

Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding
Merton's Conjectures and the Value of Work (Barry L. Padgett)

A Book Review

PHLD 605
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Summarize the ethical theories and/or practices presented their value and relationship (if any) to the Sinclair/Kohlberg Paradigm.

Professional Morality and Guilty Bystanding, Merton's Conjectures and the Value of Work is Barry Padgett's interpretation of *Merton's Conjectures* and his attempt to link Merton's work to professional life and employment. Thomas Merton was a monk who wrote on spiritual and moral issues. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he explores how the moral dilemma of "watching" as others make poor choices and not stepping in to prevent them (Padgett, B., 2009). Padgett's theories have little in common with the *Sinclair/Kohlberg paradigm*. Sinclair and Kohlberg recognize that individuals are at different stages of development (Sinclair, G., 2014). Padgett does not discuss stages of moral or ethical development at all, he writes in a way that makes it appear that everyone is at the same level. His focus is more on how various ethics theories can be applied to professionals and work.

Padgett explores a number of traditional theories including the claim that Merton's work is relative to Professional Morality and that language structures the way we experience the world. He talks about trust and that our society is pre-disposed to trust, this is especially true in organizations. Trust leads to loyalty with can make it difficult for individuals to make morally responsible choices in the workplace. If an individual is truly loyal to the organization that they are employed by, they cannot also be morally true to themselves. He further points out that specific negative language has been created to describe this lack of loyalty: rat, narc, and whistle-blower (Padgett, B., 2009).

Padgett discusses the distinction between professional morality and personal morality and the conflict that exists between these. This is widely known as role morality. Padgett goes on to say that "professional wholeness" – the idea that a unified self would be key to resolving complex moral dilemmas, is a useless daydream. He states that the way to progress beyond this is for Americans to understand "that they are part of everyone else in the world, just like everyone else". Padgett states

that a person's whole self is discovered through critical reflection and relationship with others but goes on to say that this is morally problematic given the responsibilities of a being a professional (Padgett, B., 2009).

Padgett believes that work defines us, it determines the way we think, who we associate with, and even where we vacation. Work inherently provides our lives with meaning and purpose. Because work is such a core part of who we are, fragmentation can occur as a result of the moral dilemmas that professionals face. Padgett postulates that in our professions we are "playing a game" of being in that role. Our authentic self is difficult (or impossible) to maintain when working. The result of this fragmentation is emotional and spiritual harm, citing the creation of language such as "burn-out". He states that the solution is critical self-reflection (Padgett, B., 2009).

James Owen echoes Padgett's reasoning about authenticity. In *Cowboy Values* (2008) he states that authenticity grows from understanding one's self as a whole person and taking actions guided by a coherent set of core beliefs. Owen talks about image building (parallel to Padgett's "playing the game") rather than the self-creation that should occur if we can successfully be honest and true to ourselves.

Have we Got the Cart before the Horse (Sinclair, G., 2014) discusses the need to have a basic understanding of the stage of moral reasoning that we are at in order to understand how we make ethical decisions and to be able to make better ethical decisions at a moment of critical choice. Padgett (2009) makes the statement that theories can enlighten us but cannot make the decision for us and that theories are limited in their application to real world situations.

Padgett contends that ethics training can be useful to professionals but that if it causes us to go through "routine" decision making it can result in another form of "guilty bystanding". This happens when we make choices based on what we think is right or by following the rules. By teaching ethics, we may inadvertently be telling people how to solve an ethical dilemma. The decision they make is therefore not fully owned by them (Padgett, B., 2009). Sinclair and Kohlberg similarly state that

teaching a “bag of virtues” can lead to us concrete moral action that may not be based on our own belief system (Sinclair, G., 2014).

The relevance of the book to any hands on applicability re both your professional and personal life and general comment on the overall degree of readability and interest that the book possesses.

I found this book to have little or no relevance to hands on applicability. It is written for scholars who have an existing knowledge of philosophy and can navigate the many theories Padgett discusses. As a student who has never taken a philosophy course I found this book difficult to read and even harder to get meaningful concepts out of to the complexity with which it is written.

It was difficult to tease out Padgett’s thoughts and theories from the large number of other theories that are presented. As a student who is new to philosophy, I became more interested in Thomas Merton and would recommend (based on the references that Padgett makes) that students read *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* prior to, or instead of Padgett’s study of this work.

I found that Padgett gives much criticism about the way that society (and specifically professionals) deals with moral dilemmas but gives us no methods of correcting our ways (Padgett, B., 2009). He postulates and proposes high level “self-contemplation” as a solution but for someone (me) who is not a philosophy major, I don’t know how to do this or where to start.

This book would be suitable for a philosophy major or a professional with a degree of understanding regarding philosophy. As well, the book is very theoretical and “high level. I found Padgett’s writing to dramatize the potential of not becoming more ethical and the frequent use of worst case examples (such as the holocaust).

Although it touches on some aspects that may be relevant to a young Environmental Health officer, I do not feel that this book would be of any use to them because it is so hard to understand and glean meaning from. Had it been written with less complexity and perhaps with reference to fewer ethical theories, it could have imparted some very timely messages.

References

Owen, J. P. (2008). *Cowboy Values: Recapturing What America Once Stood For*. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Lyons Press.

Padgett, B. L. (2009). *Professional Morality and guilty Bystanding Merton's Conjectures and the Value of Work*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Sinclair, G. W. (2014). *Sustaining Ethical Leadership Good - But Have We Got the Cart Before the Horse?* Retrieved June 24, 2014, from E-Sinc: <http://www.e-sinclair.com/research.html>.