
Ethics in Planning

Martin Wachs, editor. Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., 1985. 372 pp. \$14.95 (paperback).

Ethics in Planning heightens our awareness of the ethical pre-suppositions that tacitly guide our every act. It repeatedly peels

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off the masks of self-deception associated with the "flight from thinking" of which Heidegger complained.

With the growing specialization of work and the seductive lure of "powerful" techniques that appear to translate the intractable into the calculable, practitioners increasingly risk divorcing themselves from the larger concerns of planning. Questions of ethics, in particular, have suffered from the urge to render complex dilemmas into black and white solutions. Such one-dimensional approaches "would restrict discussion of professional ethics to the propriety of everyday social and professional relationships," writes Martin Wachs in his introduction. "It would ignore the broader ethical content of planning practice, methods and policies. While narrow definitions of ethical behavior can easily preoccupy public officials and professional associations, they divert attention from more profound moral issues."

The book's introduction provides a theme for examining ethics in planning; the 17 readings illuminate that theme, each casting light from a different angle. Wachs, for example, diffuses the myth of objectivity in forecasting by highlighting the politically self-serving nature of assumptions which must be subjectively chosen, but without which forecasting would be impossible. In contrast, the articles by Alasdair MacIntyre and Steven Kelman confirm Joseph Weizenbaum's fear that under instrumental reason "all conflicting interests are replaced by the interests of technique alone." Kelman writes, "Like the Molière character who spoke prose without knowing it, economists advocating the use of cost-benefit analysis for public decisions are philosophers without knowing it." If they did know it, they might be less ready to adopt methodologies that uncritically impose a system of utilitarian ethics in which judgment is surrendered to calculation.

By bringing to the surface the latent imprint of utilitarianism—and doing so with a clarity uncommon in the philosophical literature—both MacIntyre and Kelman provide for a higher level of policy criticism. After reading them, one can no longer comfortably absorb Mark Moore's "Realms of Obligation and Virtue" without pausing for thought. "There seems to me no choice but to face up to the fact of uncertainty, explicitly assess the relative probabilities of different results in all areas of concern, and decide on the basis of some expected result appropriately weighted," Moore says. Wachs would contend that such probability assessments ultimately boil down to subjective political choice; MacIntyre's and Kelman's arguments indicate that such reductionism conceals significant ethical issues in a calculus of illusory objectivity. As MacIntyre demonstrates in a discussion of four alternative methods for computing the value of a human life, it is "clear that all the mathematical sophistication and rigor that may go into the modes of computation may be undermined by the arbitrariness—relative to the mathematics—of the choice to adopt one principle for quantifying rather than another."

Moore accommodates rather than transcends those limitations of cost-benefit analysis that he does recognize when he argues for the introduction of standards of justice. In stating that individuals should understand that their "rights may be abridged when compelling reasons for doing so exist, and when the rights have been protected by procedures that force the state to establish compelling reasons, and, *sometimes* [my emphasis] arrange suitable compensation," he merely affirms that these "rights" are no rights at all. "The mere possibility

of very bad effects would not be an absolute bar to a policy," Moore writes. "It would all depend on the probability of the very bad effect, and the other offsetting (or not quite offsetting) advantages of the policy." But anyone who has read MacIntyre will wonder whether a "very bad effect" such as an increased mortality rate either can or *should* be traded off against purported "offsetting" advantages.

Kant tells us to "never treat humanity in yourself or another as a means only, but as an end withal." To a Kantian it is immoral to even *attempt* to put a cash value on human life. A view of justice that establishes fundamental rights that may *not* be traded off makes for interesting discussion when extended to the rights of nature in sections on ecology and the environment. That, in turn, provides a basis for criticism of some of the concepts included in the chapters on corruption and whistleblowing. Is it in order for an organization to compute an "optimal" level of corruption? Edward Banfield says one might expect that managements determine "the level at which the marginal cost of anti-corruption measures equals the gains from them." Although he does not address the view that corruption is indefensible and not to be tolerated at any cost, the provocative writings of other authors in *Ethics in Planning* bring the reader to consider the deeper aspects of this problem.

Frank Fischer presents a compelling case for legal argumentation, rather than calculation. His account is refreshing because he recognizes that "organizational policy arguments—unlike scientific arguments based on closed and generalizable models—must be open and contextual." Fischer's emphasis on the interpretive dimensions of policy evaluation would subject to criticism the assumptions of a given value-system. "The vindication of a political choice between reading scores and socially relevant experiences," for example, "requires the evaluator to step outside of the value system from which these processes are drawn and to examine their implications for the larger social system as a whole."

Charles Anderson's discussion, "The Place of Principles in Policy Analysis," is also provocative but is ultimately disappointing. Although, like Fischer, he recognizes that "we face a genuine dilemma of decision only when we are aware that public purposes can be perceived and appraised in more than one way," he insists on avoiding "questions like What is justice?" preferring instead "to stay safely within the positivist and pragmatic tradition." This seems inherently contradictory.

The creative dissonance generated by overlaying variations in different keys drives the reader's critical imagination. Wachs's collection points to a "return to thinking." But one is left with a disquieting thought: Here is an ideal book for a course in planning ethics or for practitioners who want to learn about ethics, but its message is that every avenue of planning must incorporate ethical appraisal, that ethics is not something that is separate—or to be studied separately from—other aspects of planning. The power of this collection to counter unreflective trends in today's planning and planning education cannot be overstated.

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