
Escape from politics: philosophic foundations of public administration

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Abstract

In order to appreciate recent practical and theoretical changes in the field of public administration, this article contrasts the ancient to the modern view of "politics". These contrasting views of politics are used to explain and evaluate the ongoing debate in public administration scholarship between what the authors call the contemporary "communitarian" school and the new public management school. By placing these competing schools of thought in public administration in the larger context of the history of political thought, the authors reveal some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. They argue that in fact these two competing schools of thought capture the tension between the ancient and the modern views as they have developed in the history of Western political thought.

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Introduction

At the dawn of the twenty-first century and the third millennium it is appropriate to view recent developments in public administration from the more comprehensive vantage point of the history of political thought. Specifically, in order to appreciate recent practical and theoretical changes in the field of public administration, this research will contrast the ancient to the modern view of "politics". Politics in the ancient sense describes a process by which citizens deliberate about, and arrive at, the common good. This ancient view embraced politics as an activity which most fully expressed and developed civic virtue in citizens. The modern perspective attempts to escape this ancient notion of politics by denying the desirability or even the possibility of citizens deliberating about the common good and thereby the development of political virtues.

These contrasting views of politics are directly relevant to the ongoing debate in public administration scholarship between what we will call contemporary "communitarian" ideas and the so-called new public management. By placing these competing schools of thought in public administration in the larger context of the history of political thought, we hope to reveal some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. We will argue that in fact these two competing schools of thought capture the tension between the ancient and modern views as they have developed in the history of Western political thought. The new public management approach, which appears to us to be a culmination of the modern view, applies the economic model to public administration and treats the bureaucracy as a value-neutral service provider. This new

approach tends to see government as a science whose chief function is to satisfy the demands of the public, whether good, bad, or indifferent. We will argue that politics in the modern sense, whose focus is accepting and understanding the influence of self-interest, and building political institutions without regard for their ability or inability to foster civic virtue, led to today's new public management school of public administration. We will argue further that a return to a politics concerned about civic virtue and the common good is highly unlikely on both practical as well as philosophical grounds.

Philosophical origins of the escape from politics

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322BC) thought of civic life, or the life of the citizen, as the highest expression of our humanity. Indeed Aristotle thought those who attempted to escape politics and concerned themselves only with private matters were displaying their ignorance and were almost less than human. Man, said Aristotle, was a "political animal" (Aristotle, 1984).

It therefore follows that for the ancient philosophers, the principal aim of government should be to foster civic virtue in its citizens. That is, the ancients wanted government to develop in citizens a concern for the common good and a willingness to make decisions on the basis of justice and fairness, not selfishness. The aim was not just to change citizens' outward behavior through appropriate laws and law enforcement, but to change them inwardly to be better people (Strauss, 1999). For Aristotle, the model of participation in politics was one of friendship among citizens, each concerned not only about himself but primarily about the common good. The role of the public official was that of statesmanship. Officials should serve as an example of civic virtue



and should lead the people as their servant, with only their good in mind.

The ancients are often called “idealists” because they developed ideals of statesmanship, government and personal virtue that could be used as models for improvement in their fellow citizens[1]. As we will see, the ancient idealists have their intellectual heirs even today, in the communitarian school of thought in political science and public administration.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) is sometimes referred to as the first modern political philosopher or even the father of modern political science (Strauss, 1999). This is because of the self-conscious and decisive break he made with the ancient world views, especially in his most famous work, *The Prince*. Machiavelli looked around him and saw that the ancient solution had not changed anything. People were as bad if not worse than they had ever been. He believed that by focusing too much attention on the development of civic virtue in both leaders and citizens, ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle were simply wasting people's time or, worse, diverting their attention from political and economic goals that were realistic and achievable (Machiavelli, 1995, ch.15, 18). This general rejection of ancient idealism in favor of “what works” became symptomatic of the modern perspective in political thought, which is generally labeled “realism”.

As a realist, Machiavelli rejected the pursuit of citizen virtue as the highest aim of government and instead endorsed lowering standards to reach more achievable, realistic goals. In practice this meant, for instance, that the leader had to reject religion's truth while using religion as a powerful tool to manipulate the masses. Instead of civic virtue and meaningful participation, Machiavelli's aims were safety, power, and prosperity. The leader's primary concern had to be the security of the state, and secondarily the state's prosperity.

The ancient idealists' aim of changing people's character through political activity was rejected in favor of simply obtaining appropriate outward behavior through good laws and law enforcement. That is, Machiavelli rejected politics in the ancient sense. He revamped the role of the political philosopher, too, taking that role from a moralist to a value-neutral architect or engineer of new and better political systems. From that time on, the trend in European political thought was in Machiavelli's direction. The modern intellectual was to deal with human nature as it actually is – self-interested and unchangeable – and to

propose realistic solutions for dealing with human problems in a practical manner. Modern positivistic political science and public administration, with their distinction between facts and values and emphasis on studying only measurable human behavior, are the intellectual grandchildren of Machiavelli.

The Enlightenment

This modern turn away from idealism toward realism initiated by Machiavelli provided the basis for Enlightenment philosophy, most notably that of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The Enlightenment is critical for the subsequent development of Western political thought in general and in particular of thought in public administration.

Hobbes (1588-1679) posited a natural equality among human beings. This equality was based upon the fact that human beings were radically individualistic. Each individual's perspective on the world was conditioned by his or her physical constitution and experiences. This radical individualism led Hobbes to reject entirely the ancient view that man is a political animal, whose organization into society was a natural development of his humanity. It also led him to conclude that such radically individualistic and self-interested creatures would more naturally see each other as enemies than as friends and fellow citizens. Without government, he argued, each individual was equally vulnerable to the attacks of every other. These equal individuals entered into the social contract merely to escape the threat of violent death they posed to each other. Government's purpose from the Hobbesian view became preservation of (hopefully comfortable) life (Hobbes, 1983).

Radically individualistic people, ruled primarily by their passions and not their reason, could not be expected to agree on a “common good” beyond safety. Thus for Hobbes and later Enlightenment thinkers, government could not define and then promote civic virtue. Government could only provide a value-neutral context for individuals to pursue the good life safely as they defined it for themselves. As a matter of fact, Hobbes ends up advocating absolute monarchy which would impose outward uniformity upon people as the only way to achieve peace. For Hobbes, forcing people to conform outwardly was the only way to avoid the conflict caused by a radically

individualistic human nature (Hobbes, 1962, ch. 13).

English philosopher Locke (1632-1704) picked up on Hobbes's theory and carried it further in the direction of the expansion of individual rights in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Hobbes had painted such a terrible picture of the state of nature that people would choose to live under authoritarian domination rather than live without government. In contrast, Locke brought in slightly different assumptions about the state of nature. It was not quite such a frightening place, so that people would not leave it only to live under a tyranny. The social contract he constructed contained within it not just a right to life, but of the individual's pursuit of liberty and property, preparing the way for the liberal democratic state (Locke, 1980).

Taken together, Hobbes and Locke established the assumptions about individualism and self-interest which flowed into the Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth century. Both held that government was not about producing virtuous citizens. It was not, as the ancient idealists thought, to be an end in itself, an instrument for the involvement of citizens in politics. Rather, government was a means to an end. The end of government was keeping order, keeping people peaceable through good laws and effective law enforcement. Particularly in Locke's case, government was about maintaining an atmosphere in which private enterprise was free to grow and prosper, instead of being hindered by too much taxation or government regulation. Indeed, as liberal thought continued to develop, the ancient view of public life as the most important area of human activity began to vanish. In its place there was a greater and greater emphasis on the "private sector" as being the most important area in which people lived and interacted with each other. Government was for protecting our private lives and enterprise not for fostering civic virtue (Macpherson, 1964).

If government was not about encouraging civic virtue, but was rather about safety and prosperity, then at the same time as we made government more democratic we also constricted its vision. Hobbes, Locke and later thinkers in Enlightenment liberalism concluded that "vision" (such as defining and promoting virtue, religion or morality) was inherently controversial, was indeed the ultimate cause of human conflict, and could not be agreed upon in a democratic society but had to be left up to the individual to decide. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the bourgeois or

commercial class, individualism became ever stronger. It seemed impossible to return to the idealistic view that there was a "common good", that man was somehow a "political animal", and that citizens could agree upon what was right for all through deliberation. Henceforth, political activity would be seen more as bargaining and jockeying among individuals and interest groups for power, position and wealth. Government would largely escape politics in the ancient sense in favor of utility.

This Enlightenment point of view is certainly reflected in the American founding. For example, it involves a great emphasis on individualism and individual rights, a growing divide between the public and the private realms, and the idea that the public realm should be for fostering individuals' free enjoyment of the private realm. The modern idea that man can manipulate his fate via a new political science predominated Western thought of the period. In fact, the proposal that we could escape politics by using scientific human reason to develop the proper institutions of government, that we could escape politics by understanding man's selfish nature and pitting interest against interest, became the prevailing faith in political philosophy. Madison's well-known view was that factions based on narrow self-interest were inevitable in a democratic republic. For Madison, the only effective way to neutralize them was through extending the territory of the republic until it was large enough to encompass many factions that would then neutralize each other (Hamilton, *et al.*, 1982). The US Constitution reflected the Enlightenment doctrine of individualism and inevitably self-interested behavior in its separation of powers, checks and balances and in the Bill of Rights.

For the American founders, government was to be minimal. It was to be devised in such a way that it could not threaten the rights of individuals. Although the project of spreading liberal democratic revolution gave such government a glow of virtue, the government was not to be about virtue but instead providing a context within which individuals could define virtue for themselves, or not. Whether citizens were truly good or not, whether they cared about the common good or only themselves, was to be of no concern to modern governments (Mansfield, 1989). Politics in the ancient sense had disappeared. Rather, the law was to create a context in which the pursuit of private advancement and private intellectual activity could flourish. Government was to leave the private realm unpoliticized.

The Enlightenment and the new public management

Despite the obvious connection between Enlightenment thought and the American founding, it is not until the latter half of the twentieth century that political thought and practice in the USA fully accepted the ideas of the Enlightenment. The same is true for the field of public administration. It is arguably the case that the eighteenth century Enlightenment does not entirely inform administrative thought and practice until the recent emergence of the so-called new public management. This new approach (both as it was reflected in public administration scholarship and in the reality of public administration) goes beyond only attempting to separate partisan politics from administration. In addition, it renders irrelevant the cultivation of civic virtue both among the general public and within the ranks of the civil service itself. This makes the new public management much closer to the modern liberal ideal of value-neutrality in government and constitutes for public administration the ultimate escape from politics.

The trend towards “public management” as opposed to “public administration” has been sweeping countries around the world. This new approach uses the “economic market as a model for political and administrative relationships” (Kaboolian, 1998, p. 190). Similarly, in much of the scholarship of public administration there has been a noticeable change toward economic/rational choice analysis.

Instead of seeing workers within a bureaucracy in an instrumental sense – people hired for the skills and controlled through hierarchical authority – they viewed workers as self-interested individuals. This approach, christened “principal-agent theory”, views organizational interactions as relationships between a principal, who has a job to be done, and an agent, who agrees to do the job in exchange for compensation. In such relationships, principals and agents alike seek their self-interest (Kettl, 1999).

Typical of the Enlightenment project to escape from politics, administration is viewed as a science in which all that are required are rational inputs and outputs in order to satisfy the demands of the public. Consideration of the common good (politics in the ancient sense) is totally absent from the equation (Kaboolian, 1998). Often this depoliticization is expressed in the attempt to treat public agencies like private businesses. This would certainly be the case with Peters’ theory of “liberation management”. Peters proposes to treat administrators almost like

private contractors who are simply assigned an objective, given the funds, but not told how to do the job. Without all the rules and regulations of the old bureaucracy, administrators would be able to get the job done more efficiently and effectively (Peters, 1992). This market-driven approach to management works best, according to its advocates, when public agencies are exposed to market forces and are made to compete. An example of this would be if public schools are made to compete with private schools through the use of transferrable vouchers (for examples of this market-driven approach see, Hood, 1995; Kettl, 1997).

The liberation management model’s appeal to business practice often also includes a growing institutional attitude of “customer service”. At universities, professors and administrators are urged to see the students as “customers” and themselves as “service providers”. At the Internal Revenue Service, accessibility and accountability encompassed in a new “customer friendly” feel have replaced the bureaucracy’s previously remote and authoritative style.

This latter example is actually one among many to come out of the “National Performance Review”, an exercise by Vice President Albert Gore in the Clinton administration. The Clinton administration’s manifestation of the new public management approach was christened *Reinventing Government*, the title of a book by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) which sought to refashion public administrators into entrepreneurs who would change the traditional mode of administration to a more market-oriented approach. This new scholarship reflected real changes in the way countries around the world were organizing their bureaucracies. In theory and in practice, the focus is now on “management rather than social values; on efficiency rather than equity; on mid-level managers instead of elites; on generic approaches rather than tactics tailored to specifically public issues; on organizations rather than processes and institutions; and on management rather than political science or sociology” (Kettl, 1999).

From the perspective of the history of political thought, this “new” approach is not new. It is simply an extension of the Enlightenment ideal of escaping politics. From this new public management perspective, politics in the broader sense of deliberation about the common good is finally and totally separated from administration. The language of contracts and transactions replaces the language of politics with its considerations of equity, fairness and the common good. These latter

considerations, so the argument goes, should only express themselves in the rough and tumble of partisan politics outside of the framework of the administrative apparatus. Unfortunately, the modern liberal regime leaves as little room outside of this apparatus for the practice of civic virtue as the new public management school does within it. The modern liberal regime has indeed been transformed more and more into simply a ground for competing interest groups, in which it is difficult to discern any theme concerning the common good.

The problems with the Enlightenment

All of this is not to suggest that Enlightenment thought is thoroughly and readily accepted by all, even at the time it emerged. Rather, critics ranging from the classic work of Rousseau in the eighteenth century to contemporary communitarians, to modern day commentators dealing with the new public management, question the implications of the Enlightenment for the development of individuals and societies. These various sources of criticism are for the most part in agreement about the general problems raised by Enlightenment thought.

Rousseau and the communitarians

First and foremost, critics argue that Enlightenment thought is basically wrong when it comes to the assumptions made regarding human nature. Specifically, critics object to the radical individualism assumed by Enlightenment thought. This is argued to be a distortion of human nature in that it denies the ability of humans to determine the common good while legitimizing the unbridled pursuit of self-interest, and by implication of materialism as well. For example, Rousseau (1712-1778), argued that the individualism of the Enlightenment was an excuse to be selfish and cruel to one's fellow human beings. In addition, the emphasis on private property rights was not some exalted freedom to Rousseau, but rather a license for the rich to abuse the poor. Democracy under these conditions would simply amount to the rule of the rich. All people would be miserable, he thought, because of the atmosphere of competition, rank, envy and other false passions inflamed by the Enlightenment's decadent values of individualism and selfishness (Rousseau, 1987).

Second, the critics argue that this emphasis on the driving force of self-interest simply leads to more and more selfish

behavior. Although Enlightenment thinkers believed selfishness was natural, critics thought that it was simply a response to individualistic political and materialistic economic arrangements fostered by Enlightenment liberalism. Contemporary communitarians specifically argue that the modern liberal way of thinking can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy, producing the very reactions of selfishness and hostility it predicts. For example, America's founders wanted to create a large republic because they thought that factions were inevitable and they wanted a system in which there were enough factions that, pitted against each other, none would predominate. One could argue instead that the system created encouraged the very splits and selfish behavior they thought were natural and inevitable[2].

Third, the Enlightenment attempt to escape politics by assuming that persons are unable to determine collectively the common good necessarily fosters value-neutrality in government. Government was not to be about fostering civic virtue in citizens but only about making them safe and representing their various interests. According to the critics, in the name of individual rights, the Enlightenment downplayed or even destroyed a sense of duty and obligation among citizens. Indeed Enlightenment thinking is argued to have destroyed true citizenship in the sense of a community of people who care and deliberate about the common good. In turn, the critics charge that Enlightenment thought destroyed the social fabric and the consensus about values that had taken centuries to build and that humans require in order to thrive[3].

Modern day communitarians on both the left and the right are especially concerned about this decline of consensus concerning common values as a result of the value-neutrality encouraged by today's liberal regimes. For example, MacIntyre (1981) argues that human beings are only fully human when they understand themselves within a context – a tradition or a “narrative” which provides them a meaning. That is, contrary to liberal thinking, human beings are uncomfortable with the task of self-definition but instead desire, even need, a given context with assumptions about morality and social/political interaction within which to develop. MacIntyre (1981) concludes that contemporary liberalism has pushed individualism to the point of moral relativism, and that relativism has ultimately led to rampant selfishness and the breakdown of any true community.

Administration theorists

In many ways critiques of contemporary new public management approaches parallel the communitarian comments regarding Enlightenment liberalism. The new public management approach emerged because of changes in the expectations of the public. In contemporary liberal regimes, and as an ultimate culmination of the effects of the Enlightenment, publics have come to see government not as a source of moral leadership but as a value-neutral service provider. People have demanded a more responsive and efficient government which mirrors what they perceive to be the advantages of private business. These demands on the part of an enlightened public made administration different, but did it necessarily make it better?

As Terry points out, the new public management approach advocates a distorted view of human nature. Just as the public is seen as a collection of rational maximizers in Enlightenment thought, administrators see themselves as maximizers of self-interest and by consequence maximizers of the interest of the institutions they direct. They will seek to make their agencies ever more efficient, and at the same time, like private business, they will seek "profit" or the growth of their particular industry by promoting their services and seeking out clients to serve. This distorted view of human nature, especially as it becomes institutionalized in public administration, is apt to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, it is apt to encourage selfishness and cynicism both in the public and among administrators. The new public management encourages public administrators and their private counterparts to act as "entrepreneurs" who are more likely to make decisions on the basis of their own personal agenda than on the basis of the common good. If they can only stay in business by innovating, showing that they have done better than their competition, they will innovate whether it is needed or not. Thus, what is an escape from politics in the ancient sense toward rational management of the public trust becomes political in the lowest modern sense of the pursuit of personal self-interest. This change in the public's mentality and the changes in administration do not bode well for democracy, if democracy is better served by the preservation of civic virtue (Terry, 1998).

Frederickson especially takes issue with the general Enlightenment expectation that government will be and can be value-neutral. For Frederickson, the value-neutrality which new public management expects from administrators is both undesirable and

impossible. Instead of ignoring the need for government to reflect and promote civic virtue, he suggests that public administrators should be trained in civic virtue. He uses the example of officials charged with administering a public schools system. Frederickson argues that the public administrator cannot simply apply the statutes and legislative mandates blindly, or only with "the rational corollaries" of efficiency and economy. This is because a statute "never so clearly defines what the task is that the administrator can act as a machine, efficiently and economically doing the job". Instead administrators must understand the "spirit" of the laws. "This understanding of the spirit of the mandate, according to the Aristotelian tradition, should incorporate the principle of equity, which is a concern for justice that varies appropriately by situation" (Frederickson, 1997, p. 101).

In administering any general law, officials will necessarily encounter some questions that legislators simply could not anticipate. Public officials (judges in Aristotle's framework) are, in principle, always faced with discretionary decisions about how to proceed. Aristotle argued that public officials must continually choose between various possible ways of reaching justice in particular administrative decisions they confront. The issue for Aristotle is practical rather than ideal and theoretical: how can officials reach the most practically just decisions? (Frederickson, 1997, p. 100)

Solutions to the Enlightenment

These are indeed compelling criticisms of Enlightenment thought. Political thinkers from Rousseau to the communitarians have roundly condemned our intellectual and political infatuation with the logic of the Enlightenment. Contemporary critics of theoretical and practical developments in public administration such as Frederickson and Terry warn us against the application of Enlightenment principles to the public service. Regardless, Enlightenment thought has relentlessly come to dominate Western political thought and practice. Why is this the case?

To begin with, in very practical terms a great deal of good has come along with the loss of focus on civic virtue, in the form of personal freedom and increased prosperity for more and more people, and a greater social safety net for those who are struggling economically. The positive effects of the liberal emphasis on human rights has undeniably benefitted people wherever it has spread. It is difficult to imagine people who

are more free and more prosperous because of the political and economic effects of the Enlightenment turning away from it in order to recover lost social and moral cohesion (O'Brien, 1995).

In addition, the solutions offered for dealing with the sorts of issues raised by Enlightenment thought are almost without exception intellectually indefensible in the modern world. These solutions may be divided into two categories. First there are those thinkers who advocate the aggressive promotion and transformation of virtue at the level of individual citizens. Second, other thinkers promote a sort of systemic virtue through the development of, and reliance upon, an enlightened elected and/or administrative elite.

Promoting individual virtue

This is clearly the approach advocated by Rousseau and the communitarians who are in basic agreement that civic virtue needs to be restored. Essentially what this entails is some manner of institutional arrangement which both compels citizens to look beyond themselves and think in terms of the common good and, more fundamentally, for citizens to determine exactly what the common good entails. These philosophers are likewise in agreement that some degree of social engineering is going to be required in order to produce these results.

By today's standards, Rousseau's solution is clearly the most radical. Rousseau accepted the liberal notion that human beings were naturally individualistic and not social. However, he also knew that something was wrong with modern liberalism, which encouraged egotism and materialism. Rousseau sought to create a government which would not encourage these things and would allow individuals to feel free. Rousseau concluded that in order to feel free and have a true sense of belonging, individuals needed to feel that their government's decisions always represented their own will. Thus Rousseau called for a democracy, but not one based upon today's majoritarian principles. Instead the democracy had to be based on consensus concerning the common good.

In order to achieve consensus, Rousseau introduced an extremely large dose of social engineering. For example, he resurrected ancient Roman institutions such as an enforced civil religion and censorship. The civil religion would emphasize the unity of the people and their duty to think of the community first. It would give people a common public experience upon which to build consensus. The censorship would

exclude ideas that promoted intolerance and division. In the assembly, if an individual's vote was different from that of the majority, he was to change his mind. If he could not do that he was to be "forced to be free" or leave the community. In short, Rousseau concluded that in order to involve everyone in public life, and obtain a real sense of community and civic virtue in a world that had become so radically individualistic, one would have to impose a totalitarian government (Rousseau, 1987).

In large part because they are writing in the twentieth century, the communitarians' solutions for promoting consensus and civic virtue are less radical than those offered by Rousseau. Rather than imposing their objectives via totalitarianism, the communitarians suggest ways in which public institutions can be stage-managed in such a way as to persuade people to be virtuous, to think beyond themselves, and to agree on social values.

Some communitarians urge a move toward more unity and participatory democracy at the local level to recreate community feeling. For example, Benjamin Barber does this by proposing a "strong democracy" (as opposed to liberal regimes' "weak" or "thin" democracy). "Strong democracy" is built through the encouragement of deliberation among citizens where this is possible – primarily at the local level. Like Rousseau, Barber rejects liberalism's majoritarianism in favor of seeking consensus. He requires government to build institutions and practices that encourage people to see themselves as citizens and act as citizens, deliberating and making decisions based on the common good (Barber, 1994).

Other communitarians such as MacIntyre and Wolin emphasize the usefulness of education in renewing the cultural consensus necessary to build true community. MacIntyre believes that all human beings need the context of their civilization's tradition in order to thrive. He argues that the Western tradition should be reintroduced into children's education through the classic "stories" that form that civilization's past. This education is more likely to produce citizens who care about the good of their people and not just about themselves (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 201). Wolin follows MacIntyre, but with more emphasis on American tradition. Americans can gain their stories through rediscovering the richness of American history. If they are encouraged to think in terms not of the liberal social contract but in terms of "birthright" they can more easily be taught the value of citizenship, the importance of

caring about and deliberating about the common good (Wolin, 1986).

But critics of thinkers like MacIntyre and Wolin often ask why they are in a position to determine what is good for the rest of us. More generally the question arises of who will define civic virtue for us, and who will decide what is the common good? These same critics point out that communitarian solutions would give too much power to the state. For instance, Schmidt argues that "complaints about the Enlightenment's 'excessive' concern with individual rights pale in comparison to a concept of civic virtue which, in its embrace of 'communitarian' goods, would open the way to state intervention in domains that it long ago vacated, so long as we have assurances that the 'public good' is being served" (Schmidt, 1998, p. 426).

As an example, Schmidt argues that enforcing religious conformity would produce more homogeneity, which does have social benefits. But who would trade their religious liberty for such benefits, no matter how attractive? As a result, communitarians almost universally fall back on tradition for the values that will somehow make society a political community again and hence define civic virtue for us[4]. But as professors often find out when discussing the drawbacks of individualism and materialism with their students, people are so immersed in the Enlightenment way of thinking that it is difficult for them even to think in different terms. In the modern world, tradition holds so little authority over people that it does not seem to be a viable vehicle for unifying them or getting them to agree about a common good. It would seem, regardless of the communitarian complaints, many of which are painfully valid, the attraction of liberalism's protection of individual rights and freedom reflects contemporary reality and is very powerful, too powerful for people to give up.

Promoting systemic virtue

There is another set of thinkers whose solutions to the problems of the Enlightenment focus more on the systemic level, and less upon the virtue of the individual citizen. Their aim is to produce, for want of a better term, "systemic virtue" because in modern liberal democracies individual civic virtue is inevitably too weak to produce outcomes in accordance with the common good. The challenge according to these thinkers is to engineer the political system so as to produce good outcomes despite the fact that the average citizen in liberal democracies is uninformed, apathetic

and primarily self-interested. In other words, attention is focused upon virtuous public policy only, rather than towards this objective in combination with the more basic humanizing goal of promoting the development of virtuous citizens[5]. In large measure this approach relies upon the development of an enlightened elite.

In this connection let us return to a consideration of the US Constitution. As we discussed earlier, the influence of Enlightenment thought upon the Constitution is clearly evident in Madison's treatment of the problem of tyranny in *Federalist 10* and *51* (Hamilton *et al.*, 1982). In *Federalist 10* the problem of tyranny is addressed by pitting faction against faction and in *51* the problem is confronted by pitting co-branch against co-branch. In this situation the public virtue associated with the elimination of destructive tyranny is accomplished by allowing the private vice of selfishness to run wild.

Less well known perhaps, but none-the-less as prominent in the US Constitution, is a reliance as well upon an enlightened elite for confronting the "excesses" of democracy (principally tyranny and incompetence). What this reflects is a reluctance on the part of the American founders to accept fully the logic of the Enlightenment. Instead, they augment a reliance upon the free play of self-interest with an appeal to civic virtue among an enlightened elite[6].

This concern for creating an enlightened elite is perhaps best reflected in the American Constitution's reliance upon indirect election and appointment for filling national offices. In their concern for providing a government in which expertise was accorded its rightful place and was not usurped by the uninformed rule of the common man, the American founders made all offices but one (the House of Representatives) in the new Constitution indirectly elected or appointed. Members of the senate were chosen by the state legislators until 1913. Until the widespread adoption of popular voting for the presidency in the 1820s, the members of the electoral college who would choose the president were themselves selected by the state legislatures. In essence, the choice of the senate was once-removed from the people and the choice of the chief executive was to be twice-removed. The indirect election of the senators and the president by groups of elites was designed to enhance the likelihood not only of expertise but of genuine statesmanship and concern for the common good in these offices[7].

More directly pertinent to our discussion here is the work of Wilson. Following the

founders' view of administration in *Federalist 77*, Wilson thought administrators should be selected not on political grounds but on the basis of merit. The administration was to be the enlightened elite which would function as a bulwark against the excesses of an uninformed and self-interested public. Writing in 1887, he extolled the ideal of the civil service as one of professionalism, efficiency, and, as much as possible, separation from politics (Wilson, 1887). But the politics from which Wilson hoped to escape was partisan politics, with its threat of corruption. He clearly saw administrators pursuing politics in the classical sense, practicing civic virtue, prosecuting public policy with the common good in mind. Inasmuch as the ideal of merit in hiring and promotion within the civil service existed, public administration could provide a way for citizens to participate in government devoid of partisan politics but still reflecting to a certain extent the ancient view of politics as deliberating upon and acting for the common good.

As Rohr (1986) points out, Wilson saw the founders themselves as locating within public administration a space in which statesmanship could take place. For Wilson, public administration was the new arena for statesmanship, and public administrators are to be trained accordingly and given the proper incentives to practice civic virtue. In fact, Wilson arguably viewed enlightened or "high" administration as a more effective device for dealing with the excesses of democracy than the separation of powers. Rohr sums up the relationship between the thought of Wilson and that of the founders quite nicely:

Both Wilson and Publius [in the *Federalist Papers*] feared the excesses of democracy, and both looked to men of "the better sort" to curb these excesses. Publius would do this through a filtered form of representation, whereas Wilson relied on a trained civil service which "substitutes for the average man or 'the man of the people', the man of the schools; that is, the instructed and fitted man" (Rohr, 1986, p. 75).

A very similar line of argument is advanced by contemporary commentators such as Rohr and Frederickson. Both are in basic agreement with the views of the founders and of Wilson that it is necessary and desirable to create an administrative elite that can help fulfill the need for virtuous leadership in contemporary liberal democracies.

Rohr argues that the growing bureaucracy in effect altered the US Constitution in a positive way by increasing public participation in the decision-making process.

Through the bureaucracy, citizens might participate as civil servants, in administrative hearings and in organizing citizens to deal with public issues. Rohr goes so far as to say that administrators should take an oath to uphold the Constitution and then can legitimately use their discretion to interpret the laws (Rohr, 1986, pp. 181-91).

Frederickson argues that inevitably public servants will exercise discretion in interpreting the laws which will have an impact on the justice of the laws. Thus, the more civil servants see their role as expressing democratic citizenship, the more they absorb and act upon the meaning of civic virtue, and arguably the more equitable our government will be. By implication, administrators must therefore be trained in the knowledge of things such as equity, justice, civic virtue, not to mention "democratic citizenship".

In addition, although the administration is clearly to function as his enlightened elite, Frederickson suggests that other citizens can and sometimes are engaged in the process of administration through being brought into the process of administrative decision making at the point where it is most likely to affect them, in the administration of the laws at the local level. Frederickson goes so far as to argue for the Aristotelian approach of promoting public deliberation among citizens as friends. Public administration can be the locus of this type of deliberation about the common good by welcoming a "public dialogue" on administrative decisions. Frederickson calls this the "participatory-process or citizen-participation approach" (Frederickson, 1997).

Although perhaps not as radical as the ideas of Rousseau or the communitarians, this notion of an enlightened elite functioning in such a fashion for the expressed purpose of saving us from ourselves is entirely alien to our way of thinking about government and politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To the contrary, true to the logic of the Enlightenment project, governance in the US has become increasingly more democratic and less republican. Nineteenth century republican ideals involving the exercise by qualified public officials of considerable independence and discretion have been replaced by more decidedly democratic notions centering around accountability and acquiescing to popular demands. Gone almost entirely is the founders' primary device for providing an enlightened elected elite – indirect election. In the case of the presidency, by the time of the Civil War the role of the state legislatures in choosing

electoral college electors is replaced by constraining the electors to abide by the outcome of popular voting for the chief executive. In 1913 the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution goes into effect which provides for the direct election of US senators.

This democratization of governance in the USA has likewise been unkind to the ideas of thinkers such as Wilson and more recently Frederickson and Rohr. Rather than being sympathetic to the idea that administrators should function in a discretionary capacity as an enlightened elite protecting the common good, American citizens have responded enthusiastically to limiting the independence of public administrators. It is arguably the case that the contemporary concern for public accountability is even more pronounced when it comes to public officials who are not elected. Ours is a modern world that is the product of 300 or so years of Enlightenment thought which is largely devoid of any sort of consensus about the common good based in philosophy, religion or tradition. In such a world, the idea of a virtuous elite understandably strikes many as little more than an invitation for particular administrators to impose their values on the rest of us. Quite simply, ideas such as these strike many Americans as being anti-democratic, designed as they are to protect the people from themselves.

Machiavellian public management?

In a sense we have been moving intellectually in the direction of the new public management since that so-called Machiavellian movement in political thought in the early sixteenth century. When Machiavelli rejected the ancient ideals of civic virtue and government's role in promoting it, Europe moved intellectually into the modern world and the escape from politics in the ancient sense began. While the goals of modern political thinkers may have changed from protecting the power of the prince to the satisfaction of the people's desires for material prosperity, the rejection of the ancient ideal of civic virtue has remained constant.

Some scholars in public administration and in the larger discipline of political science, loosely described here as communitarians, have rebelled against this Machiavellian notion and have tried to reintroduce some idea of a politics of the common good, an emphasis on civic virtue in both politics and administration. But they

are swimming against a very powerful tide. That tide has washed through Enlightenment liberalism, with its view of government as freeing individuals to define virtue for themselves and to pursue their individually-defined self-interest, to its contemporary expression in the new public management approach to administration.

In the final analysis, just how much of a loss we have suffered as a result of this transition to modernity depends on whether we agree with the ancients that man is a political animal, whose highest development lies in the perfection of his civic and intellectual virtues. Or, as argued by modern political philosophers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke, do we feel that man is a passionate animal whose development is essentially self-defined and inescapably selfish?

Notes

- 1 We see this idealism clearly in Plato's *Gorgias*, *Republic* and *Statesman* and Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*.
- 2 For an example of this general critique, see Etzioni (1994).
- 3 See MacIntyre (1981) for an example of this general line of thought.
- 4 Unlike the ancient philosophers, the communitarians do not think it is possible to arrive at a definition of virtue or the common good through reason.
- 5 Certainly from the perspective of the ancients, this focus away from individual virtue and instead upon systemic virtue substantively misses the point. That is, the fundamental issue for them was the development of individual human potential and only secondarily a concern for virtuous public policy.
- 6 See Wood (1998) for the most complete statement of the argument to the effect that the American founders were not completely of the Enlightenment tradition.
- 7 In fact, the Senate was viewed by the founders as the more stable upper house which was to provide a "great anchor" for the new government and offset the volatile and potentially incompetent behavior of the House of Representatives (Diamond, 1981, pp. 9-8). Likewise the appointed federal judiciary was to encourage the selection of those who were wise, not simply popular.

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Application questions

- 1 How can public administrators balance the value implicit in the communitarian and new public management approaches, both of which have merit, in dealing with employees and with the public?
- 2 How can public administrators involve the public in a way that encourages citizenship and in which the public truly has an impact on outcomes?