

Organization Theory and Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Balancing instrumental efficiency and social solidarity has been one of the central problems of modern life — as well as for social theory. Auguste Comte, the founder of modern sociology, saw sociology as addressing the problem of how to have both “progress” and “order.”¹ Other scholars like Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim pondered the relationship between modern rational “society” and traditional solidary “community.”² More recently, Jurgen Habermas has been similarly concerned with how the rational “system” and solidary “lifeworld” can be better coordinated after having become uncoupled in modern society.³

The polarity between rational-bureaucratic and organic-communal concerns has also been central in much of literature in organization theory, including the literature concerned with school organization.⁴ Schools and other organizations are commonly analyzed in rational terms with their organizational structures viewed as means to given social ends. Reformers commonly adopt a rational perspective, as well, suggesting ways in which schools may be more efficient in achieving specific goals. In reaction to this narrow, instrumental view, others approach schools in organic-communitarian terms. Informal group processes and organizational cultures are emphasized, rather than rational, bureaucratic structures. Reformers working in the latter vein suggest that schools should be more like families or communities than factories.⁵

What is surprising is the degree to which thought about school organization is polarized in this manner. One side seeks to tighten schools up so they can better achieve extrinsic aims, the other to loosen them up and make them more humane. The recurring debate between these polarized alternatives is not only confusing and demoralizing, it also creates social and ethical problems because both approaches presuppose alienated and dominated work conditions, either by way of promotion or reaction.

In what follows I focus on the ethical implications of these familiar approaches to organization theory, arguing that both rational-bureaucratic and organic-communal approaches actually contribute to unethical conduct. To make this argument I first focus on what it means to behave ethically, as considered from utilitarian, Kantian, and pragmatic standpoints. I then consider three principal classes of organizational theory (adding a third type to the two just mentioned) and show why they are conducive to unethical conduct. I conclude by suggesting how an approach focusing on authentic aims and democratic goal-setting provides the basis for a more ethically sensitive understanding of organization.

WHAT IS ETHICAL CONDUCT?

To behave ethically is to behave in a way that is considered to be “right or wrong, good or bad.”⁶ Ethical difficulties arise when there is conflict or uncertainty about

a good or correct way to behave. In some cases this may involve a conflict between different goods, where attaining one may mean losing another. It could also involve a conflict between an individual good and a norm. Different norms may also conflict, such as when those of one group or community contradict those of another. All such situations raise ethical and not merely technical problems, because they involve conflicts among aims. But what makes a particular resolution of such dilemmas a good or proper one? Utilitarians, Kantians, and pragmatists suggest three different answers

Utilitarianism focuses on the consequences of people's actions on one another insofar as they bring about happiness or unhappiness (or more preferred versus less preferred states). As John Stuart Mill put it, "According to the greatest happiness principle, the ultimate end... is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality."⁷ Conduct that serves to increase the "sum total of happiness" is good. The ethical problem is how to arrange contingencies so that everyone's happiness is increased as much as possible so that "the interest of every individual (is) as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole."⁸ Implicit in this view is the notion that people generally act as they do because of the resulting benefits (relative to costs), not because of any intrinsic goodness of the act itself. Thus utilitarians can be seen as adopting a *consequential* logic that focuses on outcomes rather than processes. They also adopt an atomistic approach to goods, viewing the general good as an aggregate of individual goods.

Kantians focus on doing one's duty rather than acting to bring about desirable outcomes. The essence of moral conduct for Immanuel Kant was to follow a rule for its own sake, rather than because of its consequences. As he put it, "it is not sufficient to that which should be morally good that it conform to the law; it must be done for the sake of the law."⁹ To adopt a rule for its own sake is to adopt it "categorically." Kant's "categorical imperative" thus meant conforming to a principle as an absolute end in itself. As this suggests, Kantians adopt a *categorical* rather than a consequential logic. But which rule should one adopt imperatively? Here Kant argued that one should "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."¹⁰ In other words, make sure the rule you adopt is one you would like to see everyone adopt, even in their treatment of you. John Rawls's theory of justice in which rules for distributing rewards are proposed that are agreeable no matter which station in life one is born into, adopts a somewhat similar approach, although it is also sensitive to consequences.¹¹ As these examples suggest, Kantians focus on good processes rather than good outcomes, and on the general good rather than individual goods.

Pragmatists, like John Dewey agreed with the utilitarians that outcomes are important and with Kantians that processes are important, but saw each approach as flawed, in part, because of its one-sidedness.¹² The utilitarian approach is flawed because it is insensitive to the process by which valued outcomes are brought about. A focus on outcomes irrespective of the means by which they are attained can produce patterns of unethical conduct, such as grades that are given for the wrong reasons. Utilitarians also tend to assume that individual preferences are simply

given, independent of the decision process. The problem is that the interests one has in a situation may depend on the character of the relationship in which one participates (imagine the same reward being given in a condescending versus a humorous manner).

Pragmatists agreed with Kantians that the process of allocating goods may have value in itself, but they point out that the Kantian scheme is flawed due to inattention to consequences. The rule used to settle a dispute may seem fair, since no party may have an a priori advantage, but the outcomes that result from it could be so undesirable that many people would want to change it. The Kantian approach is also insensitive to individual differences in taste, making everyone conform to a universal rule treating all alike.

The greatest difficulty with both utilitarian and Kantianism, however, is that both presuppose a fixed principle or rule for addressing all ethical dilemmas. As Dewey put it, "ethical theory...has been singularly hypnotized by the notion that its business is to discover some final end or good or some ultimate and supreme law. This is the common element among the diversity of theories."¹³ In contrast, Dewey suggested that there are a "plurality of changing, moving, individualized goods and ends" specific to each unique situation.¹⁴ Rather than deciding on the general solution to ethical problems one can adopt a more situation-specific and experimental approach. Each situation has unique goods that may be advanced. To see this one may use norms and practical procedures that have been helpful in the past, as applied to the present conflict, but one cannot simply read off the answer since the present situation is unique (when considered as a whole). Fitting rule and concrete situation calls for judgment and the attempt to find a coherent way forward that is sensitive to each. Furthermore, finding a possible approach may not resolve the situation in practice. It has to be tried to see if it works. Viewed in this way, pragmatists can be seen to adopt an *experimental* logic in which ethical judgments are treated as hypotheses that must be tested in action. They also focus on melioristic *improvement*, or a recurring process of becoming better, rather than one time fixes.¹⁵

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ORGANIZATION THEORY

Given this sense of what it means to be "ethical," or at least common reference points in terms of which to disagree, let me return to the role of organization theory in ethical difficulties.

RATIONAL THEORIES

Most organization theory developed out of rational assumptions. Max Weber defined an organization as "a system of continuous activity pursuing a goal of a specified kind."¹⁶ Many other organization theorists have followed suit by emphasizing the instrumental-rational character of organizations.¹⁷ In each case "rationality" has meant the selection of means thought to bring about a given end. A long literature has such a rational approach to schools, viewing them as bureaucracies, although often with reservations about the strictness with which a purely bureaucratic model applies.¹⁸

There are two principal difficulties with this instrumental-rational orientation with regard to ethics. First, an instrumental-rational approach overlooks whether the

goal being pursued is a good one. Consider efficiency talk in education, for example. Efficient for what? Efficiency is only good if it is in the service of a good goal. Or consider talk about “best practices.” Best for what? Surely different practices are good for different things? Finally, consider charter schools or school choice. Why is this issue framed in terms of which model will best boost test scores when one of the most noticeable things about private schools is that they have different aims or values, not the same ones? If these questions were raised more often we would have more discussion about which aims are good ones — ethical discussion — rather than brushing the issue aside in the rule to get to goal.

A second difficulty is that a rational approach is blind to the side effects of its own instrumentalism. Focusing purely on outcomes tends to make one blind to the consequences of an instrumental manner of behavior itself. This can be especially troublesome in education where many of the most desirable “outcomes” depend upon effects on the aims of others. If I pressure students to do something to such an extent that they learn to hate that activity and avoid it in the future, then I have failed as an educator. I may have won the immediate battle to raise scores, but I have lost the war. Educators must be concerned with more subtle or long run outcomes deriving from the educative process itself, such as its sensitivity to the desires of others and development of shared concerns, as opposed to narrow concern with extrinsic ends.

ORGANIC THEORIES

If the rational metaphor has been dominant in organization theory, an organic metaphor has been the principal opposing view.¹⁹ As Willard Waller put it, “The school is a unity of interacting personalities. The personalities of all who meet in the school are bound together in an organic relation. The life of the whole is in all its parts, yet the whole could not exist without any of its parts. The school is a social organism.”²⁰

The principal assumptions embedded in the organic metaphor are, first, that an organization, like an organism, has a life of its own. It is more than a means to an end, it is an end in itself! Second, each organization is unique, like the uniqueness of a biological organism. Combining these ideas, one might say that the essence of the organic idea is that every collectivity has its own unique inner life that should be valued and needs to be understood to adequately understand the behavior of its members.

The organic metaphor appears at many points in organization theory, such as the human relations school of Elton Mayo, and Fritz J. Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, as well as in work by Chester Barnard and Philip Selznick.²¹ Informal organization has also been extensively studied in school, as in books such as Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching*, James S. Coleman, *Adolescent Society*, Philip Cusick, *Inside High School*, Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor*, Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It* and various studies of the informal culture of teachers or teachers as members of a professional community.²² Recent appeals to create moral communities, communities of care, or school-homes, in Tom Sergiovanni's, Nel Noddings's, or Jane Roland Martin's work also suggest that organic tendencies, or certain versions of them, should be fostered in school.²³

On the face of it, an organic metaphor would seem nicely aligned with ethical concern. Nevertheless, there are serious ethical problems with unqualified organicism. Emphasis on the overriding value of the relationships and traditions of a given group or community can lead to ignoring the interests of other groups or communities whose activities are interdependent with the first. A group may become closed, defensive, or arrogant with respect to others. Certain group processes may also become so strong that the aims or values of minorities or individuals within the group are ignored. An emphasis on the innate goodness of organic solidarity and its norms may blind one to their consequences, which may be quite negative if a given norm has outlived its usefulness. Needed changes in norms that might help in adapting to changing conditions may not be acknowledged by those focusing entirely on convention or tradition.

This analysis suggests that those who place penultimate emphasis on the organic community may actually be reinforcing unethical conduct. The resulting conduct may be consistent with group norms but fail to allow for reflective consideration of the desires of minorities or of other groups with which the first is interdependent. It may also fail to reevaluate the instrumental goodness of norms as conditions change. Just because behavior conforms to the norms of a given group does not make it ethical, at least in the more pragmatic way in which the term is used here.

ETHICAL ORGANIZATION

The problem with both of the approaches discussed so far is that they adopt fixed, static stances. The rational metaphor assumes a pre-defined goal. The organic metaphor assumes a predefined community. Both tend to define an organization in a way that does not allow for redefinition of its mission or boundaries. Both also seem to assume that the individuals participating in the organization have static motives and identities, making them theories of dead, lifeless organizations. The reason for this may become more evident if we consider where these metaphors came from.

The split between rational and organic metaphors seems to have emerged out of alienated or morally illegitimate working conditions in which the interests of superiors and subordinates, or owners and workers, diverge. It is not surprising that organizational superiors tend to adopt a rational view, since formal goal attainment is what gives owners profits or makes superiors look good. Nor is it surprising that subordinates tend to take an organic view, since this helps to protect them from hierarchical demands and reinforce their claims to more humane treatment. If we want to develop an organization theory that better relates to ethical concern we need to start from less-alienated assumptions. To begin to develop such a theory I would like to turn to Dewey's analysis of authentic and democratic aims.

AUTHENTIC AIMS

In his discussion of educational aims Dewey developed a simple but helpful analysis of what makes an aim a good one.²⁴ We often think of an aim or goal in external terms, as though it were something imposed irrespective of one's own prior activity. Dewey argued that such external ends are likely to "obtain when social

relationships are not equitably balanced. For in that case some portions of the whole social group will find their aims determined by an external dictation; their aims will not arise from the free growth of their own experience, and their nominal aims will be means to more ulterior ends of others rather than truly their own" (*DE*, 100-01). For instance, a student who is studying in order to get a good grade is not really interested in the course material itself. When an aim is internal to an act, on the other hand, it functions to direct activity, linking action just completed to the whole act one hopes to complete. Having an aim involves a *process* of seeing the end in the beginning (and the beginning in the end), and using this vision to regulate on-going activity. Considered functionally, having an aim involves a continuing *process* of aiming.

This conception of the role of aiming in action provided Dewey with some criteria for good aims. The first is that an aim "must be an outgrowth of existing conditions" (*DE*, 104). It must pick up from what has gone before, developing from conditions here and now, as opposed to being applied irrespective of the present state of ongoing activity. Secondly, an aim should be flexible, being held in an experimental fashion, rather than rigidly. It needs to adapt to changing conditions which may make an aim impossible to attain. Third, an aim should help create conditions enabling further valued acts to proceed. In short, a good aim is one that is well-suited to where one is at present, builds from there in a flexible way so that continuity is maintained, and it is fruitful in releasing and fostering further activity.

This view differs considerably from the conventional conception of rational action. Placing aims within on-going activity makes them lose the external, alienating quality they have in the rational model. The pursuit of a goal becomes a matter of continuing what one was trying to do, rather than meeting an external demand. Some refer to such aims as "authentic" goals, such as those emerging for a student's own.²⁵ When applied to school organization, this analysis suggests that those in a school need to consider the actual state of activity and its practically improveable aspects, rather than adopting an extrinsic goal that will frustrate or confuse people because it does not build on what has been going on previously. The goal-setting process also needs to be flexible so that poor goals can be modified midstream, it being more important to find new, better goals than to stick with old unattainable ones. Finally, the process needs to be one that improves the willingness and capacity of people to assess and improve their future aiming. If goal-setting has been imposed on people who have received no practice in the process they learn nothing besides distaste and passivity.

DEMOCRATIC AIMS

Dewey's analysis of the role of aiming in action helps show how means and ends, work and play, may be integrated in authentic, artful action. The conceptual turn that Dewey used in his analysis was to begin with the *process* of constructing an act, rather than with the structures or divisions created by this process, making it easier to see how the parts of an act can be coordinated over time. He used a similar approach to help understand how the aims or different people could be coordinated with one another.

In some ways Dewey sounded much like the organic theorists I have already criticized, since he also wrote a lot about “community.” However, “community” was conceived of as a process, not a thing. As Dewey wrote, “Society not only continues to exist...by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in...communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common” (*DE*, 4). Social life is “identical with communication” (*DE*, 5). Considered in this way “community” is a way of acting in which people take each other’s on-going activity into account in constructing their own actions. More than that, they need to learn to take each other’s viewpoints, adopting the reactions of others into their own emerging actions. As conditions and actions change, various coordination difficulties emerge, requiring new efforts to take each other’s roles. Community, is, thus, a continual accomplishment, not a static state of affairs.

Dewey’s image of a good social life was often one in which different people utilized their unique, diverse talents in mutually shared endeavor. There was both unity in diversity and diversity in unity.²⁶ However, this is not a fixed state of affairs; it is a continued accomplishment created by good communication and shared aiming. Dewey recognized, of course, that problems would come up and conflicts occur. One person’s line of action might conflict with another’s, just as many people might undermine their own activities through interfering side-effects occurring on a pooled basis.²⁷ This is where the formation of a self-conscious public, dialogue, and democratic problem-solving came in. If the process of resolving breakdowns in community can itself be communal, then the very process of resolving conflict will contribute to ongoing community. The means of democratic problem-solving will be fully infused with the ends of cooperative action. A good society, for Dewey, was one that could continually renew itself in this way, using mutually-regarding reasoning and problem-solving to solve difficulties in coordinated action as they arose. As a result, there was no utopian solution to the problem of creating a good society, only a continually recurring process of acting together and together repairing problems in coordinated action. All that one can rely on is continued, cooperative meliorism.

CONCLUSIONS

Organization theory, like much social thought, has been polarized between a rational approach that views an organization as a mere instrument or “organ” serving a larger whole, and a solidary approach that views it as an organic whole in itself. Both views may foster unethical conduct since they embody a fixed conception of the organization, blinding an observer to the unique qualities and goods present in each specific situation. An instrumental-rational orientation accepts given goals and in so doing neglects concern with whether these goals are good ones in the first place. It is also blind to the side-effects of its own instrumentalism, leading to attempts to achieve goals in ways that have unanticipated and potentially undesirable side-effect. An organic-communal orientation accepts given relationships and norms and in so doing may fail to consider the claims of minorities and external communities

or the difficulties of individuals who face conflicting norms from multiple communities. It tends to be blind to the side effects of its own proceduralism, so that norms may be held regardless of their consequences.

A pragmatic approach attempts to address these problems by beginning with a conception of action that is neither alienated nor socially dominated. It emphasizes the value of action that is well-coordinated sequentially and socially. Practical selection of goals that pick up from prior activity, are flexible, and enable desirable ends to be reached while maintaining continuity for new ones, is one recommendation. Democratic problem-solving based on recognition of public problems, dialogue among the affected parties, and an attempt to reach solutions that integrate the (possibly redefined) interests of the parties is another. Both become means *and* end to good organization. Seen from this perspective the “good” or ethical organization is one that is improving from its present state and becoming more capable of identifying and addressing its own “public” problems, rather than one conforming to a given template. The resolution of the conflict between rational-bureaucratic and organic-communal concerns is found in working together to identify and solve emergent collective problems arising out of interdependent activities. The good organization is one that is continually getting better.

This solution to the problem of integrating bureaucratic and communal concerns will undoubtedly seem too fluid to those who seek static structural solutions to educational problems. It may also seem too utopian to those who work in conditions where honest dialogue appears impossible. The good news, however, is that existing structures can function in many different ways, so there is more flexibility than is commonly thought, and dialogue is often more possible than it seems. Situated, melioristic problem-solving and democratic social relations can be adopted in a wide range of situations when there is the will to do so. In the end, more ethical schooling is mostly about finding ways to be more honest, flexible, and attentive in helping each other, starting from where we are. Clearing the way for this simple but strangely radical solution is what this talk has been about.

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11. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
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