Curriculum and Case Notes

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ETHICS AND RESIGNATION: A CLASSROOM EXERCISE

Philip Ryan

In the spring of 1999, *The Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* carried J. Patrick Dobel's insightful analysis of "The Ethics of Resigning." For a number of years, I have done a simple exercise on the topic with students in my policy analysis classes. The exercise is run after our reading of J.C. Thomson's "How Could Vietnam Happen?" (1968). Thomson asks why so many officials who believed that the United States policy in Vietnam was wrong did not protest more forcefully. At one point, he comments (1968, p. 49): "The inclination to remain silent or to acquiesce in the presence of the great men—to live to fight another day, to give on this issue so that you can be 'effective' on later issues—is overwhelming." One consequence of what Thomson calls the "effectiveness trap" is that very few people resigned in order to protest the war.

The exercise, then, attempts to identify the conditions under which students are willing to reject this effectiveness trap. Students are first asked: "Take a few minutes to think of a scenario that would lead you to resign from a government position. Specify the government position, and the issue that would provoke your resignation."

After the students have presented their scenarios to the class, we move to the second part of the exercise. I choose two students who have clear scenarios (and who have, through the term, demonstrated some ability to think on their feet) and ask the rest of the group to imagine that they are colleagues, friends, or family of the two, and wish to talk them out of resigning.

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RESULTS

Some of the most interesting results of the exercise arise from the fact that I have run it with two quite different sets of students: a class of undergraduate Canadians, and an M.A.-level class of international students, most of whom already hold government positions. The young Canadians, who generally do not yet have family responsibilities and do not tend to see public service as a particularly privileged sector of work, are much more willing to spin out resignation scenarios than their older international counterparts. Some of the latter quite frankly admit that, should they succeed in snagging a good job, they cannot imagine letting go of it.

The personal costs of resignation are also brought home in the second part of the exercise. Those playing the role of family members berate the principled public servants for their "selfish" attachment to scruples that can only hurt their spouses and children. In some cases, friends and colleagues suggest that resignation on a matter of principle could lead to imprisonment, or worse.[1]

But apart from personal considerations, the arguments presented to the would-be dissenters reveal that the depth of the effectiveness trap varies from one society to another. Time and again, the dissenters are told to forget about making their objections public, as their society simply has no mechanism by which this can be done. As one student put it, "Once you quit, there's not a newspaper in the country that will mention your name again."

PEDAGOGICAL MERITS

What does this exercise offer in a classroom setting? One benefit is clear from the results just discussed: the exercise vividly reveals a particular society's structure of power and privilege. In reflecting upon what it would mean to resign a government position, the students can identify the location of the public servant within a society's hierarchy of status and influence, an identification to which the professor can return throughout the course.[2] Reflection upon the possibility of influencing public opinion after resigning also brings home the degree to which the internal workings of each state depend upon the broader social milieu.[3]

The exercise also has an ethical objective, of course: to encourage students to use their imagination to help reflect upon their ethical beliefs and limits.[4] The exercise is certainly not meant to lead students to subordinate all personal and family considerations to questions of political principle. Rather, it speaks to a concern Hannah Arendt (1978, p. 1:180) eloquently articulated: "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good." The experience of being "swept away" by events in public life has been a concern of thinkers at least since Thucydides. One can hope that public officials in situations of crisis will be more likely to make ethical decisions they can live with if they have tried to imagine such crises beforehand.

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[1] Dobel notes that a situation in which resignation endangers oneself or those for whom one is responsible "changes the moral obligations of people" (1999, p. 247). Classroom discussions with my international students suggest that such situations, unfortunately, remain the rule rather than the exception in many regions of the world.

[2] The degree to which a government position offers status advantages has implications, to take one example, for the epistemology of policy, for the means by which government actors understand (or fail to understand) the society for which their policies are formulated.

[3] Jürgen Habermas (1996, pp. 275, 485) stresses that the quality of communication within the state is dependent upon the quality of the channels of communication within society as a whole, and upon the state's "permeability" to social communication.

[4] On the importance of imagination for ethical reflection, see Arendt (1978, p. 2:257) and Putnam (1981, p. 169).

Though the exercise has an ethical objective, there is admittedly little way of knowing whether this objective is realized. Nevertheless, the exercise may recommend itself to professors who think public policy and administration programs should not focus on the development of technical reason to the exclusion of other human capacities.

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INCREMENTALISM: A CLASSROOM EXERCISE

Philip Ryan

"Reform implies form," declared G.K. Chesterton (1990, p. 105). This certainly seems like common sense: if we want to change something it must be because we have "a particular image" of how that thing should be, an image "that we see already in our minds." To be more specific, if we want to reform a policy or an institution, it must be because we have a sense of how that policy or institution can better fulfill its fundamental purpose.

Common sense tells us this. Common sense also tells us that the Sun circles the Earth. Copernicus overthrew the latter piece of common sense, and incrementalism challenges the former: "It is not irrational for an administrator to defend a policy as good without being able to specify what it is good for" (Lindblom, 1966, p. 269). The corollary is that it is possible to agree on changes to a policy or institution without any agreement, or even discussion, regarding the ultimate purpose. Possible, Chesterton might answer, but surely not rational! But, is he right?

The following exercise helps students reflect on this issue. I begin by telling them: "Imagine that the President of the university has asked you to make

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