

Preface

This edited volume brings together a selection of 12 papers that were originally delivered at a major conference – Ethical Foundations of Public Policy – in December 2009 in Wellington, New Zealand. The conference was co-hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Philosophy Programme at Victoria University of Wellington, and the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago, and was sponsored by the School of Government Trust. The conference was very well attended with some 350 participants, of whom about 50 delivered papers.

The purpose of the conference was to encourage and facilitate debate about the ethical basis for policy making. This includes, of course, the ethical principles that should inform our behaviour, whether as citizens, voters, policy analysts, or decision makers, as well as the normative considerations that should guide our choices over the substantive content of particular policies – whether fiscal policy, health policy, or foreign policy.

To facilitate such a dialogue, the conference brought together a variety of policy makers, including politicians, government officials, and political advisers, together with academics from various disciplines, including economics, law, philosophy, politics, religious studies, and theology. The mix of disciplines was deliberate. Discussions concerning the ethical foundations of public policy must not, in our view, be the prerogative exclusively of moral philosophers or theologians. On the contrary, the subject is of universal relevance and deserves the attention of all those who wish to contribute to public life.

The conference had five main sub-themes: speaking truth to power (or the ethics of advice giving), the ethics of decision making, protecting the global commons, issues of equality and justice, and measuring progress. But there were also contributions on other subject areas, including ethics and economics, and ethics and health care, with papers on such issues as vulnerability, autonomy and justice, making fair funding decisions for high-cost health care, and the role of consumers in making health policy.

As highlighted by the contributions to the conference, ethical analysis remains a vigorously contested field. There are many competing moral philosophies and theologies. In our view, public debate on the merits of the different approaches is critical. After all, the ethical framework we adopt has major consequences for

policy making: it shapes the questions we ask, the methodologies we use, the values we embrace, the weighting we give to different ethical principles, and hence the policy choices we make.

The chapters in this book cover all but one of the five main sub-themes addressed during the conference. The exception concerns the measurement of progress, and this subject will be covered, together with several other topics, in a separate edited volume to be published by Victoria University Press.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the production of this book: the authors of the 12 chapters for their diligent and rapid re-crafting of their conference papers, Belinda Hill for her assistance with copy-editing, and John Butcher for advice and encouragement. We would also like to thank the School of Government Trust, the Philosophy Programme at Victoria University of Wellington, and the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago for their generous financial support.

Jonathan Boston

Andrew Bradstock

David Eng

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