Public Administrator's Responsibilities towards Local and Global Pollution: Here-Now-Future

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Imagine that climate change didn't exist. Carbon emissions from electricity generation; methane emissions from agriculture processes; fugitive leaks from natural gas pipelines; and other purported greenhouse gases simply did not cause the average temperature of the Earth to increase 1.5 degrees Celsius since the start of the industrial revolution. Whether through a perfect balancing out of carbon emission and sequestration through ecological or technological processes, anthropogenic climate change was not something that existed. What would public administrators care about in terms of local environmental pollution? One example: school principals and parents can go to EPA.gov and receive an "Idle-Free Schools" toolkit and learn that idling vehicles emit pollutants that can cause cancer; contribute to increased risk of developing asthma; and other detrimental health effects to tiny, still-developing lungs (EPA). Parents and administrators care about local vehicle emissions – and how it may affect their children and community – without having to worry about how local pollution aggregates up to global level.

Now, imagine that anthropogenic climate change did exist, but the local effects of a warming world were not experienced and thus not mitigated. Incontrovertible scientific fact proved that human economic, social, and cultural activity emitted gases into the atmosphere that increased the average temperature of the entire planet which attributed to unpredictable weather patterns; biodiversity loss; ecological degradation; and other disastrous consequences…somewhere else (IPCC-a). What global environmental issues would a public administrator care about then? Would they care at all? Unfortunately, for a large part of the United States policymaking, political, and industrial apparatus, this second hypothetical is already true — and will have calamitous effects the world over.

The goal of this essay is to equate the ethical responsibilities of public administrators with that of identifying, mitigating, repairing, and preventing ecological harm – locally and globally. Using H.

George Frederick's *Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligations to Future Generations* as a north star, this essay will connect public administrator's responsibilities temporally with those spatially. In the foreword to *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, Aldo Leopold laments, "Like wind and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them." (p. xxi). By virtue of their responsibility to their constituents, public administrators have – in a Leopoldan-like manner – an ethical duty to preserve wild things, wind, and sunsets now and in the future.

Public Administrator's Temporal and Spatial Responsibilities

Public administrators have many responsibilities. Namely, they have a duty to promote the public interest, advance justice, and seek the greatest good (Svara, pg. 195). But whose public interest is being promoted and whose justice is being advanced? Actions of a public administrator in one jurisdiction have consequences for the constituents in another. Air pollution doesn't follow state borders (Daley; The Lancet; Spengler). Leachate[1] contaminates groundwater systems that are shared by multiple municipalities, states, regions, and countries (NRDC). And most seriously: carbon, methane, and other greenhouse gas emissions from human activity increase average planetary temperatures and contribute to their subsequent deleterious ecological effects (IPCC). There is no conception of ethical public administration that ignores or forgets these facts.

In *Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligations to Future Generations*, H. George Frederickson details the philosophical and ethical responsibilities that public officials have when dealing with intergenerational issues (Frederickson, 1994, pg. 457). Frederickson identifies various philosophers that have long wrestled with this question but arrived at answers similar in direction but different in scope (Frederickson, pg. 458-459). Kant's *categorical imperative* doesn't assume or presuppose

[1] Leachate is water that has percolated through a solid – such as rainwater through landfill soil – and has *leached* out harmful particles into groundwater systems

temporal limitations and that, “time is irrelevant in moral philosophy”; John Locke in §26-27 of Two Treatises of Government lays out that one must leave enough, “as good left in common for others” (Frederickson, pg. 461; Locke §26-27). This last clause is necessarily temporal as only those who come after you can enjoy earth and its resources in this Lockean manner of thought.

Public administrators *do* have a responsibility to future generations. But they also have responsibilities and duties to current generations located elsewhere. Frederickson draws from Rawls via Kant that, “if justice and equality are imperative in one place and at one time, they are imperative at another place and at another time” (Frederickson, pg. 458). This proposition sums the thrust of this essay up perfectly. Administrators must think about how their actions affect current generations **(Here-Now)** and in the future **(Here-Not Now)** as well as current generations elsewhere **(Not Here-Now)** and in the future **(Not Here-Not Now).** Local pollution **(Here-Now)** is deleterious to the health of people, animals, and the environment. But as explained in the last section: local pollution doesn’t stay local **(Not Here-Now)**. The following is *figure 2 – Intergenerational Social Equity: Natural Resource Depletion* in Frederickson’s article:

Figure 2
Intergenerational Social Inequity: Natural Resource Depletion

Costs \ Benefits	Temporal Generations	Near-Term Future Generations	Future Generations
Temporal Generations			
Near-term Future Generations	moderate		
Future Generations	strong	moderate	

This figure defines and explains the costs of benefits of natural resource depletion for current and future generations. Current generations benefit from resource extraction for fuel, housing,

transportation, and the like while future generations are left with fewer and worse off natural resource options (Frederickson, pg. 462). But this formation isn't exactly correct in ascribing costs and benefits of resource extraction. Constituents and non-constituents may benefit from the same policy by din of living in the same area while other areas may be subject to unjust resource extraction and environmental despoiling (Stump, 2021). The following is a new conception of costs and benefits building off Frederickson's matrix but with certain considerations for time as well as place:

Natural Resource Extraction (without mitigation)	**Constituents (Here) Positively Affected**	**Constituents (Here) Negatively Affected**	**Non-Consitutents (Not Here) Nearby Positively Affected**	**Non-Constituents (Not Here) Nearby Negatively Affected**	**Non-Constituents (Not Here) Far Away Positively Affected**	**Non-Constituents (Not Here) Far Away Negatively Affected**
Temporal (Now)	Jobs, Healthcare, Stability, Dignity	Environmental Degradation; Perverse Health Outcomes	Jobs, Healthcare, Stability, Dignity	Environmental Degradation; Perverse Health Outcomes	State and National GDP increase; Prestige	Oil Tanker Spills; Air Quality Degradation
Near-Term Future (Not Now)	Increased tax base; social safety net; Climate Change	Continued Pollution; Groundwater contamination	Increased tax base; social safety net; Climate Change	Climate Change	Climate Change	Climate Change
Future (Later)	Increased tax base; social safety net; Climate Change	Climate Change	Climate Change	Climate Change	Climate Change	Climate Change

As this figure lays bare: climate change comes for us all. In fact, those generations and constituent groups that received positive effects will also be victim to climate change because climate change exists through time and space in different degrees and contours. Just as certain areas are delegated "sacrifice zones", certain people are delegated sacrificed and subordinated. Even those who dug the coal; laid the line; and picked the vegetables. Rather than a simple grid of costs and benefits, a true conception would be more akin to multiple mobius strips of costs and benefits; a Gordian knot of jobs and layoffs; employer-provided healthcare and environmental despoilation and negative health outcomes. If public administrators are responsible for people and the planet now and in the future, then what can be done and how can it be done in the most ethically responsible manner possible?

Democratic Accountability Necessitates Inclusivity of Non-Human Animals and Nature

Principle 5 of the American Society for Public Administrators (ASPA) Code of Ethics is to Fully Inform and Advise. This principle demands that public administrators provide timely and accurate information to political superiors, elected officials, organization members, and the public (ASPANET.Org). But what does it mean to fully inform and advise? Who decides what "full" information is? For the last half-century of public administration, cost-benefit analyses have dominated the discourse in determining governmental courses of action (Popp Berman). In Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy, Princeton Sociologist Elizabeth Popp Berman identifies how an *economic style of reasoning* developed and spread through all levels of policymaking in the United States (pg. 5). This style of reasoning – which mainly includes innocuous and straightforward cost-benefit analyses – has serious ethical implications. First, the definition of "cost" is constrained while "benefits" are inflated (or vice-versa depending on who's using the argument). Who defines cost and who defines benefit? Second, the policy choices of administrators and politicians are narrowed down to simple market mechanisms. If public administrators are to fully inform and advise, then the cost of pollution and climate change must be included in the equation. How does an ethical administrator calculate costs and benefits for policies when the costs may be concealed, and the benefits may be spread out?

Principles 1, 3, and 4 of the ASPA code of ethics are to Advance the Public Interest, Promote Democratic Participation and Strengthen Society Equity, respectively (ASPANET.org). If public administrators are to fully inform and advise their political superiors and constituents when determining the most ethical course of action, then those administrators must adhere to these principles. Democratic participation means gaining input from all aspects of society – including those not directly making their case known in the first place. *Advancing the public interest is strengthening social equity*. The only way to identify how and when the public interest needs advanced is through democratic

participation. Administrators have an ethical duty to account for pollution that harms the environment and their downstream consequences. Administrators also have an ethical duty to listen to people whose bodies, land, water, air, and food systems have been harmed due to industrial or governmental actions and make sincere efforts at mitigation and reparation. Democratic accountability also includes considerations for those in the future and located elsewhere.

Public administrators are imbued with an incredible amount of power and agency. They come to their position with a wealth of life experience, morals, and principles. Administrators are responsible for fully informing their political superiors as well as the public and to always seek the greater good. In trying to fulfill their obligations and duties, public administrators must consider how their action affect those who are not in plain view. All administrative action has consequence; all administrative actions contain an ethical dimension. For ethical public administrators to “do their duty”, they must consider temporal and spatial dimensions of their actions (Svara, pg. 197).

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