



Whenever Two or More Are Gathered: Relationship as the Heart of Ethical Discourse (Public Admin: Criticism and Creativity)

Michael M. Harmon, O. C. McSwite

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This study of the critical role of ethics and moral responsibility in the field of public administration, Michael M. Harmon and O. C. McSwite posit that administrative ethics, as presently conceived and practiced, is largely a failure, incapable of delivering on its original promise of effectively regulating official conduct in order to promote the public interest. They argue that administrative ethics is compromised at its very foundations by two core assumptions: that human beings act rationally and that language is capable of conveying clear, stable, and unambiguous principles of ethical conduct.

The result is the illusion that values, principles, and rules of ethical conduct can be specified in workably clear ways, in particular, through their formalization in official codes of ethics; that people are capable of comprehending and responding to them as they are intended; and that the rewards and punishments attached to them will be effective in structuring daily behavior.

In a series of essays that draw on both fiction and film, as well as the disciplines of pragmatism, organizational theory, psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, and economics, Harmon and McSwite make their case for human relationship as the proper foundation of administrative ethics. “Exercising responsible ethical practice requires attaining a special kind of relationship with other people. Relationship is how the pure freedom that resides in the human psyche—for ethical choice, creativity, or original action of any type—can be brought into the structured world of human social relations without damaging or destroying it.” Furthermore, they make the case for dropping the term “ethics” in favor of the term “responsibility,” as “responsibility accentuates the social [relational] nature of moral action.”

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