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COOPER

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The Responsible Administrator is at once the most sophisticated and the most practical book available on public sector ethics. It is conceptually clear and jargon-free, which is extraordinary among books on administrative ethics."

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THE RESPONSIBLE ADMINISTRATOR

An Approach to Ethics
for the Administrative Role

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TERRY L. COOPER

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Responsible Administrator is one attempt to respond to the need for a systematic treatment of public administrative ethics that is grounded in both the realities of practice and the requirements of sound scholarship. It is important to identify the particular contribution intended here. The conceptual focus of the book is the role of the public administrator in an organizational setting; the central integrating ethical concept used in dealing with that role is responsibility. The central ethical process adopted for addressing ethical problems associated with administrative responsibility is a comprehensive design approach.

What Is Ethics?

Ethics is defined in various ways, some more technical and precise than others. The usual brief textbook or dictionary definitions define *ethics* as “the attempt to state and evaluate principles by which ethical problems may be solved” (Jones, Sontag, Becker, and Fogelin, 1969, p. 1), “the normative standards of conduct derived from the philosophical and religious traditions of society” (Means, 1970, p. 52), or “the task of careful reflection several steps removed from the actual conduct of men” concerning “the assumptions and presuppositions of the moral life” (Gustafson, 1965, p. 113). Preston (1996) becomes a bit more specific by suggesting that “ethics is concerned about what is right, fair, just, or good; about what we ought to do, not just about what is the case or what is most acceptable or expedient” (p. 16). Martin (1995) defines ethics as moral philosophy and stipulates that it includes four main goals or interests: clarification of moral concepts; critical evaluation of moral

claims focused on "testing their truth, justification, and adequacy" (pp. 7-8); constructing an inclusive perspective by elucidating the interconnections among moral ideas and values; and providing moral guidance through improving practical judgment.

Gibson Winter (1966) defines ethics more comprehensively by describing the functions it serves in the social world. As an active enterprise, he says, "Ethics seeks to clarify the logic and adequacy of the values that shape the world; it assesses the moral possibilities which are projected and betrayed in the social give-and-take" (p. 218). Anyone engaged in ethical reflection takes on the task of analyzing and evaluating the principles embodied in various alternatives for conduct and social order. Ethics is, according to Winter, "a science of human intentionality" (p. 219).

For our purposes in this book, ethics may be understood as the study of moral conduct and moral status. *Ethics* and *morality* are often used interchangeably, but here I will distinguish them. *Morality* assumes some accepted modes of behavior that are given by a religious tradition, a culture (including an organizational culture), a social class, a community, or a family. It involves expected courses of conduct that are rooted in both formal rules and informal norms. *Morality* includes such things as "decent young people do not engage in premarital sex," "family comes first," "one should not conspicuously display one's wealth," "guests in one's home must always be treated with respect," "never drive under the influence," "a day's pay requires a day's work," "follow the orders of those above you in the organization," and similar expectations. Sometimes these are written out in codes of conduct or rules, but at other times they are assumed and taken for granted. Typically they are asserted by a tradition, culture, religion, community, organization, or family as simply what is right.

Ethics, then, is one step removed from action. It involves the examination and analysis of the logic, values, beliefs, and principles that are used to justify morality in its various forms. It considers what is meant by principles such as justice, veracity, or the public interest; their implications for conduct in particular situations; and how one might argue for one principle over another as determinative in a particular decision. Ethics takes what is given or prescribed and asks what is meant and why. So ethics as related to conduct is critical reflection on morality toward grounding moral

conduct in systematic reflection and reasoning. It is not without an affective element since ethical reflection often evokes emotive responses of comfort or discomfort, resolution or quandary, and affirmation or antagonism.

Ethics also deals with the moral status of entities such as families, organizations, communities, and societies. Here ethical reasoning is focused on how the characteristics associated with the good family, or the good organization, or the good society are grounded in certain principles, values, beliefs, and logical argument. Ethics weighs the adequacy of these attributes and analyzes how they are justified.

Ethics may be dealt with descriptively or normatively. Descriptively, ethics attempts to reveal underlying assumptions and how they are connected to conduct. Normatively, ethics attempts to construct viable and defensible arguments for particular courses of conduct as being better than others in specific situations. This book engages mainly in a descriptive approach to the ethical situation of public administrators and provides some analytical tools for arriving at normative judgments. It does not describe a particular public service ethic, which I have addressed in another book, *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration* (1991). However, my approach to the normative ethics of the public administrative role is just one among several options under discussion currently.

Ethics may be viewed from either or both of two major orientations: deontological and teleological. Deontological approaches to ethics focus on one's duty to certain ethical principles such as justice, freedom, or veracity without regard for the consequences of one's actions. Teleological ethics, in contrast, involves a concern for the ends or consequences of one's conduct. This is the position most notably associated with utilitarianism and its calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number. This book assumes that most of us undertake decisions using both of these perspectives most of the time. That is, we consider principles that are important to us in a concrete situation and then ask ourselves what the consequences of acting on those principles are likely to be. The decision-making model presented in the next chapter combines deontological and teleological orientations.

Doing ethics, then, involves thinking more systematically about the values and principles that are embedded in the choices we

otherwise would make on practical or political grounds alone. As we reflect on these implicit values, we ask ourselves how they are consistent with our duties and toward what ends and consequences they lead. Keeping in mind the obligations and goals of the roles we occupy, we seek to rank-order them for a particular ethical decision we confront in the course of carrying out a specific role.

The relationship between law and ethics often comes up in the discussion of specific cases. My answer is that law is the moral minimum. It is the minimum level of conduct that we as a society can agree to impose on all of us through the threat of force and sanctions. Ethical considerations are often involved in deliberations about proposed legislation, but once crystallized into law, the conduct prescribed is assumed to be backed up by the coercive power of government. However, from an ethicist's point of view, law must always stand under the judgment of ethics. Sometimes laws may be deemed unjust and therefore unethical. Those who believe so may challenge those laws in the courts as inconsistent with the human rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, or they may engage in civil disobedience even to the point of being arrested and going to jail.

Both kinds of challenges occurred during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The NAACP engaged in litigation against unjust segregation laws in the American South. Martin Luther King Jr. and many others employed civil disobedience by sitting in at segregated facilities, refusing to sit in the back seats on buses, and demonstrating against segregated schools even when ordered by legal authorities not to do so. Sometimes laws need to be challenged on ethical grounds. In the long tradition of civil disobedience exemplified by Gandhi and King, the key proviso is that one must be willing to accept the consequences of one's actions in order to demonstrate commitment to ethical principles over what are considered unjust laws. That is, one must be willing to suffer fines and imprisonment in order to evoke a response from the larger society to bring about change in the laws in question.

Responsibility and Role

The terms *role* and *responsibility* are peculiarly modern in connotation. Both suggest a worldview in which the power of tradition is broken and human beings are left to construct a world of their

own making. Roles must be devised and responsibility defined as ways of reestablishing obligations in our modern, pluralistic, technological society. Technology is applied not only to production but also to society itself.

Gibson Winter (1966, pp. 254–255) observed: “Responsibility is a relatively new term in the ethical vocabulary, appearing in the nineteenth century with a somewhat ambiguous meaning. The term evaluates action and attributes it to an agent; it does so in lieu of cosmic or natural structures of obligation. The historical awareness of the nineteenth century, the scientific and technological revolutions, and the collapse of metaphysical systems had undermined fixed notions of obligations. The term ‘responsibility’ was a way of filling this gap by defining the scope of accountability and obligation in contexts of law and common culture.”

Similarly, Richard McKeon's study of the emergence of the term in Western thought reveals that *responsibility* first appeared in English and French in 1787. It was used initially in reference to the political institutions arising out of the American and French revolutions, but its use continued through the nineteenth century. When “constitutional government was vastly extended, in scope of operation and in spread among nations, as a result of contacts of cultures and peoples” (1957, p. 23), the concept of responsibility became increasingly significant as a way of defining a common set of values among people of divergent cultures and traditions.

The concept of role then becomes a convenient way to package expectations and obligations associated with the modern world. As we cease to view social functions as received intact from the past and instead to be manipulated and created anew, we take upon ourselves bounded obligation in the form of various roles. People exercise responsibility and are held responsible in society by accepting and carrying out an array of more or less well-defined roles: employee, parent, citizen, group member. The most problematic roles are those not clearly defined, usually because there is little agreement about the boundaries of responsibility associated with them. What does it mean to be a responsible parent in the first decade of the twenty-first century? Or a responsible spouse, responsible citizen, responsible politician, or responsible public administrator?

The problem is that although public administrators are responsible for certain duties (those that constitute the professional role),

they sometimes believe they are obligated to act otherwise. This is because administrators, along with everyone else in modern society, maintain an array of roles related to family, community, and society, each carrying a set of obligations and vested with certain personal interest. The quite common result is conflict among roles as these competing forces push and pull in opposite directions. The effects of these conflicts are compounded by the range of discretion administrators must exercise. Legislation frequently provides only broad language about its intent, leaving the specifics to administrators. Consequently, ethical standards and sensitivity are crucial to the responsible use of this discretion.

The Responsible Administrator

The responsible administrator is one who is responsible in the two senses discussed briefly above; the subject is treated more thoroughly in Chapter Four. Responsible administrators must be able to account for their conduct to relevant others such as supervisors, elected officials, the courts, and the citizenry, which means being able to explain and justify why specific actions they took resulted in particular consequences. They must also be able to act in ways that are consistent with their inner convictions as professional guardians of the public good. That is, being a responsible administrator includes both objective accountability for conduct and subjective congruence with one's professional values. Ethics is the most fundamental way in which one satisfies both kinds of responsibility. Responsible administrators must be ethically sophisticated enough to reason with others about how their conduct serves the public interest and have sufficient clarity about their own professional ethical commitments to maintain integrity and a sense of self-esteem.

What, then, is the difference between an ethical administrator and a responsible administrator? A public administrator who has been properly socialized may be able to act in accordance with the common good some or even most of the time, thus being an ethical administrator some or most of the time, but not be able to account for his or her conduct with reasons when questioned or challenged, and perhaps not even be able to understand in a self-conscious way why he or she acted in a particular way. Understanding one's motivations and being able to explain and justify

the actions that flow from them are the essential qualities of the responsible administrator. This book seeks to provide the concepts, theories, and techniques for responsible administration.

A Design Approach

All too many treatments of professional ethics stop with a conceptual and theoretical philosophical analysis of typical ethical problems. Some lead to a desired solution or a prescribed set of ethical norms, whereas others elucidate the problem, offer some analysis of various alternatives, and leave the reader with the implication that all are of equal value. Here a design approach is adopted as the central organizing ethical process. This orientation assumes that there is no single best solution to a significant ethical problem, but rather numerous possible solutions, some of equal value but others of greater or lesser worth. The task is to design a response to a problem at hand that addresses the immediate short-term situation but looks to the wider organizational, legal, and social contexts for the longer-term answers.

Practicing administrators cannot live exclusively in the realm of philosophical reflection, but must connect such considerations to action and organizations. As Caroline Whitbeck suggests, "People confronted with ethical problems must do more than simply make judgments. They must figure out what to do" (1996, p. 9). Far from simply assuming that ethics is a matter of looking for an ideal rational solution to an immediate problem, Whitbeck argues that a person confronting an ethical problem should be thinking like a designer. "Design problems," she points out, "are problems of making (or repairing) things and processes to satisfy wants and needs" (p. 10). And this "making" and "repairing" always involves constraints—in time, money, power, ability to persuade, and the strength to absorb consequences. For public administrators, the design of a viable and acceptable solution to an ethical quandary always takes place in the context of organizations that will support some kinds of conduct and impede others. A workable resolution of an ethical problem cannot ignore that organizational context.

Following Whitbeck, the approach developed throughout this book is one of considering the facts of a situation—its social and organizational context, its constraints, opportunities, and

implications for all concerned—and then advocating the design of courses of action that may include changes in organizational structure, culture, rules, policies, and procedures. It is assumed that there are several conceivable alternative courses to consider before selecting, not the ideal or perfect solution, but the best among an array of possibilities, some of which may be equally acceptable. This design approach assumes that it is always possible to improve on any solution given moral imagination, ingenuity, and creativity and that one must always bring these qualities to bear on important ethical quandaries. But administrators have limited time to exercise their inventiveness and finally must act in the short run while planning for the future.

Thus, as the chapters unfold, responsibility for the public administrative role will be developed by leading the reader through considerations of the elements involved in designing what to do in the face of ethical uncertainty and challenge. Some of the moral lessons Whitbeck has advanced for design problems include:

- *Begin with a consideration of the uncertainties involved in any ethical problem.* For example, no one should ever assume that appearances are always true. Conduct that may seem to be unethical may not be when it is fully explored and understood. Also, human behavior is not always predictable. A person may decide on a course of action and find out that the key actors respond very differently from what had been expected. As the process of addressing a problem unfolds, the nature of the problem may change. Other problems and conflicts heretofore unknown may be discovered to be involved in the problem.

- *The generation of alternative solutions to an ethical problem is separate from defining the problem and may necessitate gathering additional information.* This is related to the first lesson. Often, in order to reduce uncertainty, it is necessary to find out more about who is involved in the problem, how long it has existed, the characters of the key actors, the implications of various options for action for the larger organization and people within it, and how key actors outside the organization may respond to the proposed courses of action.

- *One is always acting under time pressure.* Busy public administrators do not have the luxury of contemplating an ethical problem

until they are fully satisfied that all options and contingencies have been exhaustively considered. Decisions have to be made and things have to get done, always under constraints of schedules and deadlines. Sometimes that means pursuing several alternatives simultaneously or developing a contingency approach with a decision tree indicating what will be done if various things do not happen as initially planned. Not taking this approach may mean that the opportunity to intervene and correct misconduct may be lost. Postponing action may result in a *fait accompli*. The damage may be done, and irreversibly so.

- *Ethical problems are dynamic.* They change as we begin trying to address them. What one may at first engage as an ethical problem may become also a legal problem. Or, while one is beginning to work through a planned course of action to address an ethical problem, someone else may intervene and resolve it in another way, which may in turn create an entirely new problem.

These lessons are rather abstract at this point, but readers should try to keep them in mind as the chapters unfold. Chapter Nine develops this design approach in summary fashion by applying it to a case.

Overview of the Contents

The first and most basic task of this book is to illuminate the ethical decision-making process. Chapter Two begins with some basic concepts for understanding the levels of deliberation at which ethical problems are addressed. This is followed by a model for analyzing and resolving these problems. The model is partly linear, involving a sequence of steps, and partly nonlinear, requiring a search for integration of several key elements, including moral rules, ethical principles, self-image, and the norms of the political community. It also combines reasoning, emotion, and beliefs. The model presented here is not simply a rationalist approach that focuses on principles, but includes as essential the affective dimensions of ethical decision making and conduct. The logic espoused is not a linear syllogistic calculus, but something more like the logic of aesthetics or the logic of rhetoric. Some readers seem to have missed this essential thrust in earlier editions of the book (Bruce,

1992; Cooper, 1992a; Harmon, 1995; Cooper, 1996). This chapter concludes with a summary of the design approach that is developed through the remaining chapters.

Chapter Three develops the social context within which the public administrator must work and discusses the problem of defining and maintaining the administrator's role in the diverse and relativistic environment of modern society. Without the guidance of a coherent tradition, the administrative role in modern societies is just one more set of obligations and interests that must be managed amid an array of other competing roles. One significant implication of this social context is the inescapably political nature of public administration.

Chapter Four addresses the dual nature of administrative responsibility in modern society: objective responsibility (in which one is held accountable by superiors, the public, and legislation) and subjective responsibility (in which one feels and believes oneself to be responsible). Conflict between these two forms of responsibility seems to be the most common form in which ethical dilemmas emerge.

Chapter Five further develops the conflict between subjective and objective responsibility. Conflicts of authority, role, and interest are reviewed. It is not that these three forms of conflicting responsibility require distinctly different forms of analysis to be resolved. Rather, understanding the different ways we experience conflicts helps us clarify the key actors and relationships that must be examined and dealt with if we are to achieve resolution.

Chapter Six presents two general approaches to maintaining, from a management perspective, responsible conduct in public organizations—internal and external controls. External controls include instruments imposed from outside the individual, such as codes of ethics and ethics legislation; internal controls involve the professional values and standards that public servants have internalized through the socialization process, both personal and professional.

Continuing the management perspective from Chapter Six, Chapter Seven focuses on the importance of establishing congruence among the various internal and external controls. Two examples illustrate what happens when this is not done. Four components of responsible conduct are then discussed: individual

attributes, organizational structure, organizational culture, and societal expectations.

Chapter Eight shifts the perspective to an individual who is attempting to act ethically in the face of management that has become corrupt or lost sight of its mandated mission in the public interest. The problem is one of conflicting loyalties—to superiors on the one hand and to the public on the other. Whistle-blowing is recognized as one response to this kind of conflict. Sources of organizational pressure on individual employees are outlined, organizational remedies are discussed, and the ultimate necessity for individual responsibility is asserted. The chapter closes with a treatment of the components required for individual ethical autonomy.

It is important to note that ethical autonomy is not tantamount to ethical individualism but must be seen in the context of the previous chapters and the concluding model. Individual autonomy is necessary to some degree to provide for the exercise of conscience in resistance to corrupt authority, but that always occurs for public administrators in organizational, institutional, and societal contexts. The administrator is not in his or her job simply for self-fulfillment, but to serve the citizenry by enhancing the public good. The public administrator is a fiduciary of the citizens, holding their common good in trust. Thus it is assumed here that women and men entering public service must be prepared to find fulfillment in this pursuit.

In Chapter Nine, I elaborate the design approach and its relevance to significant ethical problems. I restate the approach in terms appropriate for the public administrative role using cases as examples of how the approach would be applied. I conclude the chapter by applying the design approach to a concrete case about contracting for government services.

The final chapter summarizes the argument developed through the previous chapters and presents a model of responsible administration that brings together the components of responsible conduct from Chapter Seven and the components of individual ethical autonomy from Chapter Eight. Illustrative material has been added to Chapter Ten to clarify the practical implications of the model.

The cases in the book are based on reality and fictionalized only slightly to protect the privacy of those who wrote them. In a

few instances they are composites of several actual cases. They are intended primarily as illustration, but also to stimulate thinking about the ethical problems they portray. For both reasons, the situations are left unresolved. To indicate an outcome would diminish the experience of dilemma they are calculated to evoke; it would also short-circuit the reader's own reflections. For the same reason, the case narratives are a bit longer and more detailed than usual. Again, the ultimate purpose of *The Responsible Administrator* is to illuminate the ethical situation of the public administrator and cultivate imaginative reflection about it—not to prescribe a particular set of public service values. This is not to suggest that all alternatives are of equal value, but that the focus of this book is not on prescribing particular courses of action.

This book is largely descriptive and analytical; it is only secondarily prescriptive, and even then only in a particular sense. It prescribes a design approach to public administrative ethics that includes techniques that individual administrators can use in analyzing ethical dilemmas they confront, and a combination of organizational and management components for fostering responsible administration.

I do not attempt to develop a substantive ethic for public administrators in this book. That is a necessary and important undertaking, but it is dealt with in another of my books, *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration* (1991). There I develop the argument that normative ethics for public administration is to be found in the ethical tradition of citizenship as it has evolved throughout U.S. history. This tradition has at its core a notion of the common good, the importance of democratic participation by the citizenry, and the ultimate sovereignty of the people. The public administrator is viewed there as taking his or her ethical norms from those of citizenship in a democratic society. The administrator is a fiduciary professional citizen in some sense. For the purposes of this book, some such public service ethic is assumed.

Chapter Two

Understanding Ethical Decision Making

James A. Michener's novel *Chesapeake* (1978) portrays the history of two families who settled near each other on the shores of Chesapeake Bay during the American colonial era. As Quakers, the Paxmores tended to espouse values in both religion and politics quite different from those of the Steeds, devout Roman Catholics. However, in spite of their divergent doctrines and frequent conflicts, the two families managed to live as neighbors with a kind of grudging respect and a willingness to work things out.

In the closing pages is a scene involving the family patriarchs of the mid-1970s, Pusey Paxmore and Owen Steed. The two men are sitting on the porch of the Paxmore house, looking out over the Chesapeake and reflecting on the events of Watergate. Pusey had been a high-level appointee in the Nixon White House, and Owen was one of the oil company executives who had covertly, and illegally, raised money for CREEP, the Committee to Re-elect the President. Both men's careers were seriously damaged by the scandals, and both have returned home to retire and to think. During this conversation, an insightful and pithy exchange occurs:

Steed: How do you explain the corruption, the near-treason?

Paxmore: Men without character slip from one position to the next. And never comprehend the awful downward course they're on.

Steed: Couldn't Nixon have stopped it?

Paxmore:: Woodrow Wilson could have. Or Teddy Roosevelt. And does thee know why? Because they had accumulated through years of apprenticeship a theory of government. A theory of

democracy, if thee will. And they would have detected the rot the minute it started.

Steed: Why didn't the Californians?

Paxmore: For a simple reason. They were deficient in education. They'd gone to those chrome-and-mirror schools where procedures are taught, not principles. I doubt if any one of them had ever contemplated a real moral problem, in the abstract where character is formed [p. 1049].

This bit of dialogue suggests the underlying assumption of this book: *ethical public administration requires a theoretical perspective on the role of the public administrator*. Moreover, this theoretical perspective must be developed by practicing administrators through a combination of professional experience, contemplation, study, and deliberation with colleagues, whether in a structured course or through self-motivated inquiry.

The theories of others, including scholars from various disciplines and historical periods, are essential ingredients in a professional ethic, but a fundamental assumption of this book is that knowing the thoughts of others is only the beginning. Administrators must also develop skill in thinking about ethical problems, toward the end of creating a working professional ethic of their own. Without cultivating this ability to theorize and generalize from experience, no public administrator can transcend the boundaries of particular events to comprehend and assess them. Without the illumination born of the marriage of abstract thought and practical experience, it is impossible to see where we are going. Choice is constrained and freedom is ultimately stunted by the unforeseen consequences of our actions. Without the moral compass created by regular deliberation with others about real ethical issues, whether fellow practitioners, elected officials, or citizens, our ethics may be too narrow and self-serving.

This chapter presents a sequence of steps you might employ in thinking about ethical issues you confront. The goal is not only to develop skills in resolving particular situations, but to help you cultivate a habit of using such instances as opportunities to develop and refine a working "theory" of ethical conduct. Case material (based on actual situations but partially fictionalized to protect the persons involved) is introduced here and throughout the rest of

the book to illustrate the treatment of concrete administrative problems. To stimulate your thinking, the cases are generally left unresolved.

Ethical Problems

You were recently hired as the manager of a municipal department of parks and recreation. Soon after you assumed your duties, you discovered that the payroll clerk was falsifying the payroll account by continuing to carry the names of laid-off employees. When the clerk picked up the payroll at city hall, he would pull out those checks, endorse and cash them, and keep the money.

Most administrators would have no difficulty recognizing that this clerk is not only involved in unethical conduct, but he is also clearly violating the law. Both moral and legal sanctions against stealing are well established and generally accepted. You are immediately aware that this behavior is unacceptable and must be stopped, although you would probably pause to think carefully about the best course of action. Your responsibility for the image of the organization may suggest firing the clerk quietly, involving as few other people as possible. However, your responsibility for maintaining the public trust may lead you to consider formal charges and prosecution. Sometimes, as in this case, the ethical situation is quite clear, but the demands of administrative responsibility for resolving it are much less so. More often, however, both the ethical issue and its implications for administrative responsibility are complex and ambiguous.

Consider another situation. You are the director of a unit within a federal regulatory agency that is charged with monitoring the use of potentially harmful commercial chemicals. Linda, a junior project manager under your supervision, is responsible for studying a broad-spectrum insecticide used in agriculture by small grain farmers, large truck gardeners, and cotton farmers, and in the livestock industry as an animal spray. She has been assigned to determine whether this product should be removed from the market. At a party, Linda met a man named George, who she later learned was the Washington representative for the insecticide manufacturer. After several dates with George, she became rather fond of him and wanted to pursue the relationship. However, Linda

realized that their professional roles created a potential conflict of interest for her and she decided to tell you about the situation. She intended to continue seeing George, she said; she considered herself mature enough to maintain a separation between her professional and private lives. Linda insisted that her feelings for George would not influence her judgment in any way; in fact, she and George had never even discussed the chemical in question.

In this case, the ethical situation is much less clear. Has Linda done anything that represents a breach of professional ethics? Because of her relationship with George, it might well be difficult for her to maintain objectivity in discharging her duties. But perhaps it might not be. People differ in their ability to manage tensions of this kind. And what is your responsibility? Is it more important to avoid even the appearance of unethical conduct within your organization, or to support an employee's right to freedom in her private life? Should Linda be trusted until her behavior demonstrates otherwise? What are your alternatives?

To intensify the quandary a bit, imagine the following situation. Your spouse works for a contractor that provides support services to your organization under contract. The two of you work in roles that do not require you to deal with each other professionally, nor is there any possible conflict of interest, either real or perceived, under normal circumstances. However, you learn through the grapevine that the contract with your spouse's organization may be terminated in the near future. Because the spouse's organization is small, the loss of the contract is likely to result in budget cuts and, consequently, her termination. Although you are a manager in your organization, you have no direct or indirect decision-making authority over this contract, so there is no legal conflict of interest. However, you know that the contractor is unaware of the possible contract termination, and if that information were divulged, it could erode performance. For that reason, this information is considered sensitive and confidential within your organization. If you tell your spouse in order to give him time to plan for a possible layoff, he will no doubt feel some obligation to tell his employer and fellow employees.

Also, you are painfully aware of two other problems. First, your own financial well-being is tied to that of your spouse; if he is laid off with short notice, both of you will suffer financially. Second, if

you remain silent and the contract is terminated, sooner or later your spouse will find out that you knew what was coming and kept it from him. That failure to be honest and forthcoming in a marital relationship will likely hurt your spouse deeply and damage the marriage.

In this case, fundamental loyalties and attendant obligations come into direct conflict. Where do your primary obligations lie: with the employer or with the spouse? Can you trust your spouse not to tell his employer and colleagues? Should you expect that of him? Can you trust your boss enough to discuss this with her and try to work out some kind of accommodation that does not require you to sacrifice either your marriage or your job? Should you expect that of your boss? Does a boss bear any ethical obligation for the well-being of employees beyond the workplace?

Consider yet another situation. A soil bacterium common to warm climates can sometimes be found in the groundwater of such areas. It seldom causes disease in humans, but when it does, the infection is severe. The bacterium enters the body through an open wound and produces infections resulting in a mortality rate of 75 percent.

You are a department manager for a public utility district that produces electricity through steam-driven turbines. The department has constructed a lake for this purpose, which is also open to the public for recreational use. Recently a man was injured in a boating accident that severely lacerated his legs. He developed gangrene and, after a double amputation, eventually died. A technician in your department suspected that the man may have contracted the bacterial infection and decided to run tests. He reported that the bacterium is indeed in evidence throughout the lake, and although he cannot be certain without an autopsy, he believes it was the cause of death. Has the department committed an unethical act by not monitoring the quality of the water more carefully? Does it have a moral obligation to inform the public health authorities, the victim's family, or the general public? What is your responsibility to your organization in the face of possible litigation and public outcry? What is your responsibility to those who have used the lake for recreation and those who may use it in the future?

Here you are dealing not simply with the questionable or clearly immoral actions of a particular individual, but rather a

matter of organizational policy. How should the department define its obligations to society? Does it owe something to the deceased man's family and to others who may use the lake? Should it merely try to rid the lake of the bacterium and leave it open to use?

Ethics as an Active Process

As these cases demonstrate, ethical issues arise in many forms for administrators, but they nearly always raise difficult questions of administrative responsibility. The answers we give to these questions over time amount to a *de facto* administrative ethic. The central thesis of this book is that it is through this process of defining professional responsibility in specific, concrete administrative situations that an operational ethic is developed. Every administrator has such an ethic by virtue of having made decisions about ethical issues, even if the decision is to ignore the problem. A decision to take no action is in fact a decision about personal responsibility.

This operational ethic, hammered out in actual decision making, is the basic concern here. Put into the language of ethics, this working ethic becomes the substance of one's professional character over time. It creates an inclination or predisposition to behave in certain ways, which is one common way of understanding the meaning of character. Many professional associations, business firms, and governmental organizations have adopted codes of ethics. They amount to official statements of appropriate conduct that reflect noble but often general and abstract principles. Formal codes of this kind do serve a useful function, but without the support of other techniques involving day-to-day decision making, they tend to be ineffective as a way of achieving desired conduct. They do not have an impact on the operational ethic of professionals for whom they were written; they never get to the level of internal ethical development where character is formed and integrity of conduct developed. Such codes of ethics serve a needed function of clarifying minimum standards of conduct, much as the law functions for the larger society, but they remain externally imposed controls.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the focus of this book is ethics as an active process of design, an ongoing process that

occurs whenever circumstances force us to deal with conflict, tension, uncertainty, and risk. As administrators define the boundaries and content of their responsibility in resolving specific ethical dilemmas both great and small, they create for themselves an ethical identity and form character traits. Often this is done without consistent, intentional, and systematic reflection, but that need not be the case. Skill in addressing ethical issues can be learned and cultivated if we recognize the importance of doing so. We can view the treatment of ethical problems as an ongoing process of designing the best courses of action for specific situations we face within the constraints of time and information. As an initial step, we must have a framework for understanding ethics in dynamic rather than static terms. The following framework for ethical decision making illustrates this dynamic process.

Levels of Ethical Reflection

Henry David Aiken (1962) constructed a framework for explaining the fluid nature of ethical argument that we can adopt for understanding the process of ordering our values and making decisions about ethical dilemmas. Aiken assumes that in a broad sense, ethics has to do with concepts such as good, right, and ought, but in the arena of everyday life, considering the practical meanings of these abstract concepts causes us to deal with them at different levels of seriousness and systematic reflection. Often we simply express emotion about what is "good" or what someone "ought" to do. Less frequently we face ethical questions that force us to reflect long and hard about our fundamental worldview—even the meaning of life itself.

From this perspective it is possible to identify four distinctive levels at which we deal with ethical concerns.

The Expressive Level

Many times every day, we find ourselves simply venting our feelings about something. When you learned about the misdeeds of the payroll clerk in your department, Linda's involvement with George, the possible contract termination, or the presence of the bacterium in the lake water, you may well have responded first at this level: "That stupid clerk should have known better!" "Linda, this relationship

disturbs me deeply." "What did I do to deserve being caught in this bind between my spouse and my organization?" "We must have a bunch of incompetents managing the lake operation!" These spontaneous, unreflective expressions of emotion are perhaps the most common form of value judgment. They neither invite a reply nor attempt to persuade others. They provide neither evidence nor detailed descriptions of a state of affairs. However, depending on who utters them and how intensely, they may be followed by a more rational and systematic treatment of the problem.

The Level of Moral Rules

This is the first level at which serious questions are raised and serious answers are given. We address the problem of appropriate conduct and begin to assess alternatives and consequences. We consider these courses of action and their anticipated outcomes in the light of certain rules, maxims, and proverbs that we hold as moral guides:

- Always be a good team player.
- Loyalty to your clients comes first.
- If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.
- Honesty is the best policy.
- Truth will win out.
- My country, right or wrong.
- Never fight a battle you can't win.
- Take care of number one.
- The public should be trusted.
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- Don't air the dirty linen outside the organization.
- It is easier to ask forgiveness than to ask permission.
- It is better to be safe than sorry.
- Go along to get along.
- If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Some of the more colorful moral rules emerge around particular roles and reflect the informal moral code of those roles and the organizational culture in which they are enacted. Here are a few from the field of law enforcement:

- It is better to be tried by twelve than carried by six.
- You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.
- What goes around comes around.
- Don't embarrass the bureau.
- Don't rat on a fellow officer.

These are examples of moral rules we acquire through the socialization process from our families, religious affiliations, education, and professional experiences. For better or worse, they provide rules of thumb for appraising a situation and deciding what ought to be done.

Consider the problem of Linda and George. After your initial emotional reaction, you have to think about how to handle this highly sensitive state of affairs. Some alternatives immediately come to mind:

- Order Linda to stop seeing George.
- Transfer her to another task.
- Discuss the matter with your supervisor.
- Trust Linda to do the job without being biased by the relationship.

Then you consider the possible consequences:

- Linda may resign.
- Progress on investigating the chemical may be delayed.
- The media may pick up the story.
- A biased decision may be reached about the chemical, with serious consequences for the public.
- You may be blamed for irresponsible conduct if your superior discovers the relationship without being informed.

As you evaluate the alternatives and their possible consequences, various moral rules and maxims come to mind as reference points for arriving at a decision:

- "You should be fair with subordinates under your supervision." Would I handle this situation differently if it involved a male member of my staff?
- "Avoid even the appearance of evil." Even if Linda performs in an objective, professional manner, will the credibility of my

organization be eroded if this situation is picked up by the press?

- "Honesty is the best policy." If I take any action that Linda perceives as punishment or distrust, am I discouraging honest communication from my staff? Should I tell my boss, or should I maintain Linda's confidence and accept responsibility for dealing with the situation myself?

Most of the time, the problem is resolved at this level. As we review the facts of the case, the alternatives for action, and their likely consequences on the one hand, and associate them with our stock of relevant moral rules on the other, the field of alternatives begins to narrow and one or two rules emerge as crucial. We move toward a decision, with the practical consequences and the moral justification related in some way that is acceptable to us.

Our decisions are not necessarily consistent from case to case. At the level of moral rules, which is where most practical administrative decisions are made, rationality and systematic reflection are involved, but only in a limited, piecemeal fashion. Most of the time, we are ad hoc problem solvers, not comprehensive moral philosophers. However, on occasion we are driven to the next level of generality and abstraction, usually because we are unable to reach a decision by applying our available repertoire of practical moral rules.

The Level of Ethical Analysis

When the available moral rules prove ineffective in a particular case, when they conflict with each other, or when the actions they seem to prescribe do not feel right, a fundamental reconsideration of our moral code may be required. In the normal routine of the administrative role, we do not usually undertake this kind of basic reassessment. However, sometimes an issue is unique, so complex, or so profound in the consequences of its resolution that we have no choice but to reexamine the ethical principles that are implicit in our routine norms for conduct.

A brief but adequate definition of *principle* is "a general law or rule that provides a guide for action." An ethical principle is a statement concerning the conduct or state of being that is required for the fulfillment of a value; it explicitly links a value with a general

mode of action. For example, justice may be considered a significant value, but the term itself does not tell us what rule for conduct or state of society would follow if we include justice in our value system. We would need a principle of justice to show us what pattern of action would reflect justice as a value. A common form of the justice principle is, "Treat equals equally and unequals unequally." We might interpret this principle as meaning that if all adult citizens are politically equal, they should all have the same political rights and obligations. If one has the vote, all must have it.

Or if we look at another value, truth, we might start with a general principle to indicate its meaning for conduct and then develop more specific statements for particular conditions. Generally we might support this principle: "Always tell the truth." But when faced with a particular situation, we might revise the principle: "Always tell the truth unless innocent third parties would be seriously harmed."

Defining the ethical dimensions of a problem may require teasing out not only the values that are in conflict but also the unarticulated principles that indicate the mutually exclusive kinds of conduct those values dictate. Otherwise values are far too vague to have much meaning in ethical analysis. To say we believe in freedom or liberty conveys meaning of only the most general sort. If, however, we identify and elaborate principles about liberty, the meaning becomes more specific and ethically useful. We might, for example, indicate that liberty means we ought not to interfere, without special justification, in the chosen course of any rational being or impose on him conditions that will prevent him from pursuing his chosen courses of action. Although this statement does not prescribe precisely what should be done in every situation, it does provide some conditions and qualifications for the range of conduct that falls under "liberty."

There are several ways to train people to clarify this distinction between values and principles and cultivate the skill of thinking in a principled fashion. One way would be to give participants a list of values, or have them make up their own, and then develop these values into statements of principle, varying from brief and general to highly elaborate and more specific. Another would be to spend time developing principles as part of the exercise in defining ethical issues discussed later in this chapter. First, have the participants

identify the contending values in a case; then ask them to write statements of principle for each. Finally, when time and interest permit, readings on specific ethical principles might be assigned, such as Sissela Bok (1984) on secrecy and truthfulness or John Rawls (1971) on justice.

To illustrate the use of principle at the level of ethical analysis, let us refer back to the contaminated lake. If you discover that eight other people have developed symptoms suspiciously similar to those associated with the bacterium, the problem will have changed significantly. Now the fate of human lives may clearly and directly depend on what you do; expeditious action is required. Because the consequences for the department will be serious indeed, you go to your supervisor without delay.

You are met with an unexpectedly cool and cautious response. He listens and asks a few questions, but seems not to share your sense of urgency. After a lengthy discussion, during which you become increasingly angry, he finally informs you that he has known about the bacterium for some time. When the lake was built more than two years ago, the bacterium was detected through routine water analyses. Because there was no practical way of ridding the water of this bacterium and because the utility district had needed public support for the project, he had decided to keep the entire matter quiet. He had been advised that at existing levels of contamination, the risk of human infection was low.

The administrator orders you to take no action and instead to leave the problem entirely in his hands. He tells you that there is little likelihood that any of the eight people could be treated effectively at this point and that any action would jeopardize the future of this facility and precipitate serious damage to both the department's public image and its financial well-being.

What do you do? None of your well-worn precepts about loyalty to the organization or social responsibility help here. You are not satisfied to keep quiet and leave it to the boss, but you have no hope of changing his mind. He seems firmly committed to waiting the situation out, hoping it will blow over. And if you go to the public or the local elected officials with the story, you will lose your job and probably have great difficulty finding another one.

Confronted with this kind of dilemma, you begin to reflect on the things you value most. You ask yourself what you are willing to

risk and what you want to preserve at all costs. More specifically, you think about your personal integrity, professional reputation, financial security, the well-being of your family, the importance of your career, and the extent of your obligation to the organization, its employees, and management. You wonder what you owe the public; you consider your duty to the local elected officials. Furthermore, you begin to imagine the future consequences of allowing this kind of managerial conduct to continue. As you engage in this inventory and evaluation of your fundamental principles, a kind of rough hierarchy begins to emerge.

This particular dilemma causes you to clarify and reorder your priorities. You realize that if you are to continue in your position, you must maintain your obligation to a central principle—the public interest. You took an oath to uphold the public interest when you accepted the position. All other commitments and values must be viewed in relation to that responsibility to a basic principle. The potential negative consequences for the people of the area are great, and their right to know the risk must be upheld. Ultimately the principle of democracy and the integrity of democratic government are also at stake. If managers like your division chief are allowed to continue, self-government will be subverted; people need to know what is going on in public agencies if they are to truly participate in governing. Information about matters of public safety and welfare should not be withheld from the people and their elected representatives. However, when you took your job, you also accepted another principle: loyalty to the organizational hierarchy of your department. The orderly conduct of the public's business requires that subordinates work through superiors if accountability and efficiency are to be maintained. But this loyalty is not an end in itself; it exists for the ultimate benefit of the citizenry, for the public interest.

Another concern is the service provided by the department. Strong public resistance to building a dam had been overcome by promising the lake as a recreational facility. Closing the lake in the wake of disclosures about bacterial contamination might well result in demands to cancel the department's operating license. If the generating plant were closed suddenly, electrical service would be severely curtailed. Without electricity, industrial firms would have to cut back production and lay off workers. Hospital services might

be jeopardized. High-rise office buildings and schools might be unable to function. The public interest would be seriously and extensively damaged.

If the public interest is your fundamental controlling principle, you must weigh the probable public impact for each alternative. Ultimately the health of the citizenry must be protected, but your sense of due process requires that you act in a measured and prudent fashion. You decide on the following sequence of steps.

First, you will approach the general manager of the department, your boss's boss, thus maintaining loyalty to those above you who are responsible for the proper operation of the organization. This provides for the orderly management of the problem without unduly alarming the public.

Then, if the general manager does not act to remedy the situation, you will take your information to the mayor and city council. In this way you prevent the political process from being circumvented when serious public concerns are at stake, although orderly procedure may be sacrificed.

Finally, if the elected officials fail to take action, you will inform the local media. Orderly and efficient resolution of the problem will likely be lost altogether, but the ultimate right of a democratic citizenry to control the governmental bodies established for its benefit will be preserved.

If you are unable to arrive at this kind of ordering of principles and alternatives, it may be necessary to move to the next level.

The Postethical Level

This final point is exemplified by the question, "Why should I be moral?" Most administrators seldom reach this fundamental philosophical level of reflection. Only when pushed by a particularly persistent or cynical adversary, or under the sway of a deeply disillusioning experience, or confronting a profound personal crisis are we likely to function at this level. Here the struggle is to find some basis for valuing those things that were identified at the level of ethical analysis. Why is integrity important? Or truth? Or security? Or loyalty? Or the well-being of others? At this level we begin to question our worldview—our views of human nature, how we know anything to be true, and the meaning of life. Resolution at this level is achieved only when practical indecision has been

removed. It may require developing or confirming a worldview grounded in philosophical or religious perspectives. When we have discovered an adequate motive to allow ourselves to "play the moral game," this level is resolved.

A Dynamic Process

This four-tiered framework should be viewed in highly dynamic terms. Only in books or scholarly papers do people move logically through these decision-making steps. In real life we move up and down through the levels as we grapple with what is good or what we ought to do and within the constraints of time and context. We may first engage a problem expressively as we react spontaneously with our immediate feelings, but then move rather quickly to problem solving at the level of moral rules. As we get new information and the situation becomes more complex, we may move back again to the expressive level. Then, having vented our irritation and frustration, we may move back again to the search for appropriate moral rules.

If the issue proves unsusceptible to any of our practical maxims and rules, we may move briefly back to an expression of feelings and then to the level of ethical analysis. After a process of evaluating our basic priorities, we may finally be able to reach an action decision by applying rules that now appear to be consistent with the newly established priorities. Or we may find ourselves in such a profound quandary that we move to the postethical level and ponder why we are so concerned with morality anyway.

This movement among the various levels is usually not a matter of conscious choice, although it may be. The transitions occur because we need to solve a problem, not necessarily because we consciously think about which level is appropriate. In a concrete situation as we attempt to integrate known facts with unknown but possible consequences of action, feelings, and values, we find ourselves moving through these stages with varying degrees of rational reflection and abstraction. In day-to-day administrative decision making, we manage this process without giving it much reflective thought. However, a basic assumption of this book is that the more we consciously address and systematically process the ethical dimensions of decision making when we confront significant issues,

the more responsible we become in our work as administrators. It is then that we are able to account for our conduct to superiors, the press, the courts, and the public. This does not amount to finally advocating a simple linear rationality, but rather being self-aware and clear about the bases for our actions.

Uses of the Framework

To design effective responses to ethical problems, it is important to be aware not only of where we are in this framework at any given moment, but also where our colleagues are operating as we discuss issues with them. Often, confusion is generated within a staff because some are venting emotion while others are articulating various moral rules, and still others are reflecting on basic principles. Sometimes everyone is presenting moral rules, but the rules are in conflict and someone needs to move to the level of ethical analysis. Fundamental values, principles, goals, and objectives need to be clarified and ordered, for both the individuals and the organization, before an acceptable rule for action can be identified.

This framework helps us focus our attention on the stages in ethical decision making. It suggests that if we want to become more systematic in handling ethical issues, we need to examine more carefully what takes place at the level where rational reflection is most critical: the level of ethical analysis. This is where skill in decision making can be cultivated. Here we attempt to think about what we should do; there is intentionality and some degree of systematic treatment of the problem. At the expressive level, only emotion is involved; it is not that emotion is bad, but it is only one element of ethical decision making. At the level of moral rules, we are largely reflecting our socialization, which can amount to a set of blinders that are too limiting on our critical thinking. At the postethical level, the considerations are too abstract, too personal, and, in modern pluralistic societies, too varied to be susceptible to any generalized approach. People holding radically different philosophies and theologies are not likely to reach agreement at this level, although they may do so at the second and third levels. Also, public accountability in this kind of heterogeneous society requires reasoned application of ethical principles rather than

metaphysical assertions. As public servants, we are expected to explain and justify our conduct, or be prepared to do so when requested.

It is at the level of ethical analysis, then, that we are most likely to be able to account for our conduct publicly in terms that political officials and the citizenry can evaluate. If we proceed with reasoned justification, linking the consequences of our decisions with a tradition of ethical principles, then our conduct is reviewable by members of the political community and our deliberations and deeds are accessible for public debate and logical assessment. The higher we move up the ladder of public organizational leadership, the more important it becomes for us to be able to be accountable for our actions in this way. Therefore, the remainder of this book is devoted to applying systematic reflection at the level of ethical analysis as we design solutions.

This orientation of the book does not assume that ethical decisions are, can, or should be purely rational and principled. *The Responsible Administrator* does not advocate an exclusively rationalist perspective; human feelings are an essential part of our ethical life and inseparable from character. However, the approach adopted here is premised on the fact that in our public service roles, logical, principled, and relatively comprehensive justifications for our actions are expected by the public and elected officials.

A Decision-Making Model

In addressing ethical issues, we want to move from a problem to designing a course of action that will resolve it. This movement involves both description and prescription. That is, we describe to ourselves, and sometimes to others, what we believe to be an objective state of affairs and then attempt to prescribe what specific steps should be taken to change the situation. Between these two steps, we do the kind of reflection involved at the levels of moral rules and ethical analysis. It is far more important that we comprehend these steps for ourselves and develop the required skills than it is to simply read someone else's prescriptions.

Books, articles, and training approaches that attempt to prescribe for administrators may be inspiring or thought provoking,

but they are usually so general as to provide little guidance for specific decisions. Although they offer value orientations that readers may find appealing, the link between a value system and a concrete situation is missing. We often refer to this dilemma as the *problem of application*. We may want to apply a set of values that seem compatible with our view of the administrative role, but how to move from general to specific prescription is not clear.

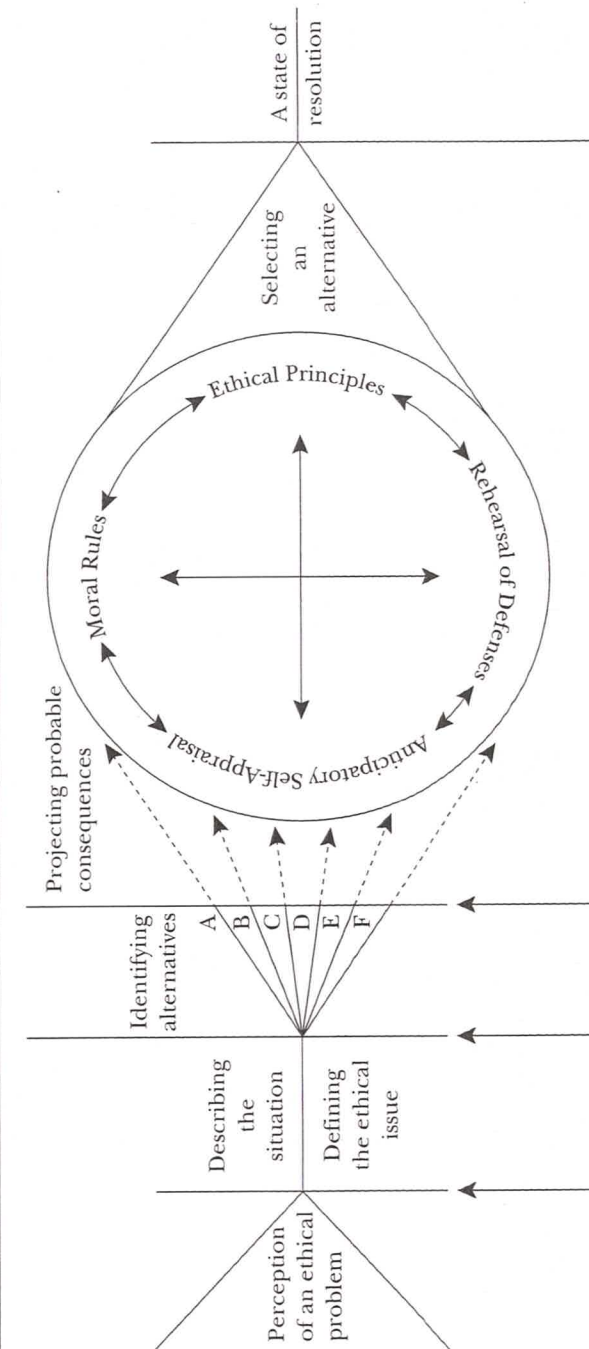
This reflective link between description and prescription has several important steps, and they are represented in the model shown in Figure 2.1. This model represents a framework for arriving at a judgment and then deciding what to do. No model, this one included, can lead you to the one best possible "correct" solution, but it can provide a template for creatively designing the best solutions for a given individual in a specific situation within the uncertainties and time limits of real administrative life. As in any other kind of design process, the course of action should take a contingency approach, providing for the pursuit of several alternatives simultaneously or sequentially until the consequences become clearer. Ethical problems, like transportation problems, architectural problems, or surgical problems, are dynamic in nature, so one must be prepared to alter course as one learns from action and the situation changes over time.

The Descriptive Task

When a problem comes to our attention, it is usually presented in a fragmentary or distorted fashion, often with judgmental language and inflections. Perhaps, in the case of the payroll clerk discussed at the beginning of this chapter, you learn about his conduct from a secretary in the office whom he has treated rudely. Having discovered several suspicious names on the payroll list, she eagerly retaliates by concluding that he is involved in illegal activities. The secretary's report to you includes considerable embellishment of what she actually knows to be true, along with a derogatory appraisal of the payroll clerk's character.

Any experienced administrator would know that such a report does not represent an adequate description of the clerk's activities. The names may appear suspicious to the secretary because she does not know them, but there may be a reasonable explanation.

Figure 2.1. Ethical Decision-Making Model



Maybe he has indeed been sexist in his dealings with her but scrupulously honest in his handling of the payroll. Sexism is a problem to be dealt with, but it must not be confused with the payroll issue. It is clear that you must gather more factual information and sift out unfounded judgments before you have a full and objective description. Without this, you dare not proceed to any kind of prescription.

In this example, it is obvious that the descriptive task is critical, but there are many situations where it is equally important but much less obviously so. If the report comes not from a secretary but from someone above us in the organizational hierarchy, we are much more likely to accept it as an accurate description of events. Howard Becker (1973) refers to this tendency as the "hierarchy of credibility." He suggests that "from the point of view of a well socialized participant in the system, any tale told by those at the top intrinsically deserves to be regarded as the most credible account obtainable of the organization's workings" (p. 7).

Admittedly, under the pressure of life in most organizations, we seldom have the time or resources to conduct a full investigation. However, we must always attempt to ascertain and describe as objectively as possible the facts of a situation. This might include identifying the key actors, the viewpoints of each, the issues, the sequence of events, and the risks.

Although it is impossible to avoid value-laden language altogether, it is possible to resist using words and phrases that blatantly create a cast of good guys and bad guys. This is a useful skill to cultivate in dealing with ethical problems because it helps to push us beyond the expressive level. Whether we are struggling with a decision alone or discussing it with someone else (a staff person, a supervisor), we must force ourselves to describe the situation with more than the influence of our gut reactions. If we are to deal with real people involved in real events, we must first face, to the best of our ability, what has actually happened.

Defining the Ethical Issue

With the necessary details before us, the next step is to define the ethical issue. An ethical issue exists when competing or conflicting ethical principles or values are embedded in a practical

problem. Experience with workshops on ethics indicates that public administrators seem to have the greatest difficulty with this second step. It is not that they are unable to recognize an ethically problematic situation; their sensitivity to such matters is encouragingly keen. They know when they are confronted with expectations, demands, opportunities, and conflicting interests that have ethical significance. But many have difficulty in articulating which values and principles are at stake. The tendency is to define the problem in practical rather than ethical terms.

Consider an administrator who is asked by a superior to provide confidential information about a colleague being considered for promotion—someone who is a close personal friend and is not qualified for the job. Workshop participants usually define the problem as keeping the boss happy but not hurting or offending the friend. This is a definition of the practical dilemma, but behind these practical considerations are some conflicting values and principles that need to be identified. There is an ethical dilemma to be defined by reference to certain specific conflicting or competing ethical principles.

"Conflicting loyalties" would be the most general statement of the ethical issue involved here. However, we could go further and consider obligations. On the one hand are the obligations to a friend: to preserve confidentiality, honesty, and trustworthiness. On the other hand are the obligations to a superior: to provide honest and objective information about coworkers being considered for greater responsibility. These obligations contribute to the best interests of the organization. Also, we have an obligation to the citizenry to uphold the public interest. Thus, the problem could be defined as conflicting loyalties or conflicting obligations, depending on the details of the case and our own ethical priorities.

Unless we can focus the analysis on underlying ethical issues of this kind, we may resolve the matter on purely practical grounds. We may make a decision without ever really engaging the important values and principles that are pulling us in different directions. Ethical analysis skills, ethical autonomy, and ultimately our ethical identity are developed through engagement of this kind. It is the process through which character is formed. Without this kind of complex character-forming engagement, the practical demands and exigencies of a situation are likely to whip us around in a manner

destructive of ethical judgment and antithetical to personal integrity.

Because this step of defining ethical issues is so difficult, those who conduct training sessions or classroom instruction must spend considerable time working on it in a variety of ways before moving on to the full range of steps leading to final resolution. Some lecturing to illustrate the distinction between the practical and ethical dimensions of a problem is probably necessary at the outset.

The next step should involve the participants, under the instructor's leadership, working through the definitional problem in a case or two. Then it seems helpful to divide the participants into groups of three or four, each group with a different case situation, and ask them to define the ethical issue on their own. During the report-back session, all the participants are then exposed to several different definitional problems.

Identifying Alternative Courses of Action

With an adequate definition of the ethical issue before us, we are ready to move on to identifying alternative courses of action. After describing the situation as objectively as possible and defining the ethical issue, the most difficult requirement is resisting the inclination to view the alternatives in dichotomous terms: you do either this or that. Either you tell Linda to stop seeing George, or you trust her to handle the relationship in a professional manner. Either you tell your spouse about the possible contract termination or remain silent. This either-or view is the most common trap in the ethical process. Rarely does an ethical issue have only two or even three possible solutions, but there appears to be a force within us, as pervasive as gravity, that impedes the spinning out of alternatives.

Use whatever methods or techniques are necessary to move beyond either-or thinking, because until at least the most significant alternatives are acknowledged, we risk overlooking the best solution. A simple grid form can help decision-making groups broaden their perspective. Down the left side, group members list all the alternatives they can think of; on the right side, they write the probable consequences, both positive and negative. First they brainstorm alternatives for ten to fifteen minutes, without evaluating any of them; if an alternative is conceivable, they are required

to list it. This may sound like a simple procedure, but experience with a large number of groups indicates that some people have an almost irresistible tendency to reject an alternative as soon as it is uttered.

Projecting the Probable Consequences

Once the range of alternative solutions has been widened, the positive and negative anticipated consequences of each possible course of action need to be projected. If you tell Linda to stop seeing George, what is the likely outcome? What if you transfer her to another position? Ask another member of the staff to work along with her? Tighten your supervision of her work? What chain of events will likely unfold, and toward what end? If you tell your spouse about the potential contract termination, what is he likely to do?

Projecting the consequences of alternatives is a key dynamic in our natural, informal decision making. As we consider what we should do, we usually run out a movie in our minds. For each alternative, we construct a scenario with actors, interaction, and consequences. Here we are attempting to raise this informal process to a more formal, conscious, and systematic level. We begin by intentionally pushing out the boundaries of our range of considered alternatives, and then attempting to be more imaginative in our creation of these projections into the future.

John Dewey described this process as one of "deliberation" in which we experiment with "a dramatic rehearsal," in our imagination, of "various competing possible lines of action" (1922, p. 190; see also Schutz, 1970). A reasonable choice of a course of conduct requires us to consider the full range of alternatives rather than only the one or two that dominate our feelings and imagination.

The skill involved here is moral imagination—the ability to produce a "movie in our minds" with realistic characters, a believable script, and clear imagery. The movies we create tend to be more like slide shows or jerky, black-and-white, silent melodramas rather than epic productions in color with stereophonic sound and complex plots. The more imaginative we can be in projecting the probable consequences of each alternative, the more our ethical decision making is enhanced. This kind of vivid projection of alternatives

tests their coherence and plausibility, as well as evoking feelings we can expect to accompany each one. It is a key connection between the rational and the affective dimensions of ethical decision making.

Writing scenarios for each alternative may help you develop moral imagination. Although no administrator has the time to do this with every issue, it may be a worthwhile exercise for particularly complex problems. Groups can use the grid form described earlier. After listing possible alternatives down the left side and the probable consequences for each along the right side, the group talks through a scenario for each one, attempting to refine the projected consequences.

It should be emphasized at this point that considering the consequences of each alternative does not mean that this is the only or determining factor in arriving at a decision. Ethicists refer to deontological (duty-oriented) and teleological (consequence-oriented) approaches to ethical decisions. The former is focused on duty to certain ethical principles such as honesty or justice in a quest for which duty is primary. The latter weighs the consequences of a course of action, as in utilitarianism with its calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number, looking for the best outcomes. The model under discussion here includes both perspectives, as it is never possible to completely separate them in practice. Duty to respect human dignity is inseparable from the harmful consequences of not doing so.

Finding a Fit

The remainder of the process is no longer linear in nature. Achieving resolution involves a search for a fit among the four elements in the circle in Figure 2.1, and that search is not simply a matter of reasoning from one thing to the next. This basis for such a fit is more like the logic of aesthetics; it requires proportion and balance among the four elements.

The first consideration is the moral rules that can be adduced to support each alternative and the projected consequences. Identifying these will tend to happen quite naturally in a group setting as individuals are allowed to opt for a particular decision alternative and defend it. However, anyone engaged in this process alone

or leading a group session must be sure that all alternatives are addressed and none dismissed too easily or quickly.

The next consideration is a rehearsal of defenses. This is sometimes called the "Sixty Minutes test" or the "New York Times test." Here we systematically consider each alternative by asking ourselves, "How would I defend this particular option if required to do so before a broad audience?" This is the test of how well a particular alternative will fit with the accepted norms of the wider professional and political communities of which we are a part. Once again, moral imagination is a critical skill as we try to picture ourselves, as vividly as possible, explaining to a superior, or subordinates, or professional peers, or the press, or a court of law why each possible course of action was chosen. In group situations, this exercise is most useful as the field narrows toward one or two alternatives.

Harlan Cleveland (1972, p. 104) advocates an approach of this kind by suggesting that an administrator ask himself or herself the following key question before getting committed to any particular course of conduct: "If this action is held up to public scrutiny, will I still feel that it is what I should have done and how I should have done it?" Cleveland insists that if those involved in well-known cases of corruption had seriously asked themselves this question and answered it honestly, most of these instances of betrayal of public trust would never have happened. One of the reasons behind the power of asking oneself these questions is that they not only help us to think, but also to feel our way through an ethical problem.

In this process of rehearsing defenses, which ethicists sometimes call "the test of publicity," we may find it necessary to move from the discovery and application of moral rules to the third consideration: an attempt to discern the implicit ethical principles at stake. This occurs when the available moral rules are not sufficiently satisfying to permit resolution. One alternative may tend to maximize the security of the individual or organization, whereas others may promote social justice or enhance democracy. As we consider the hierarchy of basic principles, we again rehearse the justification for each option: How could I justify giving higher priority to social justice than organizational security in this instance? As we engage in this process of arraying alternatives, drawing out the probable consequences in the most realistic terms, and rehearsing the application of rules and principles, both a rational and an

emotional search for resolution is under way. But what constitutes resolution?

Resolution is reached when we discover an alternative that provides an acceptable balance of our duty to principle and the likely consequences and satisfies our need to have sound reasons for our conduct and our need to feel satisfied with the decision. Because neither a perfect balance of duty and consequences nor a supremely rational alternative that provides complete emotional satisfaction is often available, resolution is ordinarily an approximate state. What we can expect to achieve is the best balance of duty and consequences and the best combination of reasons and affective comfort under the circumstances. It should be emphasized, however, that the assumption here is that both the combination of reasons and feelings and the balance of duty and consequences involved in this resolution should include the obligations of the public service role. This decision-making process must be informed by education, training, and guided socialization into a public service ethic if the public interest is to be approximated. Ethical decisions must be buttressed by public service character—the inclination to do the right thing as we engage in deciding what that should be. Here we are describing and systematizing the process that needs to be informed by such an ethic rooted in character.

Sorting through and selecting adequate reasons occur through the process just described. Arriving at a feeling of satisfaction with a decision happens during the same process but involves a set of dynamics not yet described. It is time to consider the fourth element in the circle: anticipatory self-appraisal. This is the test of how well a course of action fits with our own self-image. As we imagine ourselves undertaking various courses of action, we may experience self-disapproval in connection with certain alternatives. According to Janis and Mann (1977), these anticipations can arouse guilt, remorse, and self-reproach. When we see ourselves, in our mind's eye, carrying out a decision that is inconsistent with our core values, we do not like the self we envision. When we project ourselves into the future and look back on the act as though it had been completed, we are dissatisfied with ourselves. We anticipate not feeling good the morning after. We experience, in advance, a kind of ethical hangover.

In the same way, other decision alternatives create self-approval. The movie in our minds portrays us acting in a way that makes us feel proud and draws praise, or at least approval, from people whose opinions we value. We are drawn toward these options by the reinforcing power of anticipatory feelings of satisfaction. Acting in ways that evoke this anticipatory approval is the way we develop predispositions to act similarly in the future, which is one way of understanding the essence of character.

These anticipatory feelings are usually not appraised systematically, but they create inclinations either to reject alternatives that seem incongruent with our values or the norms of significant reference groups or to choose congruent ones. To the extent that we are able to relate this emotional process to the rational process, we gain ethical autonomy. To the extent that we cultivate a pattern of consistently acting in ways that combine sound reasons with affective confidence, we develop integrity. We can intentionally and systematically assess decision alternatives in terms of the soundness of our reasons for selecting each one and how we can expect to feel about choosing it. We may also be able to identify the sources of those positive or negative feelings. Are we anticipating approval or disapproval from our colleagues in the local chapter of the American Society for Public Administration? From the boss? Or are long-held personal values involved? How important is the source of those feelings? Are there other persons or groups whose evaluation of the decision is equally, or more, important?

Benefits of Using the Model

In brief, these are the steps in a fully systematic and self-conscious ethical decision-making process. Obviously no practicing administrator could be expected to apply this model to every ethical issue. However, the assumption here is that if this model is used with the more significant problems, administrators will cultivate over time something like an intuitive decision-making skill that will serve them well when there is no time for such explicit and formal exercises. Daniel Isenberg's research on senior managers indicates that the most effective ones systematically develop such intuitive decision models that make possible "the smooth automatic performance of learned behavior sequences" (1984, p. 85). Isenberg

maintains that this "is not arbitrary or irrational, but is based on years of painstaking practice and hands-on experience that builds skills" (p. 85). When these skills are used under the pressure of limited time for reflection, "we compress years of experience and learning into split seconds. This compression is one of the bases of what we call intuition, as well as the art of management" (p. 83).

By using the model, we achieve a greater degree of ethical autonomy because we become more aware of both our own values and the external obligations under which we act. Even when we develop intuitive skill, it is possible to raise the grounds for our conduct to conscious consideration when necessary. Janis and Mann (1977) observe that authorities sometimes attempt to elicit obedience by creating the illusion that subordinates have no choice but to follow orders. The power of this manipulation of the perceived range of real choices is vividly portrayed in the experiments on obedience to authority conducted by Stanley Milgram (1974), which are discussed at greater length in Chapter Eight. These studies demonstrated that more than half of a random sample of American citizens were willing to comply with orders that appeared to result in serious harm to another person. One of the critical factors in their decision to follow distasteful instructions was the scientist's repeated statement: "You have no other choice. The experiment requires that you continue." Defining the situation in such constrained terms leaves a decision maker feeling helpless before a single unacceptable option; consciousness of alternative choices is foreclosed. Ethical autonomy is reduced to zero, character is eroded, and integrity undermined.

Although it is easier to conceive of this kind of ethical tunnel vision in cases where we are being manipulated by an authority, it occurs more pervasively. We develop blinders that allow us to see only one alternative, or at most a very few. Until we take the initiative to systematically and aggressively widen the range of conceivable options and assess how they fit both rationally and emotionally with our value system, we are at the mercy of the most obvious courses of action. Developing moral imagination requires discipline and practice as demanding as any other intellectual and creative activity, but its rewards are greater measures of self-awareness, self-control, and decision-making flexibility. These are essential for the strengthening of character that inclines us to act on our

convictions and the building of integrity that keeps us from weaving through life like a drunkard, first stumbling in one direction and later in quite another.

Summary

I began this chapter by examining some typical public administrative cases in which an ethical dilemma could be discerned. I then defined ethics as an active process involving the ordering of our values with respect to a particular decision. Next I considered the four levels of reflection at which this process occurs. The chapter concluded with a review of a decision-making model that may be used to systematically and self-consciously move from the description of an ethical problem to prescribed courses of action. This is the first stage of the design approach to administrative ethics—the level of individual decision-making and conduct.

In the next chapter, I step back from particular ethical decisions to look at the social and political setting in which public administrators make ethical decisions. This setting imposes certain conditions that significantly shape the nature of the problems that public administrators encounter. To design effective responses to ethical problems, one must always do so with reference to the context.