

Article: “The Spirit of Public Administration”
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The Spirit of Public Administration

A lifetime award can be a mixed blessing. As my daughter Ashley has observed, a lifetime award means you must *really* be getting old. I think she has decided it means entering the mode that my computer calls, “stand-by, energy saver.” Then again, last week at dinner my wife Beverley said, “I don’t mean this to sound morbid, but I don’t know a lot of what you’ve done to get this award. Don’t you think it would be a good idea to write out your obituary?” As always, I am grateful for Beverley’s advice, but I told her the first thing I had to do was write this talk for tonight. And the first thing I must do tonight is to thank all of you for coming to hear it. I know there are many other things you could have chosen to do after a hard day of conferencing. You are here voluntarily. That is a strange thing for me, since I am used to lecturing to people who are there only because the material is going to be on an exam. So I thank you and hope there will not be too many who are thinking after the lecture

(as my departed co-author Aaron Wildavsky might have put it), “better he should have written the obituary.”

For some listeners this will seem a hopelessly old-

fashioned topic; I prefer to think of it as a subject with a historical pedigree. Not least, “the spirit of public administration” is the title of a very good book by one of my predecessors in this award, Professor George Frederickson (1997).

Others will regard it as utterly meaningless in a social science setting to speak of the “spirit” of anything—that doing so is a misguided attempt to revive what Arthur Bentley—in the early years of modern political science—dismissed as 19th century spook-talk. My response is that if you think the spirit of public administration is a fantasy, there is something important that you do not understand. In missing this, you have missed why, ultimately, public administration is worth reading and writing about, worth going to conferences and teaching about.

The Spirit of a Thing

There are many examples of talking seriously and usefully about the “spirit” of something. We may talk that way about a time period, an ethos in the air at a historical period, the zeitgeist. For example, “the Spirit

of ‘76”—which is now not even a hackneyed 4th of July phrase—seems to have been something quite real to the people of the Founding period, hence the disappointment and anxieties of 1780s when it could not be sustained. Or take a more recent example that some people in this room lived through—the spirit of the Sixties. You find it difficult to describe that spirit to one of your students, but you were there and you know it was there. It was real.

Or one might talk seriously and usefully about the spirit of an intellectual outlook. For example, Etienne Gilson’s book on *The Spirit of Thomism* (1964, 1). Gilson makes the point that spirit of Thomism enlivens but it is not the same thing as the doctrines of Thomism. Or again, one can give meaningful consideration to the spirit of a social structure or institutional presence. In his *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu seeks to uncover, not the intention of the legislator, but the reason for the existence and efficacy of law itself.¹ So likewise, this evening we are trying to consider, not the varied doctrines or institutions of public administration, but their animating presupposition.

In the end, I suppose each one of us, in our heart of hearts, knows that it does make sense to talk of there really being a “spirit” of something or someone. A beloved friend or family member is not just a checklist of personal traits. There’s more there than what you might write out as a personality profile. There is the living quality of their personhood. And when that person finally leaves you, what you grieve having lost is not a characteristic or collection of characteristics. What you miss is the animating truth of who that person was, the essential spirit of Being that no longer lives in that dead body. As Martin Buber would have said, you are missing the Thou that completed your I.

What then do we mean in speaking of the spirit of something? In discussing the spirit of Thomism, Gilson describes the spirit of a doctrine as “the inspiring and animating principle that pervades and tempers” the doctrine. The principle may be intellectual, it may be emotional or it may be both. What is inspiring and animating about the principle is its contact with the essential truth of something’s existence—its deepest, real meaning. Spirit expresses a claim about ultimate things, about the underlying rightness of what a thing is.

Have you ever noticed how we do not feel compelled to explain a right act, something we do that just seems appropriate to the situation? There is a rightness to it, a natural correctness we can appreciate and that doesn’t

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seem to require any justification. But a bad deed, or even evidence of just some indifference to what is appropriate—this can hardly ever occur without prompting elaborate efforts at self-justification.

There are some cat lovers in tonight's audience so let me offer this example. Imagine walking into your living room after a hard day's work. Kitty comes rubbing against your leg and purring with delight. You stroke the cat and fetch her a saucer of milk. Imagine a second scene where Kitty comes rubbing against your leg and purring with delight and this time you kick the cat and throw your shoe at her. If you suddenly noticed a stranger had been watching you, I expect that no one in the first scene would be at pains to explain why you had done what you did. Contrariwise, in the second scene there would be no end of explanations to the stranger about what a hard day you had had at the office, how the cat needs obedience training, or how Kitty really does enjoy playing with shoes. My point is this. We wiggle around snatching at justifications because we sense a violation of right order, in this case, what might be called the spirit of the thing called pet ownership.

Or we might switch from the domestic scene to one's work life. A vocation has been historically, and rightly, termed a "calling." When a vocation is truly heard and accepted, we might say that it is the spirit of the thing that is doing the calling and stirring an answering spirit, deep calling to deep. The work of vocation is not just a job at which one *makes* a living. It literally *is* living, to the one engaged in the call and response. This is why we recognize that a person is never so empty as when he is full of himself. And that he is never so full as when he is emptied of self and filled with the spirit of something. That filling is not an economic calculation about livelihood, but an elemental outlook on life.

This is one of the enduring themes in the world's wisdom literature. In the West's Christian tradition, (the only one known to American public administration), such teaching is recorded in the gospel of John. There Jesus says, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing." (John 6: 63) As I understand it, this is not a call to mysticism or withdrawal from the "real world." It is a statement about reality, about what *is* the real world. On the level we are dealing with here, it is saying that spirit bestows an animating quality while material concerns can do nothing more than rearrange what is already there. In physical things, it teaches the law of conservation of energy. In spiritual things, it teaches the law of expansion of energy.

By now it is probably clear that in speaking about the spirit of public administration, I am not talking about the discipline of public administration. I am trying to talk about public administration—the thing itself.

In a sense, the spirit cannot be known by disciplinary study. We study something through analysis, dissecting it into parts. And to dissect something we must first murder it. That is why Goethe wrote that little line about the new modern man: "in the palm of his hand he holds all of the sections; lacks nothing except the spirit's connections." Like other disciplines in the human sciences, the study of public

administration develops a kind of negative capacity as regards the essence of its subject. At the beginning of the 1970s Dwight Waldo, another of my predecessors in this award, gathered public administration scholars to write a series of essays aiming to rebuild the discipline in a turbulent time. As he reported in the preface, "...there was no common animating spirit, no ideological or programmatic unity.

Rather there was great diversity in spirit, approach, and outlook." (1971, vii)² (We hear the spirit of an honest and beautiful man speaking.)

The spirit of public administration is not distinguished from the discipline of public administration as from a contrary, but as something underlying the discipline. The spirit lifts it up from beneath, so to speak. And that is not something grasped and appreciated with a purely analytic eye or dissecting hand.

We face not only a disciplinary limitation in talking about the spirit of public administration. In the larger culture itself there has now developed an incapacity to talk about such things without a cynical sneer. Polls show public distrust reverting to pre- 9–11 levels and how can we be surprised? Given the performance of some business and political leaders, accountants, priests, and others, distrust seems the only sane response. However, long after the particular CEOs, priests, politicians and accounting firms are forgotten, what will not be forgotten is a continuing story that seems to begin with the peculiar civics of the 1960s and denigrates any claim to higher things in the public square.³ My aim here is not to discuss these larger cultural issues. I simply point to a fact: that in speaking of the spirit of public administration, one is working against the grain of the larger culture.

Objections

So, let me return to talking about public administration itself. There are two looming objections to what I am trying to say about the spirit of public administration.

The first objection is that we should see that public administration is simply what people in public administration do, a study of behavior and no more. In other words, in talking about the spirit of public administration we risk crossing the dreaded line between facts—which can be studied and known scientifically—and values, which cannot. Public administration is, as public administration does.

There are two answers to this objection. First, the fact/value distinction is a methodological requirement that has great value so long as too much is not claimed for it. One of the first things social scientists should want their students to understand is the need to segregate their own values from observations about the world as it is. If we want to see what is really going on, personal preferences need to be separated from observation.

Second, however, we blind ourselves if this methodological requirement expands into a philosophical dogma claiming facts and values are two alien worlds. We teach the fact/value distinction for the benefit of unsophisticated students. Nevertheless, as Philip Selznick (1961, 86) has put it, "the needs of the unsophisticated cannot forever dominate the minds of scholars and teachers." There are methodological and logical distinctions between facts and values, but there is no twofold character of human existence, one a sphere of facts yielding real knowledge and the second a sphere of

values yielding hopes and feelings. Modern social science has turned the methodological requirement for reliable observation into a way of shirking deeper inquiry into the human reality and slipping around the truth-value of values. The dodge goes like this; values are things out there that can be observed by the social scientist. Norms and rules of the game that people exhibit are simply factual data that can be studied, and that's the end of it. "No problem," as today's saying goes.

But there *is* a problem, and the problem is that this is not the whole story. The wall of separation between fact and value is a half-truth pretending to be the whole truth of the matter, and so at its heart it is a lie. Physicians want to observe the real facts precisely because they are not indifferent between health and illness. Firemen want to know the difference between real and false alarms because they are not neutral about people and property burning or not burning.

These stances toward the world are not simply random facts about personal preferences. They are expressions of a value-infused outlook on human existence. The spirit of a thing refuses to allow a fact/value division of realms. Thus it attacks modern culture at its core, because it contradicts the normal ways we have of just getting by. On one hand, we get by with a phony idealism. Here we gaze upward toward ideals and may even affirm their obligation in the sense of an intellectual feeling. However, they are not brought to earth as living obligations that guide personal choices. On the other, we try to get by with a phony realism. Values are considered conditional statements about what seems functional under the circumstances. We gaze downward and endorse what the facts of the moment seem to require.

The spirit does not split the difference between idealism and realism but unites them into one realm. It is both unconditional and incarnate, the universal in living particulars. Gazing neither up or down, right or left, its face is set forward like a flint toward a central moral ideal that is a reality meant for real people.

The human realities we are talking about have been termed "normative systems," phenomena whose very nature encompasses the realization of values. As Philip Selznick once put it (1961, 86–88), a normative system is a claim on human beings about what is genuinely valuable for well-being, whether or not it confirms to our particular preferences.⁴ More than a set of related norms, it is a master ideal addressed to behavior as well as to many specific norms. In other words, specific norms are not simple derivations from the ideal. Rather, they are rules that seem to be required by real world circumstances in light of that ideal.

For example, the practice of public administration is meant to display impersonality and objectivity quite unlike what one would expect in the social bonds of a primary relation like friendship or family. Instead, public administration prescribes "official" behavior. But the norm of official behavior is not a love of officiousness, i.e., official behavior for its own sake. Official behavior in the real world treatment of others is required by the larger idea of "office" associated with public administration as a normative system. Officialness, in the first instance, is not about the treatment of other people but an affirmation of values inherent in the idea of office—the duty one has in the way of service. Official behavior is office-affirming behavior.

Normative systems seed latent values in the world of fact. It is inherent in their nature to "en-value" everyday phenomena. Biological parenting is one thing. The bald descriptions of parent-child interactions are another thing. The master ideal of parenthood is quite another thing. Parenthood is a normative system that infuses all these other things with latent value.

So the first objection concerned the fact/value problem. The second objection is about practicality. The objection is that all this spirit talk is simply unrealistic and impractical.

My answer is this. To consider the immaterial, spirit of an activity is one of the most realistic and practical things one can do in talking about human beings. With sheep and cows we cannot see much more than purely economic behavior. There's little going on beyond grazing and wandering after better grazing grounds. By contrast, the story of humans only begins where the story of cows and sheep leaves off (Chesterton 1986, 269). The next meal matters, but what seems most present in the minds of human beings is the yearning for something beyond the next meal. We know this because these are creatures that have found ways to tell us so—ways called, literature, philosophy, art and talk radio.

It turns out that practicality can be a remarkably impractical thing. One sees this in politics all the time, and if we are sufficiently honest, we can also see it in our own lives. Nothing closes so many doors on real opportunity as opportunism. A person who is forever weighing the odds of immediate success can never believe in anything long enough to make it succeed. This is why economic interpretations and rational choice models of this and that institution fit so well with our cultural climate of postmodernism. They all deal in foreground and surfaces and refuse to consider that there might be a true, inner life to things.

But we *can* see the spirit of a thing in action. We see it in the soldier who moves toward rather than away from the sound of gunfire; the priest who stays in place administering last rites while the falling debris assures his own death; the fireman who rushes into a building that other people are rushing out of. These are dramatic images we have seen since our adjournment at the beginning of last September. These examples may mislead you into thinking that I am talking about spirit as a matter of sainthood or what cynics dismissively refer to as a martyrdom complex.

There are softer shades of the same thing: the middle manager resisting a financial misstatement; the FBI agent who goes outside channels to combat bureaucratic foot-dragging; the voter who votes with no rational chance of affecting the outcome. Self-sacrifice may be the ultimate consequence of absorbing the spirit of a thing, but there are many other expressions, expressions as mundane as getting to work on time or not pilfering the office supplies, or reworking a class syllabus even though no one really seems to care. These too are the result of obeying the spirit of a thing.

These are results, but fruit of the spirit is not exactly the spirit itself. This is how we tend to leave the matter—talking about byproducts of normative systems—because we dare not try to speak about what cannot be put into words, the spirit of a thing itself. But that is the fool's errand I am on here in this talk. And so we press onward, into the heartland.

The Spirit of Public Administration

What is the spirit of public administration? As I have already tried to indicate, the spirit of public administration is not public administration. By that I mean it is not the whole doctrine or practice of public administration. The spirit is the inner life of public administration, lifting it from beneath so to speak.

To speak the spirit of something invites us to try to see the subject as if it is coming into view for the first time. This is difficult, but when we imagine looking onto the world with new eyes, what often happens is that we become better at perceiving the implied positive, the presence of an absence. We

sense something of the spirit of public administration when it goes missing. We know it when we don't see it.

Trying to look as if for the first time, we see people running organizations, affairs being managed, implementers implementing. But if we see rampant favoritism, we ask, where is the impartiality. Then is the spirit of public administration impartiality? Well, yes, inasmuch as we do not want partiality in operating tax laws. We expect a strong justification if there is to be profiling in selectively enforcement of traffic laws. But the yes isn't all yes. There is a No too, because we also see a world where people may impartially rape, pillage and steal.

Likewise with efficiency. Certainly inefficiency is something we feel compelled to have to explain, or claim to root out when we see it. But also No, because people rape, pillage and steal with efficiency as much as with impartiality.

What about disinterested rationality? We know there is something wrong when means don't seem appropriate to ends, when decisions are made with little forethought of consequences, when consequences fail to re-inform subsequent decisions, and so on. However, crime syndicates also survive and thrive by being rational.

Efficiency, impartiality, rationality seem much more in the essential spirit of bureaucracy than of public administration.

If we ask about non-partisanship, we may hear the spirit whispering, Yes, the spirit of party is not the spirit of public administration. In the same way that we do not want partiality in general, we do not want party loyalty to be the standard of administration. However, we also hear, No, rethink your idea of non-partisanship. Public administration is expected to exhibit the peculiar neutrality of being serially and equally partisan by working in good faith during successive exchanges of partisan leaders. Loyalty to the office, not to the person or party, commands this.

We could go on at length in this vein. Most recently, the worry has been about the spirit of democratic accountability missing in public administration. In the 1990s for example, reinventing government meant putting customers first, cutting red tape, empowering employees and eliminating unneeded operations. Who could object? After all, we are talking about "public" administration. By its nature, public administration exists only because there is activity to be carried out on behalf of others. The one is doing it because the other cannot, will not or prefers not to. Inherently then, there seems a strong element of fiduciary responsibility in the spirit of public administration. And those others to whom the fiduciary responsibility holds is broad indeed—the public itself. Those who are not party or policy activists, people who are not even particularly "good citizens" in any civic sense—they all depend on the ability of government institutions to act on their behalf. Therefore, it makes at least some sense to speak of reinventing public administration to serve its "customers."

But taking the larger view, reinvention of government for customer service is a pathetically feeble market metaphor for the public's business. The spirit of public administration is not about asking people if they would like fries with their sandwich. To repeat an earlier point, a half-truth pretending to be the whole truth of a matter can be worse than no truth at all.

Rational choice models and reinventing government projects have come and gone. What remains is the fireman going into the building, the FBI agent pushing against bureaucratic stupidity, the office secretary who gets to work on time, refuses to pilfer office supplies and gives the public an honest day's work.

It is correct to say the spirit of public administration endorses service to the public. Our democratic instinct is right to tell us that such administration should not march to the commands of some minority group of citizens who have the power to demand special favors. We say this, but then we immediately forget what is the scope of this democratic value and fail to see that there is one ever-present minority group with the loudest voice and greatest power, the minority represented in this room. It is the minority of the moment—the living, as opposed to the vast majority of citizens dead and unborn. The spirit of public administration pays attention to the living, but it also pays attention to precedent and tradition, giving a kind of vote so that people are not disqualified by accident of birth or death. Administrative stewardship refuses to hear only the voice of what Chesterton (1986, 251) called "the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about." And so too with the unborn. There are debts from the dead that the living incur as charges, and there are cares to be credited for the benefit of the unborn. Public administration has no monopoly on this sort of concern but its reason for existence is, among other things, to unfailingly express this sort of concern.⁵ Like a physical body, the body politic is a composition of cells

that is never the same from one minute to the next, but it nevertheless has the integrity of one body as a going concern. That, as well as individual citizens, is the "public" known to the spirit of public administration.

What I have been saying is that the spirit of public administration is not one characteristic to the exclusion of another "in the spirit." The spirit's unique note is the simultaneous striking of many notes. The fruit of the spirit is in the singular with a plurality of expressions—including impartiality, efficiency, non-partisanship, rationality, public service, and fiduciary responsibility. Reduced to any one of these things in isolation, the idea of stewardship is impoverished. Therefore, if forced to come to rest on one word, the best that can be done is the word "stewardship." This means a calling to take care for the wellbeing of the public household. It is the central ideal of a normative system from which the other specific norms are derived in order to meet the particular circumstances of the world.

Administration without stewardship may be perfectly respectable. But it is not in the spirit of public administration. It earns a paycheck. It implements. It gets the work from the inbox to the outbox, but it has no calling. It may not be corrupt, but it is a corruption insofar as it is dead to the animating spirit of what public administration is in its truest light. Customer service is not the moral equivalent of public stewardship.

POSDCORB has come and gone. Organizational theories have come and gone. Rational choice models and reinventing government projects have come and gone. What remains is the fireman going into the building, the FBI agent pushing against bureaucratic stupidity, the office secretary who gets to work on

time, refuses to pilfer office supplies and gives the public an honest day's work.

Of course, the vision of stewardship has its own pitfalls. Arrogance, self-righteousness, elitism are some of those pitfalls. They are temptations that turn officials and professors into prigs.

This is probably one reason it is more popular to teach intellectually stimulating courses about bureaucracy and leave public administration as a subject that amounts to so much technical training. So it was that as a young professor, another of my predecessors in this award—James Q. Wilson—entered a Harvard government department at the beginning of the 1960s where no one wanted to teach the public administration course left by the retiring Professor Gaus. “Bureaucracy” became the title of Jim Wilson’s new course. Almost 50 years later, it is as if one is ashamed to say anything about the spirit of public administration. Apparently, it is thought to lack intellectual substance and theoretical rigor. Thus in the academy, the subject of bureaucracy—which can be a perverted anti-spirit of public administration—is esteemed, and the moral essence of public administration lacks respectability.

What happened between the time John Gaus taught with Leonard White at Chicago and the time Jim Wilson took over Gaus’s office at Harvard? Let me try to draw things toward a conclusion by following just one thread of the story. It has to do with the discipline of public administration itself. Progressives and their children gave birth to American public administration. These were people drawn overwhelmingly from religious and moralizing backgrounds. The idea of stewardship was deeply engrained though never very well articulated. Their European counterparts, having the concept of the State as part of their historical intellectual baggage, could articulate it but had less need to do so.

The American discipline of public administration was a good government movement but with the tumultuous growth of government in the New Deal and Second World War, it was struggling to keep up, both with political events and with its own professionalization in the social sciences.

The rationalizing of public affairs seemed a crying need and a scientific approach to public administration seemed a compelling response to that need. Both good government and good citizenship were seen to be at stake. As Professor Gaus put it in 1947, “The citizen needs help in his job of being a citizen in the classification of problems, and the responsible formulation and presentation of policies which he may choose for dealing with those problems.”⁶ The spirit of stewardship seemed to acquire a concrete agenda, and in the process public administration mistook a rationalizing project—which became encapsulated in the term “planning”—for an ethos.

It is difficult to convey to today’s reader how hopeful planning advocates had been in the 1940s and how thoroughly this centralizing, rationalizing perspective was routed, first politically by Congress as early as 1943 (Professor Gaus served as an advisor to the National Resources Planning Board that Congress emasculated at that time), and then intellectually during subsequent years (Fishman 2000) In Europe, much of this intellectual critique was at the rarified philosophical level of a Hayek, Popper, and von Mises. In this country, their intellectual counterparts breathed the American air of pragmatism and were more specific. However, they were no less devastating to the planners’ cause. There was Phillip Selznick on the TVA, and Herbert Simon on the alleged scientific rules of administrative behavior; there was Charles Lindblom on the futility of “synoptic” decision making and his student, Aaron Wildavsky, on the equivalent futility of comprehensive rationality in the budget process. This development occurred on many fronts, but for brevity’s sake we might trace it in the intellectual trajectory

of one distinguished public administration/political science scholar, the late Professor Edward Banfield.

As a young man, Banfield was a bureaucrat in the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration.⁷ In the early 1940s Rexford Tugwell, one of FDR’s prominent “braintrusts” and head of a new program on planning, recruited him to come to the University of Chicago.

Banfield was an outstanding graduate student, and his classes and readings helped clarify the uneasiness he felt about operations at his old agency in the Department of Agriculture. Still, Banfield’s first scholarly publications in the late 1940s and early 1950s were highly favorable accounts of the planning idea in the Agriculture Department and its local programs. For example, his 1951 article co-authored with Tugwell on “Planning at Mid-Century” urged creation of new federal institutions for “discovering and objectifying the future.” Congress should confine itself to making broad value judgments and leave the contents of policy to be decided by executive branch planners. The authors saw the needed approach foreshadowed in city planning, forestry conservation, and scientific management in industry. However, much more was required to institute planning in the federal government as a whole.

Meanwhile, however, Banfield’s empirical work was leading to contrary conclusions. His dissertation showed a case study of failure to achieve cooperation in a federally sponsored cooperative farm for down-and-out rural workers. In a new study of a Utah farming community, Banfield was finding some voluntary cooperation, but it seemed to fall far short of what serious community planning required. Then in the mid-1950s came his and his wife Laura’s extended study of a southern Italian town. Caring only for short-term, narrow interests of their own families, people there shunned political activities, turned against all officeholders, and did nothing about the miserable schools and health care system. This “amoral familism” formed *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958). Compared to this, the Utah farmers *did* cooperate in forming voluntary associations, contributing to community causes, working at school improvements and so on. They just did not live up to the illusory requirements of rational planning that were endorsed by a public administration discipline yearning for scientific standing. Banfield never went back to the Utah manuscript to draw the comparison showing how and why civic cooperation did happen. Perhaps he suspected that a generation later someone like Bob Putnam would come along to do that. In any event, the big point was that the planning idea beloved by public administration was a dead-end.

So it was that Banfield’s young student, Jim Wilson, moved into John Gaus’s Harvard office in 1961, thanked Professor Gaus for giving him his collection of clippings on the Department of Agriculture and promptly threw them in the wastebasket (Wilson 1994, 667). Gaus’s course on public administration would now be a course on bureaucracy. Let me quickly add, that I mean absolutely no disrespect to my former Harvard colleague and teaching mentor Jim Wilson. In the same time and place I would no doubt have done the same thing. By the onset of the Sixties, the offensive against government planning was intellectually and politically triumphant in America. In a sort of back-handed but powerful way, the essential idea of stewardship seemed not only old fashioned but intellectually discredited as a naïve planning impulse. Public administration had mistaken a rationalizing project for an ethos. And it ended up with neither.

Applications

In the spirit of the old time preachers, I will conclude with four applications concerning the spirit of public administration.

First, the spirit of a thing does change. Stewardship of the king's household is certainly not identical with stewardship in a modern democratic society. However the spirit changes by becoming a more complete realization of what it is—not by an evolution of new species or dialectic of contradictions, but by an unfolding of inner possibilities. In other words, change in the spirit of public administration resembles what Cardinal Newman ([1845] 1986) called “the development of doctrine.”

Second, what moves things toward this more complete realization is not likely to be doctrinal academic arguments, in other words, not by a succession of people becoming intellectually or emotionally persuaded of general principles and abstract ideals. And exhortation such as this lecture probably does not have much effect either. Real change comes when one person encounters another person who seems to living out the truth of the matter, people who actually mean what they say, so that in encountering them one senses a foundation that is like striking rock. Any spreading power of the spirit comes out of concrete situations and the particulars of human character. Gertrude Stein is not one of my favorite writers but she wrote at least one thing I think I actually understand. She said, we don't have an experience; we have an *experiencing*. This seems right. Interactions with the world are more participles than nouns. The most real experiencing we have is another human being, because of all the wonderful phenomena to be experienced in this world, that is the thing most like us. This is the reason the spirit of a thing moves by human-to-human encounter.

Third, we are guilty of educational malpractice when we teach our students that normative systems are merely some moralizer's pipedreams. Unlike the elementary fact/value distinction,

the normative systems of the real world are a richer, truer opportunity to observe something that is authentically human. One does not rightly appreciate these human creatures' behavior, motives, or structures of life without understanding the Ur-ideals—the spirit—they are seeking to realize but only approximate.

Fourth and finally, since these humans only ever approximate the claims of spirit, there is always the nagging objection—we are talking about what is impossible in the real world. It is a brute empirical fact that no one perfectly lives up to the life of the spirit in public administration. So why bother?

The brief answer is that while the real public administrator is certainly different from the ideal public administrator, that in itself is no logical reason for overlooking the reality at the root of the ideal. The longer answer involves pausing and listening to what is actually lies behind the question. When the so-called realist asks this question, it is actually a demand that spirit should be something less than spirit, which is to say, less than something that is both unconditional in its claim and incarnate in its expression. It amounts to demanding either that the unconditional should be banished to a realm of meaningless abstraction, or that the incarnate should have free rein to use its conditional circumstances as the ruling standard. Either way, it amounts to the demand to kill the spirit. And as it is written, blaspheming the spirit is the one unforgivable sin.

But the spirit is not killed. Either it animates or it grieves and goes missing. Either it bestows its gift or it leaves behind the dead body of a person, an institution, or a discipline—a spiritless body that profits nothing.

So now we have come to the end of this talk. Beverley, I suppose we could say it is time to get working on the obituary.

Notes

1. Domat, in his *Treatise on the Laws*, had already used the term to refer to the intention of legislators concerning positive law and the rule of equity concerning natural law. Montesquieu's search for the spirit of the laws was after something quite different. See Albert Sorel, *Montesquieu* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1969) chapter 5, originally published 1888.

2. A generation earlier, Leonard White made the same observation after a professional roundtable had asked each participant to state one “principle” of public administration. John M. Gaus, Leonard D. White and Marshall E. Dimock, *Frontiers of Public Administration* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967) first published 1936, chapter 2, p. 15.

3. I try to discuss this peculiar public influence of the 1960s in the chapter “Sixties Civics,” Sidney Milkis and Jerry Mileur (eds), *The Great Society: Then and Now* (forthcoming 2003).

4. Related ideas are developed more fully in Philip Selznick's

The Moral Commonwealth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

5. The contrary view, that the earth belongs in usufruct only to the living, is argued by Jefferson in a private exchange of letters with Madison in 1789–90. In my view Madison, being a constitutionalist at heart, gets the better of the argument. See Richard Matthews, *If Men were Angels* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 256ff.

6. Professor Gaus's more complete discussion of planning is in his chapter, “The Planning Process in Government,” Thomas C. McCormick (ed), *Problems of the Post War World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1945).

7. The following details on Banfield's career can be found in James Q. Wilson's evocative brief biography, “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,” in Henry Salvatori Center, *Edward C. Banfield: An Appreciation*, Henry Salvatori Center Monograph, New Series, No. 3, April 2002, pp. 31–79.

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