The Ethics Edge is a collection of articles intended for use as a textbook for public sector ethics training. The articles are grouped into four sections, “Foundations,” “Implementation: Ethical Leadership,” “Implementation: Ethical Management,” and “Ethical Challenges.” The introduction says that the articles included in the book are thought to be the best and most current treatments of ethics in government. Six cases are also supplied at the end. The scope of the text ranges from computers to leadership ethics and from the ethics of privatization to public cynicism.

It should be emphasized that this anthology concerns the training of practitioners in matters that are traditionally labeled “ethics.” In this respect, it largely fulfills its mission. None of the comments that follow should be taken as contradiction to this assertion. Some of the stated concerns challenge the practice of focusing training in this way, but that does not fault the book.

The contributions are a combination of normative articles and sociological studies of government practice. Part 1, “Foundations,” is entirely normative, providing guidance to administrators on how to act properly. Beginning in Part 2, however, there are occasional empirical chapters that bear some resemblance to sociology. Chapters 8, 14, and 17 are reports of empirical studies based on surveys. Several other chapters report case studies. The final chapter can be classified as “informational.” As is common in anthologies, the articles are uneven. Many are worthy of being labeled the “best [of the] current articles on ethics in government”; others, however, are more doubtful. One reason for the unevenness is that some of the authors appear to have only limited familiarity with the broader study of ethics beyond the narrow confines of public administration. This complaint certainly does not apply to Dennis F. Thompson, J. Patrick Dobel, or either of the editors, both of whom have also supplied articles. Nor does this concern apply as much to the general practice as it does to the text under review. Some of the best articles are Montgomery Van Wart’s “An Ethics-Based Approach to Leadership,” Neal Trautman’s “The Corruption Continuum: How Law Enforcement Organizations Become Corrupt,” and David W. Haines’s “Fatal
Choices: The Routinization of Deceit, Incompetence, and Corruption,” as well as those already noted.

Thompson’s article, Chapter 16, is his traditional issue of “Private Life and Public Office.” This version of this argument is quite abbreviated. Much of the subtlety is, therefore, omitted. But the broader outline of the argument is now visible. A certain level of instrumentality in Thompson’s views puts him in Machiavelli’s camp and in opposition to Kant. When it is time to talk about the petty issues that normally are labeled “ethics” in government, the discussion by David W. Haines is excellent. While Haines’s material appears to be primarily anecdotal, it has an authenticity that much empirical work lacks. He describes the interconnectedness of decisions and how petty bad decisions can lead to more serious bad decisions and organizational failure. Evan Berman’s article on “Public Cynicism” discusses the dual moral quandary: bureaucrats mistreating the public, and the public mistreating bureaucrats. However, his data curiously do not show a sufficient interest in the role of propaganda in producing cynicism. It was, after all, Ronald Reagan who declared that the government was the problem.

Much of what is discussed in this book has been transformed from a matter of low ethics into a matter of obedience to the law. There is nothing wrong with training people to obey the law, although there are usually peculiarities linked to different jurisdictions that make this training a bit tricky. However, all such training is only marginally associated with ethics. Once enforceable rules have been formalized in certain spheres, the authority is removed from ethics. Thus, matters of sexual harassment, non-discrimination, financial disclosure, and conflict of interest, for example, are typically in the jurisdiction of the law these days. Training people to fulfill their obligations is a good thing, but it is anachronistic to call instruction on these matters “ethics training.”

Central to ethics is the sense of personal agency. When a decision is externally prescribed, even when it is the “right” decision, ethics has taken a back seat. Thus, the failure of legislators to truly address corruption in the law allows them to dodge the accusation of bribery, but places the accusation of immorality all the more squarely upon their shoulders.

The typical reader will, by now, think that the reviewer has wandered off into some ivory tower stairwell covered in cobwebs. What is the point? There is much in ethics that the practitioner should consider that is not present in the current set of essays. The reviewer does not blame the editors; rather, it is the state of the practice.

To bring this concern home, consider a couple of issues not addressed in the book. Let us start off with legislators who proscribe corruption in such a way as to protect their favorite forms of corruption. This practice was much in evidence in the past and still is today. If the editors want to keep the book strictly to administrative ethics, here is a question for them: How can administrators exhibit ethical behavior while working for legislators who exhibit such cynicism? Where is this most hoary problem of American government even raised?

Second, while the inclusion of some generalized discussion of ethical theory is appreciated, the ethics of public officials and employees was not put within an appropriate political context. In part, this reflects the state of the art, for it has actually deteriorated over the past half century. Carl Friedrich and Dwight
Waldo are, by all appearances, the high point of political theory linked to public administration. While training administrators about ethics, it is important to communicate their role in democratic accountability. As the debate between Friedrich (1940) and Finer (1941) demonstrated, this is not an easy communication. A major difficulty is that the literature itself is not that rich. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine how to instruct administrators about ethical and democratic theories much more concretely than with the materials found in The Ethics Edge.

This book, then, reflects the state of the art. For a short, two- or three-day training series, or a workshop, it is a fine product. It is also recommended as a secondary text for an ethics course. It contains some excellent articles by some leading members of the profession. Most of the issues raised here are more difficulties with the field than with the text under review.

—Daniel W. Williams
Baruch College
City University of New York

REFERENCES
Finer, Herman. 1941. “Administrative Responsibility in Democratic Government.” Public Administration Review 1, no. 4:335–350.
Friedrich, Carl. 1940. “Public Policy and the Nature of Administrative Responsibility.” In Public Policy: A Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration, Harvard University, edited by Carl Friedrich and Edward Mason, vol. 1, pp. 3–24. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

The Ethics Primer for Public Administrators in Government and Nonprofit Organizations

BY JAMES SVARA
Sudbury, Mass.: Jones & Bartlett, 2007

Building Time at Brushy

BY STONNEY RAY LANE
Bloomington, Ind.: 1st Books, 2003

The Ethics Primer by James Svara is the book chiefly under review. Svara has a wide knowledge of ethics issues; in this volume he emphasizes the role of ethics in public decision-making, offers a way of thinking about ethics, and places the concept of duty at the center of ethical discourse. The book is an efficient exposition of his ethical position. Building Time at Brushy is a companion work that teachers and trainers may wish to include when using Svara’s book for instructional purposes.

Managers should always make decisions based on the public interest, but often the public interest is so vague and subject to personal interpretation as to offer little constraint or guidance. Svara defines the public interest as duty to the office one holds. Duty—a surrogate for public interest—is the foundation stone upon which he builds his process for ethical decision-making. Objec-
tive principles and personal virtues complement duty, but are of secondary importance. Benefits to society should not be ignored, but this consequentialist position ranks last in importance.

In ethical decision-making, duty should be primary. It is where the ethical conversation begins, but not where it ends, for conventional duty occupies only level 4 in Kohlberg’s six-stage hierarchy of ethical development. Duty is neither an absolute nor the apex of achievement. Although duty is basic, higher levels of ethical consideration are represented by incorporating principle and virtue/intuition. At higher stages are level 5, which directs the administrator to seek the societal interest, which Svara calls “principle,” and level 6, which Svara calls “virtue/intuition,” where the administrator is guided by universal rather than societal values. Decision processes achieving Kohlberg’s fifth and sixth stages of moral judgment require the inclusion of principle and virtue/intuition. At level 5, one looks to societal principles, and the first principle should be to search in constitutional writings. At level 6, the administrator has transcended rules and principles, and relies on intuition in making decisions.

Concern about the benefits to society (consequentialist thinking) represents an “anti-ethical” position, for the good, the ethical, should be intrinsic to the decision. At the same time, Svara recognizes consequentialism as the dominant approach of practitioners to ethical questions, and concedes that results should be considered for every decision. However, consequentialism offers no duty, principled, or virtue-based criteria for decision-making. Not only may a consequentialist-based decision choice be poor on ethical grounds, it may fail on empirical grounds as well, since any such decision can only anticipate or hope that expectations are realized subsequent to the decision.

Svara describes ethics codes as regulatory, educational, or inspirational, and asks whether codes may be a “low road” to ethics. He thinks that codes should “set standards,” and in addition to the six codes offered as appendices, his text includes the Athenian code. However, his emphasis is not on codes from organizations, but on the individual’s personal code. He invites readers to write their own personal codes, to take upon themselves the self-searching and reflection that would elevate their own decision-making from level 4 to level 6 on the Kohlberg scale. Despite guidance from rules and from social values and pressures, in the end the administrator’s decision is personal. Svara’s personal statements, which summarize the book, suggest a code for public officials (pp. 155–157):

- Be accountable to the law and to organizational mission.
- Defend the integrity of public service.
- Be dedicated to the public interest.
- Accept individual responsibility for your actions and the consequences of your actions.
- Provide leadership in ways appropriate to your position to improve policy, programs, methods, and procedures.
- Respect and strengthen the democratic process and the values of the democratic system in ways appropriate to your position.
- Promote ethics in your organization.
- Identify and support the enforcement of ethics codes that cover your professional work.
Balance virtue, principled action, and positive consequences.

Approach problems with informed ethical reasoning.

One implements such a code by the following process:

Get all the facts and interpret them objectively.

Identify all potential stakeholders.

Balance the requirements of law and policy, organizational expectations, and professional standards.

Apply considerations drawn from distinct ethical approaches.

Svara’s decision model is represented by a triangle, with principle (justice/fairness/equity), virtue/intuition (character), and consequences (greatest good) as its three corners. Duty (the public interest) is located inside a circle at the center of the triangle. This model does not mesh perfectly with Kohlberg’s ethical-stages model, but Svara’s rationale is reasonable. Duty is a necessary but not sufficient condition for high-level decision-making. Responding to duty is certainly preferable to choosing a decision alternative solely on the basis of the consequences or for one’s personal benefit. This is a flexible, inclusive decision-making process rather than a lock-step, tight deontological hierarchy emerging from a set of rules.

A chapter is devoted to whistleblowing, which Svara describes as acting on duty in the face of uncertainty and risk (p.115). Rarely does a dissenter receive anything better than quiet psychic satisfaction from having brought attention to illegal or unethical actions by administrative or political officials. Openly going public means that the employee will likely no longer be effective in the organization, and whistleblowing may severely limit other career options. After discussing the various ethical choices available to the administrator in a toxic system or facing pressure to choose an unethical alternative, Svara recommends the anonymous tip as a reasonable way to meet the need to get information to people who can act on it without incurring more than minimal risk.

The book is indeed a primer. The major issues in the ethics field are carefully, clearly, and succinctly laid out. This short text should be read by every executive, because it offers a decision process that emphasizes an ethical component. However, this book is not recommended as the sole source for pre-service students seeking to get an understanding of how to grapple with the kinds of ethical issues likely to be encountered in the workplace. Most of the cases are bunched in Chapter 3, and they are simple, providing little gut-wrenching angst reflective of the tough issues that managers must face in real life. In-service students can write their own cases to share with the teacher and class. For the pre-service classroom, more is needed to breathe reality into the information so carefully laid out. Without difficult cases, a student may see ethics as an important task, but no more problematic than applying the appropriate statistic based upon the level of measurement present in one’s data. The real world would then constitute a rude awakening. Svara does not deceive the student, because the warnings are present, but the student will not “understand” until the issue becomes lived experience. Kohlberg’s hierarchy, various diagrams, and the ethics codes will be learned as information, not as puzzles that keep one awake at night, usually have no easy right/wrong answer, and may haunt long after the decision is made. Thus,
case materials are needed to supple-
ment Svara’s primer. The cases by
student-practitioners collected in the
reader by Miller and Alkadry (1998)
and the tools present in Svara’s book
could be brought to bear on each other,
with good class discussion. Each case
is distinct.

Besides a case reader or student-
generated cases, another option is
autobiography, the manager who tells
stories of decision experiences allowing
the application of Svara’s framework
to stories in the biography. Stonney
Lane’s Building Time at Brushy is a
story told from the heart by an author
whose decisions incorporated duty,
character, and principle, with much less
concern for the consequences. We see
him bouncing around in his younger
life, then focusing on teaching/manag-
ing in later life, always engaged with
the stakeholders—teachers, students,
principals, inmates, guards, wardens,
and politicians—in his decision sys-
tem. Lane served as warden at Brushy
Mountain State Penitentiary in Ten-
nessee at the time of James Earl Ray’s
escape, but that is only one of many
incidents in the book that can give rise
to ethics discussions. Using a biogra-
phy places decisions in context, and
allows the reader a view of the decision
issues and process. Lane’s fascinating
life story can serve as a complement
to Svara’s primer, for it incorporates a
high commitment to duty and virtue.

—Bob Cunningham
University of Tennessee
Knoxville

REFERENCE
Miller, Hugh T., and Mohamad G.
Alkadry, eds. 1998. These Things
Happen: Stories from the Public
Sector. Burke, Va.: Chatelaine Press.