Introduction to the Innovation Journal
Special Issue on The Ethics of Innovation

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Eras characterized by transition, threat, and instability require economies of discovery and of innovation, which in turn demand critical analytical thinking and critical discourse on the ethics that should underlie innovation.

It is particularly important for public officials and those active in related fields to apply critical thinking skills in responding to challenges within their fields and the ethics inherent in these responses. This is so primarily because of the stewardship role they ought to play in society. It has long been recognized that responses to challenges that society faces are fraught with ethical dilemmas. A major criticism of modernity is precisely the ostensible lack of ethics pertaining, not only to innovations, but also to the application of innovations. For example, Hannah Arendt, in covering the Adolf Eichmann trials for a well-known newspaper, was horrified at Eichmann's "inability to think", as evinced in his resoluteness in following orders from superiors. He developed and applied innovations despite the consequences thereof. Such lack of moral thinking also characterized many high-profile public officials of the apartheid era, as became evident during the South African post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings.

Since innovation in general, and public sector innovation in particular, relates intimately to the existence and betterment of humanity, it raises questions of human life and social interactions. Decision-making in these areas, in turn, cannot avoid reflection upon ethics and morality, in view of the fact that human interactions demand consideration of the morally permissible, the morally impermissible, and the morally obligatory. The beneficiaries of public administration services are heterogeneous, representing many and varied cultures, belief systems, religions, and more. While seeking the advancement of knowledge and society, innovations should not violate the sanctity of societal mores.

The above matters, among others, were considered at the *Workshop on Public Sector Innovation* in Ottawa, Canada on February 9 and 10, 2002. The articles being published in this special issue of *The Innovation Journal* on the Ethics of Innovation approach the matter of the ethics of innovation from various perspectives, but all endorse the imperative nature of continued discourse on the subject, approaching ethics as instrumental to the *raíson d'être* of government, viz., the meeting of human needs. A tacit agreement within the discourse represented by the present compilation is that innovation can and does improve matters of efficiency and effectiveness in public service delivery, but that innovation can also serve to the detriment of the publics purportedly served by public service organizations. Ethics, instrumentally approached, can harness innovation and steer it down avenues that will assure enhanced service to the public.

In the first presentation Howard Doughty of Seneca College of Applied Arts & Technology, Ontario, Canada, ably argues for authentic discourse on, and the ethics of innovation. Like the other authors in this issue, his concern is the *what* and the *for whom* of innovation. Standing firmly on the shoulders of Jürgen Habermas (in a manner of speaking), he seeks to place the discourse on innovation in the public domain or market place of public management, articulating a concern for inclusiveness particularly of those traditionally excluded from public service innovation. Evidently not a supporter of Fukiyama's end of history, Doughty sees in Habermasian thought tools to deconstruct ideological limitations, and to develop ethical considerations about social transformation, particularly public sector innovation. Among other important matters, he also gives attention to Habermas's debunking of the views of ethically neutral innovations, the ancient public administration dilemma of efficiency versus democratic values (a concern also addressed in the third article by Genevieve Fuji Johnson), and the relationship of both to innovation and ethics. It is against this background that he advocates the enabling function of government with a view to making the discourse on innovation and associated ethics a democratic rather than elitist exercise.

Eleanor Glor, Editor-in-Chief of *The Innovation Journal*, focuses her attention on what she refers to as "innovation traps". She provides an insightful review of innovation and related publications, and identifies three traps for innovation that exist at the level of thinking (thinking fallacies), at the level of theories (thinking paradigms), and at the level of practice (practice biases and dilemmas). Reminiscent of Hannah Arendt, she argues for the moral imperative for public officials to apply their informed thinking faculties to innovation, but also to be suspicious of archaic and established ways of thinking, thinking about thinking, and about doing. After alerting to the pitfalls and "innovator's dilemmas", she proposes ways and means of overcoming them. The complex nature of innovation is stressed by the identification of the "innovation traps", placing an important emphasis on the need to think carefully about information, and the need to be equipped with authentic and relevant information. It is important, therefore, to make innovation projects in the public sector not only individual, but also corporate and cooperative matters. Being equipped with the knowledge of potential "innovation traps" endows the careful public sector innovator with the wherewithal to recognize and avoid them, and to take informed and conscious decisions about the best course of action with a view to efficient and ethical service delivery.

The third article, presented by Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto, Ontario, focuses on the ethics of innovation programs as evidenced in the management of nuclear waste in Canada. She uses a current Canadian case study in order to table her primary concern, viz. that public-private partnerships in innovative projects, devoid of clearly stipulated control and accountability measures, will eventually serve to the detriment of the public it purports to serve. Hence, she contends that public services, no matter how innovative, ought to give priority to the values of distributive justice. She uses the recently developed *Canadian Nuclear Waste Management Policy* as a means through which to question the relationship between economy and efficiency (what she defines as "business values") on the one hand, and distributive justice on the other.

In line with the practical bent taken in the Johnson article, Ian Greene (Public Policy, York University, Ontario) considers the ethics of innovation within the framework of specific public sector innovation projects. He presents two case studies in order to illustrate basic ethical principles that ought to govern the development and implementation of innovative public sector programs and policies. The principles he proposes derive from the *Tri-Council Statement on Ethics*. Although the process of arriving at the *Tri-Council Statement on Ethics* did not include all role players and stake holders, the *Tri-Council Statement* serves as a statement that is generally representative of an effort towards an inclusive discourse on innovation ethics; a discourse explicitly or implicitly argued for in all four presentations in this volume of articles. Greene advocates for sober, informed, and disinterested reflection upon important aspects of the ethics of innovation. These include the need for "equal concern and respect" for all potential beneficiaries, and a critical consideration of the likely impacts of innovative programs on all groups that may be affected by such programs. He uses the elements in the *Tri-Council Statement* as building blocks for an ethics of innovation, and traces the application of these building blocks in the case studies that he sites, concluding that the *Tri-Council* guidelines can serve as a useful "ethics template" for planning and implementing innovative programs.

The articles in this compilation articulate important concepts that seem imperative to the *ethics of innovation* discourse, but remain unencumbered of the temptation to establish metanarratives. The guidelines provided throughout, however, unabashedly contend for morality and ethics as an imperative twin *sine qua non* for public sector innovation, and positively contribute to the uncovering of analytical traits that may characterize ethical public sector innovation.

About the Author

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