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The Moral Ramifications of Whistle-blowing: an Applied Ethical Approach

Abstract

*This paper uses Henrik Ibsen's **An Enemy of the People** as a metaphor for contextualizing and conceptualizing whistle-blowing. This blend of literature and philosophy, apart from making our points much more pungent, inadvertently demonstrates the applicability of fiction to real life issues. The paper argues that public servants should be guided by reason and adherence to rules in dealing with organizational problems or disputes. Without doubt, situations may arise in which whistle-blowing may be heroic, or the "noble" thing to do. Such may be situations of abuse of public trust on the part of some public officers. In situations of gross wrongdoings on the part of some legally constituted authorities, a civil servant, having rationally weighed the facts, may be justified in refusing to obey the rules in order to promote the public interest..*

Key words: Whistle-blowing, Ibsen, Public servant, Wrong-doing, Fraud.

Introduction

*This paper discusses an important issue in applied ethical thinking, which is how to deal with organizational problems and dilemma with a view to creating an atmosphere of amity among workers in a social or business organization. By way of definition, applied ethics, according to Childress (1986), is used to indicate "the application of ethics to special arenas of human activity, such as business, politics and medicine, and to particular problems, such as abortions." In other words, the concern of applied ethicists is not merely with theoretical matters, but with practical issues that affect human life and thinking. In some quarters, applied ethics has been characterized as the "art" or "science" of reflecting on moral dilemmas and moral problems in different *social context* (Collste, 2007: 24). The crucial thing about this latter definition of the discipline is its emphasis on the social nature of the moral problems that philosophers deliberate upon. In the past, moral philosophers were engaged in the mere analysis of moral concepts or moral semantics. But beginning with the social upheavals that accompanied the two world wars, most scholars changed their focus and began to take particular interest on how we could apply theoretical knowledge to resolve practical social problems.*

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In fact, it can be argued that applied ethical thinking dates back to Socrates in early antiquity, who sought reflections to bring a change in the way people thought and lived their lives in the Athenian society.

What is shown from what we have said above is that applied ethics has a long ancestry, dating back to the early periods of philosophy. In the discussion that follows below, we shall be focusing on a subject that falls within the rubric of applied ethical thinking known as *administrative ethics*. Administrative ethics is a huge area of study in contemporary Western ethical philosophy, having a vast literature that treats the core issues in the field. In general, there are number of sub-disciplines that make up what today is known as applied ethics. Administrative ethics is one of them. Others are business ethics, environmental ethics, bioethics, etc. Of all the sub-disciplines in applied ethics, bioethics is the one that has received the most attention by scholars. The reason is not unconnected with the fact that the issues that bioethics deals with are very germane to human practical life. They are usually issues of great medical concern, such as the morality of killing or letting die an incurable patient, prenatal screening, *in vitro fertilization*, stem cell research, genetic screening, assisted reproduction, to mention but a few. For example, doctors are often faced with the epistemological dilemma of separating the idea of patient autonomy with the competence of a patient in a comatose condition to make a choice on having to “die with dignity.” But applied ethical thinking is also concerned with issues of animal right, welfare and protection. Many modern moral philosophers have come to recognize that animals, like humans, are capable of feeling pain and pleasure, and so are beings subject to moral consideration and respect. Similarly, a concern with the welfare of the natural environment has led to a shift in paradigm from the traditional concern of ethics to a re-evaluation of the whole edifice of the moral enterprise.

This paper, as earlier indicated, focuses on administrative ethics. It intends to use Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* as a metaphor for contextualizing and conceptualizing the current discourse. This blend of literature and philosophy, apart from making our points much more pungent, would inadvertently demonstrate the applicability of fiction to real life issues. However, before a synopsis of the play is presented, we will pose a question which effectively conveys the ethical dilemma the administrative ethics seeks to address: “If you were in Dr. Stockmann’s position as the town’s medical officer (i. e., a civil servant), what would you do and, why?” A proper response to this question will require an analysis of the key issues in Henrik Ibsen’s play, *An Enemy of the People*. It will also require a consideration of the factors that could warrant a public officer to go outside of his organizational structure to make public a perceived wrongdoing in the organization - which is exactly what Dr. Stockmann did. The easy response to the question would be to say that if I were in Dr. Stockmann’s position as the chief medical officer of the town, I will adhere to protocol by first reporting my findings to the authorities before contemplating the public option. In other words, it is only when the problem is not resolved internally that I will consider the possibility of alerting the public. But as straightforward as this answer may sound, it, however, does not address the core issues in the case.

This type of response to the question is merely a part answer to a very profound question regarding how a public official should act when confronted with a moral or ethical dilemma of an official nature. But this apart, there is the other issue of providing justification why one would act differently from the way Dr. Stockmann acted. These are the critical issues this paper sets out to address: the paper seeks, among other things, to adduce reasons why we think Dr. Stockmann's action was procedurally wrong and why we would have adopted a different approach in dealing with the dilemma that presented itself in the conduct of our official duties. But before we get into the discussion proper, it will be necessary to first undertake a critical analysis of the play itself with a view to clarifying the actions of Dr. Stockmann, the chief protagonist in the play. In doing this, we hope to show whether or not Dr. Stockmann acted in an ethically reasonable way by revealing to the press and the general public his discovery concerning the pollution of the Baths.

A synopsis of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*

Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* is set in a small coastal town, South of Norway. Dr. Stockmann, the tragic hero and chief protagonist of the play, has just returned home after many years of practicing medicine outside of this town. Through the influence of his brother, he has been appointed the chief medical officer of the Baths, an idea which originated from him but which his brother (the Mayor of the town acted upon and brought to fruition). The Baths turns out to be the resource centre for the town, that is, the mainstay of the town's economy as well as money spinner. Dr. Stockmann is happy with his job and his service to his people whom he loves with great passion and zeal. Through his knowledge of science, Dr. Stockmann carries out an independent investigation on the health situation of the waters of the Baths. He had taken water samples and had it analyzed, only to discover that the Baths had been contaminated by bacteria and germs. It is important to mention here that Dr. Stockmann carried out his investigation without the knowledge of the Mayor who is also Chairman of the Governing Body of the Baths. In other words, he had no official or legal backing for what he did. The question is: was it right for Dr. Stockmann to have conducted this type of investigation without authorization? The answer to this question will undoubtedly be divisive. There are those who will say it was wrong for him to have conducted the investigation without official backing. But others are likely to argue that as the chief medical officer of the town it lay within his fort to do what he did. But we need not dwell much on this issue for now. We shall come back to it later as we go on in the discussion. The crucial issue is indeed the way Dr. Stockmann handled the result of the investigation he conducted. The result showed, according to him, that the Baths was contaminated, that the waters were infected with germs and bacteria. What should the doctor do with this crucial information at his disposal? Should he first tell the authorities and Committee in charge of the Baths? Or should he alert the public to warn them of the health danger they were exposed to? These are the two crucial questions that underlie the play.

Dr. Stockmann chooses the second option; he makes known his findings to the press and some other members of the public - and this before alerting the Mayor and the committee charged with care of the Baths! This then is the crucial issue for discussion. We have shown already that he did not have official permission for the investigation he did. We have also pointed out that before letting his superior officers know of the result of his investigation, he had alerted outsiders. By parity of reasoning, he broke official protocol by acting the way he did. Now the crucial question from all this description is this: was the chief medical officer naïve or was he motivated by ambition and a vindictive attitude in alerting the public about his findings before making a formal report to the Baths committee? The action of the doctor is what in administrative ethics is known as “whistle blowing.” Another equally important question is this: what are the proper procedural channels that a civil servant ought to follow before he or she could blow the whistle on any perceived wrongdoing on the part of superior officers in any organization? These are some of the questions that we shall seek to find answers to in this paper. But first, we shall make a few general remarks on the concept of “whistle-blowing.”

The Concept of Whistle-blowing

Whistle-blowing refers to the act of reporting wrongdoing in the organization. Svara (2007) makes a distinction between the internal mechanism in dealing with a perceived wrongdoing on the part of a public official(s) and sounding an alarm publicly. According to him, “when a staff member becomes aware of a problem within a public organization, the active responses are to raise the matter internally or to alert someone outside the organization” (2007:115). Technically speaking, the former method is merely the method of internal complaint; only the latter is the act of whistle blowing-proper. To blow the whistle is the same thing as making disclosures or “going public” with a complaint about perceived wrongdoings in the organization. According to Burke (1994), such disclosures aim at revealing “malfeasance in office and thwart unethical and illegal activities that detract from the pursuit of proper public purpose.” The crucial point here is that the official who is taking the action to report on a wrongdoing has the choice of either following the internal procedure of dealing with organizational problems or following the “deviant” route of going public. We are not using the word “deviant” in a pejorative sense; rather, bearing in mind the type of complications involved in the issue of externalizing organizational misdemeanors, and following Svara (2007: 115), the act of whistle-blowing refers to “the classic act of deviance for an administrator.”

Dr. Stockmann’s action, which we have described above, can yield to various types of interpretation. In one breath, his action portrays him as a naïve idealist who is at once impetuous and flippant. In another breath, he comes across as an enthusiastic fellow who loves his town and his fellow humans with a never-dying love. His love for his people motivates him to serve by warning them of the danger posed by the waters of the Baths. But the problem is that he was not circumspect enough in the way he went about his perceived duty to his native land. He had too high an opinion of the ordinary people - the hoi polloi - to use the language of politics. He assured himself that he had the backing of

the so-called “compact majority,” as Aslaksen, the chairman of the Householder’s Association calls the ordinary people in the community. But as he was to discover later, the common majority are often ignorant and can be easily manipulated by cunning and self-serving politicians. The people, like a wild mob, are often guided by their whimsies rather than reason or any informed idea about reality or truth. Dr. Stockmann discovered these truths a little too late! There is also a revolutionary fervor in Dr. Stockmann’s actions as he also aimed at reforming the community by seeking to mobilize the people against the perceived corrupt leaders of the community.

But whichever way we choose to view Dr. Stockmann’s actions, there are some important elements, which according to Stone (2005), are crucial to an understanding of not only his actions but of the key issues in the play, *An Enemy of the People*. These elements can be captured under the following broad headings: (i) Truth versus loyalty and obedience to authority, (ii) Individualism versus conformity, and (iii) the morality of whistle blowing. A fourth element which is equally significant is the idea of “public interest.” These four elements are crucial to the issues in Ibsen’s play that we are discussing. Hence, we shall employ them as our foil in giving perspective to the discussion that follows in the paper. Our analysis should yield an answer or justification for the choice we make in the paper as well. Our choice can be summarized in the following ways: one, is that if we were in Dr. Stockmann’s position as the town’s medical officer, we would seek official permission to carry out the type of investigation which he did on the waters of the Baths, and second is that we will first discuss with the legal political authorities in charge of the Baths before considering other measures that present themselves for our consideration. In other words, we will exhaust the internal mechanisms for resolving conflicts in the organization before contemplating external routes to conflict management.

i. Truth versus Loyalty and Obedience to Authority

As we have mentioned already, Dr. Stockmann’s knowledge of science helped him to discover that the Baths had been contaminated. He was then faced with the problem of the next course of action to take. Here is a good example of a civil servant being confronted with an ethical problem requiring solution. What is the appropriate thing to do if we were confronted with a problem such as this? Is having knowledge of the “truth” about a moral situation sufficient on its own? Can the “truth” alone by itself set free in this regard? To begin with, was it right for the medical officer to have carried out the investigation without authorization? And when he eventually made the *discovery* that the Baths was poisoned through bacterial infection, should he not have first reported the matter to the authorities before ever thinking of telling the public? Svara (2007: 105-108), lists some methods that can help guide or improve the quality of ethical problem solving or decision making. He tells us that ethical problem solving requires action and analysis. The rational approach model he proposes is divided into three major stages as follows: description, analysis, and decision. What these approaches simply suggest is that we must not only identify the facts of the situation at hand, we must also

examine the situation from different perspectives in order to identify the different options open to us, our obligations and responsibilities to ourselves and to our superiors as well as our position and professional role. “The final stage in the model is to make an informed ethical choice and to be able to explain and justify it” (Svara, 2007: 109).

The importance of analysis in ethical decision making cannot be overemphasized. But this alone is not sufficient to resolve ethical dilemmas or problems; rather, analysis must be accompanied by other crucial elements if we are to act appropriately and arrive at reasoned outcome. For Rest et al., (1999: 100-101), there are four psychological components or processes which affect ethical decision making and behaviour. These are: (i) moral sensitivity, (ii) moral judgment, (iii) moral motivation, and (iv) moral character. The first component has to do with being aware of the existence of an ethical problem as well as being sensitive to the consequences that different courses of action could have on all persons involved in the situation; the second involves weighing standards of behaviour as well as choosing the appropriate moral options. The third component reflects the inclination to choose the ethically appropriate alternative while the last component which deals with character and virtue is needed to convert judgment into action in the face of pressure and opposition. Svara summarizes these ideals graphically this way:

[T]o act ethically, one must be aware of an ethical problem, judge which course of action is most appropriate, be inclined to accept this alternative, and be able to act on the choice and stick with it.
(2007: 105)

To summarize what we have just described above, in seeking to deal with a problem or dilemma, we need to consider the consequences of our action on ourselves, our colleagues and the organization as a whole. The tendency to act on impulse or on the spur of the moment is always there. But acting rashly may result in loss to us and negative outcome to our organization. As a civil servant and chief medical officer of my town, I would first have counted the cost of my action before thinking of going public - if at all I will go public!

Svara lists major responsibilities of administrators (whether in government or nonprofit organization), and which he regards as foundations for identifying the nature of duty of public administrators. These responsibilities are relevant to the present discussion. They are: (1) their responsibility to serve individuals, (2) their responsibility to be accountable to ‘people’ and promote the public interest, (3) their responsibility to their organization, and (4) their responsibility to political superiors and to uphold the law and established policy (Svara, 2007: 4). Dr. Stockmann seems to have been concerned with that part of the responsibility that dwelt on duty to the people. We shall return to this issue later on when we discuss the ides of public interest. Suffice it to say that Dr. Stockmann allowed emotion rather than “practical considerations, and consequences for self and other stakeholders” in the Baths committee to guide his action (Walker et al., 1995: 403).

Applying the rational approach to decision or policy making, that is, the methodologies that Svava and others have suggested above, will serve as a check of the impulse (a “gut reaction,” as Svava calls it) to act precipitously (Svava, 2007: 107). But I believe that Dr. Stockmann was a sincere man at heart. But he was naïve in placing too much trust in the media and in the people, as represented by Aslaksen. He failed to realize that the people are given to change and can be easily manipulated by politicians. He was to discover that a little too late when the same people - the “compact majority”- as he called them, declared him a public enemy! The people are subject to all kinds of foibles. The experience of humans all through the history of society shows that the majority is not always right. On the contrary, the people can sometimes be gullible, ignorant and credulous. A man of Dr. Stockmann’s intellectual standing and education ought to have known that! This points to a fundamental weakness often noticed in the lives of many intellectuals: they are often so ensconced in the narrowness of their small fields and professions that are often oblivious about the fact of *Real Politick*.

A counterpoise to what we have just explained above is Dr. Stockmann’s failure to recognize the strength of legally constituted authority. Quinlan (1993: 538) states emphatically that the ethics of civil servants requires that they “operate in loyalty to and under any instructions of ministers” under whom they serve. Quinlan suggests that whatever detracts from this type of absolute submission by civil servants has the potential to damage the proper ability the public servant has to give service within the accepted system in which he or she operates. Svava (2007) makes the same point when he reminds us that public administrators are no “sole practitioners” who set up or have charge of their own practice. On the contrary, they are people who operate within what he calls “an authority structure.” In other words, public (or civil) servants not only work with others to advance institutional goals but also have a responsibility “to make the organization as strong, effective, and ethical as possible” (Svava, 2007: 5). More crucially is the fact that a civil servant is expected to be loyal to constituted authority and to obey the rules governing the civil service structure. Agreed that there is merit in the assertion of Applbaum (1993: 555) that “the legitimacy of a rule does not, by itself, create a moral obligation to comply with it;” agreed also that the public servant does necessarily lose all his or her freedom to the organization, the fact still remains that there are procedural ways to approach issues of conflict in any organization. Peter Stockmann makes this point when he insists that as the Chairman of the governing body of the Baths he should be duly informed on issues concerning the state of the Baths. At the beginning of the altercation he had with his brother, he demurs in the following way:

“I am entitled to request most emphatically that all arrangements shall be made in businesslike manner, through the proper channels, and shall be dealt with by the legally constituted authorities. I can allow no going behind by any roundabout means.” (Ibsen, 2000)

The Mayor implied that it was devious for Dr. Stockmann to have carried out the investigation he did behind his back and without official authorization. The following conversation between the two brothers would help clarify the issue a little more clearly:

Dr. Stockmann: Have I ever at any time tried to go behind your backs?

Peter Stockmann: You have an ingrained tendency to take your own way, at all events; and, that is almost equally inadmissible in a well ordered community. The individual ought undoubtedly to acquiesce in subordinating himself to the community—or, to speak more accurately, to the authorities who have the care of the community's welfare. (Ibsen, 2000:page)

The point Peter Stockmann makes here is an important one: it emphasizes the crucial issue of loyalty of public servants to their superior officers and to legally constituted authority. Obedience to the legally constituted authority is a highly cherished value not only in the civil service but in any organization that has a hierarchical structural order or that is based on what V. A. Thompson calls “status rank.” That is, organizations where highly positioned individuals are not only respected but “acquire personal power... that arise from status rank” (Thompson, 1975: 12). Notwithstanding what the truth of his findings may be, by not recognizing the role of authority, Dr. Stockmann broke a fundamental civil service ethic. If I were in his position, I would have exhausted the internal mechanism of conflict resolution before thinking of alerting the public. To act that way is to act ethically and to remain within the bounds of the law.

ii. Individualism versus conformity

Another issue which is important to the present discussion is that of the role of the individual in an organization and in the community. To what extent can a civil servant maintain individual autonomy or shed the toga of *subservience* that is characteristic of civil service work? In the opinion of Miles (1970: 620), the era when the civil servant “meekly” submitted to the will of his superior is gone. According to this argument, a career civil servant who finds himself in a conflict situation with his superior does not meekly submit, but “argues as effectively as he knows for his conviction.” Though he may lose out in the argument, it is, however, “an absolute obligation on his part to present his point of view with clarity and vigor” (Miles, 1970). Dobel (1999) also makes the point that administrators “defer to, but not surrender to, authority.” What these arguments imply is that administrators should also be morally responsible for their actions. However, a mere cursory reading of the arguments may tempt us to want to justify acts of non-conformity to constituted authority. Undoubtedly, conditions may arise that will make the civil servant fail to conform to institutional demands or authority. A civil servant may refuse to acquiesce to authority on the grounds of conscience if told to cover up a wrongdoing in the organization. The administrator may also be tempted to act independently of authority by seeking to promote the “public interest.” Dr. Stockmann was convinced that he was acting for “the good of the community,” for as he mentioned to Hovstad, the editor of the People's Messenger and other: “it is a splendid thing for a man to be able to feel that he has done a service to his native town and to his fellow-

citizens” (see Ibsen, 2000). But to the Mayor, the doctor’s action was rash and impetuous. To him, the doctor was only displaying a “restless, pugnacious, rebellious disposition” in not submitting to authority. We have argued above that the civil servant possesses some measure of personal freedom and autonomy, and that he can disagree with his superiors when the situation warrants it. But while this may be the case, Miles however adds an important caveat that complicates the whole matter. He tells us that the civil servant can argue out his case with his superiors in some situations, but if, and when he is overruled, he must of necessity carry out “his superior’s instructions to the full extent of his ability” (Miles, 1970)! In other words, the idea of a non-subservient civil servant, while a lofty ideal is in practice, very difficult to realize.

Michael Quinlan makes the same argument as the above when he says that the civil servant may have various types of duties in his or her capacity as a professional, such as “duties of care about facts and proper process, duties of balance in argument, duties of frankness in advice... and warning” etc. However, if on a particular issue of policy the government (or, *organization*, as the case may be) has “a settled view,” the civil servant, Quinlan (1993: 541-542) avers, has no choice but to acquiesce. He also argues further that:

It would be theoretically unsound and practically dangerous... for civil servants to suppose, or for critics or commentators to encourage them to suppose, that they had some duty or entitlement of private unelected judgment of the public’s desires or interests over or around the views of the government’s duly elected leaders (Quinlan, 1993:542).

Without doubt, the opinion above may sound too restrictive on the public servant as it suggests that workers lack the right to act volitionally on any matter that affects their organization. Contra Quinlan and others who think like him, Applbaum argues on the other hand that some forms of “civil disobedience” are sometimes necessary to protest any clear case of an “unjust role requirement” from superior officers in the organization. The argument here is that if “the authority of an elected official carries moral weight, no matter how badly the will or interests of the electorate is served, then the formal authority of the senior civil servant has moral weight, no matter how badly the will or interests of the elected official is served” (Applbaum, 1993). The point being made here is that the civil servant need not always conform to authority in the face of injustice and unjust demands from political superiors. One major problem with this type of view is how to determine what an unjust demand is; the other is to ask who determines this. While Dr. Stockmann will suppose that the individual public officer is at liberty to choose how to act, his brother, the Mayor of the town believes that in matters of policy, officialdom rather than personal opinion should always prevail. Peter Stockmann reminds his brother that as an officer under the Baths Committee, “you have no right to any individual opinion.” Dr. Stockmann counters back, asserting his freedom to “express (my) opinion on any subject under the sun.” (Ibsen, 2000) Here then is the crux of the matter: a conflict between individual autonomy and conformity with bureaucratic expectation.

Much as it may be admitted that the civil servant has the right of “dissent” in some situations, it would be an exaggeration, however, to suppose that he has unlimited liberty to engage in acts of “civil disobedience” in the face of what may be perceived as “unjust” demands from superior officers (Applbaum, 1993: 556). As I have implied variously in the paper, am inclined to the belief that it is only after the public officer has exhausted all legal routes without any assurance getting justice that the matter of dissent can be contemplated. Though this may sound too harsh, but we must realize that as lawyers are wont to say, “The spirit of the law lies in the procedure”!

iii. On the morality of whistle-blowing

Now, we come to the crucial issue of whistle blowing by public officials. Whistle-blowing, as we have mentioned already, has to do with the idea of alerting someone outside the organization of a problem or perceived wrongdoing within the public organization. We have noted already, the distinction between internal mechanism of seeking to resolve organizational difficulties, and the much more complex alternative of taking it to the public domain for resolution. In ordinary parlance, whistle-blowing can be likened to washing the dirty linens of the organization in the public! Svara (2007) reminds us that while this can be a “heroic” or “noble gesture” taken at great personal risk to the whistle-blower, it is, however, not always the ethically appropriate action to take. The reason for this conclusion, is as, Svara notes, that the practice of externalizing organizational problems has the potential to hurt not only the whistle-blower in particular, but it can also harm the very people the organization is supposed to serve. We have mentioned already that Dr. Stockmann’s action of alerting the press and other members of the public about the seeming problem with the Baths is a clear case of whistle-blowing. Whatever may be the merit of his “discovery,” Dr. Stockmann’s big error is in not alerting the authorities before letting the press and some members of the public know about his findings. It is true that the Mayor and his father-in-law, who were big shareholders in the Baths, tried to coerce him into altering the result of his findings, the fact remains that these pressures were asserted after the matter was already in the public domain. It could be argued that the Mayor was concerned with defending the welfare of the community.

As I have mentioned in the paper already, if I were in Dr. Stockmann’s position, I would exhaust the internal mechanism of dealing with organizational problem before contemplating the public option. Part of my reason would be the recognition that I am working with others to achieve institutional goals. Another would be, as Svara points, and as Quinlan concurs, staff members who work in an organization, “owe loyalty to their organization” (Svara, 2007; Quinlan, 1993). Much as we disagree with Quinlan’s remark that whistle-blowing is “a euphemism for behavior that more often deserves contempt than commendation” (Quinlan, 1993), it is, however, the truth that it is not an action to be undertaken rashly or on the spur of the moment. Rather, the public official who wants to engage in this type of practice must count the cost before embarking on it. Svara (2007) outlines some conditions that a person should think of meeting before blowing the

whistle about a perceived wrongdoing in the organization: First, is that the whistle-blower must be certain that there is a serious problem warranting the action he or she wants to take. Second, is to ensure that the facts are solid and not merely based on rumours. The third is to focus on the issue and not on personalities. The fourth is something we have emphasized variously in the paper already; that is to exhaust internal mechanisms of resolving problems before going outside the organization with the problem. At the risk of repetition, we have said already that Dr. Stockmann did not adhere to the last condition listed here. He also failed in the last one because he went personal in his attack of the person of the Mayor who also happened to be his elder brother. This could be a case of familiarity breeding contempt! On the first two conditions, Dr. Stockmann had not even provided enough convincing proof for anybody to believe that the Baths were indeed infested with germs or bacteria. For as Aslaksen was to say later, and Peter Stockmann concurred, the doctor's allegations could well be "imaginary." To be fair to the Mayor, he had earlier reminded the doctor that the matter of the Baths welfare was not simply a scientific one, but a "complicated" one; it had as well, "its economic as well as its technical side." Here then was the big problem for the man of science: how to apply the findings of science to real life situations! Dr. Stockmann's discovery was made at period when most people were still ignorant about scientific facts concerning bacteria! The burden of proof was indeed on him, coupled with fact that his findings were believed to have the potential to negatively affect the economic welfare of the common people in the town. He should have been a little more cautious in his approach. In spite of his good intentions, Dr. Stockmann ended up being brandied an "enemy of the people," and by the same people whose interests he laboured much to protect! The lesson for us from what happened to him is that even what is consider the "truth" has to be properly communicated, or else it could be misinterpreted or even deliberately misrepresented as falsehood or a mere product of "imagination". In our thinking, these recommendations are reasonable and meaningful; especially the aspect that speaks about consulting one's family or loved one. The reason is that in the event of any backlash, these loved ones would suffer along with the victim.

It is a general agreement that whistle-blowing is a very serious social and ethical issue. The reason is that, not minding the good intentions that may motivate it, the one blowing the whistle is prone to suffering negative consequences from his organization or superior officers. At times, such a person may even face retaliatory measures from his organization. He may be seen as a rebel or turncoat deserving of ostracism by other colleagues. Some more pernicious consequences may result from the action; these may range from blackmail or intimidation, to outright dismissal from work. Hence, the need to count the costs and to put in place coping strategies in the event of loss of job from the action of whistle-blowing, where it is discovered that one did it. "The Art of Anonymous Activism," knowing the risks involved in the matter of whistle-blowing, offers a set of recommendations for anybody considering the whistle-blowing option. There are ten such recommendations listed, but just a few are examined here for the sake of brevity.

The crucial ones, in our thinking, are the ones that admonish one to consult loved ones before blowing the whistle; choosing one's battles; consulting an attorney early; identifying possible allies in the organization; having a well thought-out plan; getting oneself career counseling, etc. (see POGO/GAP/PEER, 2002; Svara; 2007). Dr. Stockmann did not consider it fit to consult or carry his family along in his battles with the authorities. Even when his wife remonstrated with him on the possible backlash effects his actions could have on the welfare of the family, his reply was that "even if the whole world goes to pieces," he would not retrace his steps! To act the way Dr. Stockmann did was a sure way to court failure.

iv. In pursuance of the "public interest"

The last crucial issue we want to consider in the paper revolves around the idea of "public interest." Dr. Stockmann believed in all sincerity that he was acting for the public interest in his battles with the town or municipal authorities. Severally, he harped on this idea of duty towards the public to defend his actions. Even when his wife demurred that he could get a dismissal from work if he persisted in his fight, his response was that he would then have been satisfied, having done his duty "towards the public," that is, the community. Similarly, even after the great betrayal by the press whose editors suddenly aligned with the Mayor to discredit Dr. Stockmann's findings, he still would not relent: he sought a public forum to passage his message across to the town's people. This type of concern for the public interest is quite challenging. Indeed, all the authors we have discussed in the paper have emphasized on the idea of public officers serving, protecting and meeting the basic expectations of the public while controlling their own self-interest. For as Svara (2007), tells us, in serving, we need to realize that "duty is the core and the ideal that is pursued is the public interest."

There is so much to be said about the idea of public interest; but we will not go into all the details here. However, one crucial point that needs to be mentioned is that the notion of "public interest" is not limited to that of duty to the public alone. On the contrary, the idea entails responsibility not only to the public but also to one's political superiors as well as the organization that one serves. True, in a democracy, civil servants should be committed to serving the public (that is, the citizens); they are also expected to achieve the highest possible level of ethical attainment through "balancing virtue, principle, and beneficial consequences." But in doing this, they are not to supplant political or organizational leaders "but to challenge them to govern wisely and to do their best to accomplish the goals that political leaders have set" (Svara, 2007: 159). From the foregoing analysis, we see that Dr. Stockmann erred greatly in having a partial understanding of the idea of "public interest." He was committed to "duty" towards the so-called "public" or "community," while failing in his duty to his legally constituted superiors. No doubt, the Mayor and some other members of the Baths committee, like most politicians, behaved like the real demagogues which they probably were. But perhaps also, any other person in the Mayor's position would have acted the way he did

by mobilizing the press and public opinion against the chief medical officer of the municipal town. Dr. Stockmann played into his hands by not following the official channel of resolving official conflict. The Mayor, as Mrs. Stockmann reminded her husband, had “power” (that is, legal authority) on his side. Dr. Stockmann claimed he had “right” on his side. But in the end, right did not avail much (perhaps it was not applied well). The same “public” the medical officer was fighting turned against him, declaring him “an enemy of the people.” His daughter loses her job, the children are sent away from school, and his house is vandalized by the angry mob!

Concluding remarks

Dr. Stockmann may have had good intentions in acting the way he did. But intentions are not always enough. Public servants should be guided by reason and adherence to rules in dealing with organizational problems or disputes. Without doubt, situations may arise in which whistle blowing may be heroic, or the “noble” thing to do. Such may be situations of abuse of public trust on the part some public officers. In situations of gross wrongdoings on the part of some legally constituted authorities, a civil servant, having rationally weighed the facts, may be justified in refusing to obey the rules in order to promote the public interest. For as Arthur Applbaum argues, “public servants who lend their moral energies to unjust ends and to the degradation of democratic deliberation serve neither the public nor political principle, but an empty, destructive formalism” (Applbaum, 1993). Unfortunately, the situation that presented itself to Dr. Stockmann does not quite appear like the one we have just described in the last two remarks above. Were we to be in his position as a civil servant, we would, undoubtedly have acted quite differently.

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