

Virtue Ethics: A Foundational Framework for Administrative Ethics

Sahun (Elton) Kim

Cornell University Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy

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Professor David Bateman & Professor Daniel Manne

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how virtue ethics can be a foundational framework for administrative ethics, focusing on its potential to improve the ethical behavior of public administrators amidst challenges that may diminish government accountability. The study begins by identifying the pressing need for a robust moral foundation within government agencies to enhance accountability and public trust. The literature review covers various ethical theories and approaches, highlighting the lack of consensus on the best normative foundation while positioning virtue ethics as a promising yet underexplored alternative.

The thesis scrutinizes the concept of the "virtuous person," illustrating the impossibility of perfect virtue and the necessity of adopting a framework that acknowledges the journey toward moral excellence. By framing the concept of a "virtuous person" as a mathematical limit, this thesis addresses the criticism regarding the impossibility of achieving moral perfection. Instead, it emphasizes continuous moral development as a more practical goal for public administrators. This theoretical foundation is then connected to practice by exploring the role of independent critique, changing societal standards, and the organizational context. Through these lenses, the study demonstrates how public administrators can strive toward moral excellence by continuously improving their ethical decision-making, fostering accountability, and creating ethical environments in their agencies.

Keywords: Public Administration Ethics, Administrative ethics, Virtue Ethics, Political Philosophy

i. Introduction

Scandals, corruption, red tape, political polarization, and failures in public services impose questions and concerns about administrative ethics. Administrative ethics, also known as public administration ethics, refers to the ethics of public administrators and officials. Administrative ethics is incumbent as a field of study in public administration because the accountability of a government administration ultimately depends on the ethical behavior of its administrators (Kettl, 2020, p.70). The government and its bureaucrats are subject to the rationale behind their judgment and actions in which they are held responsible. The accountability that public sector employees and the government hold is subject to greater moral standards than the private sector. Appleby (1969) argues that public morality ought to be of higher competency than private morality because public trust hinges on public servants' actions (p.42). The moral discipline for public employees, therefore, signifies more than mere delivery of their public services.

Public officials and administrators encounter various problems of dynamic forces. Despite Woodrow Wilson's theory of the *politics-administration dichotomy*, public administrators are inevitably influenced by political roots and pressure that may often compromise their moral principles and decision-making.¹ Henry (1975) also argued that public administrators are now more involved in the politics of the policy-making process, which had ultimately necessitated their moral behavior (p.33). For instance, administrators often face predicaments where political conflict occurs simultaneously with their bureaucratic processes.

¹ Wilson's Theory of Politics-Administration Dichotomy was introduced in his essay, "The Study of Administration" in 1887, in which he argued that the process of public policy administration can be distinct from the politics of policy making. He urged for administrators to have the capacity to administer and manage policies regardless of their political backgrounds and strive for neutrality and objectivity. (Kettl, 2020, p. 61).

Administrators are not explicitly informed by the policymakers on how to interpret and implement policy, nor are provided with the degree of discretion to make a judgment (Rohr, 1978).

What is more, public administrators also have their “inner compass,” consisting of their character, professionalism, dedication to public service, and compliance with the law, which is also part of the calculus in delivering their work (Kettl, 2020, p.68). Both these internal and external dynamics of public administrators and servants determine their accountability of themselves and the balance between these two forces hinges on their ethical behavior. The public’s trust and faith in the government’s accountability, therefore, is shaped by the ethics of public officials and civil servants. Despite the oath of the offices that public officials and civil servants take to be of service to the public faithfully, countless public servants fail to meet such standards, which results in diminished public trust (Sheeran, 2006, p.5). Administrative ethics, therefore, plays a vital role in public administration.

Administrative ethics is a relatively young field of study; hence, some of the crucial topics and questions in the study of administrative ethics are yet to be fully explored (Cooper, 2004, p. 395-396). There has, however, been substantial growth in literature and research on administrative ethics (Cooper, 2001, p.19). Cooper (2004) emphasizes that one of the biggest questions in administrative ethics among scholars is what the normative foundation for public administration ethics is (p.396). To this question, there currently lacks a consensus about which normative foundation might be most appropriate to fulfill the requirements of public administration ethics. Some of the prominent approaches and common themes that have been developed to answer the questions include citizenship and democratic theory, virtue ethics,

founding thought and constitutional theory, social equity, and public interest. There is no particular reason why there could not be more than one metaethical foundation, but it seems certainly beneficial to have a simpler theory for the intricacy of administrative ethics. In this paper, I will argue that virtue ethics could, to a certain degree, be the normative foundation for administrative ethics.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerning morality. Ethics has three core branches: normative ethics, applied ethics, and metaethics (Fisher, 2011). Normative ethics engages with theories that concern general rules and norms that are required of us. Metaethics concerns the sources of normativity and examines the foundations of ethics. Applied ethics grapples with what normativity demands of us in specifically defined circumstances, and how we should act in specific issues. Virtue ethics is a theory of normative ethics that emphasizes the moral character of an individual (Hursthouse et al., 2022). Contrary to virtue ethics, other approaches to ethics often begin from the position of deciphering how a person ought to act or behave.

Virtue ethics, however, provides moral guidance to individuals such that one should act as a virtuous person would act in a particular situation, in which virtue is a desirable excellent trait of character (Athanasoulis, n.d.; Hursthouse et al., 2022). These include traits like honesty, justice, temperance, and courage. Hence, this approach is distinctive in that it centers on the character of the person prior to considering their actions. Given that the character and morality of the public administrator are imperative for administrative ethics, this paper attempts to argue that virtue ethics can be the appropriate normative foundation for administrative ethics, which places more emphasis on the discretion and responsibility of the public administrator. This paper will be a philosophy paper that dives deep into administrative ethics and political and public philosophy.

Before diving into the extensive review of literature on administrative ethics and virtue ethics, I would like to provide a rationale for this paper being a work of philosophy. One might argue that philosophy may be too theoretical for public administration ethics, which requires technocratic and practical prescriptions. However, the lack of practicality may have resulted from the lack of consensus in theoretical frameworks and philosophical foundations.

Administrative ethics shares an extensive basis in philosophy.

Firstly, administrative ethics is an application of ethics in political philosophy. It, therefore, seems examining the normative foundations of administrative ethics through the lens of philosophy seems intuitive. Secondly, public administration, along with other natural and social sciences, has its roots and basis in philosophy. Sheeran (2006) further strengthens this notion by arguing that all sciences, like public administration, begin where philosophy ends (p.11). Furthermore, Denhardt (1988) also adds that the development of philosophy in administrative ethics will be crucial in freeing the discipline from a parochial scope (p.viii). Philosophy has influenced and shaped the ethics of public administration. Hence, philosophy is necessary for administrative ethics and this paper aims to extend and foster academic debate in administrative ethics that considers the significance of philosophy.

ii. Literature Review

The foundational framework of administrative ethics has been rigorously refined and developed since the 1940s and it consolidates various ideas and perspectives. The first foundation of the administrative ethics framework was introduced by Leys (1944), who argued that public administrators being *ethical* meant thinking beyond the public policy-making process and exploring how the administrative decision can be made without adhering to the customs and

traditions of policymaking (p.12). Essentially, Leys believed that an ethical public administrator is a considerate and thoughtful policy decision-maker. Much of the public administrator's work and the scope of their ethics was within the boundaries of policy. However, Anderson (1954) has expanded such boundaries; Anderson argued that the ethics of public administrators extend to the ethics of all administrative decisions since all decisions are based on the foundations of our philosophies (p.1-3). He argues that public administrators should be able to reflect some of the core values of our public and society, by which individual philosophies could be constructively grouped for a foundation of administrative ethics.

Administrative ethics was then further developed by Golembiewski (1965), who redefined the concept of ethics. He argued that ethics refers to the "contemporary standards at any point in time in terms of which men evaluate their conduct and that of men about them," to highlight that ethical standards are subject to change and development (p.61). Golembiewski distinguishes ethics from morality, that morality is an "absolute standard that exists beyond time," while ethical matters factor in the contextual and temporal circumstances, and administrative ethics cannot be built upon fixated standards. Hence, the ethical standards required of a public administrator are to be questioned, debated, and reconstructed throughout the development of an administration (Denhardt, 1988, p.9-10). This development within the framework is significant because the ethical standards during the 1960s and today in the 2020s are distinguishable, as the societal values and understanding of moral standards have also differentiated.

Denhardt (1988) emphasizes that throughout this development, two vital dimensions *process* and *content*, have risen within the framework (p.12). The process dimension in the

administrative ethics framework is the process of scrutinizing, questioning, and contemplating the core values and standards that establish administrative actions (p.13). It is the systematic procedure that an administrator takes to reflect on the values and their application. The content dimension in the framework is the process that determines such values that may guide the administrator's behavior (p.12). Hence, it provides the normative means for an administrator to base their action upon. Denhardt argues that an administrative ethics framework must consist of both dimensions at a balance (p.15). She explains that administrators need guidance for their ethical standards but also must undergo a procedural reflection and thinking over those values and standards to be held accountable for both their actions and the guidance that informs their decision-making (p.16).

To the two dimensions, Rohr (1978) stresses that the framework should also allow the administrator to embrace the two dimensions independently (Denhardt, 1988, p.23). Rohr believes that being an administrator equates to the ability to always justify one's actions but can do so with the justifications that are formed by their deliberation, instead of adhering to precedents or opinions of the law (p.22). To this attribution of independence, Cooper (1982) adds that the public administrator also needs guidance on the actual process of ethical decision-making (p.8). He adds that an administrator is also a member of an organization, who must also adhere to the values and standards of the organization, which Denhardt (1988), argues, is a crucial aspect of administrative ethics.

Denhardt, adding to Cooper's introduction to the organization, asserts that the public administrator's ethics equation should also consist of the organizational aspect because the organization has its own sets of responsibilities and standards that are expected to be followed by

its employees (p.26). Within this historically cultivated administrative ethics framework, there are three key philosophical aspects: independent critique, changing standards, and organizational context (p.27). Theories of political philosophy and ethics attempt to fulfill these philosophical aspects for the administrative ethics framework. Virtue ethics appears to be one of the philosophical theories that could do so.

Virtue ethics dates back to the ancient Greek philosophy of Aristotle. Virtue ethics is one of the salient theories of ethics, along with prominent theories like Kant's deontology and Mill's utilitarianism. Ethics, however, was subject to criticism with the arrival of modern society; much of the theory focused on Aristotle's eudaimonia, and human flourishing seemed to be disconnected from the modern market economy and society's diversification (Qun, 2010). With this modern society that had diversified from the traditional Western philosophy, rule-following ethics, such as deontology and utilitarianism, often seemed arguably more relevant and universal. Different cultures and societies have different models of virtue and when discussing morality in general contexts, there is much to be discussed in favor of more universal and less culturally dependent theories of ethics.

Yet, some philosophers have reignited virtue ethics and highlighted the propriety of the theory in modern philosophy and society. A notable figure was Alasdair MacIntyre. Aristotle's virtue ethics heavily emphasized the notion of teleology, in which he believed that virtues are qualities that relate to the telos or purposes of human life (Lynch, 2004, p.34). Contrasting to this theory, MacIntyre argues that virtue ethics is rooted in specific and particular traditions and communities in which one could embrace virtues for flourishing; he asserts that modern moral theories that urge relativism are too extreme, and argues for a middle ground that concedes the

significance of cultural relativism in shaping our comprehension of virtues while also embracing the notions that there are shared virtues across various cultures (MacIntyre, 2022). Hence, MacIntyre addresses the cultural disparity and lack of universality of virtue ethics, alluding to the fact that virtues are shared across varied cultures. He defines virtue as an “acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (p.191).

MacIntyre’s virtue ethics deposits a substantial weight on practice.² His conception of practice is like that of Aristotle’s. Aristotle asserted that moral virtue, like any other expertise or performance, is acquired by repetition and practice of virtuous acts (Brown, 2009. p.23). Virtue, despite being a disposition, can only be acquired through the habituation of virtuous acts. MacIntyre (2022) further elaborates on this conception of practice, where he argues that such practices are necessary but insufficient to fulfill the virtues themselves. He believes that the practice of virtue extends to a societal level and true virtue can only be understood in a collaborative joint practice. The reason lies in the deliberation and understanding of virtue; MacIntyre believes that practice requires multiple agents deliberately observing and engaging in practice, to understand why such practice is considered a virtuous act (p.187). MacIntyre’s practice in virtue ethics, therefore, provides two important implications for administrative ethics, that highlight politics. For one, MacIntyre’s call for the collective practice of virtue seeks moral

² This concept is pivotal as, while administrative ethics frameworks had frequently employed the term, professional or professionalism, to denote the ethical standards for administrators, Cooper (1987) asserted to replace professionalism with the normative foundation for a public administrator based on MacIntyre’s conception of practice.

excellence through human agency. On the other hand, he also seeks a political environment in which everyone is engaging in fostering the good of themselves and the common public good (Lutz, n.d.). MacIntyre's practice plays an integral role in virtue ethics being the normative foundation for administrative ethics, which will be further discussed throughout the paper.

In addition to MacIntyre, other philosophers have also argued for virtue ethics as an appropriate foundation for contemporary moral philosophy. Hursthouse, for example, tackles the concept of practical wisdom in depth. Aristotle in Book VI of his *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces the concept of *phronesis*, which is often understood as practical wisdom (Brown, 2009, p.105). Practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, is one of the intellectual virtues that allow one to secure eudaimonia and it involves those who can deliberate well about what is good for themselves (p.106). Hursthouse (2006) argues that this practical wisdom is also the knowledge that allows one to make a sound judgment for the right reasons, for their practical wisdom allows them to deliberate on what is right (p.289).

Hursthouse also concurs with Aristotle on the necessity of experience for practical wisdom, by arguing that practical wisdom requires experience given that one cannot decide as a virtuous agent would in a *particular* situation, because one without the experience of *that* situation would not know how to do so. Furthermore, Aristotle argued that a morally virtuous person cannot be morally virtuous without being practically wise as well (Brown, 2009, p.117). To this end, Hursthouse further portrayed what Aristotle meant by the connection between practical wisdom and moral virtue, in which she argued that a virtuous agent who acts virtuously would do it for the right reasons and knows what is right as well. Virtue ethics, therefore, has frequently appeared in the literature of philosophy but there remained the perplexing thoughts of

whether virtue ethics, as a moral philosophy theory, can be extended to other areas of philosophy, like political philosophy (Hursthouse et al., 2023).

Despite being the minority in areas of applied ethics, virtue ethics is one of the commonly appearing themes in administrative ethics (Hursthouse et al., 2023). The importance and semblance of character, which was understood synonymously as a virtue, began to take extensive influence on administrative ethics with Frederickson and Hart's (1985) work, where the authors had emphasized the significance of the character of an administrator to encourage them to make competent and ethical decisions (Cooper, 2001, p.19). Similar arguments to highlight the character of public officials were made by Pincoffs (1986) who argued that placing more moral weight on the public administrator and their characters may be more reliable than composing standards and principles to resolve ethical dilemmas. Jos (1990) has also advocated for providing the public administrator with more moral autonomy for a more responsible administration. The government administration's responsibility hinges on moral judgment and the character of public administrators (p.239). This was the work in which the concept of virtues of public administrator were being shaped.

The commonly known virtues that Aristotle found significant for virtue ethics are virtues like justice, temperance, and courage (Kraut, 2022). Swanton (2003) argues that these virtues are traits that we already have a conception and understanding of and that we have an idea of which traits would qualify as virtues and what they require. She argues that what is important is not to break down a virtue to its most basic and abstract level in which the virtue could be imitated or built upon to fulfill the goal of virtue ethics but is instead examining what the traits of such virtues would involve. To Swanton, questioning the epistemology of virtue and its conception

would be impertinent. For example, we already have an existing conception of virtues like justice and courage of what they are.³ Instead, we must determine the virtues that are appropriate to a particular context or field, as “different virtues are concerned with different fields” (Swanton, 2003). Therefore, virtues specific to the field of public administration and public administrators are just as paramount as virtues like wisdom, prudence, courage, etc.

One such virtue crucial to administrative ethics and public administrators that Frederickson and Hart (1985) specified was benevolence, which they expected a public administrator to possess (p.547). They argue that the ideal of democracy expects a special relationship should exist between citizens and public servants. This special relationship requires the public servant to be both a moral philosopher and moral activist, who can uphold the regime values of the state and the extensive benevolence for the people (p.551). Molina (2015) also identified a list of virtues of public administration and administrative values that most public employees and officials have found values like honesty and integrity, both being significant moral virtues, as being most important in public administration. Other virtues pertinent to administrative ethics are accountability, dedication, efficiency, humaneness, honesty, impartiality, integrity, etc. (Molina, 2015, p.53). Another important virtue relevant to administrative ethics and virtue ethics is political responsibility (Tholen, 2018). Politics today arouses negative connotations, while politics, in its purest origin, means collectively leading a good life together (Ricoeur, n.d.).⁴ Hence, for public administrators who face political issues,

³ Swanton adds that we can work with existing conceptions of virtues but that is not to say that they are complete. She argues that this untutored conception of virtue can be clarified and further improved.

⁴ By origin, I am referring to the origin of the ancient Greek, *polis*.

political responsibility, which as a virtue is the “attitude that aims at the realization of [politics],” is also an indispensable virtue (Tholen, 2018, p. 23).

As mentioned above, however, different cultures have different models of virtue. This could depend on various factors like religion. For instance, patriotism in the United States can possess different conceptions of patriotism in South Korea. There are, however, virtues that are also universal; virtues that are inherent to human beings. Such virtues are honesty, respect, kindness, openness, and tolerance (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.4). Ergo, though administrative ethics contain field-specific virtues that are necessary for public administrators to possess, these virtues are not necessarily bounded by a cultural boundary. Instead, such virtues are also universally applicable virtues.

Within the common appearance of virtue ethics in administrative ethics, most scholars have focused on the adoption of virtue ethics for an administrative setting. Yet, there seems to be an issue of practicality with virtue ethics. As I will be showing throughout the paper, virtue ethics, as discussed in the review of literature, places the moral weight on the person and their character. The virtue ethics’ principle of *acting as a virtuous agent would for its situation*, presuppose the existence of a virtuous agent. However, such virtuous agents seem impossible to exist and become. Then why should virtue ethics, given its lack of realization, be a normative foundation for public administrators, when it does not provide them with a legitimate impetus for them to accept?

Much literature on virtue ethics being extended to administrative ethics to be the normative foundation had focused on defending how and why virtue ethics would be important and needed for public administrators. However, before I contribute, I argue that virtue ethics,

while idealistic and significant, bears the problem of impossibility. If an ethical theory is impossible to replicate, how could it provide the means for an administrator who needs practical guidance for their behavior? In the following sections, I attempt to show why virtue ethics faces the problem of impossibility. I will, however, also provide a framework to resolve this very issue of virtue ethics and justify why the framework can help virtue ethics be a normative framework for administrative ethics.

iii. Virtue Ethics: Impossibility

To fully grasp this notion of the *impossibility* of virtue ethics, we must ask the question of whether a virtuous act makes a person virtuous or whether the virtuous person acts virtuously. The answer to this question strikes at the core of the theory's feasibility. Since virtue ethics guides one "to act as a virtuous person would in a given situation," it logically presumes the virtuous agent ahead of the actions (Athanasoulis, n.d.). Hursthouse (2001) argues that just like consequentialists permeate their standards with ample account of the best consequences, for virtue ethics, a virtuous agent must also be understood with a considerable account of what virtues are and what a virtuous agent is like (p.28). Therefore, the virtuous person bears extra moral weight than actions.

Aristotle emphasizes that one does not simply become a virtuous person just by doing virtuous acts. Rather, one must have the knowledge of that virtue and do it for the sake of that virtue, such that they are acting virtuously as a virtuous person would (Brown, 2009, p.27-28). Hence, those who merely emulate a virtuous person's behavior without understanding the intentions and reasons are not the virtuous person that Aristotle denotes. Aristotle's urge for habituation and repetition of virtuous acts makes a logical presumption of a virtuous person since

one cannot act virtuously with repetitions without knowing how and why a virtuous person would act virtuously. So, for someone to act virtuously, that individual must know how and why their particular virtuous person acts virtuously. Aristotle's argument then shows that by acting virtuously, one does not simply become a virtuous person and that a virtuous person acts virtuously for all the right reasons and knowledge. To answer the question then, it seems that it is that a virtuous person acts virtuously, and not vice versa such that a person performing virtuous acts does not constitute a virtuous person.

The fact that a virtuous person acts virtuously and that virtuous acts do not make a virtuous person places virtue ethics in a challenging position. One may argue that if someone cannot become virtuous just by acting virtuously, why should someone accept virtue ethics? The theory could respond to this objection by highlighting that the emphasis is not simply on emulating virtuous acts but also on the wisdom that such acts require. However, if it is the case that a virtuous person acts virtuously, does this have any realistic practicality? Is there an agent with genuine virtue to define them as a virtuous agent? Lomasky (2019) argues that virtue ethics is impossible because genuine virtue is impossible. He argues that virtue is excellence and things of true excellence are extremely rare and with limited availability for people in need of moral guidance (p.686). Lomasky adds that there is scarcity in the availability of virtues for imperfect human beings who will face temptations and hardships during their lives, and these virtues are merely aspirational and are not operational, by which he aggrandizes that those who seek moral guidance by emulating virtuous persons cannot genuinely attain virtues (p.686-687).

I, however, think that there is another way to think about the impossibility of virtue ethics because virtuous persons act virtuously, and virtuous actions are not enough to form a virtuous

person. Consider two agents: Alpha is a virtuous person and Beta is not a virtuous person.⁵ Consider a day in the life of these two agents. Throughout the day, Beta engages in multiple virtuous acts during his day advertently, especially more attentively in public. Assuming that Beta is engaging in these virtuous acts with the right knowledge and for the sake of their virtue, we could argue that Beta is a virtuous person both from the perspective of others and himself. However, let us now consider that Beta acts non-virtuously, especially when he is in a private space, where there is no spectator of his actions. Non-virtuous acts can include acts like sexual misconduct or murder, or any acts or behavior that we would commonly find unethical or immoral in the sense that it contravenes virtues. In this case, Beta is not a virtuous person anymore, even if no public members know of it, and even if he does not know it himself. Is Beta, then, a virtuous person or not? Can someone be both virtuous and non-virtuous simultaneously, just like Beta? I argue that Beta is not a virtuous person, and certainly not the virtuous person that virtue ethics promotes.

Beta is not a virtuous person because being a virtuous person for only a certain point of time does not entail becoming a virtuous person. If we represent the time he had been in the public domain as t_1 and the time he had been in his private domain as t_2 , we could say that at t_1 , Beta is a virtuous person, and at t_2 he is not a virtuous person. So, if we add the two domains, $t_1 + t_2$, we could find that Beta is not a virtuous person, because a virtuous person's domains would not be the summation of two domains that contain both non-virtuous character and

⁵ Here, a virtuous person is a person who is virtuous and who can act virtuously. Someone who is not a virtuous person is not incapable of virtuous actions. This person can act virtuously. The difference is that a virtuous person would be a virtuous person regardless of any circumstances.

virtuous character. A virtuous person would have a summation of all domains with virtuous character and acts, or else, we would not call such a person a virtuous person.

By definition, a virtuous person is “a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels as she should”, a morally perfect person (Hursthouse et al., 2023). This virtuous person would also know how a particular virtue should be acted upon, so the person knows to act to the right person, at the right space and time, to the right degree, and for the right reasons (Vallor, 2018, p.22). So, in our case, Alpha is a person of moral perfection and excellence. Alpha, then, would not have moments of any non-virtuous behavior or acts because she is a virtuous person. If not, we would not call Alpha a virtuous person in the first place. In specificity, if we denote, $\sum_{t=0}^{t=86400} t$, as a summation of every single second of Alpha’s Day, it will consist of virtuous acts and character, since Alpha is a virtuous person. With room for flexibility, this summation would not consist of any non-virtuous acts or character.⁶

In comparison to Beta, regardless of domains, Alpha’s Day would not have any non-virtuous acts or character, while for Beta, there is a chunk of time within his day that consists of non-virtuous acts and character. More simply put, we would not denote a particular person as a virtuous person if that person were always not virtuous. Hursthouse (2001) further supports this conception of a virtuous person, as she describes the virtuous agent as always doing what is right, because if not, then that agent would not be virtuous (p.30).⁷

⁶ I simply use seconds as a measure for simplicity. Someone could make decisions or act in a matter of milliseconds in all possibilities, but the point is to emphasize that a virtuous person would be virtuous in every moment of their day and life. If not, we would not denote such person as a virtuous person.

⁷ She also adds that we will end up in a circular problem; hence the definition of a virtuous agent is of truism.

Then, to answer the question above, we could agree that it is true that a virtuous person acts virtuously and that virtuous acts do not make a virtuous person. Since this understanding of a virtuous person and a non-virtuous person in the perspective of time answers the question, it directs us to another question of whether virtue ethics is then possible or not. This is because, realistically, for someone to be a virtuous person for every moment of their life is impossible. If someone would argue otherwise that there could be and is a virtuous person, then we might ask whether that person is truly virtuous or not, because that person seems to deny reality. Hence, I think that it is arguably true to say that no person is virtuous for every moment of their life. Then we can accept that a virtuous person is an idealistic conception that cannot exist. To this point, Hart (2001) adds that “no one can achieve complete virtue, the quest is never-ending, and moral progress can never cease” (p.139).

As previously mentioned, we must engage in virtuous acts as if a virtuous person would. But if a virtuous person is impossible and realistically non-existent, why must we accept virtue ethics? More specifically, why must we strive to become virtuous people for moral excellence knowing that it is impossible to achieve? If we are appropriately motivated, would our efforts that only ever be aspirational be a failure given that it is impossible? For that matter, how could we base virtue ethics as a normative foundation for administrative ethics for public administrators if it is an ideal that cannot be upheld? This shows that virtue ethics, as a theory, faces the problem of impossibility, which would not provide practical means for administrative ethics. For this, I introduce a framework.

iv. Virtue Ethics: Framework

I have shown that virtue ethics is in a bind because a virtuous person is needed for the theory to guide actions, but a virtuous person does not exist. Despite this impossibility, I argue

that virtue ethics can still be of significant value for our moral guidance and, thus possesses practicality. The framework that I use to argue this is, viewing a virtuous person as a *mathematical limit*. In other words, a virtuous person can be thought of as analogous to a limit. In mathematics, without a rigorous and technical mathematical definition and explanation, a limit is a constant value or a number that a function is approaching, but the function never actually approaches that value. In other words, it is like an unattainable goal (Strogatz, 2020, p. 8). The reason why I argue that a mathematical limit can be a framework for virtue ethics is because of two reasons: infinity and continuity.⁸

Though a limit is a constant defined to be unreachable, the key is that the function can get *infinitely* close to that limit. This may initially sound counterintuitive since thinking of an infinite entity within a limited boundary seems illogical. However, in a mathematical abstractness, this is quite intuitive. For example, between the integers 1 and 2, there are infinitely many numbers, namely 1.1, 1.111, 1.111111, 1.98888888, etc. In philosophy, we usually understand this as “infinity within the finite” (Gasché, 2017). Based on this mathematical definition, I argue that the virtuous person that I defined above in the context of virtue ethics is like a mathematical limit. The important point here, again, is that there is a possibility of getting *infinitely* close to the limit, the virtuous person. This would mean the concrete case of performing virtuous actions of various degrees.

I have already shown that a virtuous person is realistically impossible. Given that a virtuous person is impossible to exist or to become, I believe that a mathematical limit

⁸ Infinity and continuity are also the primary reasons why the concept of mathematical limits is introduced in mathematical calculus. This concept is also introduced in Tall, D., Vinner, S. Concept image and concept definition in mathematics with reference to limits and continuity. *Educ Stud Math* 12, 151–169 (1981). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00305619>

analogously resembles a virtuous person. Defining a virtuous person as a mathematical limit gives those who seek moral guidance through virtue ethics an opportunity to get infinitely close to becoming that virtuous person. This opportunity to get infinitely close to becoming a virtuous person recognizes the significance of virtue ethics because it highlights the importance of continuous moral development. From the mathematical perspective, a function getting infinitely close to the point of limit can be seen as a graph of a line in the cartesian plane reaching that point of limit. This is analogous to continuous moral development because a person striving to become a virtuous person, by this framework, is getting closer and closer to the virtuous person they wish to become.

Consider the example of a particular public administrator: Gamma who seeks moral guidance through virtue ethics. Let us consider that a virtuous person is like a limit of constant value, 10. Though Gamma cannot become a 10, he can get infinitely close to it since 10 is the limit. This means that Gamma can become 9.99, 9.99999, or 9.99999999. Notice how 9.99999999 is greater than 9.99999, and 9.99999 is greater than 9.99. The comparison of these numbers shows that Gamma living a life of 9.99999999 is a more virtuous life than Gamma living a life of 9.99 or 9.99999, as the 9.99999999 is closer to 10 than the two latter numbers. This comparison is important because Gamma has an infinite number of chances to become closer and closer to 10, where he could be living a life of 9.999999999999 from what he was previously. This means that he can always aim for something better than what he is. For example, if Gamma lived his day as a 9.999999999 on day, d_1 , he has the opportunity to live the next day, d_2 , as a 9.9999999999999, assuming that Gamma thinks of living a better life the next

day.⁹ This shows that Gamma does not settle where he is but impels for continuous moral development because he knows he can get infinitely closer to what he wishes to become. What is important here is that redefining a virtuous person in terms of a mathematical limit allows one to reflect upon their life at any point in time and direct them towards a more virtuous life with ample opportunity.

A virtuous person being defined with a mathematical limit is also fitting because of continuity. Our common understanding of continuity is that something is “unbroken” or “uninterrupted” (Bell, 2022). This idea of continuity is also similar in calculus; a continuous function is a function that does not have any gaps, jumps, or breaks, which we could draw on a graph without lifting our pencils (McLean, 2022). This idea of continuity plays an important role with limits in calculus, because mathematically if a function is to be continuous, the function must be defined at a particular point, the function must have a limit as it approaches that particular point, and that they equal. In simple words, a function with its value being equal to the point of limit it has is continuous. Though mathematically very technical, in the context of virtue ethics, it strengthens what I have argued for virtue ethics.

For someone to be virtuous, I have argued that this person must be, at any point in time, a virtuous person. From the idea of continuity, a virtuous person also has a homogenous characteristic. Continuity means that something is unchanging and discrete, which is similarly, the identical meaning that a virtuous person would be since a virtuous person is someone virtuous, but who is unchanging and uninterrupted. Here, the unchangingness and uninterruptedness precisely refer to the virtuous person who would always be virtuous, as I have

⁹ I have already argued that a point in time does not entail that person, because we need to define a virtuous person by his entire summation of time that he had lived. Therefore, the virtuous person as a limit would be defined when at the very end of the journey, which may be a state in which the person is incapable of engaging in a moral journey.

shown above in reference to time. Therefore, given that a virtuous person is a limit, if someone is to be a virtuous person, that person must be embodied or defined by continuity. This shows that a virtuous person can indeed be thought of as a mathematical limit since continuity is required if a function is to equal to that limit, just like anyone attempting to become a virtuous person requires continuity. Continuity, then, is a necessary condition for someone seeking a moral and virtuous life, because without continuity, a virtuous person is no longer viable. Beta, for instance, is an example that shows why he is not a virtuous person as he lacks continuity of what a virtuous person requires. On the other hand, Alpha is a virtuous person because she is virtuous, or not non-virtuous, always, with an unchanging continuity.

I have so far argued that virtue ethics faces the objection of impossibility because the theory logically presumes the existence of a virtuous person, but such a virtuous person does not exist or is impossible to exist as a human being, given that it requires continuity. To overcome such problems, I have proposed to think of a virtuous person as a mathematical limit, which acknowledges the impossibility of becoming a virtuous person, but allows one to become infinitely close to it. Allowing a person seeking moral perfection to become infinitely close is momentous because it not only gives these individuals countless chances and opportunities, but also provides them with time to reflect, reconsider, and constantly ponder how they ought to and should live, which is what a virtuous person would do. Moreover, despite its impossibility, to think that someone could become infinitely close to that ideal gives one a strong reason to strive for such a life.

Though we could accept this framework, there is still reason for us to believe that virtue ethics lacks feasibility. Even if individuals could get infinitely close to becoming virtuous people, knowing that this end goal is impossible is a strong reason to impede one from pursuing

it. Why should one even consider pursuing such an ideal knowing it is impossible and while no such people exist? While other ethical theories like deontology and utilitarianism bestow one with a clear moral principle with feasible ends, it seems that the only moral principle that virtue ethics gives is to “act as a virtuous person would,” which is even less contingent because virtuous people are impossible and are nonexistent (Athanasoulis, n.d.). Even if they could exist metaphysically or in theory, basing action on a theoretical or metaphysical existence does not seem preferable over performing the same act from a realistic and tangible existence that we, as human beings, could relate to.

In response to this objection, I invite the reader to ask the question that is opposite to the objection: is there anyone who considers pursuing such an ideal knowing it is impossible and this ideal does not exist? In other words, who aims for perfection knowing that it is impossible? Although there may be many examples, let us consider the case of pianists.¹⁰ Pianists strive for musical perfection through extensive practice and extreme commitment. These professionals dedicate themselves and countless hours of repetition to perfect their performance. What is weighty here, is that these pianists understand and know that they cannot be perfect. In an interview, one prestigious pianist Seong-Jin Cho, talked about his mistouches during his performances.¹¹ He said that he’s given hundreds and thousands of performances throughout his career, and he has made mistouches almost every time. They have been inevitable. He, however, emphasized that mistouches are part of the performances and that to reduce these mistouches or

¹⁰ In her paper, *Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing*, Julia Annas uses builders and pianists as examples of expertise who we often look for when we search for virtuous people.

¹¹ Seong-Jin Cho was invited to an entertainment interview and was asked of mistouches during his performance. Mistouches are mistakes that pianists make during their performances by playing the wrong note.

to focus on playing every single note perfectly is not what he aims for, but to play the music for its beauty and for the beauty to be heard.

The vital implication here is that these pianists do not devote themselves to the piece they play believing that they will never achieve perfection, but they do so believe that the beauty of the music is greater than the piece being played with absolute perfection. In other words, technical perfection or perfect execution of the notes is insufficient for the beauty they seek. Therefore, they still aim for perfection which explains the countless and substantially devoted hours of practice to perfect their performance, but the perfection they aim to achieve is not merely the technical competency but the beauty they are constructing. This beauty of musical perfection is achieved and experienced when these pianists have played the piece almost perfectly, which is analogous to a person approximating the limit.

This is substantial because pianists aim for perfection, knowing that a perfect performance is impossible, which in this case, is analogous to our understanding of virtue ethics and becoming virtuous persons. It seems, then, it is agreeable to say one could pursue something that is genuinely impossible to attain. The reason why the pianist analogy is particularly more powerful for the sake of this argument is that it also places significance on the beauty that results from the journey and development. If pianists are never perfect, why do people still watch their performances? If we truly sought and valued technical perfection, we would be listening to a piece of music on a machine, which has the music sheet programmed into it. We would be listening to a piece of music from what the machine is playing because machines would be error-free, where they would be playing that music to absolute perfection, with every single note being played as it should be. However, people give up their time and resources to watch these pianists' performances and still find themselves emotionally struck by these performances, despite them

never being perfect. The key feature of this analogy is that *being virtuous* is not a destination; it is a journey. It is not something one arrives at; it is something that needs to be continuously strived for. As soon as one becomes complacent, the progress would halt.

More importantly, we often find ourselves describing these performances *as* perfect because of the musical beauty that they give regardless of the poverty of our language or expressions. Similarly, in the virtue ethics context, we can imagine an agent who has strived for the virtuous person ideal. Even when this person knows that they can never become a virtuous person, this person may be able to look back and find an immensely morally developed person compared to his previous self, who was far from the ideal. Here, this agent also knows that she and the journey towards the ideal is never perfect, but herself approaching the limit and the virtuous acts and behavior she had been developing is of beauty given the abundance of virtues that she lives by (Raphael, 2007).¹² Hence, I assert that an individual pursuing the virtuous person ideal is no different from the pianist analogy.

Virtue ethics and the virtuous person ideal should be understood in a similar way to these pianists. Though it is indeed impossible to become a virtuous person if we implement the mindset and understanding of pianists, our goal is not merely to aim for perfection, but also aim with the knowledge that concedes one's shortcomings and imperfections, and that there is beauty in the journey of our pursuit of moral virtue. Just like how music does not bring beauty through perfection but through the emotions, aesthetics, and artistry of music, virtue ethics also brings value and beauty not through perfection but from our journey in pursuing it. Our journey in moral perfection where we are habituating and practicing moral virtue, is just like how pianists

¹² The author asserts that virtues are beauties of action as well.

are practicing the piece of music for their performances. The beauty that we find in our journey is recognizing ourselves as approximating the virtuous person limit, where we see ourselves acting like virtuous people in every moment of our lives despite it being with mistakes, is like the beauty that we find in the actual music performance. Hart (2001) also concurs with this understanding of our moral development, as he conveys that virtue ethics gives us happiness “from learning to love the processes of a virtuous life rather than the chimera of achievement” (p.139-140). I will now discuss why this framework and these philosophical implications appear pertinent to administrative ethics and its developed framework.

v. Administrative Virtue Ethics

I have argued that virtue ethics, despite being impossible to normatively replicate, can meaningfully be realized with the proposed framework. The framework recognizes continuous moral development with unlimited opportunity and transformative experience through the continuous moral activity of an individual public administrator. I assert that these features of the framework fit the administrative ethics normative framework that had been extensively discussed in the review of the literature.

To recap, the administrative ethics framework that has been developed over the years requires the public administrator to be ethical such that the individual could be able to independently deliberate the processes of standards by which administrative decisions are made, to the degree that the decisions are made with legitimacy at the level of the organization (Denhardt, 1988, p.26). Moreover, the standards adhere to the social values and concerns that trend the society, hence being subject to change. The administrator is expected to adapt to these changes and reflect their commitment to these values. Finally, the administrator is held accountable and responsible at their personal, professional, and organizational levels for the

decisions made and the standards that justify those decisions. The core philosophical components of this framework were *independent critique*, which requires a deliberation process for standards, *changing standards*, the reflection of societal values that change over time, and *organizational context*, as administrators will have their responsibility and rules required to be followed as a member of their public agencies. I will attempt to show how my proposed framework of virtue ethics could fulfill these components of the framework.

A. Independent Critique

I have argued that the virtuous person who exemplifies the ideal virtue ethics ideal should be viewed as a mathematical limit. Though one cannot become a virtuous person that virtue ethics urges, one can become *infinitely* close to the virtuous person and this agent will need to maintain *continuity* to do so. These two properties satisfy the independent critique needed by a public administrator.

Independent critique is asked of a public administrator because the public administrator is to voluntarily and knowingly act according to moral standards. The administrator, therefore, must know what the moral standards are by a process before they uphold such standards. However, the administrator is also expected to reflect upon those actions after they have been informed by such standards. The administrator is presumed to reflect and deliberate before and after their ethical decisions. The salient detail, here, is that this process of deliberation does not cease after one or two instances and that the public administrator is required to do so consistently and perpetually. This, therefore, goes hand in hand with the continuity concept of the proposed virtue ethics framework. A mathematical limit could exist only when the function is continuous. This analogically means that the virtuous person, the mathematical limit, can only exist when there is continuity. For the public administrator, then, continuity is required for them to enact

virtue ethics and to become the virtuous person they must become, to fulfill the demands of administrative ethics.

Why should a public administrator be required to go through this process of independent critique uninterruptedly and consistently? Public administrators are essentially public officials who represent the democratic nature and the people of the state. Even if the public administrator had done one thing well, if not followed by a series of similar results that meet public needs and expectations, the public faith is curtailed, and the accountability of government is acutely damaged and mitigated. The common problems that we often see in public administration like corruption and various offenses mostly arise from the lack of ethical consistency and experience (Gorsira et al., 2018). The continuity of one's independent critique serves as a foundational means to bring forth ethical consistency. It would help the public administrators to habituate themselves to such necessary processes and help them grow into better public administrators, thereby strengthening their individual and organizational accountability towards the public.

Continuity, therefore, entails infinity for these public administrators. When a public administrator contemplates moral decision-making and standards continuously, the public administrator reaches the limit of the virtuous person. This progress towards the limit, however, is boundless and there are infinite opportunities. I have shown above that for a limit of 10, for example, the function can get to 9.99, 9.99999999, 9.999999999999999999, and so on. The continuity of ethical deliberation and critique of oneself allows them to become better public administrators. Therefore, in every moment in which independent critique is occurring within a public administrator's mind continuously, the public administrator is moving up the ladder, towards the limit of becoming the virtuous person they should become.

One might argue that the life of a public administrator, however, is not quite infinite, the role that they uphold may become void, or the public administrator could also become unemployed. While this is true, the expected outcome of administrative ethics is to develop and produce a public administrator who can execute their roles with ethical character. Hence, the infinity here does not refer to the infinity or unlimited opportunity for the individual's life, but the infinite opportunities while they are public administrators. The vital point is that the public administrator while being a public administrator, has the infinite opportunity to better themselves ethically. Perhaps such progress within themselves would allow them to take higher roles within the bureaucracy, due to their competency as a public administrator who can not only do their job well but also do them ethically.

B. Changing Standards

Perhaps this concept of society's values and standards changing ties very closely with Aristotle's metaphysics, in the most abstract sense. If one was to describe Aristotle's metaphysics by a single term, it would be, *change*. Things in nature and the components of our reality are subject to change. That also means the values of our society and moral standards, like everything else, are changing. For instance, technology, ever since the earliest times of our human progress, as an inherent component has constantly been changing our way of life and reality, which has embedded different values (Weinberg, 2019). The world that we live in is an amalgam of various features including human beings, each of whom possesses various values and hopes, and their lives often create diverse and unexpected challenges, that cannot be predicted by the designers of constitutions and rules, no matter how thoughtfully designed (Chapman, 2003, p.15 – 17). This conception of change in our societal values and standards also has an intricate relationship with my proposed framework. As mentioned above, a mathematical

limit is an essential component of mathematical calculus. Without limits, calculus would not exist. Calculus, in mathematics, is the study of change. Differentiation, a concept in calculus, is the measurement of the rate of change. It measures how steep or narrow a function moves along the cartesian plane. Hence, continuity and infinity, as a part of calculus, also play an important role in calculus, or in understanding change.

I have mentioned that continuity meant an unending effort and progress toward the goal of getting closer to becoming a virtuous person. Continuity, then, also applies to changing standards, because the public administrator must continuously be alerted to changing standards and values. Given that standards change, the continuity of public administrators' deliberating process and reflections allow them to understand and ponder the changing values. Without such continuous deliberation and reflection over the values and standards that inform their actions, they would be incapable of acting as they should be. For example, a public administrator could be acting in compliance with a particular value that is outdated. This value then would not reflect the current society's values and hence the public administrator's actions may misrepresent the public interest.

It is requisite for a public administrator to understand that the society that they serve is continuously changing. This places the burden on the administrator to change as well. This change, however, is not a fundamental change of one's identity, but being able to be a *flexible* public official. This flexibility is precisely what Vallor (2018) mentioned as a strength of virtue ethics. Vallor argued that despite virtues being ambiguous and vague can be a powerful tool for ethics because they provide flexibility. This flexibility is what the changing standards require of a public administrator. Public administrators must be flexible to act and think according to societal values and moral norms. This flexibility, therefore, is incumbent for a public

administrator. This flexibility, however, requires a continuous process of deliberating and awakening oneself against an outdated value that society may no longer find esteemed. This, however, does not mean disregarding important virtues just because the society no longer values them; in essence, the administrator must discover a way in which the society's values can be reflected in important virtues that the society seems to be negligent about. As society changes, the means by which one practices virtue must also change.

For example, virtues like tolerance were once deemed to be very important for 80% of American respondents to a study (NORC, 2023). However, within four years, this number had fallen to 58%. This does not entail that tolerance is no longer a worthwhile or significant value, and it merely signifies that people and society change in a way that certain virtues or values are preferred over another, over time.

This moral progress through awakening oneself and striving to cope with society, again, becomes the necessary steps and foundation for a public administrator to become infinitely close to the virtuous person or the virtuous public administrator they wish to and must become. As society changes, new situations and circumstances constantly arise inevitably as a part of our nature, the public administrator will face unexpected situations all the time. These situations though may require substantial effort and progress, but it also means that the public administrator has countless opportunities to better themselves, and hence can become closer to the limit of the virtuous person.

Nonetheless, there are problems that society's changing standards may pose for public administrators who look for ethical codes through virtue ethics. Society's values may change, and these values may not always be consistent with virtues. For example, a study by the Pew Research Center (Silva et al., 2021) surveyed 17 advanced economic countries and their people

to examine what makes life meaningful. In this study, South Korea's respondents have identified "material well-being" as their number one priority and choice that determines a meaningful life.¹³ When society values instrumental values like material well-being over intrinsic values or virtues like peace or love, the public administrator who seeks virtue may find himself bewildered. How can a "virtuous public administrator" meet the expectations and adhere to the society's standards and values, when such values are inconsistent with virtues that they wish to embody? When we were discussing changing standards, the assumption provides deference to society's changing standards and values; the society's values that have changed are consistent with virtues that a public administrator can nurture. Such societies, however, differ in reality. In a society that finds material well-being indispensable, the public administrator who seeks to meet the society's needs and expectations may appear democratic in the sense that it copes with the majority's values, but it also collides with being a virtuous administrator, who most likely would not find material well-being as a virtue to base their actions.

For this problem, the public administrator carries extra moral weight and burden. The virtuous public servant, in this case, would have to be vigorous and contemplative to a greater extent in deliberating and examining over the society's values. Hence, the independent critique allows the public administrator not only to reflect upon themselves but also to mull over society's changes and whether such changes are conformant to the virtues that they may seek.

I wish to highlight that it seems that in such cases as South Korea, it is arduous for a public administrator to uphold conflicting or inconsistent values because it would then

¹³ This may provoke debate on value theory, but the purpose of mentioning this value is to argue that we often believe that the values that the society changes to prefer over time should be of intrinsic and virtuous values. Though material well-being can be argued to be an important value, whether it can be an intrinsic and virtuous value is questionable.

undermine government accountability and fail to be a faithful public servant. However, it also seems unfair to place responsibility on the public administrator's shoulders to question society's wrongful values; the public administrator is the servant of the public, not the navigator. It also seems like upholding society's values would seem like the public administrator compromising themselves with the society, with no moral deliberation. Therefore, in such cases, the public administrator who seeks virtue as their code of ethics would need to find a way to cope with such instrumental values by identifying virtues that could overcome such misdirected values.

For instance, in the realm of healthcare, a society that values material well-being would place a strong emphasis on profit-driven healthcare systems. Access to medical care and treatment is mainly driven by financial resources, which prioritizes financial flourishing and economic efficiencies over virtues like compassion, care, and fairness. Public administrators, who seek their normative foundation as virtue ethics, would pursue those virtues to ensure impartial access to healthcare and medical treatment while meeting society's standards in materialistic values. Hence, public administrators who translate healthcare policy, for example, can demonstrate cost-efficiency in healthcare delivery, but also simultaneously implement public healthcare programs for low-income individuals to promote impartiality. By practicing and fostering virtues like impartiality, the public administrator can indirectly, like a proxy, highlight and promote health and well-being, and remind the public what true virtues and worthwhile values are. This shows administrator's means by which he or she practices virtue changes as society changes without an abandonment of virtue.

This illustration is a concrete actualization of MacIntyre's practice. MacIntyre's practice conceptualized the manifest effort to cultivate the true meaning of politics and achieving virtues. In the example, the administrator thoughtfully analyzes the society's values and attempts to meet

its expectations considering the appropriate virtue. This deliberation process to promote virtue is precisely the practice that MacIntyre advocated, and it also demonstrates why political responsibility, as a virtue, plays a notable role for administrators. It requires the administrator to acknowledge the difficulties in conflicting values but also entitles them to solve the problem virtuously.

The framework is consistent with this example because the virtuous administrator would be continuously ruminating and evaluating society's values that may be problematic and assist them to populate ideas of their actions and judgment that foster the necessary and appropriate virtues that could not only meet public expectations but that could also help the society recognize the importance of virtues. The virtuous administrator would not be compromising with such values and attempt to embrace those societal standards with virtues that could overcome societal shortcomings. Finally, the virtuous administrator will be facing similar challenges regarding changes in society inevitably; the administrator has countless, if not infinite, opportunities to enhance themselves and their judgment based on practical reason and experience, based on their decisions and judgments made in the past. Within this moral journey and process, the administrator can experience growth in their moral capacity.

C. Organizational Context

Perhaps, the most difficult moral dilemmas or ethical circumstances that the public administrator may face have to do with the organizational context. Public administrators are members of their organizations and public agencies. These organizations, under a bureaucratic nature, have a form of hierarchy and authority, to which public administrators are also subject. Thus, public administrators are not only entitled to be ethical as individual decision-makers but also need to adhere to the ethical standards and rules of their organization as well. If they are

individually ethical but are not compliant with the rules of their organization, whether they have acted ethically is questionable in the context of administrative ethics. Administrators, therefore, are generally granted the degree of moral conviction towards the goals and norms of their organization, as they are importantly relevant (Brandt, 1959, p. 58).

There are, however, concrete moral conundrums that administrators face in an organizational context, such as when the personal moral values of an administrator and the organizational values could conflict, or when the organization or its members are engaged in actual wrongdoing. In these quandaries, the administrators are often baffled by which moral value should be prioritized and the consequences that would follow from their decisions.

A prominent example of this would be that of whistleblowing. On one hand, to report wrongdoing of a government agency's actions or government employee might be the right thing to do for a virtuous administrator who values honesty and justice. On the other hand, regardless of whether the public administrator has spoken the truth about the problems within their agency, whether whistleblowing would have been the best ethical decision to make against the agency is debatable, in the consideration that the public servant is to be loyal to their colleagues and the agency as well.

The proposed framework can provide a positive intervention. Continuity, as required for deliberation and recognizing society's changes, also applies to the public administrator in the organizational context. Initially, continuity in the organizational context means that the public administrator should not limit their deliberation and reflection upon moral standards that change by the society's values, but also open their progressive ethical deliberations to the context of their organization. This means that their values should be open to their organizational and bureaucratic norms as well. For this to happen, however, the implicit yet necessary assumptions

would be that the organization upholds such values, and the constituents, including public administrators and other public officials, also practice those values. This is not to say that everybody else is already ethical, hence the need for ethics would be unnecessary. Rather, I am arguing that a government agency is already established to foster and uphold virtues, and so the administrators who are elected or chosen to represent their agency are certainly expected to embrace and base their decisions aligned with the agency's preestablished norms and virtues. The choice of these values and rules, therefore, plays an important role. How such values and rules can be developed may be an important implication for future research in administrative ethics.

Notwithstanding, the critical element here is that the public administrator considers their agency's rules and procedures as a part of their education in deciphering ethical decision-making, and that process of deliberation is required continuously. One may question, however, how could this work if only one public administrator is working this way and others do not. I must clarify that I am also assuming that based on this virtue ethics framework and that it could serve as a normative foundation for administrative ethics, all public administrators are subject to continuity of moral deliberation by considering their organizational rules and norms. When everybody can perform these procedures systematically and voluntarily, the organizational context can become second nature for the public administrators, and they could become more accountable for their actions, but also represent their agency's accountability as well. In this case, the virtuous public administrator can eventually become the virtuous public administration, where the agency and administrators, all together, strive to become the limit of their virtuous ideals.

For this to constructively work, however, the practice and adoption of this normative foundation for all public officials and government agencies would be imperative. This means the government and its agencies actively and routinely work closely and collaboratively to adopt such practices. For this to happen, then, the education of public administration ethics and administrative virtues would be crucial. The government and their employees' environment should be an environment that could fully embrace this normative foundation that emphasizes continuity and infinity, and help their employees reach their potential by engaging in training and education of this normative foundation. It would, therefore, be more important for government agencies to hire and look for administrators who are not only competent but who can demonstrate ethical and moral capacity.¹⁴

There is an assumption that colleagues and society are acting as though they are bound by ethical obligations and to promote intrinsic values. This, however, as frequently seen, is not the case, and my assumption may atomize the problem. The clear need for administrative ethics occurs because administrators act unethically, and the virtuous administrator is responsible for taking action that could be morally justified. According to Gross et al. (2020), public official misconduct contributes to 54% of false convictions. Hence, it may seem that virtue ethics would only hold under idealistic circumstances, which is unrealistic.

To this, however, the framework provides an insight. The framework urged administrators to engage in deliberation of moral virtues and one's moral journey, in conjunction with the organizational context. This means that the organization, too, should allow the organization's environment to be an environment in which its employees can engage in such

¹⁴ Administrative ethics, therefore, should be considered a necessary part of public administration education, as Cooper (2001) also advocates for.

activities. This not only includes the education of ethics, but also an environment in which wrongdoings can be rightfully and consciously admitted, and employees could freely engage in those communications. For instance, if an official wrongdoing has been done, it is the virtuous administrator and the organization's role and responsibility to engage in helping the wrongdoer's moral deliberation. Hence, these moral deliberations are executed within the organization internally. It is just like how we often say a problem within the house stays in the house. The public would find a government agency that can internally fix ethical problems more competent and accountable, instead of an employee publicly whistleblowing the wrongdoings of his or her colleague's wrongdoing. If the administrators are expected and required to not only uphold personal virtues but the organizational virtues and goals, then it is certainly more important for them to fix their problems within the organization. For this to work, therefore, MacIntyre's notion of practice must be fully embraced by government agencies, where the public servants are provided an environment in which they can have open-minded discussions on ethical problems, by which they could achieve the relevant virtues more successfully.

Another way the framework could also assist this issue is the recognition of infinity. Infinity refers to the countless opportunities that an administrator would have to become the virtuous administrator they ought to become. I have provided that a state of 9.99 could be aimed to become 9.9999 for a limit of 10, which is something similar that could be done by an administrator. This also means, however, like the pianist analogy, that the goal is not mere perfection, but also acknowledging one's vulnerability to never be able to become that limit.

Therefore, in the organizational context, official wrongdoings or unethical actions must be also considered as a part of the journey. For an administrator seeking the limit of a virtuous administrator, their position could be a 9.999 on day 1 but can also be 5.891245 on day 8 due to

their unethical actions.¹⁵ The quantified number can demonstrate that one's position in the journey has deteriorated. This, too, however, is part of the journey for administrators.

Administrators in an organizational context are situated with an extra burden of accountability due to their commitments to both the public and their organizations.¹⁶ Hence, their wrongdoings or unethical conduct, regardless of how significant they are, maybe an inevitable part of their career, despite the expectations for them to excel as ethical public servants.

However, as I have shown in the pianist analogy, the true meaning of virtue is not in acquiring it due to its impossibility, but in the journey to getting infinitely close to it. Therefore, the framework recognizes that there exists a possibility of deteriorating in this journey, but that should not hinder one's journey in seeking the ideal of a virtuous administrator. The organizational practice of deliberating and fixing ethical problems internally is fundamental because this would encourage a more inclusive and receptive environment for administrators to admit their wrongdoings and provide them the prospect of bettering themselves in the future.¹⁷ Such environments are those that are encouraged by MacIntyre, who believes that practices to achieve virtue are supported by institutions like hospitals, chess clubs, or political organizations that enable their constituents to achieve internal goods or intrinsic values (Lutz, n.d.).

vi. Discussions

¹⁵ The limit of a virtuous administrator, here, is considered 10, just for reference.

¹⁶ I am not arguing that private sector employees do not face the same degree of burden, but rather emphasizing that public servants differ from private sector employees in that public servants are expected to do good. Private sector employees can also be subject to high scrutiny of moral standards if their work directly impacts the public sector.

¹⁷ This is not to say that the organization should be open to employees making mistakes and allow mistakes. The goal is to mitigate mistakes and wrongdoings. What I am arguing for is the environment in which administrators could freely engage in moral deliberation as a culture so that they can become virtuous administrators, and not merely judge other employees' behavior or wrongdoings. Instead, the administrators should fix their problems internally and help their fellow colleagues to become better ethical decision makers in the future.

The first objection to my thesis concerns the impossibility of virtue ethics. There may be a valid objection as to why we would separate the person from the act. Though it may seem common to do so, it may lead to a conceptual morass. In my argument in demonstrating the impossibility of virtue ethics, I have argued that it is the case that a virtuous person acts virtuously, and not vice versa. But one may object that perhaps this *person* exists as a moral agent *only* in the moment of their action. Why should we consider the virtuous person beyond its mere ethical circumstance? It may seem to be more than just the summation of discrete actions because both internally and externally, we are inclined to establish coherence. More simply put, if we are discussing ethics and how one ought to act in ethical situations, why do we not merely look at the person *only* at its situation? If the virtue ethics principle is to act as a virtuous person in *that* situation, why should one examine the person beyond their being as a moral agent in the moment of their action?

In response to this objection, I contend that removing the separation of the person and the act brings us back to a problem that fails to recognize the key conception of virtue ethics. The key conception of virtue ethics was that one cannot become a virtuous person by simply engaging in acts and those acts are insufficient to creating that virtuous person. Hence, the virtuous person holds an important value in the theory. If we, however, only consider the virtuous *person* in the moment of their action, so in other words, only look at who and what the virtuous person is only in the moment of their action, are we truly looking at the virtuous person? I argue that we are not.

When we try to examine and comprehend someone, we do not do it solely by looking at who they are in a discrete number of situations. In this case, if we are to replicate a virtuous person's actions, we ought to know who they are, because we are not to merely consider their

actions. When we attempt to know who they are, we simply cannot execute the diagnosis of who they are by looking at how they perform as a moral agent in the moment of their action. This is no different from merely looking at their actions in a particular situation. If we are to truly know who that virtuous person is, we are naturally directed to look at how they have lived and the journey of their development as a virtuous person. We must examine the time and experience required for practical reason, the deliberation and progress in how they inculcated their virtues to become that virtuous person.¹⁸ The virtuous person is most likely the person who has consistently and persistently strived to live such a life. To know how and why they act virtuously in a situation, we must not merely inspect them at the particular instance but probe the life they have lived that had led them to make such virtuous decisions.

The second objection to this argument is that the framework requires specific knowledge of virtuous acts over a given time if we are to quantify virtue and virtuous acts. The framework of limits is the virtuous person, and through virtuous acts, we are getting closer to that limit. But for example, if the limit of a virtuous person is a 10, how do we know whether we are 9.9 or 8 or 5 or 9.9999? Conceptually, it was argued that because we can get infinitely close to this limit, we could know that 9.99999 is closer to 9.999. How could we, in the context of one's life, know whether this person is a 9.99999 or 9.999? Do we simply add how many virtuous acts one has done throughout the day?

But given that all virtues are not equally valuable in different situations, how do we even quantify these virtues? For example, even if we agree to quantify one's closeness to the limit by counting the number of virtuous acts one has done, if Gamma has done 8 out of 10 virtuous acts

¹⁸ I have argued that a virtuous person does not exist. However, on a conceptual level, a virtuous person, the ideal we would want to become in virtue ethics, exists for us to learn from.

and Beta has done 9 out of 10 virtuous acts, can we say that Beta lived a more virtuous life than Gamma? That is not necessarily the case, because there is a contextual explanation for all of these virtuous acts, and Gamma's 8 virtuous acts could carry a heavier moral burden and weight, which gives more depth to his virtuous acts than Beta's. We simply cannot quantify our virtuous acts. Contrary to mathematics, to conceptually define a virtuous behavior through numbers seems a difficult task.

To respond to this objection, I would say that a virtuous person being defined in terms of a limit is more of an analogy, instead of a technical and mathematical idea. Though it is agreeable that quantifying virtue and its corresponding acts are difficult, one could still know what kind of life that person lived. If this person strives to become a virtuous person, that person would also reflect on her day and the life she lived, to see how virtuous she had lived that day, in comparison to the virtuous person she wishes to be. Given that limits also require continuity, it would lead her to think that "I must do better tomorrow, and if I did things well today, it's a matter of continuity and not stopping here." If that is truly the case, then we would know that in a summation of her two days, she lived a more virtuous life than her first day alone, because she had continued to live a more virtuous life. This would be like $d1 < d2 + d1$.¹⁹ Therefore, even if we cannot precisely measure or quantify virtuous acts, by constant reflection and drive for continuity, one could know that they are getting close to the life of a virtuous person.

The third objection can be made against the pianist analogy. For music and its performances, even if they are not perfect, there is beauty in those performances and the mistakes are rarely noticed. More importantly, it seems that these mistakes or little mistouches

¹⁹ This would only be the case where both days have been lived with continuity and full of virtuous acts.

by pianists are part of their performances. But despite this imperfection in performances, we often feel like the performance was perfect. Is this acceptable for virtues, or in other words, can it be the same for virtues? Virtues are intrinsically valuable and are excellent. How could there be mistakes or faults in excellence? If we have defined virtuous people as people who are virtuous at every moment, can we allow room for mistakes?

To respond to this objection, I have already shown that acknowledging vulnerability in our pursuit of moral excellence is also a virtue. However, I also assert that this objection seems plausible because we have already heard the entire piece of music. As mentioned above, one could feel the emotional response that the performance was perfect even if the performance was not perfect. This is because one judges a performance not by its incremental constituents, but by the performance as a whole. The performance is not necessarily the little-by-little parts, but what the whole piece is about. Virtuous people should also be considered this way. In addition to the fact that we cannot decipher a person as a virtuous person or not only by looking at various points of time, it is also important to look at this person's life as a whole at the end to see how close they are to the limit and how virtuous of a life they have tried to live. This judgment is also not necessarily what others judge about one's life, but also how one thinks about the life they have lived.

The fourth objection can be whether the framework recognizes continuous moral development. One might argue that it might be the case that one starts life closer to the infinite and then recedes eventually. If the limit is about proximity, then development may only be relevant if it increases proximity. Put differently, it begs the question of whether the framework values someone far away getting closer to the limit or someone already very close that demonstrates continuity. Does the framework value Gamma going from 2, to closer to 10, or

value staying at 9.99? Moreover, given that my argument upholds the journey and continuous process of moral development, is the distance one travels towards the limit or the proximity to the limit?

To this objection, I would assert that both are valuable and important, and this framework recognizes both. I argued that the virtuous person as a limit holds with admitting one's impossibility to achieve but also the recognition of infinite growth and the need for continuity. In that case, the journey, which is the distance traveled toward the limit, is important because if that journey is getting closer to the limit, it means that the person is consistently striving for moral development. For example, Gamma would not be nearer to 9.999 the next day from 9.9 if Gamma did not live a more virtuous life than the day before. Moreover, the framework recognizes continuous moral development because if proximity to the limit is what we value, then reaching the limit infinitely close requires one to recognize that he could get closer the next day. Along with the journey, proximity is also valuable and important because the whole framework is dependent on the notion that proximity to the limit is precisely the goal of virtue ethics.

Another objection to the argument is that virtue ethics, despite being able to be flexible with its equivocal nature, still can be problematic with culture. Different cultures define and understand virtue very differently (Stewart, 1991, p. 369-370). For example, a virtue like respect may appear differently in countries in Asia in comparison to the Western world. Given that the public administration and its administrators now have more diversified personnel who come from various backgrounds and cultural identities, whether these virtues that are culturally different can be unified to a single understanding of virtue can be a debatable issue, given its strengths in flexibility.

Finally, an objection can be made to why virtue ethics, given the framework, should be preferable over other competing ethical frameworks. This objection would highlight that virtue ethics, within this framework, still does not provide guidance for legitimate actions to take on moral enigmas for administrators. For example, in the organizational context, my framework suggests that administrators should freely deliberate over ethical matters with their cohort to fully foster virtue, and to seek more continuous moral development irrespective of how virtuous their preceding actions or judgments were. Though individual critique, continuous cogitation, and collaborative endeavor within an organization are necessary and prescriptive in the sense that they guide the administrator's moral journey in arriving at a decision, they may still lack the explicit directives for an administrator to act upon. For example, my framework suggests that an administrator should be contemplating how to base the right decision for an ethical situation continuously, instead of providing the administrator an unambiguous set of actions to take.

This paper entirely developed the thesis that virtue ethics should be the normative foundation of administrative ethics for philosophical reasons. However, despite my attempt to convince the reader, the objection still stands, because in ethical situations, administrators are expected to act upon them and to make the right decision. Despite my framework, it is fair to concur that virtue ethics may not provide a list of actions to take on ethical circumstances. A utilitarian or deontological ethical foundation would provide a set of actions for an administrator to take, based on its consequences. In particular, utilitarian foundations would suggest the administrator make a certain decision to maximize utility, and a deontological foundation would work under strict categorical imperatives, such as deciding such that under the principle of universalizability, a certain decision would elicit positive consequences.

To respond to this objection, I argue that my thesis and the main argument for this thesis is that for public administrators to do good for the public, they must be good.²⁰ Administrators and public servants are elected and hired by the government based on their competency in their roles. They are also, however, subject to high standards of moral competency to deliver public services. To do this, however, these administrators need to be good people, prior to their ability to perform proficiently as an administrator. Therefore, taking into account the objection that the framework still lacks explicit rules, I am arguing that an ethical administrator is not an individual who abides by rules and ethical principles that are based on one dimension of ethical theories, and instead is someone who knows what and why those rules and ethical principles may be right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate in ethical circumstances. In a society that is constantly changing, dynamic, pluralistic, and becoming sophisticated, it is more important for an administrator to justify their moral decisions that had been manufactured through rigorous contemplation both to the public and their organization, in place of an administrator who merely follows rules that they may or may not understand.

As mentioned above, Aristotle argued that those who act upon a virtue without knowing what it truly means and why they are significant do not fulfill the demands of virtue ethics. Similarly, as a society, we would yearn for an ethical administrator who knows why they are upholding ethically material values through experience and who could offer a more holistic understanding of ethics that reaches beyond the scope of following rules or maximizing utility. Virtue ethics and my framework would offer a basis for an administrator to root their decisions in a more comprehensive approach, which could indeed end up with the administrator following

²⁰ Similar to that of Quark's argument here in Quirk, B. (2020). Being Good to Do Good: Public Servants and Public Ethics in the Twenty-First Century. In: Sullivan, H., Dickinson, H., Henderson, H. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03008-7_61-1

their bureaucratic rule in a particular context. After all, the rules that the organization expects are also another form of ethical intervention that should bring a positive outcome. In that sense, virtue ethics with my proposed framework could encompass all other competing theories of ethics. The point is that ethical and virtuous administrator invests their time to critically assess their options and establish the best reasons for the best decision available.

vii. Conclusion: The Future of Public Administration with Virtue

From its long historical tradition, Virtue ethics has been a powerful tool for ethical guidance. It has, therefore, been an important base of theory for administrative ethics. Due to its idealistic nature and its ambiguity in guidance, it has been considered deficient in providing a normative basis for public administrators who face ethical challenges consistently. In this paper, I have provided a philosophical examination of why virtue ethics is indeed a practical impossibility. For this, I have proposed a framework to understand the virtuous person, to whom we base our actions, should be thought of like a mathematical limit, which is the end to which will never be able to reach, but can infinitely get close. I have argued that the virtuous person ideal can be achieved through the continuity of virtuous actions, just like Aristotle had argued that a virtuous person requires habituation of virtuous actions. However, this continuity was not merely the perpetuation of virtuous actions, but also the protraction of deliberation of virtues and critique of one's moral capacity. The agent also has an infinite number of opportunities to get closer to the virtuous person ideal they desire to become. The important point was that the limit of a virtuous person is not only an end goal but also a journey in which one can appreciate the beauty of their moral development.

Throughout this paper, I have mainly focused on virtue ethics in a philosophical tradition with an emphasis on the person. This was because, for public servants who aim at doing good for

their public, these public servants must be good. This means that an ethical or virtuous public administrator is always followed by the prerequisite of an ethical or virtuous person. Therefore, the focus of my paper was defending why becoming a virtuous person is important, why it is impossible yet still valuable, and how we could go about it, in the context of administrative ethics. Administrative ethics has a normative foundation framework that had been historically developed by various scholars who have all agreed on three major components, which were independent critique, changing society, and organizational context. I have explained why my framework and virtue ethics can meet these requirements philosophically.

The limitations of my paper, therefore, relate to the specificity of the complex moral conundrums that public administrators face. This paper centered on why virtue ethics can philosophically serve as a foundation for administrative ethics. It has not fully tackled the concrete problems in administration and why virtue ethics can offer solutions to concrete problems. I believe that future research can be directed at why my framework and virtue ethics can solve various and specific moral dilemmas that administrators encounter. The essential point of this thesis, however, was not to pinpoint every complex moral quandary and offer adequate solutions. It was rather to demonstrate that with virtue ethics and my framework, no ethical or moral dilemma would be unsolvable in administrative ethics.²¹ Though my framework demands enervating and interminable continuity and an unsettling moral development for an administrator, it can certainly be a beautiful and worthwhile journey that they can describe as a meaningful life as both a public servant and a person.

²¹ This was an idea that was strengthened by Tholen (2018) in page 30 of his work.

viii. References

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