

Book Review

FARMER, D. J. *To Kill the King: Post-traditional Governance and Bureaucracy*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2005.

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AN AWAKENING OF IMAGINATION

To Kill the King is a beautiful read. It stands apart from the more traditional public administration (PA) offerings that tend towards the rationalist, the prescriptive and the anything-but-poetic, -imaginative or -playful. *To Kill the King* is a foray into post-traditional thinking; it is a must read for those concerned with seeking justice, undertaking administration with a fresh consciousness, and thinking about the inevitable conundrums that plague us as potential works of art in the making. Farmer's words give comfort, inspire creativity and imagination, and guide us towards a more human enterprise—one that is public administration. And what is required for such a reign of imagination? Farmer writes:

I suggest that this rule of imagination requires post-traditional governance and bureaucracy. These essays suggest constitutive features of post-traditional governance and bureaucracy. They reflect on a fresh consciousness that can help us live together better. They seek to answer three general questions: First, what is post-traditional thinking? Second, what is post-traditional justice? Third, what is post-traditional practice? (Farmer, 2005, p. xi)

Farmer commences his marvellous collection of essays with an introduction to these three essential questions that frame the book. First, he introduces us to a welcome insight; that thinking is play. And what is post-traditional thinking? Post-traditional thinking, he says, is play. Farmer offers a fresh awareness of what it is to be critical of what we do, and he encourages us to do this with imagination, openness and searching. Secondly, he explores the idea of justice as seeking. And what is post-traditional justice? Post-traditional justice, he asserts, requires a consciousness that is open, unlimited and unselfconscious, with concern residing with what one owes other persons morally, rather than

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what might be done due to law, love, manners or prudence. Third, he asks, what is post-traditional practice? Post-traditional practice is governance proffered as an art form, where the artistry should be truly human. Each person is an artist in the conduct of his or her own life and the doing of administration. PA practitioners are vigorously encouraged, in this mode, to carry out their work as though creating works of art.

This delightful and engaging introduction draws the reader to join Farmer as he explores these three novel and exciting themes throughout the substance of the book. Thinking as Play, Justice as Seeking, and Practice as Art compose three discreet sections, each with a number of essays that offer us new ways of thinking about, construing and doing governance and administration—ways that ask us to think outside our field, to work beyond our usual means of tinkering, and to challenge our usual ways of responding. Farmer also encourages us to explore specialisations beyond traditional PA, such as philosophy, sociology, social work, literature, and the arts, as well as to invest attention in other areas related to the biological, psychological, social and spiritual domains.

Farmer invites us to join him in these essays in a manner that is playful and imaginative. He counsels, for instance, that readers might read the essays in whichever order they please. (What? Read them out of order?) While recognising that there is a pleasing order in how the essays are presented and aid in developing his line of reason, Farmer surrenders the necessity that we should follow this traditional mode. Indeed, he offers that one might read the three sections in order, but the essays in each, in reverse order. Well, such a simple and beautiful gauntlet wove its magic with me: While I was unable to deviate from reading the essays in Part I in the order in which they were presented, I then—playfully, if a little nervously—leapt ahead to chapter 18 (And, no, I don't do this with novels as a rule, although I know those who do). I then returned to Part II and read these in a fairly ad-hoc fashion, returning to the various Part III chapters, in between, from time to time, based on how the imaginatively entitled chapters beckoned my interest, at that particular time and place. This was a very challenging option for me to follow—but I did it *because* I hoped it would help me break away from my traditional ways of doing, thinking, analysing, reading and writing, as Farmer was suggesting. As I was still at the developmental stage of grasping non-traditional art rendering and weaving into my work, the writing of a sensible review also necessitated that I deviate from reporting the chapters in the order in which I read the

volume. (What? Not write about them as I read them?) However, as I reflected, this was also a pleasing shift in tradition. I also managed not to name every chapter as I referred to it, and even found opportunities to share Farmer's insights in a manner that melded with what I was trying to say, rather than any particular order.

Make no mistake, while I may seem to make light of this, my review was carefully and seriously undertaken. I have learned that serious can also include being playful, imaginative, poetic, artful, empathic, sceptical, wise—and, importantly, from within me. Farmer urges us all to dispossess ourselves of our traditional blinders and venture along new paths. It is a journey that I wish to recommend with the thoughtfulness, care, seriousness and dignity—as well as the playfulness, humanity, imagination and artistry—that it deserves. And so I now turn to some engaging extracts and ideas from the book.

Part I of the book—Thinking as Play—commences with a discussion about post-traditional thinking. Farmer explains that the consciousness that he is advising is constituted by play that privileges the human and is sensitive to context: “It is *the* escape route from the intellectual and performance doldrums of traditional governance” (Farmer, 2005, p. 1). He admonishes that “play at its highest level is poetic contemplation that begins in imagination and that focuses on constitutive patterns of imaginative possibilities” (Farmer, 2005, p. 3). He asks us—and this is a big ask, he knows this—to imagine that administration is not like a machine. Morgan (1986) warned us that metaphors and images can limit our thinking. Certainly, the image of organisations as machines is the single most pervasive and comprehensively swallowed. Farmer recognises this and asks us to consider, instead, an administration that is open, that is not dominated so completely by symbols of economy and efficiency, hierarchy, and the professional model—“imagine that we can kill the king!”, he says—and then imagine what possibilities abound when operating with a fresh consciousness, a playful contemplation, that is inspired, energised and wondering, without the anti-intellectual certainty that comes with traditional “knowledge” and traditional bureaucratic thinking.

Play can be ridiculed, Farmer warns. The rationalists will accuse play as a diversion that leads us to ignore day-to-day difficulties. However, he explains, like most who are discomfited with the new ideas of others, the ridicule of thinking as play disguises the fact that the ‘tinkering’ that generally attaches to approaches defining more traditional governance has a proven record of incompetence. Farmer reminds us that play should not be jettisoned because it does not relate to the rou-

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will accuse play ties. However, new ideas of at the 'tinker- ore traditional aer reminds is ate to the rou-

tine administrative tinkering that we are most familiar with. Indeed, this is the very reason why play should stand in the foreground.

The first section of the book also introduces the gadfly role, and its importance, in administration. The metaphor of gadfly describes the person who acts to goad or provoke others. Farmer tells us that this is the “in-your-face critic, persistent and irritating, stirring the pot” (2005, p. 21), citing Socrates’ efforts trying to best serve his city with his biting questioning. Farmer also underlines the importance of privileging the self over the system, reminding us of the Faustian bargain we make with the system when we trade our full and beautiful humanity for a narrow, bland vocation, without spirit or heart. Farmer also encourages us to write ourselves, to write with our individual signature, and to express our humanity and our lived experiences in an unbridled and unfettered way that is life-affirming and engaging (p. 47). Farmer also cautions us to “listen to the symbols and symbolic systems; abandon *exclusive* attention to things and systems of things! Thinking as playing should be sensitive to this critical feature of context” (p. 57).

Farmer also introduces us to the notion of *aporia* as “arguing from a received belief; a conclusion is reached that contradicts either experience or another received belief” (2005, p. 62). When one is in a state of *aporia*, one is, as Aristotle’s literal translation indicates, stumped, stymied, and “with no way out.” The concern here lies with the role of discourses in shaping specific ways of viewing our environment, which can be very limiting, acting as filters that arbitrarily exclude and marginalise. What-counts-as-true is shaped by language and power considerations, “by unthoughts, by self-interest, and by other factors like individual and group ignorance” (p. 66).

Instead, Farmer points to the role of the pyrrhonist, as one who withholds assent about whether any proposition really is true or false. The pyrrhonist has no system of beliefs, and suspends judgement about what is the case behind all phenomena, about what is objectively true or false, and about the truth of their own propositions. Farmer draws us to realise that every issue is, thus, indeterminate. The pyrrhonist is the ultimate critical thinker—skeptical about all statements, including value judgements. This, says Farmer, is the attitude for the thinker as player to adopt; the position where being at a loss, puzzled, stymied and stumped is embraced, rather than avoided.

Part II of the book explores the second question: Justice as Seeking. Farmer, with the help of passages from Hamlet, asks us to acknowledge our legacy for justice seeking. Justice wisdom must be sought in a sea of *aporia*—where we are “with no way out.” Our justice legacy, Farmer

reminds us, includes complexities and contraries, shaping both the substance and form of justice as seeking. We are reminded of the flawed nature of traditional ways of thinking about things; for instance, the view that whatever is believed by all about ethical behaviour must be ethical. However, Farmer reminds us to avoid canned solutions. "*Warning: Beware of off-the-shelf systems!*" (2005, p. 83). Farmer affirms, instead, that it is vital to recognise the indecisiveness that should accompany the seeking of justice. He reminds us that the long history of justice thinking is replete with conflicting claims. Each ethical system has its strengths and weaknesses; each is attended by supporting arguments and counterarguments; there is no winner. Philosophy should be studied, he chides, not for the answers it gives, but for the questions it raises:

Justice as seeking should include sympathetic reflection on the content of the justice systems that are within the literature on moral philosophy. It also should include reflection on ideas available in other traditions, for example, religious, political and psychological, and on insights available in arts like poetry and novels. (Farmer, 2005, p. 92)

Farmer also warms us to the idea of searching within ourselves (2005, p. 94), the searching for spirituality, or self-realisation. Farmer calls it poetry. The purpose of the searching within is to identify what should motivate one's whole being. Whatever one chooses to call it, the objective is to arouse in us a liminal experience: Farmer likes the idea of "gripping a person within her entrails, within the cockles of her heart" (p. 96). I like it too. Justice seeking, he assures us, is not only about the *what* of justice (the content of the justice claim); it is also about the *how* of justice (the way the claim is developed and made). This is what we must attend to.

Next unearthed is the notion of authentic hesitation, which Farmer depicts as standing against the arrogance of "I know best" and "my system is right" by persons in authority or bureaucratic positions of power. Authentic hesitation is not about denying one's own beliefs; it is about expressing empathy for the other; it is a pause, a hesitation, even a silence. It is listening with genuine openness to the other and relinquishing concerns for one's self. Authentic hesitation is motivated by moral principle, moral impulse or conscience. It is justice seeking administration.

Finally, Part II of the book challenges traditional wisdom, and traditional insights. The "Golden Rule Jingle" is introduced for our brain-teasing pleasure as a traditional justice insight that has (a) enjoyed

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widespread popularity throughout the world and much of history and (b) has been essentially dismissed by modern philosophers. It is, we are reminded, ancient and unusually widely acknowledged. It goes like this:

Do to others, as you would that they do to you (Farmer, 2005, p. 113).

The trouble is, we are warned, few have actually thought it through. You see:

the Golden Rule by itself will not encourage me to end my corrupt practices. It will encourage me to deal with the *other* no worse than I want to be dealt with myself. (p. 116)

Also, the Golden Rule contains nothing about duties to others, and nothing about duties to oneself. Then there is the problem of defining the other, and the I. Farmer queries: Is the other all humans? My friends? My tribe? My ethnic group? My economic class? My peers in the bureaucracy? My corporation? My nation? My gender? And, of course, there is the problem that the Golden Rule is not really a rule at all. Recognising that the Golden Rule is not a definitive and complete system for determining "what should be" leaves us with what is left: doing the justice seeking from within ourselves. And that is what Farmer wants us to contemplate, that the Golden Rule prompts us to realise that governance should not confine the ethical sphere to particular classes of people and that justice as seeking should go beyond the traditional limits of the customer, the client and the good citizen. It should extend to all humans. Farmer also talks about the centrality of the Silver Rule, and how it relates to questions of what it is to be human, how humans should live together and how leaders should act.

Part III of the book asks us to consider, what is post-traditional practice? For Farmer, post-traditional practice is art. Thus, the practitioner is the artist. The essays in the final section of the book speak to the constitutive features of post-traditional practice as symbolically killing the king:

Think of a radically different symbolization of governance! Kill the king, who manifests himself in a variety of faces. I repeat that Essay 14 writes about power-over, the majesty of the king in traditional government and especially in the public bureaucracy. Essay 15 is about the unexamined rhetoric of power-over, especially in the private sector. Essay 16 speaks of cruelty as a face of the king, being cruel to be kind. Essay 17 talks about the coldness of mere efficiency, not love, as the face of the king; Essay 18 points to the many-faced king as the figure of hierarchical democracy, as the political boss. (Farmer, 2005, p. 140)



The king that Farmer refers to is the king characterised in Thomas Hobbes' (1651) *Leviathan*. The citizens in Hobbes' treatise sought their wellbeing, not from themselves and their relationships with others, but from a political power above them—the Leviathan—the king. Farmer instructs us otherwise; rather than seeking an ideal from a powerful other, the ideal of each person should come from the primacy of themselves, and from including and accepting their differences. This requires different ways of thinking about ourselves and others, and recognising the role of language, discourse and rhetoric in fuelling our thoughts:

Executing the king, piece by piece, entails changing the language that is in the citizen's head. (Farmer, 2005, p. 184)

And that is exactly what Farmer is encouraging us—symbolically—to do. And here's why:

I expect a better world from a killing of the king. . . . The traditional way of looking at governance should be transcended. Terminated would be highly undesirable features, all socially constructed, like those described in these essays on practice as art. From that killing I expect a better quality of life for each individual whole human-in-herself in-her-difference. I expect the hand of bureaucracy to become lighter, especially as practitioner attention is broadened from immediate short-run concerns to include longer-run understandings like those discussed in this essay. . . . As a bureaucrat, I want to be more than a cog in the machine. (Farmer, 2005, p. 140)

I urge you to be swept away in Farmer's energetic, engaging, lively and entertaining concert of ideas about new ways of being, doing and thinking in PA. A revolution is being provoked. We are being urged to kill the king: to think of bureaucracies as things other than machines; to think of ethical debates without right answers, to look within ourselves to find our own poetry; to recognise our own artistry and humanity and bring them to our life and work; to grow our empathy and morality, not because we should but because we can. And we are asked to share this, unashamedly, with our own signature, stinging like the gadfly, and with the sensitivity, creativity and courage of the artist. And we are to do this as we deal with the human difficulties that inevitably surround governance and bureaucracy.

This is a beautiful book. Read it and be awakened.

REFERENCES

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