

## **Book Review**

Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction, by Edoardo Ongaro, 2017, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited: UK, 288 pp.

In the 1950s, ideas from two prominent figures in the field of public administration, Dwight Waldo's understanding on ethics as well as Herbert Simon's paradigm on facts in public administration were put side-by-side for academic discourses. The rise of neo-liberalism and market triumphalism had silenced Waldo's concern on ethics in public administration. This has made room for managerial schools to expand, emphasizing the importance of technical instruments and ready-made solutions by private companies.

However, after decades of administrative reforms, along with the rising consciousness on the importance of a broader interpretation of public administration, a space was set for the reemergence of Waldo's concern. Such concern on ethics is echoed in Edoardo Ongaro's book, *Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction*. The book was published in 2017 by Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

Employing Raadschelders' four ideal types on how philosophy is beneficial (practical wisdom, practical experience, scientific knowledge, and interpretative venture), Ongaro surveyed philosophies over the course of two and a half millennia to examine how public administration can benefit from them.

One might wonder why philosophy is needed in managing a public organization. Contemporary issues, among many revolving biotechnology and genetic engineering, such as transhumanism, artificial intelligence, GMOs, as well as others such as internet privacy and global warming marry ethical and philosophical debates. Such issues motivate Ongaro to invite experts in public administration to appreciate the significance of past thinkers, particularly on the way they deal with issues of their time.

The author asserts that a systematic employment of philosophical thought would yield fruits for deeper and suppler understanding of contemporary issues as well as research in the field of Public Administration. He details findings of his survey in two parts; chapter two and chapter three. The first part deals with pre-modern and modern philosophy, beginning from pre-Socratics, patristic, medieval, late-medieval, renaissance, early modern, empiricism, as well as enlightenment. The philosophical dimension of the book may not be easily understood by non-philosophical readers, unless those with at least a good summarily understanding of the field. The author goes on in the second part to discuss

modern and contemporary philosophy, beginning from Kant and Hegel's idealism, to Marx and Gramsci. Other streams were also surveyed, such as historicism, existentialism, as well as contemporary discussions on philosophy, such as on communitarianism and spiritualism.

Understanding Ongaro's findings from the survey would require a separate treatment of book review. However, suffice to say that the two parts stand as a backbone for Ongaro's discussion for chapters four, five and six in the book. The philosophy of knowledge (epistemology) and metaphysics (ontology) are two aspects of concepts commonly employed in any discussions on philosophy. The focus of chapter four were on the ontological and epistemological issues in regard to public administration.

Any discussion of Western philosophy should begin with the Greek, and consider the major differences between analytical philosophy and continental philosophy. It is in chapter 4 that American based philosophy (analytical) and European based (continental) philosophy were ontologically examined by Ongaro to highlight some aspects of logic in which public administration can benefit from. Following the discussion of Rakuchi, Ongaro asserts that in principle, knowledge can be derived from the senses and intellect. Epistemologically, intellect guides rationalism, and the senses guide human empiricism.

The point that Ongaro tried to make is that rather than taking sides and creating unnecessary wars against other logics, such as the disagreement between Kantian and relativism, it would be more appropriate for those in the public administration discipline to appreciate the strength of both ontological sources of knowledge. Similarly, rather than pointing fingers towards opposite approaches, such as between technical and ethical public administration, it would be more rewarding to get benefit from the two epistemological approaches towards rationalism and empiricism.

In Chapter five, Ongaro grapples with the question of how a public organization should be organized. It is an almost similar question that philosophers in the past grapple with; what makes the government legitimate? Ongaro stated contemporary works on public administration, such as the New Public Management (NPM) (Barzelay, 2001; Hood, 1991; Ferlie et al., 1996; Boston et al., 1996); the Public Governance approaches (Rhodes, 1997), the 'New Public Governance' (Osborne, 2010); the Neo-Weberian State (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004, 2011); Digital Era Governance (Dunleavy et al., 2006); Democratic Governance (March and Olsen, 1995); and others. He poses the question of how such works treat philosophy in their discussion, arguing that pressing contemporary issues require both ethical and philosophical ingredients.

To bring the focus on what public administration should philosophically do when faced with current issues, such as those involving biotechnological and genetic engineering as mentioned earlier, Ongaro provides a detailed

account of two streams of thought; the common good approach and the social contract tradition. The common good approach, such as the one pioneered by Plato asserts that the government should be concerned of public lives by guaranteeing eudaimonia (happiness). However, 18th century enlightenment philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham believes that acknowledging individual utility as the point of departure brings greater good and increase social utility. The government, or at least what Ongaro mentions the public organization should focus on the greater good by maximizing the utility of the majority. The social contract tradition, on the contrary, uses the hypothetical human state of nature as the point of departure, and asserts that the government or the public administrator should act in accordance to what has been consented by the people. After all, according to social contract theorists, man leaves their state of nature (pre-political life) as they realize that they can get benefit from the government in which they have given their consent towards. Ongaro further explains how contemporary philosophers, such as John Rawls provide justification for the government, which should not only guarantee liberty and equality, but equally important, focus on the wealth of the lowest group in the society. The problem with Ongaro's argument, which he himself is aware of, is that all of the works he quoted speak about justification for a political system or what makes the government legitimate. The current understanding of public administration, particularly among managerial schools, is that public organization should be understood as different from the political institution. Hence, different philosophical justifications are required. The debate on justification of government should be separated from the justification of public organization. If the latter argument is more acceptable, the works of many that Ongaro had quoted earlier should not be tainted with lack of ethical and philosophical ingredients.

In the next chapter, in his attempt to extract public administration lessons from the works of past thinkers, from the famous painting of *The Good Government* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli, to *Utopia* by Thomas Moore, Ongaro revisits the concepts of the role of (public) virtues, 'realism' in politics, as well as the 'inspiration' that Utopian thinking may propose. The question is, does the relevance of the 5-century-old image of the effects of public virtues as imagined by Lorenzetti in the frescoes of the City Hall of Siena make contemporary public servants ponder on the issue of good governance?

Similarly, how would the negative or gloomy aspect of human psychology painted by Machiavelli serve as ethical or moral principles for contemporary public administrators? Although Moore Utopian thinking might bring some guide for us to visualize the best public administration practice without being much influenced by the cultural baggage of the past or without the problem of path dependency mentioned by Ongaro, readers

would still question the rationale for the author to choose the three traditional thinkers, when there are many available works from contemporary philosophers.

Those who have been occupied with knowledge on technical public administration may recognize philosophy as part of an important ingredient of public administration. However, the following concerns should be discussed by Ongaro; how was it that past philosophers are able to respond to issues such as strategic planning, management accounting and control system, human resources management, total quality management, and the like? (This question was only discussed by Ongaro in passing).

Throughout the book, Ongaro used a deductive approach to get his idea across. The question above is empirical in its nature. Therefore, to get a larger audience, attempts should be made to explain philosophy inductively as well. This was only done in the last chapter by the author. It is in the last chapter on the four ideal types by Raadschelder (practical wisdom, practical experience, scientific knowledge, and interpretative venture) that the author discusses how political philosophy might impact public administration; both in teaching and for research purposes.

Interpretative venture, which welcomes relativism may allow different approaches on public administration globally, and might include non-Western philosophies such as Confucianism from China, Kautilya from India, as well as the Muslim tradition. On the other hand, the scientific knowledge, drawn from positivism and neo-positivism approach puts more weight on public administration when contemporary issues are presented, as it values facts and evidences.

The third type, practical experience appreciates experience in the public administration practice, especially those which had proved successful. This approach was drawn from the works of many 19th and 20th century experts in public administration, such as Weber, Gulick and Taylor. Lastly, practical wisdom which sees contribution of existing philosophies; both analytical and continental, arguably brings in a universal principle to public administration.

These philosophies were discussed throughout the book, directly or indirectly. This book is a timely work, and the content displays how the author attempts to bring back philosophy in the field of social sciences. Contemporary issues should alert those involved in public administration to consider practical and philosophical debates in the public administration field.

The question posed by Flyvbjerg in 2001 as quoted by Ongaro is relevant here; "Where are we going? Is it desirable to go there? What can we do to get there?" This book provides guidance on the desirability and what we can do.

The author's appointment as the President of EGPA (the European Group for Public Administration) might give him more space to put forward his philosophical assertion. However, readers should be clear that as mentioned in the book, what is important in making the public administration field useful and relevant is to appreciate the heterogeneity and multiplicity of approaches in dealing with the society.

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