Blind Spots in Public Ethics and Integrity Research: What Public Administration Scholars Can Learn from Aristotle

Ronald van Steden

To cite this article: Ronald van Steden (2020): Blind Spots in Public Ethics and Integrity Research: What Public Administration Scholars Can Learn from Aristotle, Public Integrity, DOI: 10.1080/10999922.2020.1714412

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2020.1714412
Blind Spots in Public Ethics and Integrity Research: What Public Administration Scholars Can Learn from Aristotle

Ronald van Steden

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

The discourse on ‘good governance’ is of growing importance in the public integrity and public values literature. However, it is not so simple to discern what ‘good governance’ actually means. This paper delves into the work of the ancient philosopher Aristotle who has influenced a stream of practice theories underlining the significance of virtues (instead of values) and of ‘doing things well’. It specifically explores the relevance of Aristotelian philosophy for public professionals by emphasizing the central virtue of practical wisdom (phrónēsis or prudence) that sustains craftsmanship as an action-oriented means to achieving viable results. Public integrity, defined as an overarching virtue of a practical sort, contains strong parallels with this Aristotelian phrónēsis which aims to achieve excellence in professional practices – even to the point of being modest if necessary – and assures continuous reflection on public professionals’ quality of work. In other words: public professionals must be persons of integrity – of moral wholeness and soundness – who are virtuous in aligning their judgements with a vision of the good life from which society and citizens can flourish.

Keywords: Craftsmanship, good governance, intrinsic normativity, public integrity, virtues

INTRODUCTION

In his inaugural address Leo Huberts (1998) highlighted what he called ‘blind spots’ in police practice and police science and laid the basis for a program about, among other things, the organisation and policy of the Dutch police (Huberts, Verberk, Lasthuizen, & van den Heuvel, 2004), the rise of private security (van Steden & Huberts, 2005) and, indeed, the ethics and integrity of police work (Huberts, Kaptein, & Lasthuizen, 2007). Over the years that followed, his work has specifically evolved in the direction of what can be described as public ethics research or, more precisely, research into public integrity (de Graaf, Huberts, & Strüwer, 2018; Huberts, Anechiarico, & Six, 2008; Huberts & Huberts, 2014) and public values (de Graaf, Huberts, &...
Huberts has been widely praised for his important and inspiring contributions to this body of knowledge, and rightly so given the publications referred to in the beginning of this section that represent only a small part of his voluminous oeuvre. However, a symposium issue in honour of Leo Huberts marks a moment of gentle criticism and reflection, of both looking back and forward. I therefore return to the question the master himself posed at the start of his professorship. What are the blind spots in research – this time in public ethics and integrity research?

Of course, my ambition is not to demonstrate all blind spots in the public ethics and integrity literature, but to focus on the publications of Huberts and colleagues. They have devoted much academic work on public integrity to measuring integrity violations, including corruption, fraud, dubious gifts, and misuse of power (de Graaf et al., 2018; Lasthuizen, Huberts, & Heres, 2011). Yet, does the absence of integrity violations also imply that governments and public servants are displaying ethical behaviour? Not necessarily so. According to Huberts’ own definition, “integrity” is seen as a characteristic or quality that refers to accordance with the relevant values and norms. [...] Which values, norms, laws and rules are relevant [...] depends on the context’ (Huberts, 2014, p. 4; italics in the original). But what exactly are these norms and values, and do people act ethically simply by following them? Can members of the mafia be said to be morally right because they abide by their joint norms and values? To rephrase my argument, Huberts mostly avoids the difficult question of how to understand ‘good governance’. Indeed, it is easier to say what constitutes ‘bad governance’ as people fundamentally disagree about a shared positive morality (MacIntyre, 2010 [1981]). This makes my question even more pressing.

In ongoing scientific discussions, the fuzzy concept of good governance has usually been applied to institutions, rules, procedures, competences and behaviours that must ensure effective and democratic policy making and implementation with respect for citizens’ rights and inputs (Bevir, 2009). My purpose is to stress that good governance cannot go without good governors. As de Graaf and van Asperen (2018, p. 414) argue in their reflection on Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s worldfamous allegorical frescoes of Justice and Good Government (1337–1339): ‘good governance is governance by good governors, and good governors are governors guided by charity’. But further back in ancient times, scholars also regarded good governors as important for the sake of a just and prosperous society. This brings us to what Aristotle (2000), the renowned Greek thinker, calls ‘virtuous’ behaviour. Although his position does not provide us with a definition of good governance, Aristotle introduces a classical perspective that puts the character of public governors (hereafter, I focus on public craftsmen) first. Practising moral excellence should be genuinely derived from what people regard as ‘good governance’ – and, relatedly, as ‘the good life’.

Aristotle’s work has in particular influenced a stream of practice theories underlining the significance of ‘doing things well (enpraxia)’ (Nicolini, 2013, p. 26). Human actions and activities have an intrinsic moral character. In the following pages, I wish to explore the relevance of Aristotelian philosophy for public professionals by emphasising the central virtue of practical wisdom (phrónēsis or prudence) that sustains craftsmanship as an action-oriented means to achieving viable results. My argument is in three parts: section 1 moves from values to virtues; section 2 stresses the importance of intrinsic normativity; and section 3 makes a connection between virtues, normativity, and public craftsmanship. The conclusion
remains inevitably rather philosophical since it rests on the point that public professionals can achieve moral excellence by being persons of integrity – a disposition which contains strong parallels with practising the Aristotelian virtue of *phronēsis*. Nevertheless, this line of reasoning should inspire new ways of thinking that connect public ethics and integrity research with empirical studies on the moral dimensions of everyday professional practices. My afterthoughts about the significance of action-oriented methodology give directions here.

**FROM VALUES TO VIRTUES**

International political, social and academic debates about the central importance of values, ethics, and integrity in public and private professions have expanded rapidly over the past decades, and Huberts has, no doubt, stimulated this development. Yet, values, whether public or private, are not necessarily good or desirable in themselves. It may be very fruitful, for example, to implement a large infrastructural project without informed consent from local residents, but this violates democratic procedures and the integrity dimensions of good governance. Professionals thus cope with conflicting values, including effectiveness, transparency, and responsiveness, which pose serious dilemmas for them (cf. de Graaf et al., 2016). Governing a country and dealing with complex situations in which many stakeholders, interests, and worldviews are involved is hard work.

The integrity of government agencies is a fundamental pillar of public administration as this quality guides public professionals’ behaviour and promises citizens transparency and equality if they take part in democratic processes and are subjected to certain rules and regulations. Therefore, governments have implemented codes of conduct and have taken other measures to prevent corruption, ensure fairness, and stimulate honesty among their employees. Questions remain open, though, as to whether diverse public professionals interpret the meaning of values in the same way and about how they act upon interpreting their meaning (de Vries & Kim, 2011). Saying that certain values are vital does not necessarily imply that professionals also practice what they preach, not the least because values easily collide and contradict, and thus cause confusion when action is needed.

This presents virtue ethics as a philosophical line of thought in which the moral character of both actions and results becomes the central feature of public professionals’ sense of responsibility. Instead of a deontological approach ‘telling us which maxims everyone is obliged to follow’ or a consequentialist standpoint that sees a ‘morally right action’ only in terms of ‘just outcome’, the whole idea of ‘being virtuous is judged to be a value in itself’. Or, put differently, ‘[v]irtues do not only add to [the] good life, but are a constituting element thereof’ (de Vries & Kim, 2011, p. 6–9). As such, public virtues ethics seeks to stimulate correct choices in the minefield of opposing values through an ongoing reflexive training of moral character, eventually enabling self-control and responsible behaviour. Democratic values can only fully prosper if public professionals and citizens alike are willing to pursue long-term common goods.

At this point, Aristotle’s philosophy proves to be of lasting relevance for our times. First, Aristotle acknowledges that there are more valid ways of knowledge and knowing than what we now call scientific knowledge, which is often considered superior to non-research-based results. He did not start out from today’s taken-for-granted positivist individualism, but
thought of knowledge as something ‘fundamentally and explicitly relational’ (Eikeland, 2007, p. 349). While modern scholars take epistémé, often equated with Enlightened science, as the most universal and reliable source of knowledge, they tend to overlook other important forms of knowing that refer to practical and normative competence. Tékhné or technical know-how (connected to poiēsis or making) and sophia or wisdom (connected to théoria or philosophical thinking) are two such forms that can be found in Aristotle’s canonical text the Nicomachean Ethics. In addition, Aristotle places praxis – activities conducted by free, politically engaged Greeks – between poiēsis and théoria so as to express ‘a relationship between colleagues sharing common standards for how to go about their professional activities’ (Ibid., p. 351). Praxis knowledge, in other words, goes beyond abstract theorising as it draws upon a shared ‘we’ – a community of people – with collective values about how they make and do things. 

Second, Aristotle’s ethics aims to improve the quality standards of people, specifically aspirant politicians, and their political community in order to cultivate virtue in both. Virtue, as understood by the ancient Greeks, ‘means in general what makes any thing or activity work at its best (árístos)’ and ‘is the result of a process of perfection (teleiōsis) from within a specific activity or practice’ (Eikeland, 2006, p. 20–21; italics in the original). We still recognise this meaning of virtue in the contemporary word ‘virtuosity’, a kind of action-oriented excellence. A key virtue to be cultivated here is phrönesis – practical wisdom – in English – as a means ‘to do the right thing the right way’ (cf. Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010) and achieve happiness as well as well-functioning. This quest for practical wisdom, in turn, closely alludes to a modern-day desire to obtain integrity in the broadest sense of the word: ‘an excellence of persons as knowing, advising, planning, and managing agents’ (Scherkoske, 2012, p. 196). The importance of virtues should therefore be placed higher on public administration’s normative research agenda.

**INTRINSIC NORMATIVITY**

In 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre’s seminal book After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory suggests a virtue-centred alternative to mainstream convictions about ethics that, in his view, fails to help people cultivate the normative qualities that are necessary to flourish. However, his provocative work has had little impact on public administration scholarship so far (but see Overeem & Tholen, 2011; de Vries & Kim, 2011; van Steden, van Putten, & Hoogland, 2019 for noticeable exceptions). It is thus necessary to say a few more words about the core ideas of MacIntyre’s moral philosophy before returning to the issue of virtue in relation to public ethics and integrity research and professional conduct.

MacIntyre begins his diagnoses of modernity with the ‘disquieting suggestion’ (2010 [1981]: chapter 1) that moral philosophy is incoherent in itself: academic thinkers and ordinary people both seem deeply divided about what ‘a good life’ entails, and even show little interest in trying to understand each other’s different positions. He locates the origins of this catastrophe in the meta-ethical philosophy of ‘emotivism’: the claim that judgements about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are nothing more than a matter of subjective, personal taste. ‘There seems to be no rational way,’ Macintyre (2010 [1981], p. 6) writes, ‘of securing moral agreement in culture’. According to him, modernity suffers from a deep epistemological crisis, which can be solved by turning to the Aristotelian tradition that cultivates practical wisdom and moral excellence through a clear notion of ‘man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-telos’ (p. 54).
Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to think and talk about the purpose or destination (telos) of human life as morality has scattered into incommensurable pieces. An objective and rational approach to values and ethics, in fact, summons the whole notion of moral coherence to a Nietzschean universe of struggle and power.

MacIntyre believes that the only escape from this tragic (post)modern mess is to restore ‘the classical view of man’ (2010 [1981], p. 119) as laid down in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, which serves as a counterweight to ‘the voices of liberal modernity’ (p. 146). Yet, MacIntyre and others are well aware of some major limitations in the pre-modern worldview of their intellectual idol. To begin with, Aristotle was primarily interested in the moral character formation of elite male citizens deliberating about the future of Athens’ polis (city-state): ‘women, slaves and the foreign-born […] were categorically excluded’ (Siedentop, 2014, p. 18). Furthermore, this polis was no association of free individuals, but fully depended on families and clans that protected their members against threats and harms. Outside the ancient city walls, as Aristotle jauntily argued, a citizen’s life was simply not worth living (Siedentop, 2014, p. 25). Subsequently, Aristotle favoured contemplation and deliberation over ordinary material activity: ‘in the polis, all the manual labour, from mining to housework, was carried out by slaves who formed half of the population. This was hardly something that an educated Greek would consider a call of life leading to happiness’ (Nicolini, 2013, p. 27–28). Ordinary life was thus more or less excluded from the realm of politics and ethics.

However, over the centuries and particularly under the influence of Christianity, appreciation for the vita activa (the active life) has steadily developed in the West. ‘This appreciation for ordinary life’, as Vos (2018, p. 20) notes, ‘also changed the meaning and place of moral exemplarity. Moral exemplarity was no longer found in the exceptional lives […] but could in principle be found in the lives of ordinary people […]’. [Likewise], character cultivation found its proper locus in ordinary life, which in turn was seen as more than just profane – it was to be sanctified’. The relevance of Aristotle’s philosophy today should thus not be overstretched, because, by the letter, he strongly endorsed praxis and phrónēsis (free Greeks engaged in political activity and moral conduct) over tékhné and poiēsis (constructing things through manual labour carried out by slaves) – a sharp distinction we no longer make.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of Aristotle, scholars underline that practices are still regulated by a specific interpretation of values and rules from which the direction or destination (telos) of professionals’ activities and performances stem. For these reasons, social scientists and philosophers have turned to everyday practice – ‘a routinised type of behaviour’ (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249) – to find the deeper sources of morality, ethics, and virtue. Without such a normative direction or purpose, practices become meaningless; activities always inhabit a specific goal or sense. MacIntyre offers one of the most famous formulations of this insight:

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human power to achieve excellence, and human concepts of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (1981 [2010], p. 218).

His definition of a practice puts us on the track of intrinsic normativity. In this regard, MacIntyre speaks of ‘internal goods’ versus ‘external goods’. Internal goods are inherently
(or intrinsically) linked to the activity of a practice. In contrast, external goods, such as power, fame, and wealth, can be gained from anywhere and always have a competitive element to them. MacIntyre gives the example of a chess game where the rules of the game define chess and determine its value. For him, chess games can only be played properly when people respect certain standards of excellence, since internal goods, including fair play and the beauty of playing a game, constitute this excellence. Playing chess games only for the sake of winning a tournament (an external good) makes people vulnerable to cheating. It is therefore crucial to understand the ‘logic’ – i.e., the internal good – of a practice, to grasp its underlying values and quality standards that guide proper, not to say virtuous, behaviour.

PUBLIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

Let us return to the world of public professionals, their search for integrity, and the complexity of opposing values. It may not come as a surprise that scholarly attention to craftsmanship is on the rise in public administration since public professionals struggle with high expectations, bureaucratic burdens, and performance targets which (potentially) undermine their quality of work and personal enthusiasm. For example, Rhodes (2016, p. 638) stresses, ‘that the old craft skills of traditional public administration remain important’ within the context of New Public Management (NPM). ‘Public administration’, he adds (p. 639), ‘continues to be characterised as an art and a craft as much as it is a science, and public servants are generalists – that is, a profession based on craft knowledge’. This rediscovery of public craftsmanship alludes to the principles and ethics of ‘good work’, a virtuous way of fabricating or doing things. Craftwork, by itself, is not limited to pottery, painting and making sculptures, but also extends to raising children, running a business and, most certainly, providing government services (Sennett, 2008; Bannink, Bosselaar, & Trommel, 2013). The best craftsmen are aware of the fact that their efforts are adventurous, lack any clear blueprint, and require skilled intuition or ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polanyi 1966 [2009]) – i.e., implicit or unarticulated knowledge that can only be acquired through personal experience, continuous learning and on-the-job tenure.

In addition, craftsmanship stands in a longer tradition – think of the Medieval guilds that passed on knowledge and skills in a master/pupil-relationship – that shape trained intuition in which ‘practice speaks for itself’ – or, dixit MacIntyre, have an internal good and immanent normativity. Good craftsmanship, so to speak, emerges from devotion, dealing with imperfection and professional pride, and relates to a sense of modesty as to ‘knowing-when-to-stop’ (Trommel & Boutellier, 2018, p. 21–22; Sennett, 2008). Following Rhodes (2016, p. 642; italics in the original), public administration explicitly stands in such a tacit – unsystematised and uncoded – tradition of ‘skills that the public servant ought to have in the era of NPM’. He lists ‘diplomacy’ (the art of negotiation and persuasion), ‘political nous’ (instinctive understanding of ‘the political lay of the land’), ‘stewardship’ (the preservation of institutional integrity), and ‘practical wisdom’ (being master of your craft) among these skills necessary to facilitate public governance and to improvise. In particular, the art of improvisation ‘gives individuals the room to excel’ (Boutellier, 2013, p. 158) within confined institutional structures, which led Kane and Patapan (2006, p. 711) to highlight ‘prudence’ – or
practical wisdom (phronēsis) – as the core ability of public professionals ‘to make sound decisions under complex, ever-changeable conditions’. Their discretionary powers, after all, do not necessarily guarantee good or just outcomes.

Kane and Patapan (2006) sketch that criticism about an ‘empire-building’ Weberian public administration has eventually resulted in organisational transformations along NPM rationales of redefining citizens as clients, implementing performance indicators, and implying market mechanisms within government structures. Yet, this response to bureaucratic expansion, ‘red tape’, and technocratic failure has ironically resulted in an even more omnipresent ‘engineering model’ guided by businesslike rules and mechanisms. Although the expected uncertainty and malfunctioning arising from NPM reforms must not be overstated (van der Wal & Huberts, 2008) Kane and Patapan (2006, p. 720) claim that ‘an ethos in which the public sector is honoured as a distinctive realm that is dedicated to the very best public service and in which public servants are honoured for their role in providing such service’ is deemed necessary. A public-service ethos, in their view, encourages civil servants to act wisely and solve problems in accordance with collective democratic standards and long-term government policies.

So-called ‘exemplary practitioners’, virtuous workers being part of larger groups, teams and coalitions, fit this type of public craftsmanship that is ‘able to get things done and keep things going’ (van Hulst, de Graaf, & van den Brink, 2011, p. 135). As such, public ethics and integrity scholarship and sociological studies on everyday craftsmanship increasingly intertwine and open exciting new directions for further investigation. However, to be really productive in bridging existing gaps between the two fields of research, the significance of integrity must be taken to be broader than anti-fraud and corruption policies alone and must go deeper than just uprightness and being honest. Integrity, it seems, represents the contemporary virtue of which one can never have enough (cf. Overeem, 2014). I wish to argue that public integrity, defined as an overarching virtue of a practical sort, contains strong parallels with Aristotelian phronēsis which aims to achieve excellence in professional practices – even to the point of being modest if necessary – and assures continuous reflection on civil servants’ quality of work. On this view, public craftsmen must be persons of integrity – of moral wholeness and soundness – who are reliable and competent in their judgements, practical, prudent and wise (cf. Scherkoske, 2012). Good governance deserves no less.

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS

Finally: how to learn more about public craftsmanship and, with this, about the integrity of professionals and their practical wisdom in how they carry out their jobs? Participative action research (PAR) is well-suited for gaining better insight into how things work and how findings can be explained, but it also aspires to change and improve practices. That is only possible if scholars try to study practices from inside out and delve into the ‘tacit knowledge’ that is needed to genuinely understand public craftsmanship. Consequently, in PAR, ‘the distinction between the knower and the known, between the researcher and the researched tends to be suspended. Instead, dialogue about our own practically accumulated experience (in different fields) creates a “we” quite naturally across former frontiers of division between researchers and practitioners’ (Eikeland, 2007, p. 354). This approach to social science, for
sure, poses a serious provocation to prevailing positivist outlooks on what proper research is. It challenges the deeply held notions that scientific research methods are neutral and that values (and virtues) can be rationally studied from a comfortable ivory tower.

Action-oriented proponents, in general, use an iterative method comprising four phases: diagnosing and constructing, action planning, action taking, and evaluating and learning (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, pp. 10–13). The first step engages in diagnosing the problem at hand and identifying the issues. Planning action involves awareness of the context and purpose of the projects, after which interventions are made (action-taking). In evaluating the entire process, various intended and unintended effects of an intervention are evaluated and reflected on (‘meta-learning’). Adaptability and transformation are part and parcel of this cycle. Rigour in action research should not be judged according to positivist criteria, but requires responsiveness to critical questions such as: do researchers help ‘developing a praxis’, is research guided by ‘a plurality of knowing’ and ‘does sustainable change come out of the project’? (Ibid., p. 15). The general thrust behind this undertaking is to revitalise and strengthen socially committed research by introducing a refurbished ideal of the ancient *agorá* (cf. Eikeland, 2006): an open assembly where engaged scholars and practitioners meet up, enter into dialogue, draw on their personal prudence, and build communities of integrity in which public professionals act responsibly in realising the good life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article appeared in a different form in a Liber Amicorum for Leo Huberts (De Graaf, G. (ed.) (2019). *It is all about integrity, stupid*. The Hague: Boom).

REFERENCES


Huberts, L., & van den Wal, Z. (2014). What is valued most in politics and administration. In L. Huberts (Ed.), The integrity of governance: What it is, what we know, what is done, and where to go (pp. 144–166). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.


