Another denotation of ethics, which may be linked to the dynamic denotation, is that, ethics is an inquiry or study or examination of morality – the object of the inquiry or study or examination (Denhardt and Denhardt 2009:18; Chryssides and Kaler 2004:13). Morality is considered as a set of principles, practices and actions that are regarded as right or wrong (Bloisi *et al.* 2003:496). One way into this inquiry is the presentation, only, of the facts or course or events that generated the ethical issues. However, in terms of this approach, namely *descriptive ethics*, there is no emphasis on interpretation and explanation of facts or course of events. Another means of examination, namely *analytic ethics or metaethics*, focuses on understanding the underlying reasons or motives behind the facts or course of events propensing ethical issues. This notion of going *deeper* is in line with the *meta*, which is of Greek origin meaning *beyond* or *next to*. In terms of *normative ethics* study, facts and information are presented on what should be done in the future, rather than what was done in the past. Unlike, descriptive and analytic ethics, the rationale underlying normative ethics is to address potential ethical issues prior to them occurring (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:4; Rossouw 2002:32-34). Thus, it can be stated that ethics is a systematic and deliberate process which attempts to make sense of one's individual and social moral experience in order to determine and clarify what is right or wrong, as well as the way we should act, based on our understanding of what is right or the proper course of action (De George 1982:12 in Denhardt and Denhardt 2009:127; Denhardt and Denhardt 2009:127). However, Clarence Gazalot Jr (in Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:149) cautions: "Ethical behaviour is more than a code or act, it's a habit."

Framework for ethical theories

Various authors use different terminologies in describing and explaining ethical theories – such as sets of ideas, foundations, approaches, criteria and frameworks (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:4). Considering the fact that theory is a logical and systematic large scale description and explanation in the context of which smaller description and explanation (approach) are both generated, evaluated and predicted, the term *framework* is said to

suggest interconnection and potential for replacing or endorsing or modifying or altering existing theories (Chryssides and Kaler 2004:16; Encarta World English Dictionary 2009:739). For example, in the framework for deontological ethics, the overarching descriptive and explanation is deontology, and the smaller generated description, explanation, and evaluation, includes: existensialism, contracteriarism and Kantian ethics (Fisher and Lovell 2009:109-110; Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7-8).

Teleological

Teleological theories have their roots in the Greek word *telos*, the meaning of which, includes ends, goals and purpose, and according to Aristotle, everything in life has a specific goal (Northouse 2004:303). As the purpose of the Internet is to provide and share information, so too, do all humans share a common telos, the rationale being that in order to live a life of dignity and respect, people should endeavour to achieve the telos of human life. This suggests a live well-lived, as well as the realisation of full human potential (Rossouw 2002:45).

In terms of the teleological perspective, actions taken to pursue ends, purposes and goals will result in consequences; therefore, the rightness or badness of an action, will be determined by its consequences, that is, by looking at the outcomes, outputs and impacts. In effect, the goodness or badness of the action is *not* intrinsic to that action, but, it can only be judged, assessed and evaluated by its consequences (Fisher and Lovell 2009:125; Northouse 2004:303). The focus is on the goodness or badness of the consequences of the action. It is argued that best intentions are of no significance, if an ethical or moral outcome is not altered. Such action is *only* regarded as ethically or morally correct and acceptable, if negative outcomes are outweighed by the positive outcomes, outputs and impacts (Dellaportes *et al.* 2005:530). Teleological theories are also referred to as consequential theories which are underpinned by the principle of *ulitarianism* (Fisher and Lovell 2009:125).

Derived from the word utility (serving a useful purpose), ulitarianism - an *ethic of welfare*, is focused on creating the maximum good/benefit for the maximum number of people, as well as minimising harm/wrong. More importantly, the action must be avoided if such an action should result in less benefit and more harm. Moreover, the consequences of the right action must benefit everyone and not *just* an individual (Fisher and Lovell 2009:135; Northouse 2004:304; Jones and George 2003:91; Spitzer 2000:207;

Goree 2007:221). It is also argued that, whether the minority that does not receive the greatest benefit, would be subject to unfair treatment, as well as whether their rights will be severely curtailed or violated by the issues of *greatest bad for the smallest number*, provided that the overall welfare/good of the community or public was increased significantly (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:5; Starling 2008:187).

Another ethical principle within the teleological ethical framework is *ethical egoism*, *Ego*, a Latin word, is defined as *one's self* (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:5). Some of the terms associated with ego are: *egoism* – the pursuit of one's own welfare as the primary concern, as well as the belief that the correct and acceptable foundation for ethical and moral conduct, is every individual's only concern. The focus here is, only, on one's own best interests. *Egotism* – selfishness or self-centredness – is an aligned concept, which focuses, only, on needs, interests and wants of the self with no concern for the welfare of others (Encarta World English Dictionary 2009:602).

The beliefs underpinning ethical egoism vary. One belief is that every individual should act in a manner that would promote and enhance himself/herself, if the net outcome will propense, on balance, positive rather negative outcomes. The other belief focuses on *others*, in that pursuing self-interests are acceptable as long as there is positive benefit, also, for *others* (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:5). Another stance on ethical egoism is referred to as: *objectivism*, which is concerned with the primacy and importance of the capacity of individuals to engage in rational and logical thought, as the only guide (Fisher and Lovell 2009:123). Supported by the principal virtues of independence, integrity, honesty and productiveness, individuals are motivated and encouraged to believe in self-help, as well as understand and accept that individuals who are negatively inclined towards taking responsibility for themselves, have to suffer the consequences. State and society should not be expected to relieve or bail them out. Furthermore, a cogent requirement is that an individual should not expect others to sacrifice themselves for his/her sake, as well as not expect himself/herself to make sacrifices for others (Fisher and Lovell 2009:124). This is a perspective which may be contrary to the ethos of public service life, which must focus on humanising itself and remain human and humane in all circumstances (Jagannadham 2003:273). However, Rossouw (2002:2-3) asserts that if ethics is concerned with the good or right in human interaction and purpose, then consideration must be given to include the concepts of *good*, *the self* and *the other* in the definition of ethics and ethical behaviour. Ethical

behaviour is regarded as behaviour that considers what is good for others and, not only, good for oneself. Therefore, it can be contrasted with selfish behaviour, but not with self-interested behaviour. Action is selfish and unethical, if it is known that behaviour will cause wrong or bad to others, as well as caring only for what is good or right for oneself. In contrast, if you seek and aim to serve your own interests, while at the same time care about and promote the interests of others, then this behaviour can be regarded as being self-interested, while also being ethical (Rossouw 2002:3-4). Therefore, this *win-win* proposition will create benefits for the rest of the society, while simultaneously rewarding the individual's own self-interest (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:5). However, improving your own interests could be risky because a strong personal well-being and self-esteem, is an essential condition for balanced, meaningful and ongoing interaction with others, – individuals and society as a whole (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:5; Rossouw 2002:4).

Deontological

In contrast to teleological frameworks, which place emphasis and focus on whether an action is favourable or unfavourable, deontological (non-consequential/duty-based ethics) frameworks focus on the assumption that the principles of rightness and wrongness can be determined and established, and moreover, that these principles and the actions emanating from them are not dependent of the consequences (Denhardt and Denhardt 2009:130). For the consequentialists, the determination of whether an action is right or wrong, is dependent on whether, it is good or bad in the sense of causing benefit or harm. Therefore, while good or bad is a question of benefit or harm, right or wrong is a question of good or bad (Chryssides and Kaler 2004:88).

In terms of *Kantianism* - an *ethic of duty*, actions must be guided and directed by universalisable principles, irrespective of the consequences, as well as an action can, only, be morally carried out as a duty without expecting any reward (Fisher and Lovell 2009:109). Kant claims that only one thing and one thing *only* done is, *good in itself* (highest principle), that is, *goodwill*. This means that, actions are only performed or undertaken for reasons of principle, from a sense of duty or obligation, and therefore, nothing else is of concern, whether results or outcomes or impacts. Thus, the intrinsic duty is paramount and therefore, the categorisation of Kants' theory in terms of the

deontological (*deon* the Greek word for duty) (Fisher and Lovell 2009:109; Chryssides and Kaler 2009:97; Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:6).

In addition to the Kantian theory in the deontological framework, is *existentialism*, a 20th century philosophical movement that denies that the universe has any in-built or embedded purpose or meaning. Moreover, it requires and expects that individuals shape their own destinies, and take responsibility for their own actions (Encarta World English Dictionary 2009:655). This implies that the underlying belief is that the individual making a decision is the only person who can determine right or wrong, and thereby has to bear ultimately responsibility for the actions, impacts and effects of his/her action. This rationale is regarded as the most viable approach to create a link between duty and actions by some philosophers. This approach can enable individuals to develop and sustain their own sense of persona; virtue can be gained through fairness, reliability and credibility of actions (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:6-7). Unlike, Kantian ethics, existentialism does not utilise universal principles, in that each person determines which action/s are acceptable and are correct or not, which are moral and ethical, and which are not (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7).

Also housed in the deontological ethical framework is *contractarianism* or *social contract theory*, underpinned by the belief that all individuals agree to and accept social contracts to be members within a society (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7). A fundamental proposition is that, to be a member of society, one requires a certain adherence to certain duties and responsibilities. This creates the motivation to agree and subscribe to norms, rules and laws which create the environment to enable individuals and society to pursue common interests. In other words, individuals and society, both, greatly benefit (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7). An underlying principle underpinning contractarianism is that of fairness and if, fairness prevails in all actions, then everyone in society should agree to abide by it (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7). Like Kantian ethics, contractarianism is framed in the language of rights to guide day-to-day living, and importantly, everyone should have equal rights and duties. In addition, it is reasoned that if there are, for example, social and economic inequalities, then it would be morally and ethically acceptable and correct to the society if these inequalities were able to generate and sustain benefits for every member of society (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7). Social contract theorists will question the utilitarian principle by arguing that it is unjust and unfair to focus on the actions of greater good, if there is no benefit accruing to

minorities. On similar lines it is stated that income inequalities may be permissible, only, if they do in reality benefit the least advantaged (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:7; Fisher and Lovell 2009:16). However, Clarence Gazalot Jr (in Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:147) cautions:

“But in real life, doing good doesn’t always equate with doing well.”

Virtue-based

Behaviour in terms of rightness and wrongness in the teleological rationale, is based on the consequence of actions. In terms of deontological thinking, rightness and wrongness, is embedded in the action itself. The social contract rationale focuses on the rightness and wrongness of behaviour in the context of a jointly agreed ethical and moral system. However, in terms of the virtue-based reasoning, the rightness or wrongness of behaviour, is dependent on the person committing the act. While, the teleological, deontological and social contract-based theories focus on behaviour, the virtue-based theory emphasises the character or virtue of the individual as being fundamental in determining the rightness and wrongness of actions (Northouse 2004:305; Reynolds 2003:339; Quinn 2004:55-56). *Eduaemonia*, is the Greek term associated with virtue-based theories and encompasses the notion of both “behaving well and faring well” (MacInyre 1967 in Fisher and Lovell 2009:103). The Encarta World English Dictionary (2009:2078) refers to virtue as: “the quality for being morally good or righteous;” “a particular quality that is morally good.” Virtues are also regarded as promoting and enhancing personal and collective organizational well-being, and as the character trait or quality, it is valued as always good in and of itself. Vice is its opposite (What is virtue: a definition and its characteristics: <http://answers.yahoo.com>) [Date accessed 12/11/2012]. While, virtues are personal habits that promote an acceptable behaviour, vices incline individuals to unacceptable actions (Reynolds 2003:339; Brady 2003:529-532).

There are many virtues of an ethical or moral person cited by classical and modern thinkers, and all of them are regarded as important and significant. Examples include: courage, perseverance, temperance, sociability, forgiveness, benevolence, public spiritedness and affection (Spitzer 2000:224; Bradbun 2001:16; Brady 2003:527; Northouse 2004:306; Aristotle in Starling 2008:189-190). Some examples of vices include: cowardice, vanity, boastfulness, shamelessness, defeatism, obsequiousness, rashness, boorishness and irascibility (Rossouw 2002:48; Fisher and Lovell 2009:105). Confucius, a

non-Western philosopher, largely emphasized the virtues of *jen* which connotes human heartedness – the foundation for loving others (Starling 2008:189). It only through love for others, that an individual is able to perform his own duties (Starling 2008:189). The rationale for considering love for others in human action is indicated as follows: in desiring to sustain oneself, one sustain others; in desiring to develop oneself, one develop others (Confucius Analects VI 28 in Starling 2008:191). This virtue of unconditional love for others in public service life could propense such questions as (Spitzer 2000:230; Starling 2008:192-193):

- Do I have the inclination to be courageous and temperate in applying my ethical and moral principles in a caring manner?
- Am I preserving and yet generous in pursuing my ethical and moral values in a sensitive manner?
- Is my willingness to forgive and be fair and just, motivated by a deep and meaningful regard for the human dignity and integrity of the other individuals?
- Am I for neglecting public spiritedness at the expense of fulfilling obligations to specific individuals and constituencies? Am I caring for only myself, and therefore not being sensitive to the needs of others?
- Do I exercise courage and perseverance in pursuing my public conscience, which should be embedded in beliefs and principles that reflect unselfish consideration of, and sensitive commitment to the needs of others?
- How do I without any rashness and boorishness exercise power to facilitate the capacity for self-direction of citizens?
- In any institutional and social design, am I sensitive to decisions that would have ethical and moral implications on the lives of my colleagues and citizens?

Virtues as a set of personal characteristics enable individuals practising virtues to be able to make *right* choices than *wrong* choices in ethically and morally complex situations and circumstances. Entangled in these situations and circumstances, an appeal to virtues, for guidance will propense questions - such as (Fisher and Lovell 2009:104): what would a virtuous person do in this situation? And more particularly, what would a

benevolent and courageous person do to deal with conflicting citizen needs? Virtuous things and moral characteristics are not features that an individual can choose to have or not have. For Aristotle, they are the preconditions for life with human dignity (Rossouw 2002:48). Therefore, proponents of virtue-based theory emphasise development and training in ethical and moral values, to be enabled through: repetition, positive construction, and positive conclusions of one's self-image. And, this is consistent with Aristotle's belief that development of virtue is a slow process and not developed instantaneously, but be sustained throughout the lifetime of the person (Spitzer 2000:24; Northouse 2004:305; Rossouw 2002:47). Instead of telling individuals what to do, the focus should be directed towards telling people what to be – nurturing them to become virtuous individuals (Northouse 2004:305). Thus, the implication is, if practised over time, from youth to adulthood, good values become embedded in the personality of the individuals. Therefore, becoming truthful results from telling the truth, and from being fair and just to others, individuals become fair and just. Thus, one's virtues are derived from one's action, and one's action manifest one's virtues (Northouse 2004:305). However, Senator John McCain (in Strom 2003:20) asserts:

"Virtue is not determined in moments of public attention to our behaviour. Courage, devotion, compassion, humility – all the noble qualities – are not practiced in pursuit of public approval. They are means to much nobler ends. And they are ends in themselves."

Learning and Growth

In discussing the learning and growth ethical framework, consideration should be given to the perspectives of March and Simon (1958) (in Paton and McCalmen (2000:121):

"An organization is after all, a collection (and a network) of people and what the organization does is done by people. Therefore, propositions about organizations are statements about human behaviour."

The rationale for the learning and growth theory is that policy ends in the form of codes, pacts, protocols and understandings, should serve as yardsticks or benchmarks against which ethical and moral actions ought to be judged and evaluated. However, an ethical organization cannot be achieved by, *just*, those policy ends. Moreover, in

themselves, they cannot propense implementation (Fisher and Lovell 2009:121). Therefore, these ends have to be approached in an oblique and indirect way to enable and encourage the processes of learning, which will cause individuals to decide for themselves to act ethically and morally (Fisher and Lovell 2009:120-121). The views of Parsloe and Wray (2000:176) are noteworthy: "Learning is a skill that, like any other skill, you can develop and improve, learning to learn is the ultimate skill."

Individual growth and organizational learning constitutes a part of the learning and growth ethical framework, and there is recent literature suggesting concepts and practices, on how this can be achieved. Coveys' proposition (in Fisher and Lovell 2009:121): begin with the end in mind, and Senge's idea (in April *et al.* 2003:51) that individual personal mastery can be attained in that organizations can only learn, if, the individuals within the organization learn, are consistent with the approach that policy is considered as concentrating on sets of aims, goals and objectives that results in some individual and organizational improvement and growth through the processes of learning. Thus, these propositions represent a policy end and policy implementation orientation (Fisher and Lovell 2009:121).

Learning, a key ingredient in this ethical framework, can be explained as an iterative and continuous developmental process, which involves individual and group knowledge discovery, skills acquisition, reflection, assessment and experience (Fisher and Lovell 2009:146). Evidence emerges "...when people can demonstrate that they know something they did not know before (insights and realisations, as well as facts) and/or when they can do something they cannot do before (skills)" (Honey and Munford (1996) in Gold *et al.* 2010:117). Also implied in the learning process is that there is discovery of why things are as they are and how they manifest, and through reflection, interrelationship and connection are revealed among many things which were vague, opaque and unrecognized (Ranson and Stewart 1994:118). Through the processes of learning, individuals become cognisant of their ethical and moral potential in terms of conceptualization and practice, and thus, learning is attributed to being an ethical and moral end in itself (Fisher and Lovell 2009:122). And therefore, according to Fisher and Lovell (2009:146): "Learning about learning, learning how to deal with ethical (and moral) issues is more important than learning pre-packaged solutions."

Encouraging the process of learning to enable people to grow, develop and mature in order that they can themselves act and behave ethically and morally, must be considered, also, within a deeper perspective, as Senge (1990:14) (in Fisher and Lovell 2009:122) asserts:

“Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we create ourselves. Through learning we perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life.”

Communitarianism constitutes another part of the learning and growth ethical framework. The dictionary refers to communitarianism as the advocating of a collective and co-operative way of life, and a supporting collective or co-operative community or system (Encarta World English Dictionary 2009:385). The rationale underpinning communitarianism is that ethics and morality does not locate in an autonomous individual, but within the co-operative community, in that ethics and morality are embedded and emerges from the relational context within which individuals act and behave, namely the public square - such as deliberations of civil society (Adams and Balfour 2012:515). Furthermore, people are regarded as inherently social, that is, they, believe in inclusiveness; accept individual differences; engage in collaborative behaviour; facilitate, build and nurture networks, alliances and coalitions; and support continuously learning and growth – all in the public interest, and, people can *only* attain *their* ethical and moral potential by being part of growing and developing communities (Fisher and Lovell 2009:122-123). More importantly, by contributing to the ethical and moral growth and development of individuals, people also become ethical and moral (Fisher and Lovell 2009:122). Through the deliberation process of rational discussion, consultation, debate, dialogue and striving to rise above win-lose exchanges; over time, participants may even aspire to become a learning community which endeavours to ensure that ethical and moral problems will not occur in the *first instance* as well as in the *future* (Adams and Balfour 2012:515). By being involved in the public square, public servants and communities develop a level of intuition that will enable them to: keep explicit and implicit promises; repair negative consequences of previous wrong decisions; show gratitude and appreciation for the kindness and care others have given to him/her; and improve oneself by focusing and concentrating on practising and promoting human

virtues and a public character (Stanwick and Stanwick 2009:8). However, Adams and Balfour 2012:517) caution:

“... no human communities, even deliberative and democratic ones, offer any guarantee against administrative evil (such as oppression, suppression, cheating, lying and deceit). And they certainly offer no escape from evil itself, which remains a part of the human condition.”

Public service life can benefit optimally from the ethical frameworks and their components, if they can be reflected upon and applied in an interwoven, integrated manner, notwithstanding the fact that the underlying principles of the various frameworks for the ethical theories, can be contradictory or conflicting or opposite. At the best the ethical frameworks can serve as a toolkit for the various actors, role-players and stakeholders in public service life to rationally and insightfully deal with ethical and moral expectations, dispositions, threats, issues, and promises, as well as exercising judgments (Dellaportes *et al.* 2005:343; Rossouw 2002:160; Denhardt and Denhardt 2009:134).

Conclusion

Change, – a world-wide phenomenon, is an essential and irrepressible in public service life. Given the varying dynamic, interwoven and intertwined realities and environments impacting on public service life, establishing, embedding and promoting proper frameworks for ethical theories – such as teleological, deontological, virtue-based, and learning and growth in public service life, have emerged as daunting challenges. The role of frameworks for ethical theories in coping and dealing with these challenges, is crucial. A keen grasp and application of these various frameworks and their components, can propense and propagate the viewing and applying of these frameworks and their components, not in isolation, but in an interconnected and interwoven manner. This could enhance the clarification of ethical and moral alternatives, as well facilitate the spreading and diffusion of techniques for ethical reasoning and moral awareness throughout public service life.

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