

MEDITATING ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION:  
*"What Can I Know?"*  
CHANGING PERSPECTIVES, EXPLORING NEW PATHS\*

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*"Even the simplest of questions can have the power  
to open Pandora's box of existential dilemmas" (Glattfelder, 2019)*

As "meditation" and "meditating" come up so frequently and stir more and more interest in contemporary society, to the point of becoming almost a lifestyle for a growing number of persons, engaging into reflection upon one's main topic of research is of utmost importance. Besides being a high-value way of spending the time allocated to research, it may actually prove to be a useful and quite rewarding method of approaching the vast and intricate domain of public administration.

Trying to shed some more and different light on the same old question of: "What is public administration?" may seem redundant, but it is actually not, and this (rather) brief essay tries to prove why. Certainly, the first step taken was that of swiftly assessing the great variety of perspectives applied in the study of public administration, to be able to establish some categories and the most often used viewpoints. The attained result was the idea that, at least, one more line of inquiry may be explored further. Since "meditating" is used in this venture in the sense of "posing questions and finding answers" rather than reciting a mantra (!), the line of thought, alluded to earlier, may have already become evident: it is, of course, the perspective of philosophical thinking. This axis of research may bring, in our opinion and according to other contemporary scholars' point of view,

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important insights into the numerous aspects of public administration and its related administrative phenomena.

Long time ago, the majority, if not all, of the scientific branches have developed from one “mother” or “queen” of all sciences, not surprisingly considered (so frequently) to be... philosophy. In other words, “...the philosophical study of nature is the wellspring of science” (Glattfelder, 2019, p. 299). It is also accepted as fact, that the distinction between “scientist” and philosopher” will be made only (much) later, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Shuttleworth, 2009), and that the thinkers of Greek antiquity were, actually, both scientists and philosophers, fusing in their personalities the qualities of the sage and seeker of truth and those of the scholar solver of the problems of the universe. As a consequence, it has often been affirmed that the “genesis” of sciences must be placed within the two major philosophical streams of thought, Platonism and Aristotleitism. For instance, modern researchers highlight the role played by Aristotle in the evolution of science: “No one in the history of civilization has shaped our understanding of science and natural philosophy more than the great Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle...” (Grant, 2002, p. 33).

As for the modern scientific methodology, we can remark that it has been built progressively, upon layers and layers of philosophical currents of thinking, coming down from the Greek antiquity through eras such as Renaissance, Enlightenment, Victorian and 19<sup>th</sup> century Philosophy of Science, up to Einstein and other inquisitive minds of the 20<sup>st</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Equally remarkable are the ways in which various scientific perspectives and methods have been developed and combined to create what is known as scientific methodologies applied to explore and make sense of the complexity of the world around us and of what we know as reality. Public administration, with all its intricacies and paradoxes, is no exception and has been studied, in its turn, through various lenses, claiming and establishing for itself the undeniable right to be analysed from multiple perspectives and with the help of mixed methodologies. Hence, the existence of numerous lines of inquiry, such as political, economic, sociological, law, critical thinking, managerial, psychoanalytic, feminist, behavioural, ecological, and, certainly, philosophical. Our essay tries to bring the focus of attention upon the philosophical perspective, the first motivation being that contemporary public administration has to redefine itself and adjust to the new dynamics or mega-trends that are forcing it to profoundly transform and find new ways of responding to the current, unfamiliar issues.

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The idea of introducing philosophical inquiry into research and methodology that are specific to the domain of administrative phenomena is not new, but it is worth taking further, especially now as the current context requires the establishment of different ways of understanding and explaining public administration. Besides this necessity of adding or deepening certain perspectives, there is the claim made by contemporary scholars that various “key philosophical issues - ontological questions, political philosophical and epistemological - underlying and grounding any inquiry...” into major topics of public administration studies, “receive only scant attention, if any” (Ongaro, 2020, p.1).

We consider, that this stream of research can contribute to a more meaningful and comprehensive definition of public administration, whereas researchers may gain new insights into the ontological and philosophical foundations of public administration. Exploring the topic of public administration’s philosophical foundations may also bring the necessary unity to the great array of themes like public management, public governance, public affairs, public values, which are, often, analysed separately, and their interconnection is only very scarcely mentioned.

Philosophical concepts and methods are of great importance for the study of any scientific domain, and this principle holds valid in the case of public administration, too. Acknowledging the fact that there have been various attempts and efforts, in the form of books or articles, that take up the philosophical stance on public administration, we cannot but agree to Ongaro’s statement that there is still “important uncharted territory” and that a “whole bundle” of philosophical themes may be of utmost significance because they “are linked to the knowledge and understanding of public administration” (2020, p. 4).

Our brief incursion into the challenging map of research perspectives of public administration has only intended to captivate the attention of other colleagues and focusing it on the importance of starting or re-starting the study of one’s main subject of research looking through different lenses. Bringing into play more and under- or non-explored threads of inquiry, may bring unexpected success and rewards. It is also an invitation to take part into a journey of discovery and, “why not?”, of self-discovery.

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