

When the State Meets the Street
Public Service and Moral Agency

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*The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press*

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

LONDON, ENGLAND

2017

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Introduction

It is not a compliment to be called a bureaucrat. The word evokes rigidity, narrow-mindedness, insensitivity, coldness, lack of initiative, and, above all, rule-worship. These attributes are so ingrained in our collective imagination that they have become definitional. According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, a bureaucrat is not just “an official in a government department” but, more specifically, “one perceived as being concerned with procedural correctness at the expense of people’s needs.”¹ Webster’s tells us that the word is often used to designate a “government official confirmed in a narrow rigid formal routine.”² Dictionary.com makes a further leap, this time into the cognitive realm: “an official who works by fixed routine without exercising intelligent judgment.”³

To the extent that bureaucrats have these unflattering characteristics, they inherit them, in large part, from the organizations to which they belong. David Foster Wallace takes himself to be speaking for “most ordinary Americans” when he writes of bureaucracies: “I hated and feared them . . . and basically regarded them as large, grinding, impersonal machines—that is, they seemed rigidly literal and rule-bound the same way machines are, and just about as dumb.”⁴ He goes on to describe the individuals who work in such bureaucracies, and who acquire, as if by osmosis, the characteristic traits of the organization: “My primary association with the word *bureaucracy* was an image of someone expressionless behind a counter, not listening to any of my questions or explanations of circumstance or misunderstanding but merely referring to some manual of impersonal regulations as he stamped my form with a number that meant I was in for some further kind of tedious, frustrating hassle or expense.”

There is a sketch by Sergei Eisenstein, the Russian film director, that could serve as a perfect visual companion to Wallace’s quote (Figure 1).⁵ It is titled, aptly enough, *The Bureaucrat*. The sketch depicts a broad-shouldered, balding man, with a mustache and without a neck, looking down from behind tinted glasses and holding up his hand as if to say “No.” It is drawn on a printed page that has the graphic markers of officialdom—one filled with words so small and densely packed that they morph into an almost

Georges Courteline, Nikolai Gogol, Franz Kafka, George Orwell, Naguib Mahfouz, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Ismail Kadare; a pairing so dreadful and grotesque that it is, alternatively, the stuff of nightmares and that of satire.

The mixture of hostility and incomprehension toward bureaucracy that Wallace and Eisenstein record, almost a century apart, is widely echoed across the social sciences. Economists have denounced bureaucracy for its lack of adaptability, its inefficient allocation of resources, and its tendency to expand past its optimal size.⁷ Political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists have criticized its bias in favor of elites, its resistance to change, its capacity to usurp the powers of elected officials, and its tendency to be captured by special interests.⁸ They have also deplored the extent to which it can disregard, alienate, or even degrade its own workers as well as the citizens whom it is meant to serve.⁹ More pointedly, scholars have shown that the bureaucratic encounter itself—the moment at which ordinary people come into contact with public agencies—can be demeaning, disempowering, and paternalistic; that it can contribute to reinforcing status distinctions; and that it can discourage citizens from being active participants in political life.¹⁰ As Charles Goodsell puts it, “Bureaucracy, institutionally, is said to sap the economy, endanger democracy, suppress the individual and be capable of embodying evil. It is denounced on the right by market champions and public-choice theorists and on the left by Marxists, critical theorists, and postmodernists.”¹¹

Even those who have a more nuanced appreciation of bureaucracy feel compelled to begin their studies, as I have, by acknowledging the disrepute into which public agencies have fallen—if only to explain why, or to challenge the correctness of the popular verdict. Peter Blau opens his classic work *Bureaucracy in Modern Society* with the invective “That stupid bureaucrat!” He goes on to solicit the reader’s sympathy: “Who has not felt this way at one time or another? When we are sent from one official to the next without getting the information we want; when lengthy forms we had to fill out in sextuplicate are returned to us because we forgot to cross a ‘t’ or dot an ‘i’; when our applications are refused on some technicality—that is when we think of bureaucracy.”¹²

What brings together most critics of bureaucracy, besides the indignation that they voice, is the standpoint from which they write: that of clients

who, as Wallace puts it, are invariably in for some further kind of hassle. What these critics typically leave out, however, is the other side of the story—the viewpoint of the bureaucrats around whom the drama also unfolds. We know that clients frequently experience bureaucracies as slow, unresponsive, demeaning, and arbitrary—but what do such bureaucracies look like from within, from the standpoint of those who stand behind the expressionless masks and who are so often reduced to lifeless caricatures? We know how citizens see the state. But how does the state see its citizens?

This question takes us into the world of street-level bureaucrats—the social service workers, police officers, counselors, and educators who are responsible for delivering public services and enforcing the law and who, as such, effectively serve as the face of the state for ordinary citizens.¹³ These bureaucrats are caught in a predicament. The proper implementation of public policy depends on their capacity to act as sensible moral agents who can, among other things, interpret vague directives, strike compromises between competing values, and prioritize the allocation of scarce resources. And yet, they must operate in a working environment that is particularly challenging and that tends, over time, to erode and truncate their moral sensibilities. While public service agencies depend on the moral agency of street-level bureaucrats, they proceed, at the same time, to undermine that very agency.

This book explores the factors that lead to this predicament and the remedies that can be offered to it. It pays close attention to how street-level bureaucrats experience their everyday work; to how their understanding of their role and responsibilities is shaped by the environment in which they evolve; and to how well their behavior and self-understanding stack up against the normative values that we would expect a democratic state to uphold when interacting with those who are subject to its authority.

The following pages draw extensively on empirical work by political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists as well as on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted as a receptionist at the Norville Community Development Initiative, an antipoverty agency in a large city in the northeastern United States (I have altered the name of the agency and of the city in which it is located, and I use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of staff members). What will become apparent, as I begin to draw on this material, is that it offers a portrait of bureaucratic life that is

much more fluid, flexible, and open to contingency than one might expect when looking at such organizations from without. The structure of rules and regulations with which bureaucrats must comply is not as tight as it may appear to outsiders, and it leaves significant room for discretion. This discretion, in turn, allows bureaucrats to develop different styles of work and to give expression to them.

Take the rule-bound, mechanistic simile that Wallace offers—that of bureaucracy as an orderly collection of moving parts that operate in a cold, repetitive, and unthinking fashion—and contrast it with the impression that emerges from the following account, which draws on my first set of field notes.

It was my first day on the job, and the task I had been given sounded simple. I was to assist the main receptionist, DeShawn, by acting as a greeter of sorts. The instructions DeShawn gave me were brief. “Say ‘Good morning, welcome to the Norville Service Center, do you have an appointment?’ If they do, check with whom; ask them to fill an intake form; and escort them inside, to the other waiting room. Then, walk over to the cubicle area, and inform the case manager that his or her clients have arrived. If they do not have an appointment yet, have them speak to me and I’ll schedule something for them.” This, he told me, would be a good way to familiarize myself with the office and the clients.

The reception area, with which I would become intimately acquainted over the following eight months, was located on the first floor of a three-story building, in a low-income and predominantly African American neighborhood of Norville. It consisted of seven rows of neatly arranged plastic chairs facing the receptionist’s desk. The room was spacious, tidy and clean. It opened onto a small corridor that led to another waiting room and to the case managers’ offices. The walls were pastel green, and the lighting fluorescent.

The Center, one of Norville’s largest antipoverty agencies, assisted low-income clients in applying for food stamps, public housing, fuel assistance, earned income tax credit, head start programs, and citizenship. It served as a non-profit contractor for the state, and received most of its funding through federal grants—a type of arrangement that has become increasingly common since the 1980s.

I had come freshly prepared for the day, around 8:30 AM, wearing formal business attire, as requested by the Director of the Center (“we must project a good image,” he had told me over the phone). I felt uncomfortable in my outfit—a relic from two years spent working as a management consultant in Manhattan after college—and I recall thinking that my skinny tie may betray me and ruin my attempt to pass as a regular volunteer.

At 9 AM, the first clients started walking in. I rehearsed my routine, and everything went well. I thought I was in control. But the first glitch occurred soon enough: an old African American woman came in with a question. I realized, half-amused, half-panicked, that nothing, in the brief instructions I was given, had prepared me for such a possibility. I attempted to direct her to DeShawn, but he was on the phone with someone else. Before I could decide what to do, two other clients had entered the office and were trying to make eye contact with me. One of them handed me a letter, and said “John told me to come back with this, it’s urgent; I need to speak to him.” The other asked to use the Center’s photocopying machine—“they always let me do that,” he said, pointing to DeShawn, who was still on the phone. Before I knew it, I found myself pacing back and forth between the reception area, the case managers’ offices, and the photocopying machine.

All this time, new clients kept arriving. Several clients at a time; clients with children who refused to acknowledge the invisible boundary between the reception area and the back-office; clients who spoke so loudly on their cell phones that they had to be asked to lower their voice; clients who wanted to use the fax machine; clients who wanted to use the restrooms—all of them, or so I recall, speaking to me at once. Even my co-workers started turning to me: DeShawn asked me to make photocopies and to answer the phone while he was away from his desk, others wanted me to deliver documents to various offices in the building. Somewhere along the line, as I was moving back and forth between the various clients, the phone, the fax machine, and my co-workers, trying to improvise as best as I could to fill any gaps in DeShawn’s instructions, I noticed that I had dropped my smile.

It was around then, too, that I came to understand the significance of a piece of information the Director had mentioned earlier that day. This

was the start of “fuel assistance” season, one of the busiest times of the year, and the office had, as of that morning, stopped accepting walk-ins because case managers were already operating at full capacity. Most clients were unaware of this change, and came in without appointments, expecting to get their paperwork done. For many of them, I would later find out, this involved taking time off from work. This was the kind of day where one did not want to be a greeter.

One after another, I had to break the news to them: “I’m sorry but we can’t help you today, we’re no longer taking walk-ins. Would you like to schedule an appointment for some other day?” As my words sank in, I could see a mixture of deception and contained anger spread across their faces—torn as they were, I imagined, between the urge to vent their frustration, and the thought that, since I stood between them and the fuel they needed to make it through the cold northeastern winter, it might be better not to risk alienating me. One client—a middle-aged white man, with loose jeans covered in paint marks, an oversized jacket, and a scarred face, dragging two screaming children, one in each hand—could not contain himself. He lashed out at me, at the top of his lungs “ARE YOU SERIOUS? YOU’VE GOTTA BE FUCKIN’ KIDDIN’ ME!” I became acutely aware of the physical proximity at which he was standing, and of the absence of any protective boundary between the two of us. And I thought back, once again, to my skinny tie and to how ridiculous I must have looked.

I felt gripped at the time by three competing impulses. The first was a movement of sympathy. I could understand the client’s frustration and thought for a moment of setting other tasks aside so as to focus entirely on his case. But I did not know how to help. And what about all the others who were able to remain composed? Should their needs be ignored simply because they did not raise their voice? My second impulse was exactly opposed to the first. I felt the need to re-establish my authority, and to regain control over the situation. There were several clients in the room, and I could not let our interactions degenerate into a screaming match. Perhaps I should find a way to put the client back in his place? But I rapidly corrected myself. Surely, I thought, my job was not to discipline people. I remembered being told, during my first phone interview,

that the Center was supposed to be a place where clients could come for help when everyone else had turned them down.

So I gave in to the third impulse. I convinced myself that there was nothing personal in the client's anger, and that I should continue working as if nothing had happened. It probably was a numbers game: I couldn't help him, but if I pressed forward, and did my job as diligently as possible, I would be able to help many others. So I stared at him blankly, and said, "I'm sorry, but I'm just doing my job," and moved on to the next task. I remember being shocked at hearing these words roll from my mouth, barely three hours into the job. I consoled myself by thinking that there really was nothing else I could have done.

But this certainty about my powerlessness, and the psychological relief it provided, vanished in the early afternoon. One of the case managers, Paulina, came to see me in the reception area and informed me that one of her clients had not showed up ("It happens all the time," she explained). She told me that I should feel free to come see her if someone was here without an appointment, and if I thought they needed to meet with a case manager. Maybe she could take care of them.

"If I thought they needed to meet with a case manager"? And so with this conditional, I was on my way from being a mere operator to being a gatekeeper endowed with circumscribed but very real discretionary power. And I quickly discovered that I could also disguise the boundaries of my discretion by claiming, as I had done earlier in the day, that I was "just doing my job."

Over the course of the eight months I spent volunteering at the Norville Service Center, I became more knowledgeable about the job and more comfortable interacting with clients. The standards I was expected to use in making discretionary decisions also became clearer through informal conversations with colleagues, and as I became steeped in the culture of the organization. But the vagueness did not disappear entirely, and the advice I received from my colleagues varied considerably. As I soon found out, they had different working styles, and it was up to me to choose whom I wanted to listen to.

The fundamental test I experienced on the first day—how to adapt myself to the demands of the role in an ethically responsible yet psychologically

sustainable way—stayed with me throughout the job. I knew, and was reminded by my manager and colleagues, that I had to treat clients fairly; that I had to be as responsive as possible to their needs; that I had to behave toward them with respect and consideration; and that I had to process their cases as efficiently as I could. But how could I do all of these things at once? How could I remain attentive to all of them without succumbing to the three temptations I experienced—that of being overly sympathetic, harsh, or disengaged? What follows is a foray into this question—a question that pressed itself on me from my very first day on the job, and one to which hundreds of thousands of street-level bureaucrats provide an answer every day.

Moral Agency in Adverse Institutional Conditions

By virtue of their position at the interface of state and society, street-level bureaucrats are required to take decisions that are highly consequential for ordinary citizens.¹⁴ On any given day, they must determine, within the ambit of the law, who will have access to public services and how much of these services they will be entitled to. They are responsible for conferring administrative status, and hence official recognition, to people's personal problems. Their demeanor also contributes to shaping how the encounter with the state will be experienced—whether it will “feel” welcoming or transactional, considerate or inquisitive, respectful or demeaning. The bureaucratic encounter is not simply a moment in which goods are distributed; it is also a moment of citizenship, in which status and standing are assigned. *How* one is treated is just as crucial as *what* one gets.

While any particular encounter with bureaucracy is charged with significance for the specific individual whose case is at stake, the cumulative effect of these encounters matters at a societal level too. It is, in part, through our encounters with street-level bureaucrats that our perception of the legitimacy and trustworthiness of our political institutions is shaped.¹⁵ Some studies have even shown that *how* policies are implemented can have a greater impact on people's perception of legitimacy than *what* those policies are.¹⁶

This book is an attempt to bring our personal encounters with street-level bureaucrats to the center of our thinking about the democratic state. I will have more to say momentarily about who street-level bureaucrats are

and about the distinctive characteristics of street-level work. Before I do so, however, I want to explain what is at stake theoretically in focusing on this category of actors. When political theorists write about the state, they generally concentrate on the characteristic features of democratic institutions, on the complex processes through which the views of citizens are translated into a body of laws and policies, and on the merits of these laws and policies. The approach I adopt here starts at the other end of the political process: it begins not with the policies that the state pursues or the principles according to which it is structured, but with the ways in which it intervenes in the lives of ordinary citizens at the moment of service provision and law enforcement.¹⁷ With this comes a shift in imaginative standpoint. We are no longer in the seat of voters, legislators, or participants in a hypothetical social contract but instead find ourselves in the midst of ordinary interactions with frontline officials in waiting rooms, classrooms, or welfare offices.

By adopting this different starting point, I aim to provide an account of how the democratic state ought to interact with those who fall under its legitimate authority. By this, I do not mean *what* policies such a state should pursue, but *how* it ought to pursue them.¹⁸ As I will try to show throughout the book, such an account is, in large part, an account of how street-level bureaucrats ought to inhabit their role—an account, that is, of the kind of moral sensibilities, affective dispositions, and role conceptions that we would want and need them to have as they go about implementing public policy.

There are several ways of occupying the role well and, depending on our moral views and political convictions, we may reasonably disagree on which of these is best. But while we may not be able to reach consensus on a positive characterization, I believe that there are ways of performing the role that most of us would recognize as undesirable or unbecoming. I therefore proceed indirectly. I focus on the pathologies and try to offer, in contradistinction, a sense of the moral dispositions that we would deem appropriate. My aim, however, is not just to sketch a profile of the kind of moral agents we would want at the front lines of the state. It is also to investigate how we might be able to orchestrate an institutional environment that can support them in being such agents.

We have reason to be concerned with how street-level bureaucrats inhabit their role because, contrary to popular representations of bureaucracy

where they often appear as rigid automata, they are in fact vested with a considerable margin of discretion. They must give content to hierarchical directives that are often vague, ambiguous, and conflicting. As agents of the democratic state, they are also exposed to a plurality of normative demands that frequently point in competing directions: they must be efficient in the use of public resources, fair in dealing with clients, responsive toward their needs, and respectful when interacting with them. The proper implementation of public policy depends on their capacity to remain sensitive to these plural demands and to balance them appropriately in light of specific situations.

These tasks would be difficult to discharge in any context, but street-level bureaucrats must perform them in an environment that is particularly challenging—one that forces them to contend not only with drastic limitations in resources and a chronic shortage of staff but also with incompatible objectives, unrealistic targets, arcane rules, and an endless stream of emotionally trying encounters with clients. As frontline workers in the public services, they are condemned to being front-row witnesses to some of society's most pressing problems without being equipped with the resources or authority necessary to tackle these problems in any definitive way. They must navigate a terrain mined by conflicting expectations that cannot all be satisfied at once, while knowing that they are likely to be held personally responsible, by clients and superiors alike, for any shortcomings in service provision. We will see in the following pages that when experienced day in, day out, the psychological pressures fomented by such an environment tend to erode the moral sensibilities of bureaucrats and to truncate their understanding of their role and responsibilities.

This leaves us with a predicament: while public agencies rely, for their proper functioning, on the moral agency of street-level bureaucrats, they place these bureaucrats in a working environment that tends to undermine that very agency. This book explores how this predicament comes about and how we might respond to it. It seeks to address two questions: How do the pressures of everyday work gradually truncate the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats? And how can we equip such bureaucrats to respond to these pressures while remaining sensitive and balanced moral agents?¹⁹

In brief, I argue that the challenges that street-level bureaucrats face in implementing public policy come to view only when we step back from the

moment of ethical decision-making so as to consider more broadly the moral dispositions they adopt on the job. By moral disposition, I mean to refer to how they tend to perceive and interpret situations and cases, to how their moral sentiments are mobilized, and to how they understand their role and responsibilities. These dispositions act as filters that regulate how bureaucrats make use of their discretionary power.

The shift from the study of decisions to that of dispositions can help us capture how the pressures of everyday work slowly truncate the moral outlooks of street-level bureaucrats. The problem is not that bureaucrats lose their capacity for sound moral reasoning, but that the moral perception and role conception that feed into such reasoning become overly narrow and specialized. This brings into focus a family of dispositions—indifference, enforcement, and caregiving—that are troubling because they are reductive takes on the role that street-level bureaucrats are meant to play. Those who settle for such dispositions lose touch with the plurality of demands they must attend to and focus instead on a single dimension of the role. These “pathological” dispositions, which I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 2, are more insidious than the well-known problems of corruption, abuse of discretion, or incompetence, because bureaucrats can fall into them even as they remain wholeheartedly dedicated to their mission, within the scope of their prerogatives, and in full mastery of the technical skills necessary to fulfill their role.

Bureaucrats tend to gravitate toward such reductive dispositions because they provide some measure of relief from the psychological pressures of everyday work. These pressures are occasioned, in large part, by the conflicting demands inherent to the job, and by the gap that exists between the lofty aims that such bureaucrats must pursue and the far more modest resources they are given in practice. Since bureaucrats do not have the capabilities to live up to the demands of the role, they narrow their understanding of these demands to bring them in line with the capabilities they can marshal in practice.

Resisting the drift toward such reductive dispositions is a complex affair. It calls for keeping a certain pluralism alive within the organization—both in the minds of bureaucrats and in the environment in which they operate. This, I hope to show, is not something that can be achieved through formal institutional design alone. It is a three-tiered effort that

requires a combination of practices at the individual, group, and managerial levels.

As individuals, street-level bureaucrats must learn to cope with the psychological strain endemic to street-level work. They must find creative ways to regulate and control the intensity of the pressure to which they are exposed so as to better mitigate its transformative effects. I show, in Chapter 3, that they can do so by deploying a regime of everyday practices of the self.

While street-level bureaucrats must exert themselves, as individuals, to resist the pull toward moral dispositions that are overly narrow, I show in Chapter 4 that they must strive, as a group, to retain a range of dispositions that are sufficiently diverse. If the danger at the individual level is the pull toward moral specialization, the danger at the group level is the pull toward conformism and uniformity. The existence of a diverse array of moral dispositions within bureaucratic agencies serves as an institutional irritant that stimulates the moral perception of bureaucrats, and that forces them to remain attentive to a plurality of normative considerations.

The task for managers is to tread a path between these two pitfalls: that of excessive specialization and that of uniformity. It is to create an environment in which street-level bureaucrats can develop and maintain a diverse range of balanced dispositions. To do so, managers must carefully orchestrate an array of signals, formal and informal, which pull in competing directions. It is the lack of alignment between these signals that provides bureaucrats with the space and resources necessary to craft their own moral dispositions, and it is their relative strength that delimits the range of moral dispositions that are sustainable in the long run. As I show in Chapter 5, the failure to properly orchestrate such signals can lead to the creation of impossible situations—situations in which bureaucrats are pulled in directions that are so antithetical that they can no longer operate as integrated moral agents.

If the implementation of public policy is to respond to a plurality of normative standards, as I believe it should do in a democracy, it must be enacted by bureaucrats who are themselves sensitive to such standards. For this to happen, the desired pluralism must be reflected within the organizational environment in which such bureaucrats evolve. The proper implementation of public policy depends, as such, on the friction between a plurality of

normative worlds within public agencies. The pathologies of street-level work arise either when bureaucrats do not respond well to such pluralism or when the pluralism itself disappears because one of the worlds takes systematic precedence over the others and comes to eclipse them. When this happens, bureaucrats are led toward reductive moral dispositions—dispositions that entice them to focus exclusively on a subset of the normative considerations to which they ought to remain attuned.

From Decisions to Dispositions

To take an interest in the moral dispositions of street-level bureaucrats, as I do throughout this study, is to be concerned with a range of questions that lie upstream from the moment of ethical decision-making: how they think of themselves, how they understand their role, how they value different courses of action, how they perceive incoming clients, and how they interpret events. It is to take seriously, as well, the fact that their sense of self can be profoundly transformed by the role that they occupy, and can enlarge to encompass the organization to which they belong. It is to be concerned, finally, not so much with offering prescriptive advice on how to perform any given task as with enabling street-level bureaucrats to develop the kind of moral dispositions that will allow them to answer such questions well for themselves.

By examining how we can enable bureaucrats to retain adequate moral dispositions, I depart from three other ways in which one might be inclined to respond to the pervasiveness of discretion at the front lines of the state: by thinking about how to constrain it; by reducing it to an exercise in moral reasoning and providing principles to guide it; or by focusing on the virtues of those who must wield it.

Discretion at the front lines of the state makes us uneasy, and rightly so. It raises the specter of arbitrary treatment, personal domination, bias, and corruption. It is especially unsettling when wielded by unelected officials. Political theorists and institutional architects have long argued that one can alleviate the worries related to discretionary power by placing both preconditions on discretionary action (ex-ante) and penalties for improper action (ex-post).²⁰ They have stressed the importance of administrative rule-making; emphasized the need for due process, transparency, and strict

measures of accountability; and recommended the adoption of systems of checks and balances that prevent the concentration of power in a single actor.²¹

But while these precautionary measures are all necessary to constrain and structure the use of discretion, they are far from sufficient to guide it. So long as the directives that street-level bureaucrats inherit are not fully determinate, they cannot fulfill their duties simply by knowing what *not* to do. They must also engage in a positive moral exercise—they must determine which course of action or style of work, among the many that are open to them, would be best to follow.

There is another way to approach the topic of discretionary power that stems from such a recognition. It involves thinking of public officials as ethical problem-solvers who confront successive moral puzzles. The key is to help them make the right decisions. This may involve thinking about the various principles of moral reasoning that such officials should use, or about the professional codes of conduct that could give them adequate guidance. It may also involve working with psychologists and behavioral economists to identify the sources of decisional bias or “irrationality” that cloud their decision-making, and to devise ways to correct them.²²

The problem with such an approach, and its focus on the moment of ethical decision-making, is that it presents an overly narrow account of the obstacles that public officials face in making sound use of their discretion. It fails to account, in particular, for the fact that ethical questions do not come with a label but need to be perceived as such before they can be addressed. The way in which bureaucrats come to recognize moral problems, however, depends heavily on their moral disposition: on the interpretive lens they adopt, on their normative and affective sensibilities, and on the way in which they understand their role and responsibilities. These factors both precede and inform the decisions they ultimately take.

Instead of thinking about how to constrain the discretion of street-level bureaucrats or how to prepare them to be better ethical decision-makers, I will examine how we can enable them to develop and sustain the kind of moral dispositions that will allow them to perform their role well. In this respect, my approach bears a close affinity to the work of virtue ethicists and their insistence on the importance of character. But while I am sympathetic to virtue ethics, I depart from it in at least two ways, which I elaborate

at greater length in Chapter 3. Depending on the conception of virtue that one holds, these divergences could be seen either as a friendly amendment or as a critique of some of virtue ethics' central tenets.

While virtue ethicists often seek to identify stable character traits that befit a particular social role, I try to show in what follows that no such traits are unmitigated blessings when it comes to frontline officials. Street-level work calls, rather, for the capacity to move flexibly between a variety of attitudes and stances in response to ever-changing situations and challenges. My account diverges from virtue ethics in a second way. Whereas virtue ethicists tend to stress the importance of environment and habituation for the *acquisition* of character traits that individuals can then carry with them across contexts, I underscore the extent to which individuals depend on their environment and on situationally specific practices for the *maintenance* of adequate moral dispositions. I hope to show, accordingly, that when we think about moral agency and moral dispositions, we must look not just at individual character but at the ongoing practices through which individuals relate to the environment in which they are situated.

Toward a Political Theory of Implementation

In his preface to *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Michael Lipsky observed that public policy remains an abstraction until it is carried out. In an important respect, public policy just *is* the sum total of the actions taken by street-level bureaucrats. As scholars in the field of implementation studies have long argued, we cannot know what the state does simply by looking at the text of the law because policies undergo important transformations in the process of implementation.²³ If we are to detect these transformations, understand their causes, and assess their merits, we need to look at what public officials actually do and why they do it. This is one of the rationales for studying the state from the bottom up.

For all their importance as mediators between state and society, however, street-level bureaucrats have received surprisingly little attention from political theorists. This neglect is not merely accidental. As a discipline, political theory has had a lot to say about the general rules and standards that make up the law and the protections they should afford to individuals, but comparatively little about how the state ought to enact or enforce such law.

It has had much to say about *policymaking* but relatively little about *policy implementation*.

But the normative difficulties that we face, as a polity, do not end once we have agreed on a legitimate set of institutions and on a range of policies to enact. These policies still need to be implemented, and this is where the world of bureaucracy comes into play. As we will see throughout this study, the process of policy implementation opens up a host of distinctive normative challenges—challenges that are not merely derivative from, or subsidiary to, the ones that arise in the course of policymaking. As such, it merits our attention in its own right.

Take any law that is just or legitimate, and its implementation will have to respond to a further set of normative demands. It will have to be enacted in a way that is efficient, fair, responsive to the needs of individual citizens, and respectful of them. How to interpret these various considerations, how to resolve conflicts that arise between them, and how to apply them to specific cases are normative challenges that are intrinsic to implementation. A normative theory of the democratic state that did not engage seriously with such challenges would remain incomplete.

But there is more. The normative questions that arise in the course of policy implementation—how to interpret demands such as “respect,” how to weigh competing considerations, and how to bring them to bear on specific cases—are of a distinctive kind. These questions cannot be settled at a high level of generality and call for contextual judgment. We can sometimes encode answers to such questions in rules and procedures, but there is a limit to how much we can do so in advance of being confronted with specific cases and situations, lest we blindly prejudge them. This is why we often delegate the interpreting, weighing, and balancing of these plural considerations to street-level bureaucrats who are closest to individual cases and best acquainted with their specificities. An account of how the state ought to interact with its citizens, then, is in large part an account of how these bureaucrats ought to inhabit their role and of how our institutions can support them in doing so. A political theory of implementation has, at its heart, a political ethics for street-level bureaucrats.

I believe that the normative significance of policy implementation has been obscured to date by a range of reductive views as to what implementation entails. On one such view, policy implementation consists merely in

executing directives, and striving to attain objectives, that have already been spelled out in legislative statutes. Bureaucracies are understood to be mere instruments for the execution of the political will or, in other words, morally inert tools for the execution of decisions taken from without. The tasks they have to perform may be complex and may require technical proficiency, but the normative questions—the questions about which ends to pursue, and which values to prioritize—will already have been settled by legislators.

As we will see in Chapter 1, this “morally inert” view of policy implementation has been widely challenged since the birth of the field of public administration. Political scientists have observed that legislative statutes are often both vague and ambiguous and tend to leave much to the discretion of bureaucrats. They have shown, as well, that bureaucrats are frequently solicited as partners in the drafting of legislation; that the decisions they have to take about how to implement a particular policy can be political questions in their own right; and that the process of implementation typically uncovers a variety of normative issues that could not have been foreseen. In short, the worlds of politics and administration are intertwined and cannot be easily separated. Besides the empirical inaccuracies that plague the “morally inert” view of policy implementation, one could also argue that the strict division of labor it envisions between politics and administration is undesirable, and I will try to make such a case in Chapter 1. To put it simply, such a view overestimates our capacity, as well as our readiness, to formalize our normative commitments, and does not sufficiently appreciate the costs at which such formalization would come.

Political theorists have long recognized, of course, that the separation between politics and administration does not obtain in practice, even though some may continue to hold on to such a separation as an attractive ideal. But to the extent that they are willing to grant that public agencies are involved in making normative decisions, they appear to presume, by and large, that such decisions are concentrated in the upper echelons of the bureaucratic hierarchy, and that the place of moral and political judgment diminishes substantially further down the ranks. This would explain why political ethics—which has traditionally, since Machiavelli, focused on political leaders—has had something to say about senior bureaucrats (such as

ministers, regulators, or “technocrats”) but has remained largely silent about the rank and file.²⁴

The presumption that senior bureaucrats matter more from a normative standpoint than lower-ranking ones finds support in two of the dominant models of bureaucracy: as hierarchies driven by rules, and as chains of principal–agent relationships. According to the first model, bureaucracies are vertical organizations in which superiors control the actions of their subordinates through detailed rules of conduct. While senior officials may inherit vague legislative mandates, they are responsible for translating such mandates into precise standard operating procedures. The lower one goes in the hierarchy, the more specific the directives to follow and the narrower the objectives to attain. In this model, top-level bureaucrats are solicited as moral and political agents who are entrusted with the value-laden task of giving specific content to vague legal directives, whereas frontline workers are enlisted as technical operators who are expected to follow procedures and attain objectives that have been specified on their behalf. The only moral question left for these workers to answer is that of compliance or disobedience: whether to obey the directives they receive or not.²⁵ This question becomes especially salient when the policies that street-level bureaucrats must implement are unjust, illegitimate, or morally repugnant.

As an alternative to the rule-bound model, it is possible to look at bureaucracy as a chain of principal–agent relationships.²⁶ This model starts from the premise that bureaucrats have an informational advantage over their principals and that the organization as a whole would gain from giving them the discretion to make use of it. The challenge, however, is that the preferences of bureaucrats are not necessarily aligned with those of their principals, and that monitoring and enforcement are both costly. In such conditions, managers must design an incentive system such that the interests of their subordinates are aligned with their own.²⁷ If designed properly, such a system should harmonize the pursuit of bureaucrats’ preferences with the advancement of the organization’s overall mission. From a normative standpoint, this model brings into relief two threats: that of distortion—when bureaucrats go rogue and advance their own (principled) preferences of what the organization ought to do over those of their principals—and that of corruption, when bureaucrats fail to realize that there

are limits to how far they can pursue their own (narrow) self-interest while holding claim to their role as agents of the state.

Despite their differences, these two models of bureaucracy—the “rule-bound” model and the “principal–agent” model—have two characteristics in common. Both locate the center of normative decision-making among senior officials who are responsible for orchestrating the formal structure of the organization (What rules to put in place? What system of incentives to adopt?). Both models assume, as well, that it is possible to avoid relying on the moral agency of lower-ranking bureaucrats, save for the question of compliance, since they are merely responsible for following rules diligently or for acting in line with their self-interest.

The problem with these two models of organizational behavior is that they mask the everyday moral choices that frontline workers must make in the conditions that most frequently obtain: namely, when their interests are reasonably well aligned with those of their principals, and when the political institutions that they serve are sufficiently just and legitimate not to warrant shirking or outright disobedience. These two models overstate, respectively, the extent to which rules can provide determinate guidance and the extent to which the preferences of principals are well determined. They also presume that the ambiguity or vagueness that is characteristic of legislative statutes will resolve itself within bureaucracies as various layers of superiors try to control the behavior of their subordinates.

But this is not always the case. As we will see in Chapter 1, not all normative ambiguities can or should be resolved before they reach the street. Frontline bureaucrats will frequently inherit normative guidelines that lend themselves to various interpretations, and whose meaning varies greatly depending on context and culture. They will have to find creative ways to adapt and refine administrative categories to fit a complex world that often eludes them; they will be forced, as well, to contend with questions of prioritization that arise because of limited resources. In all these ways street-level work gives rise to its own normative questions.

But that is not all. Policy implementation at the street level also brings into play its own distinctive set of normative considerations. We can begin to think of those if we accept, as Joseph Heath succinctly puts it, that public administration has a “‘job to do,’ one that can be specified independently of the particular wishes of the government of the day.”²⁸ Once public ad-

ministration is assigned the task of providing a particular service, it acquires direct obligations to the public. In particular, it takes it upon itself to provide this service in a way that is—among other things—efficient, fair, responsive, and respectful.

The criterion of *efficiency* embodies the technocratic ideal of good management. Simply put, public administrators are entrusted with a limited amount of public resources, and we, as citizens, expect them to make these resources go as far as possible. This means being economical, speedy, and effective in the course of everyday work. We can measure the importance of efficiency, as a standard of evaluation, by the stridency of the criticisms that public administration draws when it fails to live up to it. The various waves of reform that have profoundly transformed the administrative state since the 1980s derive much of their support from the perception of public service agencies as slow, wasteful, and ineffective.

But the standard of efficiency, on its own, does not capture what is distinctive about public service agencies. What sets these agencies apart from other types of organizations is that they interact with people in their capacity as citizens and provide them with services to which they are entitled as a matter of right. This distinguishes services provided by the state from services provided by charities or services that can be purchased on the market. In a democracy, moreover, citizens are meant to be political equals and have a claim to being treated by their state with equal concern and respect. Public administrators, then, have a duty of *fairness* or impartiality. They must treat clients on the basis of principles that such clients could reasonably be expected to endorse. On this count, public administration derives its legitimacy less from its capacity to “get things done” than from its capacity to stand, in some way, “above politics,” and to remain, like the law, at equal distance from all. Here again, the importance of the criterion can be measured by how seriously we take its violation—when officials are accused, for instance, of favoritism, bias, or discrimination.

The third normative standard—of *responsiveness*—captures the thought that no two cases are exactly alike. If public administration is to be legitimate, it is not enough for it to be impartial and to treat people equally; it must also be attentive to the specificities of their needs, demands, and circumstances. In *Democratic Legitimacy*, Pierre Rosanvallon argues that the importance accorded to responsiveness to particularity is a relatively

recent transformation within democracy—one that resonates with elements from the politics of recognition and the ethics of care and that signals the move toward a “legitimacy of proximity.” Democratic citizens, he notes, are no longer willing to accept a one-size-fits-all model of treatment on the part of their state. They expect officials to listen to them and to be able to respond with some level of flexibility to the specificities of their case. This desideratum is the counterpart to a range of familiar criticisms targeted at public service agencies: that they are distant, unconcerned, immured in red tape, and less responsive to the particularities of clients’ situations than their counterparts in the private sector.

When making discretionary decisions, street-level bureaucrats ought to remain sensitive to these plural considerations—of *efficiency*, *fairness*, and *responsiveness*, as well as to that of *respect*, which, we will see in Chapter 2, intersects in complex ways with them—and must contend with the fact that they often pull in competing directions. Making the most efficient use of limited public resources may involve allocating them in a way that is not fair; adhering strictly to standards of fairness may curtail the flexibility that is necessary to be responsive to people’s individual needs; responsiveness, finally, may detract from fairness, and may slow down the pace of work and thus stand in the way of efficiency. As Lipsky and others have observed, much of the routine of street-level work involves negotiating difficult compromises between these normative desiderata.²⁹

To sum up, then, policy implementation is not just a seamless continuation of policymaking. It gives rise to its own breed of normative questions and brings into play its own normative standards. Lipsky’s dictum that street-level bureaucrats effectively “make policy” does not simply mean that they are the channels through which public policy is enacted. It also means that public policy is still underdetermined by the time it reaches them, and that it takes shape as they carry it out.³⁰ As they resolve its ambiguities, address its oversights, and assign priority to its various components, public policy takes one of several instantiations it could have taken. To the extent that we, as members of the public, are exposed to the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats, and to the extent that such bureaucrats are partially responsible for giving countenance to public policy, we have good reason to be concerned with their moral dispositions,

and with their capacity to remain sound and balanced moral agents despite the pressures of everyday work.

Street-Level Bureaucrats

The label “street-level bureaucrat” designates a broad category of frontline workers in public service. It encompasses welfare workers, social workers, counselors, police officers, and educators. To use a distinction made famous by Pierre Bourdieu, these bureaucrats belong to both the “Left hand” of the state, the one that delivers social services, and to the “Right hand,” the one that enforces order and economic discipline.³¹

There are important differences among street-level bureaucrats pertaining, for instance, to the nature of the decisions they take, to the populations they interact with, and to the kind of encounters they have with clients. Unlike teachers, police officers carry guns and sometimes make life-or-death decisions; unlike welfare workers, these officers interact not just with individuals seeking services but with the population at large; and unlike social workers, who have repeated encounters with clients through which a personal relationship can develop, our encounters with police officers are often episodic and happen on a one-time basis (although this is of course more true for the highway patrol than for officers stationed on a beat).

While I try to do justice to the important differences that exist between the various professions that street-level bureaucrats occupy, I focus primarily in this book on what they have in common. Since the field of inquiry is already vast, I restrict my attention to the workings of street-level bureaucracy in the United States, drawing occasionally on examples from other “advanced liberal democracies” such as France and the United Kingdom, countries that espouse broadly democratic values and have guarantees of due process, a commitment to the rule of law, and a modern administrative apparatus.³²

Scholars have found it useful to speak of street-level bureaucrats as a single category—notwithstanding differences among professions—because of similarities in the structure of everyday work at the front lines of public service across agencies.³³ Three commonalities are particularly noteworthy: street-level bureaucrats are at the bottom of organizational hierarchies; they

interact with clients directly; and they are vested with a meaningful margin of discretion. The label can arguably be stretched to include 911 call operators, who do not see their clients in person but whose “voice-to-voice contact imposes the emotional demands of more typical face-to-face encounters,” but it leaves out line agents, such as IRS data transcribers, who do not have direct contact with clients, and those, such as toll collectors, whose discretion is so constrained that they effectively can be—and often have been—replaced by automated systems.³⁴

As mediators between state and society, street-level bureaucrats have a foot in two worlds that are often out of tune with one another. Street-level work is traversed by the tensions that arise between these two worlds and by the need for street-level bureaucrats to navigate between the “two bodies” they occupy in each.³⁵ These bureaucrats are at once powerful and powerless, personal and impersonal, creative and rule-bound, *de facto* experts and low-ranking subordinates.

As frontline workers, street-level bureaucrats occupy some of the lowest and least influential ranks of the various agencies to which they belong. Such workers have been described as those “rewarded the least, valued the least, and considered the most expendable and replaceable.”³⁶ And yet, street-level bureaucrats are also responsible for personifying their agencies—and with them, the state—to citizens. As employees, their influence is largely circumscribed (unless they are unionized); as representatives of the state, they are powerful gatekeepers. This asymmetry, between how they are perceived from within their own organizations and how they are perceived from without, colors their everyday work.

Another distinctive characteristic of street-level work, which sets it apart from the activities of legislators or senior bureaucrats, is that it does not involve making decisions about policy. Frontline workers are expected, rather, to apply existing policies to specific cases—a task that relies heavily on practical judgment. But street-level bureaucrats do not make such judgments at a distance, by looking at files from the comfort of an office. Their job involves direct face-to-face encounters with clients. They come to know the individuals and the personal stories that are attached to each case. This proximity with clients makes their role particularly interesting from an ethical and psychological standpoint: they are at once representatives of an

impersonal legal order and participants in encounters that can be very personal and intimate.

As intermediaries between citizens and the state, street-level bureaucrats must also act as translators between the complex and nuanced realities of everyday life and the more regimented world of public administration. They are responsible for translating the personal stories they hear from their clients into an administrative “case,” a task that often involves some measure of creative redescription and force-fitting. But street-level bureaucrats must also translate in the opposite direction: they are expected to explain the bureaucratic process, with its labyrinthine rules and procedures, to clients who are as foreign to bureaucracy as they are dependent upon it. It is, at least in part, on the basis of the reasons that bureaucrats provide for their actions that citizens come to form an opinion about their state—about how much they trust it, how legitimate it is, and what standing they have in its eyes.³⁷

A central feature of street-level work, finally, is that it involves—amid all the rules and standard operating procedures that we rightly associate with bureaucracy—a considerable degree of discretion and independence. Street-level bureaucrats often work alone and are hard to monitor. Given that they occupy the lowest ranks of the bureaucratic hierarchy, they also find themselves forced to resolve any ambiguity, vagueness, or conflict that exists in public policy—for they cannot delegate it any further. And yet, despite the discretion they have in practice and the tacit knowledge they accumulate on the job, such bureaucrats typically lack the social recognition and technocratic markers of expertise that usually come with discretionary power and that serve to legitimize it to the greater public. (By contrast, think of judges or scientific experts.)

One of the challenges in studying street-level bureaucracy today is that it is changing before our very eyes. When Lipsky first coined the term thirty-five years ago, the great majority of street-level bureaucrats were government employees. This is no longer the case. Since the 1980s, and under the impetus of a body of ideas known as “New Public Management” or “Reinventing Government,” public agencies have increasingly contracted out the provision of public services to private nonprofit and for-profit organizations.³⁸ As we will see in the following pages, this increasing reliance on

contracting has been accompanied by the adoption of managerial practices drawn from the private sector—such as performance-based management—which have altered the organizational environment in which street-level bureaucrats work on both sides of the public / private divide.

While the transition from “public agencies” to “public service agencies” raises a host of important questions about accountability, authority, and mission incompatibility, the original findings of the literature on street-level bureaucracy have, by and large, held up remarkably well in the realm of non-profit service provision.³⁹ In a new concluding chapter written in 2010 for an updated edition of *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Lipsky suggests that this might be because “the controls, performance measures, and agency review procedures imposed on private [nonprofit] agencies by public authorities have become increasingly rigorous, tending to drive out whatever differences in the treatment of clients attributable to private or public status that might at one time have prevailed.”⁴⁰ This convergence may be especially tight for nonprofits, like the one in which I conducted my fieldwork, which have relied on government funding to such an extent and for so long that any sense of independent mission and special priorities they might once have had are by now long gone.

By contrast, for-profit agencies, which remain beyond the scope of this book, depart more substantially from the standard street-level bureaucracy profile.⁴¹ This is, in part, because their employees are often differently motivated, and their organizational culture not always well aligned with the public service ethos. But it is also because their managers inherit, on top of the responsibilities associated with the provision of social services and sometimes competing with them, an obligation to advance the interests of shareholders, usually taken to mean maximizing profit or return on investment.⁴²

In addition to the changes brought about by contracting, street-level bureaucracy is also being transformed by technology. Many of the interactions that people used to have with bureaucrats, especially to solicit information, can now be done online or over the phone. In some domains, the use of information systems has also contributed to displacing the locus of bureaucratic discretion. Some scholars have gone so far as to herald the gradual replacement of street-level bureaucracy (where officials have a significant amount of discretion over individual cases) by screen-level bureau-

cracy (where officials enter forms into a computer program that makes decisions for them), and possibly even by system-level bureaucracy (where officials are no longer involved in handling individual cases but spend their time developing the relevant algorithms).⁴³

While such prognostics must be taken seriously, we must be careful not to overstate the speed, reach, and inevitability of technological change. As we will see in the following pages, street-level bureaucrats still make plenty of significant decisions in the course of face-to-face encounters, and in some agencies the scope of their discretion has actually increased with recent waves of administrative reform.⁴⁴ We must be careful, as well, not to treat technological change as a *fait accompli*. The fact that we now have the technology required to replace people with screens and algorithms does not mean that it is always a good idea to do so. By shedding light on how the bureaucratic encounter takes place in more traditional, face-to-face settings, the following pages will help us think more clearly about the proper role of technology in public service delivery. Understanding how personal encounters between bureaucrats and clients play out, and what significance they have for the parties involved, can give us a yardstick to assess what we stand to gain and to lose by moving to a different model of service provision. It is precisely because the state is changing so much that it is incumbent upon us to look closely at what it is, or what it was until recently, so that we can critically assess what it is becoming and help shape what it might become.

Methodology and Fieldwork

This book draws on an eclectic array of sources. It engages with political theory in the Anglo-American and Continental traditions, with contemporary moral philosophy, and with social theory. But it also situates normative questions in a richly textured account of bureaucratic life that remains sensitive to institutional context and lived experience. This account builds on empirical research in anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology; on literary representations of bureaucracy; and on eight months of participant observation I conducted in an antipoverty agency.

This eclecticism is called for by the subject matter at hand. To be interested in the conditions of possibility of moral agency is to be interested in

questions of moral psychology that are open to experimental inquiry. It is to be concerned with how individuals are influenced by their environment and how they adapt themselves to it—questions of interest to sociologists and political scientists. It is to be attentive, finally, to the everyday experience of social actors—how they perceive their surroundings, how they think of themselves, and how they attribute meaning to events—questions that are evoked suggestively in literature, that are of direct concern to anthropologists, and that lend themselves to exploration through participant observation.

On a methodological front, I hope that this study will attest to the potential for cross-pollination between political theory and ethnographic modes of inquiry. The window that ethnography opens onto individual experience, and the attention it devotes to context, can prompt us to think more carefully about how moral and political questions actually present themselves to ordinary agents in the thick of everyday life. It can also help us gain a more nuanced appreciation for the various ways in which moral agents interact with, and depend upon, the environment in which they are situated. In turn, I hope to show that political theory has something important to contribute to an anthropology of morals, because it can provide us with an interpretive lens to grasp the moral and political valence of everyday practices that would otherwise appear devoid of significance.

For quite some time now, a number of political theorists have been dissatisfied with the level of abstraction at which much of contemporary normative political theory proceeds. Political realists and proponents of non-ideal theory have, each in their own way, decried the extent to which normative theory has become detached from the realities of politics.⁴⁵ They have enjoined us, instead, to start the process of normative reflection from the here and now, thinking about what might be required of us in our present circumstances and trying to understand the practices of politics and morality as they actually exist. I take these criticisms seriously and will attempt in the course of this study to practice a more grounded kind of political theory—one that is informed by an ethnographic sensibility. Rather than open with a methodological preamble about what it might mean to engage in such a form of political theory and why we might want to do so, I will try to make my case by exemplifying it. Save for a few necessary remarks along the way, I will leave my reflections on methodology for the

book's conclusion, by which point the reader will have had a chance to see it at work.

As a contribution to a more realistic theory of the state, I begin by taking street-level bureaucracies, street-level bureaucrats, and public policy largely as I, and others, have found them, and attempt to examine the challenges of street-level work in these conditions. I use the experience of street-level bureaucrats, in turn, as a starting point to critically assess existing institutional arrangements, managerial practices, and policies. The organizations we will encounter in the following pages are, for the most part, understaffed and underfunded. The bureaucrats we will meet are, by and large, well intentioned and motivated to do their job well, although their understanding of what this means and their level of dedication to the ideal public service vary considerably. Petty corruption, while not absent, is not as prevalent or pressing a concern as it is in some developing countries. The policies that street-level bureaucrats are asked to implement, finally, are for the most part legitimate enough or just enough ("just-ish") not to warrant shirking or outright disobedience, even though they may be far from ideal.

These conditions are in some ways better, and in others worse, than they conceivably could be—but they are currently ours. Some of the tensions I describe in the following pages would be alleviated if public agencies were funded far more generously. And while unjust laws, corruption, and improper motivation could be more rampant, we will see that street-level work is ethically fraught and challenging even in the absence of such familiar problems.

The organization in which I conducted my fieldwork, and to which I will refer from now on as the Norville Community Development Initiative (NCDI), is in many ways representative of the new face of public service provision. The NCDI was founded in the early 1960s as a private nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the "human side" of urban renewal projects. With the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act under Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 and the beginning of the War on Poverty, it was designated as Norville's official antipoverty agency. While the NCDI started with a militant community empowerment agenda, it gradually morphed into a human services organization that both administers and helps clients apply for a wide range of governmental programs.

Low-income families visit the NCDI to apply for Head Start programs, fuel assistance for winter heating, food stamps, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. The NCDI also runs job assistance programs, financial counseling sessions, and an after-school program. It provides housing assistance to families in need; assists seniors by providing Medicare counseling sessions; helps families access child care through referral and voucher programs; provides recommendations for public housing; and assists clients in applying for citizenship.

The agency is responsible for reaching out to potential clients; for determining which services they are eligible for; for helping them apply for such services; and when necessary, for sending their completed applications to governmental offices for approval. It is also responsible for verifying the accuracy of the documents that clients provide; for assessing the veracity and consistency of their claims; and for monitoring compliance with program requirements. The NCDI thus combines service and regulatory functions and, given the volume of clients who pass through it, it is also effectively a “people-processing” organization—one whose primary function is not to change the behavior of clients but to confer “public statuses” on them.⁴⁶

By the time I joined the organization, it operated a network of sixteen neighborhood sites scattered throughout the city and served close to 100,000 families annually. Its yearly budget was close to 150 million dollars, practically all of which came from governmental grants at the federal (~70 percent), state (~10 percent), and local (~15 percent) levels. The NCDI was granted a quasi-monopoly over the services it provided, and its performance was reviewed cyclically by federal, state, and local officials.

The neighborhood site to which I was assigned as a receptionist—hereafter referred to as the Norville Service Center (NSC)—was one of the largest in the city. It served a predominantly African American neighborhood (~65 percent) with large Asian and Hispanic communities. The NSC was housed in a large three-story townhouse at the intersection of a quiet residential street and a medium-sized road, across the street from a public school. It shared its location with the Norville Hispanic Center (NHC), a branch of NCDI that specialized in providing services to Hispanic clients, which had a dedicated Spanish-speaking staff. The NHC had its own entrance, reception desk, and director. It could be accessed directly through the parking lot of the NSC. Over the course of the eight-month period I

spent at the NCDI, I had the opportunity to work as receptionist both at the Norville Service Center and at the Norville Hispanic Center. This made for an ideal comparative setup: it allowed me to be exposed to two different organizational cultures and managerial styles, as well as to two different groups of clients within the context of a single institutional framework (the NCDI).

The Norville Service Center employed five to seven case managers; the Norville Hispanic Center employed three. Both centers also relied heavily on the help of interns and volunteers like me, many of whom stayed with the organization for several years. Most of the staff members and interns had close connections with the neighborhood, and their demographics broadly reflected those of the client population, which was predominantly African American and Hispanic and about three-quarters female. Full-time staff members had a variety of professional backgrounds; most had prior training in “human services” or exposure to social work, but many did not and were recruited by the organization after serving as volunteers for a long period of time.

As a receptionist, my primary responsibilities involved greeting clients in person and on the phone, answering their questions, informing them of the status of their appointments, and updating their administrative records ahead of their meetings with case managers. I also had to perform miscellaneous administrative tasks, sometimes away from the front desk, in a cubicle adjacent to those of case managers. When there was a shortage of staff or experienced interns, I would be asked to meet with clients individually to help them apply for specific services. Given my physical proximity to the offices and cubicles of case managers and the open-door culture of the organization, I could overhear the conversations that staff members were having with one another and would frequently be invited to sit in on their meetings with clients for the purposes of training.

Outline of the Book

I begin, in Chapter 1, by examining the reasons for which street-level bureaucrats have discretion and the normative grounds on which such discretion can be justified. In Chapter 2, I proceed to examine how street-level bureaucrats inhabit their spaces of discretion. I argue that we can best

understand the ethical challenges that such bureaucrats face by focusing not on the individual decisions they must take but on the broader moral dispositions they develop on the job. I give analytic content to the notion of a “moral disposition” and show that such dispositions shape how bureaucrats make use of their discretionary power. With the aid of this conceptual groundwork, I proceed to identify three dispositions that frequently appear among street-level workers—indifference, caregiving, and enforcement—and show that they are, each in its own way, pathological.

The following three chapters draw on my ethnographic fieldwork at the NCDI to examine why the pressures of everyday work drive street-level bureaucrats toward such dispositions, and what can be done to counteract such a drift. Chapter 3 takes up these questions from the standpoint of individual bureaucrats, Chapter 4 from the standpoint of peer-level dynamics, and Chapter 5 from the perspective of managerial practices and public policy. Each of these chapters puts the accent on a distinct failure of moral agency—a failure of role conception (Chapter 3), a failure of moral perception (Chapter 4), and a failure of moral integrity (Chapter 5).

I conclude with some reflections on the nature of administrative rationality, on the need for a bottom-up normative theory of the state, and on the potential for synergy between political theory and ethnography.

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INTRODUCTION

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- 9 See, for instance, Robert K. Merton, “Bureaucratic Structure and Personality,” *Social Forces* 18, no. 4 (1940); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); Jeffrey Prottas, *People Processing: The Street-Level Bureaucrat in Public Service Bureaucracies* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1979); Ralph P. Hummel, *The Bureaucratic Experience: A Critique of Life in the Modern Organization*, 4th ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).
- 10 See, among others, Sandra Morgen, “The Agency of Welfare Workers: Negotiating Devolution, Privatization, and the Meaning of Self-Sufficiency,” *American*

- Anthropologist* 103, no. 3 (2001); Suzanne Mettler and Joe Soss, “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (2004); Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Didier Fassin, *La Force de l’Ordre: Une Anthropologie de la Police des Quartiers* (Paris: Seuil, 2011); David Graeber, “Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (2012).
- 11 Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2004), 17.
- 12 Peter M. Blau, *Bureaucracy in Modern Society* (New York: Random House, 1956), 13. See also the opening of Paul Du Gay, *In Praise of Bureaucracy: Weber, Organization and Ethics* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).
- 13 See Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, 30th anniversary expanded ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010).
- 14 Street-level bureaucrats, of course, do not only interact with citizens. They also come into contact with long-term residents, temporary workers, irregular migrants, and refugees. In this book, I focus primarily on citizens because from a normative standpoint, the democratic state is typically thought to have special obligations toward its citizens, and they, in turn, are understood to have special rights and powers to press against it. How far these obligations and correlative rights extend to non-citizens is a matter of debate in democratic theory, and the question remains beyond the scope of this study. On the rights and responsibilities of the democratic state toward non-citizens, see Joseph H. Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 15 See, in particular, the work of Tom Tyler and Bo Rothstein: Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Jason Sunshine and Tom R. Tyler, “The Role of Procedural Justice and Legitimacy in Shaping Public Support for Policing,” *Law & Society Review* 37, no. 3 (2003); Tom R. Tyler, “Enhancing Police Legitimacy,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 593, no. 1 (2004); Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Tyler’s findings are also helpfully discussed in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 171–177.
- 16 Bo Rothstein, “Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy versus Quality of Government,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 3 (2009): 313.
- 17 For an approach germane to mine from the field of anthropology which also focuses on the spaces of agency available to frontline bureaucrats, see the essays collected in Didier Fassin, ed., *At the Heart of the State: The Moral World of Institutions* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

- 18 In shifting the object of inquiry from the *what* to the *how*, I take up a theme discussed by scholars of political ethics and transplant it into the realm of bureaucratic organizations. The latter have reminded us that it is important to look not just at what politicians ought to do, but at what sorts of persons we would want them to be. See, for instance, Bernard Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” in *Public and Private Morality*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Andrew Sabl, *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 19 These questions are inspired by a long-standing agenda of research in organization theory on the effect of bureaucratic organizations on the individuals who work in them. See, for instance, Chris Argyris, *Personality and Organization: The Conflict between System and the Individual* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957); Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 20 Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57–58.
- 21 For a review of these various institutional measures and a discussion of why they are both necessary and insufficient, see Kenneth Culp Davis, *Discretionary Justice: A Preliminary Inquiry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1971), and Pettit, *Republicanism*, 63–73, 241–246.
- 22 See, for instance, David M. Messick and Max H. Bazerman, “Ethical Leadership and the Psychology of Decision Making,” *Sloan Management Review* 37, no. 2 (1996); Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What’s Right and What to Do About It* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- 23 See, for instance, the seminal study by Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
- 24 See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For other influential treatments of political ethics, see Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1973); Dennis F. Thompson, *Political Ethics and Public Office* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 25 To put it as political scientists John Brehm and Scott Gates do, the question is whether to work, shirk, or sabotage. See John Brehm and Scott Gates, *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

- 26 See Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling, “Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs and Ownership Structure,” *Journal of Financial Economics* 3, no. 4 (1976). For the case of public bureaucracy, see Terry M. Moe, “The New Economics of Organization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 4 (1984). For an overview of the literature on formal models of bureaucracy, see Jonathan Bendor, “Formal Models of Bureaucracy,” *British Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 3 (1988); Sean Gailmard and John W. Patty, “Formal Models of Bureaucracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012).
- 27 In fact, a common assumption in the formal literature on bureaucracy is that the risks associated with delegation would be greatly reduced if principals were able to appoint agents who are ideological clones of themselves. This is what Jonathan Bendor and Adam Meirowitz call the “ally principle.” They go on to explore the conditions under which such a principle actually holds. See Jonathan Bendor and Adam Meirowitz, “Spatial Models of Delegation,” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (2004).
- 28 Joseph Heath, “A General Framework for the Ethics of Public Administration,” unpublished manuscript (2014): 30. The idea is that the legitimacy of public administration is not merely derived from the legitimacy of the elected government that instructs it to act in certain ways. Public administration has a claim to being democratically legitimate in its own right, either because of the problems it solves and the values it honors, or because it embodies a different kind of democratic generality than that which can be achieved through elections, or because it performs a distinctive constitutional function. This line of argumentation has been developed by a range of authors with different theoretical inclinations. See the work of the authors of the Blackburg Manifesto, in particular: John A. Rohr, *To Run a Constitution: The Legitimacy of the Administrative State* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); Gary L. Wamsley et al., eds., *Refounding Public Administration* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990). See also Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*.
- 29 See, for instance, James Q. Wilson, “The Bureaucracy Problem,” *The Public Interest*, no. 6 (1967). Wilson adds to the concerns of “equity,” “efficiency,” and “responsiveness” those of “accountability” and “fiscal integrity,” and argues that “the solution to each is in some degree incompatible with the solution to every other.”
- 30 This idea reflects a recent turn within legal scholarship toward the study of “Administrative Constitutionalism.” The guiding thought behind this burgeoning literature is that administrative agencies play a role not just in the application of established constitutional requirements but also in the elaboration of new constitutional understandings and in the construction of the administrative state. See Jerry L. Mashaw, *Creating the Administrative Constitution: The Lost One Hundred Years of American Administrative Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); William N. Eskridge and John A. Ferejohn, *A Republic of Statutes: The New American Constitution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,

- 2010); Sophia Z. Lee, *The Workplace Constitution from the New Deal to the New Right* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a review, see Gillian E. Metzger, “Administrative Constitutionalism,” *Texas Law Review* 91 (2013).
- 31 Pierre Bourdieu, *La Misère du Monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1993). Bourdieu initially used the distinction to distinguish the ministries in charge of social functions (health, housing, welfare, education) from those in charge of enforcing economic discipline. Loïc Wacquant has argued, more recently, that the police and courts are also essential constituents of the Right arm of the state. See Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 32 To be sure, these countries have different administrative traditions, different regimes of administrative law, and different public policy climates. Here again, it is on the commonalities, rather than on the differences, that I will focus. For a discussion of differences in administrative traditions, see Fabio Rugge, “Administrative Traditions in Western Europe,” in *The Handbook of Public Administration*, ed. B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre (London: Sage Publications, 2003). For studies of street-level bureaucracy that are attentive to national differences, see Mark Considine et al., eds., *Getting Welfare to Work: Street-Level Governance in Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Evelyn Z. Brodtkin and Gregory Marston, eds., *Work and the Welfare State: Street-Level Organizations and Workfare Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013). Both of these volumes focus on workfare reforms.
- 33 On how to delimit street-level bureaucracy and on the characteristic features of street-level work, see Steven Maynard-Moody and Shannon Portillo, “Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, ed. Robert F. Durant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 254–264; Peter Hupe, Michael Hill, and Aurélien Buffat, eds., *Understanding Street-Level Bureaucracy* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2016), 3–24.
- 34 Even operating a toll booth, however, is not quite as routinized as it may seem and leaves room for discretionary openings. See Marie Szaniszló, “Mass. Pike Toll Collector Reflects on His Last Shift,” *Boston Herald*, October 30, 2016. On 911 call operators, see Maynard-Moody and Portillo, “Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory,” 263; Mary E. Guy, Meredith A. Newman, and Sharon H. Mastracci, *Emotional Labor: Putting the Service in Public Service* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008).
- 35 Vincent Dubois speaks of the street-level bureaucrat’s “two bodies,” in allusion to Ernst Kantorowicz’s famous study of medieval political theology. See Vincent Dubois, *The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices*, trans. Jean-Yves Bart (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 73; Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also my review of Dubois’s book: Bernardo Zacka, “The Two Bodies of the Bureaucrat,” *Public Administration Review* 72, no. 2 (2012).

- 36 Rosabeth Moss Kanter and Barry Stein, eds., *Life in Organizations: Workplaces as People Experience Them* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 176. Cited in Maynard-Moody and Portillo, “Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory,” 255.
- 37 On the provision of reasons as an essential component of administrative legitimacy, see John W. Patty and Elizabeth Maggie Penn, *Social Choice and Legitimacy: The Possibilities of Impossibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 162–188.
- 38 For a discussion of the development, dimensions, and risks of government contracting, see Jocelyn M. Johnston and Barbara S. Romzek, “The Promises, Performance, and Pitfalls of Government Contracting,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*, ed. Robert F. Durant (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 39 On the questions occasioned by the shift from government provision of public services to nonprofit organizations dependent on public funds, see Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). On the distinctiveness of nonprofit organizations as service providers, see Lester M. Salamon, *Partners in Public Service: Government–Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Rachel Fyall, “Nonprofits as Advocates and Providers: A Conceptual Framework,” *Policy Studies Journal* (2016).
- 40 Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 216. Lipsky adds: “Also, in many street-level bureaucracies, workers’ perspectives strongly reflect professional rather than administrative norms. Thus a social worker in a contracting agency may process clients very much like a counterpart employed by a state agency.”
- 41 *Ibid.*, note 6.
- 42 See, for example, Janice Johnson Dias and Steven Maynard-Moody, “For-Profit Welfare: Contracts, Conflicts, and the Performance Paradox,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 17, no. 2 (2007). The authors conclude their examination of a welfare-to-work training program as such: “Beholden not just to clients and staff but also to their stockholders, these programs are driven by financial objectives that encourage them to maximize output while minimizing expenditures. Therefore, even as they provide services to recipients, they may have a disincentive to attend to clients’ entrenched employment deficits, such as low literacy levels and mental health problems. Indeed, they may be motivated to ignore them completely, particularly in cases where the cost of attending to their clients’ needs is high.”
- 43 Mark Bovens and Stavros Zouridis, “From Street-Level to System-Level Bureaucracies: How Information and Communication Technology Is Transforming Administrative Discretion and Constitutional Control,” *Public Administration Review* 62, no. 2 (2002). For a review of the literature on the impacts of e-government technologies on street-level bureaucracy, see Aurélien Buffat, “Street-Level Bureaucracy and E-Government,” *Public Management Review* 17, no. 1 (2015).

- 44 I am thinking in particular of welfare reform in the United States. See Celeste Watkins-Hayes, *The New Welfare Bureaucrats: Entanglements of Race, Class, and Policy Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Mark Considine and his coauthors have also found that welfare workers in the UK report an increase in their perceived discretion from 1998 to 2012. The trend points the other way in Australia. See Considine et al., *Getting Welfare to Work*.
- 45 For the realist critique, see Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); William Galston, “Realism in Political Theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010); David Run-ciman, “What Is Realistic Political Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 43, no. 1–2 (2012). For a defense of nonideal theory, see Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). On the distinction between political realism and nonideal theory, see Matt Sleat, “Realism, Liberalism and Non-Ideal Theory or, Are There Two Ways to Do Realistic Political Theory?,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016).
- 46 Yeheskel Hasenfeld, “People Processing Organizations: An Exchange Approach,” *American Sociological Review* 37, no. 3 (1972).

1. STREET-LEVEL DISCRETION

- 1 See Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 3; Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, “Introduction: Rethinking Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization,” in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 11.
- 2 See Herman Finer, “Administrative Responsibility in Democratic Government,” *Public Administration Review* 1, no. 4 (1941); Carl Friedrich, “Public Policy and the Nature of Administrative Responsibility,” in *Public Policy*, ed. C. J. Friedrich and E. S. Mason (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940).
- 3 Merriam-webster.com, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of Law*, s.v. “discretion,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discretion> (accessed March 17, 2017). Another meaning of discretion is the authority to take a decision that cannot be reviewed or reversed. When we say that a jury has discretion, for instance, we mean that it has “final say.” This meaning of discretion will not concern us here; since street-level bureaucrats are low-ranking officials, their decisions can typically be reviewed by their superiors. They can be reprimanded for poor judgment and, in certain cases, their decisions can be overturned.
- 4 See Lawrence Meir Friedman, *The Legal System: A Social Science Perspective* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1975), 37.
- 5 See, for instance, Herbert Kaufman, *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior* (Baltimore: Resources for the Future, 1960), xiii–xiv, 161–200; or the more formal study by Brehm and Gates, *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage*, 47–75.
- 6 The distinction between “formal” discretion and “real” discretion is indicative of the wider gap that can exist between an organization’s formal structure and