

Book Review

James Svara.

The Ethics Primer for Public Administrators in Government and Nonprofit Organizations.
Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett, 2007.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty, Book Reviews Editor

Instead of being content to register such obvious maxims as approval for truth-telling and disapproval for sloth, Svara introduces readers to the basic issues in ethics in general and administrative ethics in particular.

This is a very good book for what it does. It introduces readers to public service ethics and that is something that is very much worth doing. It's not that public servants lack ethics or that the public need instruction about how and why to be impatient with public service, the point here is that it is a commendable project to make ethics and debates about ethics understandable to everyone involved.

James Svara's book advertises itself as a primer. I take him at his word. Like a good paint, a primer should cover an entire area, and provide a solid foundation for more extravagant or refined work. It should also be as neutral as possible, so that it does not show through and be visible when the job is done.

James Svara's *Ethics Primer* does that. Covering the complete surface is difficult. Ethics is not just a list of "Dos and Don'ts." It must consider process and procedure as much as substance. In fact, in my view, it should include almost nothing but process and procedure. It should concentrate on how we should properly come up with decisions about right and wrong rather than make choices about what is or is not good and evil. Ethics is less a matter of moral judgement than of moral thinking. A book on ethics, I believe, should be a rule-book about arriving at a sound moral position, and not an inventory of moral sentiments. But that's just me. Others have alternative positions and approaches.

It is to Svara's credit that he has managed to take a number of positions and approaches into account, and to produce a volume that is usable by almost anyone likely to be searching for a primer in this field. It covers the area, but it is unlikely to intrude upon or to distort further, more sophisticated and more fully developed ideas.

The result is a helpful "how-to" book that takes very little for granted, and that offers few unreflective slogans, much less a "one-size fits all" template for doing the right thing. It is far more than a collection of moralisms or a catalogue of high character traits. Instead of being content to register such obvious maxims as approval for truth-telling and disapproval for sloth, Svara introduces readers to the basic issues in ethics in general and administrative ethics in particular. His main contribution is to supply the intellectual tools and encourages the reader to apply them to the vast range of ethical problems that all of us face every day.

Svara is focused. He does not explore many of the more esoteric matters of importance to advanced ethical philosophers. You will not learn a great deal about metaphysics here. There is little to engage an itinerant axiologist or an aspirant transcendentalist. There are two *brief* mentions of Kant and one reference to Aristotle. On the other hand, I am pleased to report that Plato, whose *Republic* stands as a model of proto-totalitarianism, gets totally ignored.

Novice readers will, however, learn *enough* to appreciate the fundamentals of ethical reasoning, and to do so in ways that permit the lessons to be immediately applied to the real world. Words such as “deontology” and “utilitarian” do appear, I admit, but they are suitably explained, and the reasons why they are important are satisfactorily presented as well.

Of special interest are the practical implications of familiar instruments such as “codes of ethics.” As a trade unionist who works under the rules of a *Collective Agreement* with my employer, I confess to having a dim view of such rules and conventions. In my experience, the introduction of what are commonly known as professional ethical standards amount to nothing more or less than non-negotiated appendices to a binding contract, and I will have none of it. At the same time, I cannot gainsay the legitimacy of ethical concerns in the workplace—especially when employees are considered by themselves and others to be worthy of the honourific status of “professional.” In a particularly thoughtful chapter, Svara sets out a persuasive case for the existence and the enforceability of codes of acceptable conduct within rational corporate cultures. Even sceptics like me cannot easily dismiss his argument.

Svara has other important things to say. Often, ethical standards are put in place to limit the behaviour of organizational subordinates. They are instruments of social control. Whether at the level of the current kerfuffle about WikiLeaks or in the local workplace, political controversies have highlighted the crucial role of “whistleblowers” in all manner of organizations: private, public and nongovernmental. The precarious status of employees who becomes aware of some mischief being done by a co-worker, a supervisor or, for that matter, an entire industry or private firm, public institution, charitable organization or public advocacy group is now familiar to all. On this topic, *The Ethical Primer* offers some sage advice, not on what to say, when and to whom to say it, but on the underlying principles at stake. Svara’s ongoing discussion of “duty” alone is worth the price of the book.

“Fair and balanced” is a phrase that has lost enormous credibility and is now something of a media joke to anyone within the cable or broadcast range of Fox News (a right-wing American television outlet which tests its audience’s credulity every day by declaring itself “fair and balanced,” while denouncing the other corporate media as somehow “liberal” or “left-wing”).

It is, however, applicable to Svara’s clear and succinct guide to the duties of public service. Should anyone be tasked with the responsibility of providing guidance to a single individual, simply interested in thinking through a personal situation in the workplace, offering direction to a group of new employees or presenting a refresher course to management, copies of *The Ethics Primer* would be a fine investment. More than an inspired guest speaker or a “brain-storming” session, James Svara has supplied between two covers a competent and comprehensive introduction to the subject matter for anyone with a need for ethical grounding (and who among us is exempt from that?). The book can be read and discussed in a group or made the subject of personal reflection at home. Either way, it will stand you in good stead when ethical dilemmas appear, and when you begin to think seriously about the concept of duty when it arises on the job or in the rest of your life.

Those who are fortunate enough to have doctoral degrees in philosophy or are already employed as ombudsmen in major institutions may find *The Ethics Primer* a little less than challenging, but that’s what a primer is *for*—and, who knows, you might even be surprised at what you find.

About the author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Sciences at Seneca College, Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howardadoughty@yahoo.ca.