

Bureaucracy and Moral Agency: Practices of the Self at the Frontlines of Public Service

Bernardo Zacka

The Author

Bernardo Zacka is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at Harvard University, and a Junior Research Fellow at Christ's College, University of Cambridge. His research interests revolve around contemporary normative political theory, 20th century Continental political thought, and political anthropology. His work has been published in *Grey Room* and *American Ethnologist*, and is forthcoming in *Contemporary Political Theory*.

The Paper

This paper is a heavily truncated version of a chapter from my doctoral dissertation.

The dissertation explores the everyday moral life of street-level bureaucrats—the frontline public workers responsible for implementing public policy and enforcing the law. These bureaucrats are caught in a predicament: the proper implementation of public policy depends on their capacity to operate as sound moral agents, and yet they must operate in working conditions that tend to undermine their moral agency. My dissertation examines the factors that lead to such a predicament, and the remedies that can be offered to it.

In the paper, I argue that the traditional arguments offered to explain why bureaucracy truncates moral agency do not travel well to the street level. I show that research in social psychology on coping mechanisms is more illuminating, and can help us understand how the pressures of everyday work gradually force street-level bureaucrats into a variety of reductive moral dispositions. I suggest that resisting the drift towards such dispositions does not call for the development of personal autonomy or the cultivation of virtue, but for the judicious deployment of a regime of everyday practices of the self.