Can Bureaucrats Be Virtuous?

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*When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*

by Bernardo Zacka.


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Reviewed by John Ehrett

It’s easy to view the modern administrative state as a faceless regulatory apparatus, or a lumbering authoritarian engine largely detached from citizens’ concerns. But Bernardo Zacka’s new book *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* invites us to do the opposite—to think deeply about the inner lives of bureaucrats.

This isn’t as difficult as it sounds, thanks to the uniquely interdisciplinary methodology Zacka deploys. His study is an intriguing blend of the ethnographic and the theoretical: it draws heavily on its author’s experience working at an antipoverty agency in the northeastern United States, and goes on to contextualize these fieldwork insights in light of Hannah Arendt, Martha Nussbaum, Ronald Dworkin, and other political theorists.

And Zacka’s findings are intriguing. In his telling, individual “street-level bureaucrats” are not merely automatons or disempowered cogs. They are
sophisticated moral agents who routinely confront a tangled web of expectations and pressures, leading them to make decisions that manifest as various forms of government failure. This may seem intuitive: as many scholars have recognized over the years, the duties of street-level bureaucrats—that is, those government employees who interact directly with the public—pull in multiple directions simultaneously. Street-level bureaucrats must symbolically represent the state to its citizens, administer services that the state has agreed to provide, and interact with one another as coworkers in a discrete workplace. These imperatives frequently conflict with one another, producing dysfunction.

Analysis of this dysfunction is the centerpiece of Zacka’s research. Much of the book is an account of the three “pathologies”—indifference, caregiving, and enforcement—that street-level bureaucrats must work to avoid. Indifference is a sense of detachment and disregard for members of the public (a phenomenon that anyone who has ever set foot inside the Department of Motor Vehicles will immediately recognize). Caregiving is an unhealthy emotional involvement in the details of individual cases (consider a social worker who becomes overly invested in the lives of those he serves, to the point that his interventions ultimately prevent his clients from becoming fully independent). Enforcement is an excessive concern over the management of tax dollars, resulting in seemingly arbitrary denials of the services to which clients are entitled by statute (imagine a welfare administrator growing cynical over what she views as abuses of the system, leading her to refuse benefits to clients for pedantic reasons).

There’s a grim logic to these particular pathologies: all three are unavoidably bound up with the work that street-level bureaucrats are required to perform. Bureaucrats ought to avoid favoritism and discrimination; this impulse, when taken to an extreme, becomes indifference. Bureaucrats ought to be public-spirited and concerned for their clients; this can mutate into caregiving. Bureaucrats ought to be responsible stewards of public resources; this can turn into over-enforcement of procedural rules. If left unrestrained, Zacka argues, these pathologies will eventually lead bureaucrats to develop informal
taxonomies—heuristic schemes used by street-level bureaucrats to classify the cases before them into “deserving” and “undeserving” categories. A vicious downward spiral results, in which bureaucrats become increasingly alienated from their clients and disillusioned with their work. And when that occurs, the bureaucratic system begins to break down.

The antidote to these pathologies, Zacka argues, is a regime of “practices of the self” designed to help cultivate resilience and thoughtful decision-making. He proposes three behaviors in particular: self-examination of one’s own potential biases and concerns, self-recalibration through reflection on one’s deeply held values and goals, and modulation through careful analysis of critical prior moments in one’s career. Over time, so the argument runs, these practices can become sustained disciplines, through which a moral sensibility will ultimately emerge that allows for responsible case-by-case reasoning.

This general approach overlaps significantly with the framework of virtue ethics articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre and others—a debt Zacka readily acknowledges. The bureaucratic pathologies Zacka traces are, at bottom, failures to achieve a proper balance between competing duties—or, put more abstractly, failures to achieve an Aristotelian “golden mean” of virtuous behavior in the face of moral dilemmas. Given this reality, formalized practices of the self should theoretically help bureaucrats develop the virtues necessary to succeed in their work. But given the severity of the pressures bureaucrats face, will any such practices ever be enough?

That is the unanswerable question at the heart of When the State Meets the Street.

To his credit, Zacka resists the temptation to lazily declare that more governmental intervention or spending will remediate the pathologies he identifies (a vice common to other writers on the subject like Matthew Desmond, Rachel Sherman, and Alex Vitale). The distinct temptations and hardships of bureaucratic life will plainly be present in any world where public resources are limited; they’re inevitably connected to the
administrative role. Such a sense of inevitability looms large in Zacka’s work—and though not explicitly noted, there are obvious parallels between his ethnography-driven conclusions and James Buchananite public choice economics. Both paradigms treat state actors as sophisticated rational agents, and both are essentially skeptical of bureaucrats’ ability to remain indefinitely disinterested.

In humanizing the bureaucracy’s constituent members, Zacka—perhaps ironically—exposes the administrative system’s deepest weaknesses. Cultivating moral agency in the workplace is undoubtedly a worthy goal, and virtue-oriented “practices of the self” might go a long way towards mitigating the harms of bureaucracy envisioned by public choice scholars. But why not address the root pathologies themselves? Ought the administrative state have a mandate so expansive that it necessarily forces street-level bureaucrats into impossible situations? Does anyone consistently behave virtuously, day after day, within the constraints of an unresponsive and inefficient hierarchy? Like Buchanan, Zacka finds himself forced to confront uncomfortable truths about the incentives at work within the state—but in leaving this question unaddressed, Zacka ultimately fails to grapple with the full force of his own scholarship.

And more broadly, Zacka—in Rawlsian fashion—seems to assume without argument that a broad regime of entitlements is normatively desirable. Yet again, one can’t help wondering whether the phenomena associated with, say, the enforcement pathology—that is, repeated observations by caseworkers of clients’ abuse of “the system”—pose serious difficulties for any expanded program of social services. Bureaucratic pathologies plainly don’t emerge in a vacuum: might there be something inherent in the bureaucracy itself that incubates these tendencies? Zacka doesn’t say; indeed, the answer may be too uncomfortable to acknowledge.

But even if Zacka’s analysis stops a few steps too soon, When the State Meets the Street is both a strikingly original work and a penetrating analysis of
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governmental decision-making. Not only is the book a sophisticated
deconstruction of the administrative state, it also encourages liberty-minded
readers to expand their intellectual horizons beyond the traditional citizen-
government relationship. The motivations driving street-level bureaucrats are
complex, and Zacka teases them out skillfully. By adopting such a focus on his
subjects’ inner lives and high-level coping behaviors, Zacka opens up space for
critics of the administrative state to conceive of bureaucrats as complex—and
even, one might say, sympathetic—figures. That is an achievement indeed.

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