CHAPTER 1

Connecting Philosophy and Public Administration: Rationale, Functions and Approaches

Abstract This chapter provides two reasons why philosophy and public administration (PA) ought to be connected more closely. The first perspective considers this connection as being constitutive and inherent: like every discipline and profession, PA is in search of its foundations, which only philosophical thinking can provide. The second perspective in connecting philosophy and PA stems from a concern for and preoccupation with the contemporary problems and multiple, interconnected and unceasing crises facing the world and society, and thence government and the public sector as a key part of society and of the possible solutions to contemporary problems. The chapter outlines the four approaches examined in this book for connecting philosophy and PA: (i) philosophy for PA; (ii) mapping backwards; (iii) aligning philosophy and PA; and (iv) philosophy of PA. The chapter then identifies the functions of philosophy applied to PA: enlightening; critical; gap filling; integrative; and normative. Finally, a research programme for connecting philosophy and PA is outlined.

Keywords Philosophy · Public administration · Functions of philosophy applied to public administration · Philosophy for public administration · Aligning philosophy and public administration · Philosophy of public administration

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Connecting Philosophy and Public Administration: Two Main Rationales

Why a book on connecting philosophy and public administration? We argue there are two main perspectives—supported by two distinct, albeit complementary, rationales—in connecting philosophy and philosophical thinking, on the one hand, and the field of public administration, public governance and public management (hereafter PA—more on definitions of both philosophy and PA below), on the other. The first perspective considers this connection as being constitutive and inherent: like every discipline and profession, PA is in search of its foundations, and philosophy's core preoccupation lies exactly in finding the roots and foundations of what we (human beings and the societies to which we give rise) are, what we should do, what we can know.

When seen through this lens, philosophy and PA should almost by definition be connected (since all fields of inquiry and academic disciplines should connect to philosophy) and the observation that in certain historical periods (like the one we are living in) such connection becomes tenuous gets to be seen as akin to some sort of temporary aberration, as a contingent situation brought about by some spurious, exogenous factors. Such factors may include the way in which academic groupings and career paths are organised in contemporary academia, which may have led to separating and distancing these two disciplines, which are generally grouped into different clusters—the cluster of the humanities for philosophy, a more miscellaneous clustering for PA, which may be located within political science or government departments, or in business schools, or in law schools. Other factors can reside in the pressures put by decision-makers in public sector organisations on the academia to find 'solutions that work', which are often considered as 'technical' in nature and hence afar from the core preoccupations of philosophy, hence driving the focus of the PA scholarly investigation away from philosophical interests. From this first perspective, the rationale for connecting philosophy and PA lies in remedying a contingent, temporary disconnect and reinstate a 'natural state of affairs' by providing a connection that should have always been there in the first place—connecting philosophy and PA can in this perspective be seen as 'operation back to normalcy'.

The second perspective in connecting philosophy and PA stems from a concern for and preoccupation with the contemporary problems and multiple, interconnected and unceasing crises facing the world and

society, and thence government and the public sector as a key part of society. In this perspective, PA as a field of study is seen as a discipline (in itself at times deemed to undergo an 'identity crisis', Ostrom, 2008; Rutgers, 1998) which operates in a world in crisis—in multiple, interconnected crises. Climate change, the information revolution and its disruptive consequences, the return of large scale war, the risk of pandemics, the long-term legacy of the 2008 financial crisis—amongst other processes—and the multiple ways in which such processes interact, give rise to a world in poly-crisis (Tooze, 2018); and the multiple crises may deteriorate due to bad political and policy responses that are too often given, bad responses which in turn may further exacerbate such crises and trigger vicious circles difficult to break (for example, amplified economic inequalities and reduced social cohesion can trigger consensus for populist forces, which then enter government and whose governing action in turn further amplifies inequalities and deplete social cohesion, thereby nourishing the consensus for populist forces and hence reinforcing their position in government, and so forth).

In this picture, government and the public sector can be part of the solution (thence countering by means of example the narratives of those who claim they are part of the problem), but in order to attain the goal of being part of the solution, governmental, policy and administrative action require to be guided by clarity on the assumptions that inform PA theory and practice; by a critical assessment of such assumptions which may lead to revise and improve them; by novel ideas, constructs and approaches that may fill gaps in the assumptions held; by the capacity to combine and integrate various forms of disciplinary knowledge into a broader understanding of the problems to be addressed; by evaluative and normative criteria which can provide justification for public action and provide the foundations for its legitimacy. That is, in order to be part of the solution to the problems of the poly-crisis the world is facing and be able to operate to transform such crises into opportunities, PA requires philosophy and philosophical thinking, in order to: shed light on its assumptions; critically assess its assumptions and, where required, revise them; provide novel ideas, concepts and constructs to fill gaps in such assumptions; integrate diverse and at times disconnected forms of knowledge into the broader PA theory and practice; and ground and justify prescriptive and normative arguments about how governmental and administrative action should unfold, and how the public sector ought to be organised. In this second perspective, connecting philosophy and PA

is a way to strengthen PA and enable it to be part of the solution to the problems of the contemporary world: it is a way of finding contemporary solutions to tackle contemporary problems and hence to transform crises into opportunities.

This book has the ambition to provide a framework for connecting philosophy (including eastern philosophy alongside western philosophy) and the field of PA in the pursuit of both rationales: the perennial one, as well as the contemporary one. A preceding book is much in the line of the first rationale: that book is explicitly a call to rediscover this perennial connection (Ongaro, 2020—the book is titled 'Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction', published by Elgar Publishing, and it is available open access; it has also been translated into Chinese, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, thereby witnessing a quite widespread interest and attention for an introductory work about the contribution philosophy can provide to the field of PA). The present book aims to provide a framework of analysis of the connections between philosophy and PA that can enable to pursue both rationales: the rediscovery of the perennial linkages between philosophy and PA, while also enabling to employ and deploy philosophy to tackle specifically the contemporary challenges.

The intellectual division of labour with my previous book is that Ongaro (2020) provides an introduction to the very rationale for connecting PA to areas of philosophy (ontology, political philosophy, epistemology); the 2020 book also provides a succinct overview of key streams of philosophy in relation to its application for PA (as scholarly books in philosophy may be written in ways that are not amenable to direct application to PA problems and themes) as well as an introduction to selected philosophers and philosophies whose thought may prove to be of special significance for certain topics in the field of PA; finally, the 2020 book discusses issues of researching and teaching philosophy in PA programmes (also examined in Ongaro, 2019 and 2022). In short: that book is about rediscovering the perennial and inherent, underlying reasons for connecting philosophy and PA; this present book shifts emphasis and focus. In terms of emphasis, this book is about applying philosophy to contemporary PA problems in order to stimulate the exploration of new ideas and perspectives in developing contemporary PA. Along the way, it also has the ambition to contribute its bit, however infinitely small, not just in fostering the field of PA but also in revitalising philosophy itself, because philosophy gets fresh nourishment when its ideas and notions get applied to contemporary societal

challenges and problems; in fact, as aptly noticed by the philosopher Luciano Floridi (2019, in 'Afterword—Rebooting Philosophy'), philosophy is always at risk of 'scholasticism', meaning philosophy talking about itself to itself in its own jargon, hence becoming unfruitful, incapable of bearing fruits for addressing contemporary problems; instead, the application of philosophy to contemporary problems—an important part of the solution to such contemporary problems requiring conceiving of PA to be part of the solution—can revitalise philosophy itself (indeed, philosophy has never meant to self-confine in the Ivory Tower: this rather is a drift of philosophy, and engagement with contemporary problems and issues can be immensely healthy for philosophy itself to counter any such drift). Finally as regards the differences in emphasis between the previous and the present book, the previous book provides a review of the philosophy literature (although inevitably just a drop in the ocean given the immensity of the field of philosophy)—at least western philosophy—and correspondingly the reader finds in that book classical references, mostly to the masterpieces of (excuse the pun) the masters of western philosophy; in this book, the reader will find chiefly contemporary literature and references, mostly twenty-first-century publications.

One commonality between this and the previous book is that the reader does not need to have been previously trained in philosophy to follow and appreciate the flow of the argument: we hope and think both the present book and the previous one are accessible to everyone, while keeping the highest standards of rigour in the argumentation being developed. Both books can guide the interested reader in engaging with philosophising about PA and appreciating the philosophical underpinnings of PA with increased awareness and knowledge. The reader who wants to turn such enhanced knowledge and sensitivity towards the topic of philosophy and PA into teaching applications may consider in particular the following works: an article entirely devoted to the teaching of philosophy in PA university programmes and published in one of the top journals for the teaching of PA (Ongaro, 2019); a chapter connecting researching and teaching of philosophy and PA (Ongaro, 2020, chapter 9) and a chapter on philosophy in PA published in a book entirely devoted to teaching public administration (Ongaro, 2022 in Bottom et al.). Further considerations on the significance of incorporating philosophy into PA teaching are discussed in a few paragraphs.

The other major difference between that previous book and this one is its very focus: while the 2020 book is mainly about philosophy *for* PA,

while hinting also to other possible directions of inquiry, this book works out in full a framework for connecting philosophy and PA along four main directions of inquiry:

- Philosophy *for* PA: this direction of inquiry in connecting philosophy and PA is based on mobilising philosophical thinking (one or more specific philosophies or philosophical notions) to enable revisiting key PA themes (this direction of inquiry is illustrated in detail in Chapter 2).
- *Mapping backwards*, from existing PA scholarly publications to their philosophical, often implicit, underpinnings: this direction of inquiry is centred on uncovering the underlying philosophical bases of the extant PA research (Chapter 3)
- *Aligning* Philosophy and PA: this direction of inquiry is centred on the ideational bases of PA doctrines, intended as elements of knowledge, both analytical and normative, pertaining to the configuration of the administrative system, and aims at exploring the philosophical underpinnings of doctrines of reform of the public sector, such as the New Public Management, the New Public Governance and Collaborative Governance; the Neo-Weberian State; and others (Chapter 4 is devoted to this topic).
- Philosophy *of* PA: this direction of inquiry is centred on working out a philosophy of PA, which can be seen in two ways: (i) as a 'section' of a broader philosophical system; (ii) as a dedicated branch of philosophy aimed at tackling the problems and issues in PA that are philosophical in nature, and cannot be (at least not entirely) addressed through social sciences methods of inquiry; the latter direction of inquiry is delineated in this book (Chapter 5, which also concludes the book).

This book outlines the profile of each of these four directions of inquiry by also benefiting of a growing literature on the topic. This present book contributes to the growing literature on the topic by proposing and developing a framework of analysis based on four main ways—which are called 'directions of inquiry'—in which it is possible to conceptualise the interconnections between philosophical thinking and PA. The framework that is being wrought out in this book is, to my knowledge, unique

in providing a comprehensive approach to analysing and making sense of the interconnections between philosophy and PA.

This book also outlines the 'functions' that philosophy applied to PA can perform, and it indicates how such functions can be performed along each of the four directions of inquiry (the functions of philosophy applied to PA are introduced at the outset of the next section, and further discussed in Chapter 2). In short, this book provides an analytical framework to map the approaches to connect philosophical inquiry and PA theory and practice, and it outlines and illustrates the functions that philosophy can perform when applied to PA. We deem that providing a broad and (in our view) comprehensive framework for connecting philosophy and PA, based on four dimensions of analysis, and outlining the functions that philosophy applied to PA can perform, along each of the four directions of inquiry, is the distinctive 'added value' of the present book.

For whom is this book written? The direct answer is that it can be relevant to a wide range of readers, scholars as well as reflective practitioners, who recognise the significance of philosophical issues and questions for their everyday concerns (be it researching and studying public administration, or the practice of it and the making of decisions in public settings). Indeed, this book makes the case and tries to provide a tool for philosophy to become part and parcel of higher education programmes in PA, undergraduate as well as postgraduate programmes (be them MPAs—Master of Public Administration or MPPs—Master of Public Policy—programmes, or specialisation tracks within an MBA—Master of Business Administration—or other postgraduate programmes—and of course in postgraduate research and PhD programmes). The argument here (using a very direct language to strengthen our case) is that we would 'betray' our students if we convey them the message that PA is a 'technical' and 'practical' field, at least without qualifying the meaning of 'technical' as well as 'practical': it is *not* technical (or to be precise 'not only' technical), as it combines techniques (which need to continue to be taught in PA programmes) with issues of values-laden decision-making problems and processes which can be appreciated only by taking also a philosophical standpoint; and it is not technical (not only) as it concerns human behaviour and decision-making whose roots are in human nature and freedom as well as culture and society, all dimensions which can be appreciated only by taking also a philosophical standpoint. And *exactly because* it is practical, PA does require of its teachers to make it explicit issues of values (normative in

nature), thence of public ethics and morality and axiology, and the underpinning political-philosophical premises of whatever is communicated to represent a pattern of 'good public administration', a notion which can only be underpinned by ideas of what it means 'living well together', hence on a conception of what is 'good' (and what is not) in life together as human beings—and the broader ontological alongside the epistemological (and linguistic) premises on which it relies. PA programmes which do not even mention the philosophical underpinnings of PA are at risk of conveying the wrong message that PA can skip engaging with philosophical issues; and students do intuitively realise this message to be wrong, and when they become public decision-makers they discover it for themselves painfully, because they miss having engaged with these issues in the 'protected environment' of a classroom, and would love to 'catch up' on these issues: which is why philosophy should become part and parcel of executive education programmes in PA too. The lack of engagement with philosophy in PA programmes is a gap in the extant teaching offer which could and should be filled.

This is getting recognised more and more: as an important example, we notice that the latest (at the time this book goes to press) Subject Benchmark Statement of the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education of the UK explicitly mentions 'Philosophy of PA' as one of the listed content subfields to be included in public policy and administration higher education programmes. And philosophy needs to become part and parcel also of PhD Programmes in PA and related fields: the teaching of PA in doctoral programmes has for example been experimented and rolled out at Penn State University (USA) at the time this book is being published, with an important uptake by doctoral students.

After having introduced in these initial pages the rationales for connecting PA and philosophy, we are now ready to address the key question of 'what can philosophy be used for?' and thence delineate the functions that philosophy applied to PA can perform.

The Functions of Philosophy Applied to the Field of Public Administration

Philosophy can be considered to perform certain key *functions* when applied to PA—one or more in a combined way depending on the PA problem or issues being considered. Such functions can be identified as follows (they are introduced here and further elaborated in Chapter 2):

an *enlightening* function, whereby philosophy sheds light on the guiding assumptions of PA; a *critical* function, whereby philosophy enables to revisit the guiding assumptions of PA, including by identifying possible gaps or outright contradictions in the assumptions that are held, at a given time, in the field of PA; a g*ap filling* function, as philosophical knowledge can provide constructs, concepts and frameworks to fill, at least partly, gaps in PA assumptions, notions and theories; an *integrative* function, whereby philosophy sheds light on the underlying assumptions and the so-called 'philosophical residue' that is present in any social (or other) science as applied to PA, thereby enabling or at least facilitating the integration of the multiple disciplinary perspectives that are employed to address PA problems and topics; and a *normative* function, since philosophy can provide the rationale for normative-prescriptive arguments about how the public sector ought to be organised or reorganised—the 'reforms' of the public sector.

This book provides a framework to consider and appreciate the functions that philosophy can perform when applied to PA, thereby also providing a conceptual map to apply philosophy to PA. Thus, in Chapter 2 are presented and discussed in more detail the functions of philosophy applied to PA briefly previewed here; it is shown how the thought of key philosophers and philosophical streams can be applied to address PA problems and issues, thereby illustrating how philosophy can perform one or more of the functions outlined. The discussion of the findings of a number of published articles in PA that employ and deploy a philosophical perspective as a core part of their argument is used in an illustrative way to highlight the actual performance of these functions in published scholarly works. For example, we notice the integrative as well as the gap filling function that the philosophy of critical realism can perform by enabling to conjoin four distinct conceptions of what 'public value' is about into one integrated framework; or the normative function performed by philosophy when an ancient idea (both in the East and in the West) about the random selection from the population of representatives for inclusion in public decision-making processes gets applied to the public administration problem of the selection and promotion of public servants, by means of creating 'deliberative mini-publics' that can perform a role in such processes and—the argument goes—enable to overcome some of the limitations of extant public management practices. Finally, the chapter expands on the possibility of combining a range of philosophies (not just one at a time) to be able to address PA problems, as well

as to, more ambitiously, match fields of philosophy with thematic areas of PA as ways of more closely interconnecting philosophy and PA.

The normative function of philosophy is especially relevant when considering the theme of what are 'good' reforms of the public sector and what it means that public services are 'better' managed after a reform of the configuration of the administrative system or the management of public services. The topic is addressed in *Chapter* 4 through the lens of the notion of 'administrative doctrines', defined as elements of knowledge with a prescriptive/normative thrust about how public administration ought to be organised. Specifically, the administrative doctrines of certain 'movements of reform' of the public sector like the New Public Management, New Public Governance, the Neo-Weberian State and the Guardian State are discussed in Chapter 4 by means of the systematic consideration of the ideational bases of such doctrines of reform, noticing that such ideational bases encompass ontological, epistemological, linguistic, ethical and political-philosophical perspectives. The chapter introduces the notion of 'ideational public governance configuration' to indicate the overall configuration of administrative doctrines and the ontological, epistemological, linguistic, ethical-moral and political-philosophical ideas which enable to conceptualise, understand, interpret and explain administrative doctrines. The notion of ideational public governance configuration is a conceptual tool to mobilise philosophical thinking for unpacking and elucidating the ideational bases of our understanding of public administration. The framework of analysis proposed in Chapter 4 may provide a further expansion and direction of development of an important, wide-ranging and expansive stream of works on public ethics (De Graaf et al., 2016; Heath, 2020; Huberts, 2014; Jorgensen & Rutgers, 2015), an area of inquiry which has been amply investigated in the PA literature—indeed perhaps it represents the only area of inquiry in the field of PA which has developed in close connection with philosophical thinking.

Prior to that, Chapter 3 discusses how to identify the philosophical premises of the extant PA scholarly works and literature, and it presents three approaches to detect and trace back the philosophical premises and underpinnings of such works: (i) by having the very authors of the public administration research to make it explicit the philosophical underpinnings of their work; (ii) by having an ex post interpretation performed by a scholar who reviews extant PA scholarly works with the aim to detect and unveil the underlying philosophical stances and premises of

such works; and (iii) by investigating via bibliometric analyses the extant publications in the field of public administration and how they are influenced by academic publications in the field of philosophy. We detect in the development of this direction of inquiry the performance of the critical as well as the enlightening function of philosophy applied to PA, also paving the way for the use of philosophy to identify gaps in the extant literature (gap filling function of philosophy) as well as potentially for performing the integrative function of philosophy applied to PA.

Finally, a (yet-to-be wrought out) philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century would mediate, enable and support the performance of all five the functions of philosophy applied to PA that we have identified. *Chapter* 5 outlines the contours and the features that a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century could and should (in our view) display.

Definitions of Philosophy and Public Administration Used in This Book

The very word 'philosophy' is a product of the genius of the ancient Greeks who established and grew to vertiginous heights the 'science of reason', giving rise to philosophy as the rational investigation of reality as such, the deployment of reason and the rational faculties of humanity for attaining the fullest possible comprehension of reality as such. The very Greek language word λόγοσ (read: 'logos') indicates both 'reason' and 'word', hence it is a pivotal term in Greek philosophy to denote the capacity to apprehend reality in and through language. To dwell a moment more on the language of the people who invented philosophy, the ancient Greek word from which the English term of philosophy derives is φιλοσοφία (read 'philosophía'), which can be translated as 'love for' or 'friendship to' knowledge understood as 'wisdom', thereby indicating the speculative and contemplative character of this so noble human venture as well as the personal involvement and engagement ('love for', 'friendship') and search for the betterment of human life (by seeking to attain 'wisdom') of those human beings who pursue philosophy (we will revisit, in a few paragraphs, the contemplative thrust of philosophy as a key feature of this enterprise which originated in the West when considering similarities and dissimilarities with the thrust which underpins perspectives to philosophy that can be found in the East).

As aptly noted by Kenny (2010), philosophy is about the big questions that humanity faces (it has always faced, and it will always face),

and philosophy can be characterised (and distinguished from any other 'science') by its very distinctive trait of not having a subject matter (while all sciences have a subject matter and are defined by it: physics studies the laws of movement, biology studies the living organisms, economics studies the problem of the use of scarce resources for addressing needs which can be prioritised, and so forth). What philosophy rather does have are key questions and themes, very aptly summed up by Kenny (2010) around the following ones:

- The question of Metaphysics, or Ontology, and God: 'What there is'
- The question of Soul and Mind (and Body), or Philosophical Anthropology: 'Who I am/ Who we are'
- The question of Ethics and Morality: 'How to live (well)'
- The question of Political Philosophy: 'How to live well together' ('together' meaning both within a political community—public governance—and amongst political communities across the world—global public governance)
- The question of Epistemology and Logic: 'How to know/What we know' (what is knowable, what we can and cannot know, and how we know).

While most professional philosophers will deal with specific sub-questions in their daily practice of the profession, these are key overarching questions that substantiate what philosophy is ultimately about. There are of course other questions which are also eminently philosophical, giving rise to yet other areas of philosophy (e.g. 'What is beauty?': the field of philosophy of beauty or Aesthetics, with its deep interconnections with all the other fields of philosophy): the five questions above provide a necessarily very succinct yet effective summary of key questions in philosophising, which translate into corresponding main fields of philosophy. There are also other related questions, or subtly different ways of formulating the above questions, with huge implications: e.g. the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, connecting to a long thread of philosophising, emphasised the formulation of the ontological question as: Why (is there) being rather than nothingness? And relatedly, why do I exist? Such questions complement—and are often part of the attempts to answer—the key questions delineated. It may also be noticed that Ethics/Morality and

Political Philosophy can also be referred to as 'Practical Philosophy' (a camp to which also Philosophy of Law can be ascribed, which is central to understanding the assumptions of law and legal studies in general and notably, for the field of interest in this book, administrative law), while the other branches of philosophy can be placed under the label of 'Theoretical Philosophy': while the core of our argument is that the entirety of philosophy can (and should) be applied to PA, Practical Philosophy may be the most directly applicable to the field of PA. Finally (in terms of classification of branches of philosophy), a more recent branch called 'social ontology', which can be distinguished from both 'pure' ontology and political philosophy (albeit deeply entwined with both), can find applications to PA (see Chapter 4 in this book for an application to the study of administrative reforms and their underpinning ideational bases, and Ongaro, 2020, Chapter 4 for an introduction to this branch of philosophy in view of its application to PA problems).

Importantly, all the 'modern' sciences, the individual disciplines that populate the academia have originated from philosophy and the act of philosophising and have only at a later stage detached from it, gained autonomy in terms of object of investigation and methods deployed to generate knowledge, and ultimately 'set up home' as a specific and distinct (from philosophy) discipline, all the while retaining their ultimate connection with the specific subfield of philosophy from which they derive (for example, economics derives from moral philosophy). This irreducible philosophical element present in every discipline is referred to as the 'philosophical residue'. The philosophical residue is present in any science, hence the social and other sciences that are applied to investigate PA problems and themes. The philosophical residue can be defined as the philosophical element that remains in any given field of scientific study as the irreducible questions that cannot be addressed within the confines of the specific discipline itself, with its defined object of inquiry and methods for the generation of knowledge; such questions cannot be entirely reduced to and being addressed by scientific categories of analysis. Since PA is an interdisciplinary applied field (it utilises multiple social sciences, often in combination), it requires to detect the philosophical residue not just of one but of all its constituent disciplines, as well as to understand how such philosophical issues inherent in the social sciences that are applied in the field of PA interact and combine with each other. By way of example, we may consider the critical investigation of the assumptions about the human motives (which

are philosophical in nature, hence part of the philosophical residue) that are purported to drive human beings as social agents when analysed along the lines of economic science applied to PA (like in the theorisation of the bureau-shaping model, see Dunleavy, 1991), on the one hand, and when considered from the perspective of law (public law, administrative law), on the other hand, as applied to PA problems and themes; economics-based models in PA may see human beings as driven by the pursuit of self-interest and utility maximisation, while law-based models in PA may evoke sense of duty and moral compass (or absence thereof); the findings of the two disciplines may differ because of the different assumptions and perspectives they employ. Such assumptions may be similar or dissimilar, may be made explicit or be hidden and go unnoticed: philosophical inquiry enables to detect and critically examine and possibly integrate the assumptions taken by different disciplines when they are applied to PA problems and themes, hence the findings of such disciplines to the given PA problem/topic can be applied in a combined way (integrative function of philosophy) for a more holistic understanding of the problem under investigation.

It can be argued that the further away a discipline is from defining its problems in an unproblematic way and standardising its concepts in an uncontroversial way—that is, the further it is from fully setting up home as a 'normal science'—and the closer it remains to philosophy as such. In this sense, given it is widely and almost unanimously claimed that such is the case for PA, that is, that it is very far from having its problems and concepts unproblematically and uncontroversially standardised (e.g. Raadschelders, 2005), then it can be claimed that the ties with philosophy are stronger in the case of PA than most other academic disciplines, and that the unresolved 'philosophical residue' gains even further prominence in the case of PA (Ongaro, 2020). Indeed, the inherent interdisciplinarity of PA (see below on the definition of PA) further distances it from monodisciplinary sciences (like physics or economics), since PA inherently compounds the philosophical residues of all its many constituent disciplines (that is, of all the disciplines that it applies to its subject matter: which is the functioning of government, the administrative system and public services), thereby being 'by nature' (so to speak) closer to philosophy than most other sciences. As a further consideration, it may be noticed that it is not just disciplines but more specific theories that may vary in the degree to which they have a philosophical residue, and for this reason, some PA theories are more amenable to 'philosophical treatment'

than others: they contain a deeper philosophical residue; a clear example is the theory of public value, which may be seen as more inherently philosophical than other theories employed in the field of PA.

Over the centuries, philosophy has worked out a range of concepts and notions, including that of substance (the essence of a thing or entity) and accidents (ways of being of a thing that depend on another being and are not related to the nature of the thing in itself), of entity and their relations (inter-entity relations and relations of whole and part), of causality (what determines something—indicated as the 'effect'—to happen), of human freedom and individual agency (the autonomous self and the nature of human liberty), and so forth—as well as having critically reviewed and revisited 'commonsensical' notions like those of time and space, or those of mind and body—noticing that of course all notions are only apparently 'commonsensical' when seen from a philosophical standpoint. (The reader interested in a primer of philosophical concepts specifically for application to PA may wish to look at the already mentioned introductory book that precedes this one, on philosophy and public administration, Ongaro, 2020.)

In an illustrative way and concerning a notion on which we return in a few paras for its implications in relation to comparing the contribution that can come from the application to PA of both eastern and western philosophies, we briefly pick and discuss the notion of causality. The ancient Greek Philosopher Aristotle identifies four types of causes: material, formal, efficient and final. The material cause refers to the material element of which a thing is made (for example, the marble of which a statue is made—the marble being a cause of the statue, since without it the statue could not come into being), and more subtly the material cause refers to potentiality, the potential of becoming something: in fact, Aristotle goes beyond the 'simple' notion of matter as 'that which has an extension, that which occupies a volume' (this is the definition of matter used by the philosopher René Descartes), rather referring to matter as potentiality, that which has the potential of becoming something. The formal cause refers to the essence or substance of a thing, what makes it be what it is: a statue is a statue—let us define it as 'a three-dimensional artwork'—irrespective of whether it is made of marble or bronze or wood or any other suitable material; the formal cause is the form, the 'what it is' of something. The efficient cause is what makes something happen, the 'force' which effects a certain change—in the case of the statue, the sculptor operating on the material with its tools (hammer and chisel).

The final cause is the goal or end or rationale: the reason why something is brought about—in the example of the statue, the final cause can be the pursuit of beauty and/or the celebration of a ruler and/or the satisfaction of the buyer of the artwork. It goes without saying, the notion of causality has been dissected by philosophers throughout the centuries that followed Aristotle and it has been refined and extended in manifold directions, including for use in the social sciences; however, it can arguably be stated that the notion of the four causes as wrought out by Aristotle remains a key entry point to the notion of causality in philosophy.

So far so good as concerns the delineation of 'western' philosophy—in the example, the philosophical treatment of the notion of causality—for application to PA problems. Let me make an appeal to the patience of the reader to put this notion aside for a moment (we come back to it in a few paras) to now turn our attention to a challenge that comes from the East. With an oversimplification (adopted here only as starting point to introduce the issue), we can claim that eastern philosophies are different from western philosophies in a number of respects. To start with—and very important—eastern philosophies are more intimately interconnected with religion, religiosity and mysticism than is the case of philosophy in the West, where philosophy has established itself as an autonomous field of investigation driven by the use of reason and rational thinking, a domain of inquiry fully distinct from both theology and religious studies as well as from spirituality and mysticism (conceived of as the direct experience of the divine, of the connection of the human to the totality of reality attained in experiential terms). In the East, conversely, philosophy has arisen closely entwined with religion and mysticism. It can be claimed that philosophy in the East (to the extent the very term of philosophy can be utilised in this tradition of thinking) is more about giving verbal expression and form to the direct experience of the interconnectedness of the individual with reality, than about enabling the autonomous apprehension of reality by means of the force of pure reason in and by itself (again alerting the reader we deploy here an oversimplification in order to capture the key point of differentiation between eastern and western philosophy—while recognising the immense variety of conceptions of philosophy and the huge differences that can be found across what we have here lumped together as 'the East' and 'the West'). Such 'verbal expression' of the experience of interconnectedness may be wrapped in mythological language, like in the Upanishads in Hinduism (this itself being a western term coined in the nineteenth century by Sir

Monier Monier-Williams, expert of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford: an indigenous term to indicate Hinduism is *Sanatana Dharma*, which can roughly be translated as 'the eternal law'), or it can be manifested in the form of teachings for meditation—*sutras* and *mantras*. Indeed in eastern religions, and perhaps most notably in Buddhism, it is meditation which is key for the individual to attain salvation (more precisely: liberation from the cycle of re-birth or *samsara*), rather than philosophical inquiry, which may even be deemed to be an impediment on the way to liberation, as philosophical inquiry entangles the mind in quizzes and doubts which forbid to 'let go' and distract from the pursuit of mindfulness and the attainment of deep meditation (see, e.g., the interpretation of Zen Buddhism, a strand of Mahayana Buddhism which originated in China and spread to Korea and Japan and in the latter it is known as Zen Buddhism, as 'anti-philosophy', where philosophy is here intended as 'western' philosophy, see Nagatomo, 2025).

This conception of philosophy (or at least emphasis in what philosophy is concerned with) that comes from eastern thinking brings about a challenge about the very role and function of the intellect and reason (let us remind the reader here of the definition of philosophy in the West as the 'science of reason'). If in western philosophy intellect is the 'power' of the human soul that enables to attain the apprehension of reality (intellect, volition and memory are often referred to as the three key faculties or capacities of the human soul), its function may be very different in an eastern perspective, in which the role of the intellect lies rather in 'clearing the way' for enabling the direct experience of reality, in supporting a preparatory phase of casting away prejudices and errors before connection with reality can be attained, through other paths. It has aptly been noticed that philosophy in the East can be more appropriately conceived of as 'way', rather than as a body of knowledge and understanding. For example, in the interpretation of a key trait of Japanese philosophy, Kasulis (2025) notices that philosophy in the Japanese tradition is seen as an enterprise that transforms both the knower and the known through a body-mind theory-praxis, in a conception of philosophy which can be contrasted with—if not outright opposed to—the (western) idea of philosophy as a field of scholarly inquiry, to philosophy as *Wissenschaft*, where the German term of Wissenschaft points to a domain of inquiry, an area of scholarship, research and (academic) education, especially in the sense of detached knowing, 'theoretical' knowledge (the ancient Greek word for θεωρία—read 'theoria'—evokes a contemplative and speculative

thrust). A Japanese (more broadly: eastern) conception of philosophy as 'way', as process in which the knower is intimately involved (through a body-mind theory-praxis), might rather be closer to the ancient Greek etymology of philosophy as 'loving wisdom', as an engaged effort to attain wisdom, although Greek philosophy also always emphasises theorising as speculation and contemplation with an element of detachment from the object being contemplated.

Can these conceptions of philosophy—eastern and western—be reconciled? This is arduous question, and one to be asked more properly of professional philosophers. What we can state here is that in our examination of the functions that philosophy applied to PA can perform (the enlightening function, the critical function, the integrative function, the gap filling function, and the normative function, previewed in the previous section and further wrought out in Chapter 2 and throughout the rest of this book), we try our best to refer to, accommodate and incorporate all these emphases and insights—eastern and western—into what philosophy is about.

There is another challenge coming from the East, more strictly metaphysical in nature (or perhaps more precisely: 'anti-metaphysical'). It relates to the key notion of dependent origination (a core concept in Buddhism—though not shared by other eastern religions and related philosophies), the notion of the interdependence and impermanence of all things, and its implications. This notion refers to the dependence of all things—whether physical or mental—on other things, including dependence of the knowing subject on all the rest, hence from this eastern perspective the knowing subject cannot be a principal autonomous entity or process, like in western philosophy is the Cartesian 'I think' which lies at the beginning of knowing for the philosopher René Descartes, or the principle of identity as 'I = I' whereby the thinking 'I think' poses itself and by posing itself it also poses the 'non-I' as claimed by the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and hence—in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's interpretation—the principle of identity which starts from the 'I' is the—dialectical—foundation of the entirety of reality. Conversely, the notion of dependent origination elicits major questions about the very existence of the subject as a discreet, independently existing, autonomous agent, and hence of its social agency too (and thence, as concerns the object of investigation of this book, of the social agency of public servants and of citizens-users of public services alike). Even the use and conception of language is seen differently in an eastern perspective: rather than

words possessing a capacity to refer to already existing things (enabling to interpret and give meaning to them through the relationship of the signifier—the written or pronounced word—and the signified—the thing or entity to which the word refers), as it is generally assumed in a western conception, from an eastern standpoint of reality as a field of interdependent events in continuous flux, language rather arises from engagement with the field itself, and the words, reality and the speaker express the moment together as part of the flux, and the truth of words arises from their ability to confer with, rather than refer to, reality (Kasulis, 2025, sect. 5.4). We reiterate that we are here proceeding by oversimplifications to highlight points of possible contrast between perspectives and standpoints of eastern and western philosophies, and it is important to restate that major differentiations and qualifications should be introduced within each cluster (including by noticing that the notions of dependent origination and impermanence are especially pertinent in the perspective of Buddhism and, in certain regards and within a different framework, Taoism—but not necessarily so within the frame of other eastern philosophies like, e.g. Confucianism); the point here for the purposes of this book is that such philosophical conceptions pose formidable challenges to philosophy when seen from a western perspective.

How can these perspectives (eastern and western) be reconciled? We formulate here one premise and two lines of argumentation about how to overcome this potential incompatibility (whether apparent or real). The premise is that the challenge is at the metaphysical level, the one more directly concerning philosophical preoccupations and hence of pertinence of this book. It does not pertain, however, to the level of religiosity as such: a systematic review of the scholarly literature in both the social sciences (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023a, 2024b) and the religious studies and theology literatures (Tantardini & Ongaro, 2025) has shown how religion as both a personality system and an ideational basis, and mediated by the nature of the religious regime, does affect PA (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2023) along at least eighteen thematic areas (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2024a) and, although the (English language) literature that has been reviewed contains a lesser number of articles about eastern religions than about Christianity or Islam, there are examples of published works which illustrate how eastern religions affect different aspects of PA: from the behaviour of public managers (Dwivedi, 1990) to the level of Public service Motivation (Yung, 2014), from infusing the values of public sector organisations (Parboteeah et al., 2009) to the influence of faith leaders on

local public governance (Chapman & Lowndes, 2014), from providing legitimacy to public governance (Rots, 2016) to shaping conceptions of Public Value (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2024c).

To tackle the metaphysical challenge, we propose two lines of argumentation. The first one lies in drawing a distinction between the experience of unity with the flow of becoming and the overcoming of any duality, a state that can be attained through paths like deep state of meditation (a 'state' which, for example, in Zen Buddhism is designated as non-discriminatory wisdom, a state in which the Zen practitioner can trans-descend and which transcends the perceptual reality we experience in everyday life, and which poses challenges for western philosophical notions of being, self, time and space—amongst others), on the one hand, and the everyday life, on the other hand, where 'normal' sensorial experience and normal science continue to apply. Since every encounter of citizens with public administration and public services occurs in the everyday life, it could be argued that the metaphysical challenge of conceiving of reality as a field of interdependent events in continuous flux is indeed a challenge at the ontological level, but not something the scholar and the practitioner of PA should concern themselves about. This point is effectively illustrated in the profiling of the Zen person discussed in Nagatomo (2025, sect. 8.1) in which, in the commentary to a passage of the Zen dialogue between Zen Master Ungen and a fellow practitioner, when Ungen is making a cup of tea, the dialogue runs as follows:—Practitioner: "To whom are you going to serve the tea you are preparing?"—Ungen: "There is the person who wants it"—Practitioner: "Can't the person who wants it make the tea himself?"—Ungen: "Fortunately, I am here to do it for him". In this dialogue, 'person' designates a Zen person who has attained non-discriminatory wisdom, while 'you' designates those who remain in the everyday world. The former is a 'trans-individual' while the latter is an 'individual': the former cannot 'make the tea himself' because he or she is not incarnate like the individual who remains in the everyday world, who continues to live in the perceptual world according to everyday commonsensical patterns of behaviour (like being able to use what nowadays would be a kettle to make a tea). The Zen master avails him or herself of both of these perspectives—she or he is extraordinary in having attained wisdom, while at the same time being quite ordinary in appearance and availing her/himself of the everyday perspective when required: to make a tea or, in the case of more direct

pertinence for the subject of this book, to make, co-produce or use a public service.

The second line of argumentation to tackle the metaphysical challenge undertakes another path, arduous yet potentially fruitful. An integrative path can in fact be envisaged, one which engages with philosophical concepts and perspectives both eastern and western and pursues the path of integrating such notions into broader frameworks—at least within the much more modest remit of the application of these concepts to the field of PA which is the humble preoccupation of this book, leaving aside, to the extent this is possible, addressing the broader and more fundamental underlying philosophical issues—questions that have occupied the brightest minds for millennia.

How can, then, be reconciled the perspective typically adopted by philosophies and philosophers where Buddhism has historically been more influential, e.g. Japanese Philosophers who view reality as field—viewing reality in terms of a complex, organic system of interdependent processes, a system that includes themselves as knowers (Kasulis, 2025, sect. 5.2)—with views of reality centred on notions like the autonomous existence of entities (their substance and attributes) and of the self-conscious soul (the thinking subject) and the explanation of change (or the absence thereof) at the physical, social, psychological and metaphysical level through notions like Aristotle's four causes (the already introduced western notion to which we can now return)? Since we are examining these arduous philosophical problems in relation specifically to the application of philosophical concepts to PA, we can afford to discuss such issues in relation to specific PA problems rather than in abstract and purely philosophical terms.

One of these PA problems concerns how to conceptualise the notion of 'context'—usually referring to the societal, cultural, political and administrative context—and the ways in which it affects continuity and change of public administrative systems and public services and their reform—a major strand of research and inquiry in the field of PA (Pollitt, 2013; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The notion of context is fraught with philosophical implications, thereby making it a topic of interest for analysis from a philosophical standpoint (Ongaro, 2026). What kind of causality applies when studying contextual influences? One useful notion is that of multiple conjunctural causation, in which 'outcomes are analyzed in terms of intersections of conditions, and it is usually assumed that any of several combinations of conditions might produce a certain outcome'

(Ragin, 1987, p. x and chapter 2). It is centred on multiple intersecting conditions linking features of context and process to certain outcomes and in which different conditions combine in different and sometimes contradictory ways to produce the same or similar outcomes. While still firmly within a western philosophy-derived notion of causation, because it distinguishes between causes and effects rather than assuming interdependence of all things with all other things, the notion of multiple conjunctural causation may possibly represent a tentative bridge with the notion of universal interconnectedness, at least for the practical and limited purpose of application to analyses of a PA problem like the question of how a notion like context can be dealt with to understand its influence on the functioning of administrative systems. In fact, the notion of context by its very transparent etymology suggests the image of a tissue (Rugge, 2013, pp. 44–45—the Latin *contextere*, from which the English word 'context' is derived, in fact means 'to weave together'), of something which is woven (interconnected) into something which is (indefinitely) broader. Indeed, the notion of context is intriguing in terms of exploring bridges between notions in western philosophy and concepts from eastern philosophies for a range of reasons. In fact, context 'denotes an object of an undetermined extension' as 'there is always a broader context' (Rugge, 2013, p. 44): contextual influences are amenable to being studied through a range of conceptualisations of causation grounded in western philosophy: the Aristotelian four causes, multiple conjunctural causation, probabilistic causation (Ongaro, 2013, pp. 198–201), primary and secondary causes—and yet the very notion of context denoting an undetermined (indefinite?) extension evokes interconnectedness and interdependence of things on other things. It may also evoke a holographic paradigm of analysis, typical of eastern thinking whereby the whole (holo-) is considered to be inscribed (-graph) in each of its parts (Kasulis, 2025, sect. 2.2), a paradigm which is not alien to western thinking (consider Neoplatonism whereby each unit, and notably each person, is considered to be a micro-cosmos and to reflect the entirety of reality within itself): analysing phenomena in context is an approach to detecting the connections between a unit (the focused object of analysis), that is, what is determined in its extension, and the undetermined extension of which it is part and that it reflects. Moreover and relatedly, the notion of 'context denotes one object, but in fact evokes two of them [t]here is no context without a "contexted", an object that is or has to be

put into a context' (Rugge, 2013, p. 44), thereby suggesting a relational view of reality, evoking if not outright pointing to reality as a field.

Combining these elements of reflection, there appears to be an opening to envisage a path(way)—at least within the frame of the confined application of philosophy to a delimited set of concerns like those in and of PA—towards fruitfully combining western and eastern philosophical notions to study PA (Ongaro, 2021), towards a truly global appreciation of the application of philosophy to PA. The end result of such effort can have global reach, as it encompasses and is open to the wider range of philosophical perspectives and pursues a critical analysis to integrate them, without being globalist, that is, it does not reduce or subsume different perspectives into one viewpoint—rather it strives to attain a higher-level integration of the contribution that each perspective can provide, achieved not in a syncretistic mode but through critical inquiry in the Kantian sense, through an approach that strives to attain synthesis wherever possible while also contemplating the possibility of rejecting options which are deemed contradictory or unacceptable on logical-ontological ground. This way, a range of conceptualisations of causation grounded in western philosophy—the four causes, multiple conjunctural causation, probabilistic causation, primary and secondary causes—can be combined with paradigms grounded in eastern philosophy—interconnectedness and interdependence,[1] holographic relations—in view of a broader and more

[1] The notion of interconnectedness is central also in different perspectives to those associated with Buddhism and certain eastern religions and philosophical systems. In the East, it is central in Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma), albeit in Hinduism the existence of the autonomous self (soul or *atman*) is a central tenet, and all that exists has its self (atman), and all souls are interconnected and ultimately a manifestation of the absolute principle, *Brahman*. In the West, interconnectedness is central to Christianity, notably in Catholicism in the key notion of the Communion of Saints—the communion in Christ of all people and of all things who belong to God, who are all interconnected in and through Christ (the Second Person of the Holy Trinity), who is the Vine to whom all those who belong to Christ partake as its shoots, while maintaining one's own autonomous self (in full unity of soul and body, hence in full psychosomatic or body-mind unity—this happening according to the Christian faith as the end of times when the *parusía*—the return of Christ on earth / in this world—will occur and will bring about the resurrection of the body of all human beings: this is marvellously visualised in the most famous painting by Michelangelo Buonarroti in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican); this consideration provides an important bridge with the notion of body-mind theory-praxis that we have seen in relation to eastern philosophies, and it is also a powerful reminder that the perspective of mind-body unity has been amply considered also in western philosophy, whose richness cannot be simplistically reconducted to the divarication of Cartesian ascendence of mind

encompassing potential synthesis. A path of inquiry for the application of philosophy to PA characterised by an integrative thrust is therefore envisaged in this book in which we aim to dissect the connecting points between philosophy and PA and the functions of philosophy for PA in an encompassing way (as encompassing as possible) by relying on both western and eastern thinking, with all their huge richness of thought and understanding and internal variety (in the same line of analysis is situated the collective work published in the special issue guest edited by Ho and Ongaro, 2025, titled 'Eastern and Western Philosophies: Rethinking the Foundations of Public Administration'; for an argument about the benefits of integrating eastern and western philosophical perspectives for application to PA, see specifically the editorial introduction, Ongaro & Ho, 2025).

We can now turn to the definition of PA that we use in this book. We use the acronym PA to encompass three notions: public administration, public management and public governance. We deem the framework wrought out in this book for connecting philosophy and PA to apply to all three the notions (an argument originally developed in Ongaro, 2020, chapter 1, pp. 9–18 in particular, from which we draw in this section), which are then placed collectively under the umbrella of PA (we indicate in the text whenever we are singling out one or the other, if and when a certain aspect of the connection with philosophy pertains more specifically to it). Starting from the notion of public administration, there seems to be wide consensus amongst scholars in the field that it can be defined as

and body, of the separation if not outright opposition of *res cogitans* (literally: the 'thinking thing') and *res extensa* (literally, the 'extended thing', the thing which occupies space). This conception provides room for interpreting the notion of the autonomous self, that is, of individual or personal freedom, as relational freedom, that is, a freedom that acquires its full meaning in the encounter and relation with the freedom of fellow human beings as well as the liberty of God, who in the perspective of the Christian faith (and the Abrahamic faiths more broadly) engages into a covenant with humanity in which God, in a sense, fulfils his liberty by freely choosing to bind Himself to humanity thereby living a relational form of freedom, one which chooses to constrain itself for love of the others, of all creatures.

In relation to the key topic for this book of the interconnection of faith, religion and philosophy, we notice that the Christian faith and the Greek philosophy combined in the Patristic philosophy to complement each other (a key element for conjoining faith and Greek philosophical reason is in the Gospel according to John in which Christ is referred to as the *Logos*). While philosophy established itself in the West as an autonomous field of inquiry relying on the power of reason, it also profoundly intertwines with religion and faith, in a mutual nourishment.

a subject matter, defined by its subject (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Ferlie et al., 2005; Ongaro & van Thiel, 2018; Perry & Christensen, 2015; Pollitt, 2016; Raadschelders, 2005) rather than being defined by its focus on one category or dimension of natural or social phenomena or by its methods (which are borrowed from other disciplines and often combined, as public administration displays an inherent openness to methodological pluralism). A subject matter is defined by the terrain it covers, all the while remaining a discipline in the sense of Wissenschaft, a field of scholarly inquiry, study, education (and in this sense being an academic discipline in its own right).

In distinguishing between public administration and the second notion that we place under the umbrella of PA, that is, the notion of public management, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) notice that one way of qualifying the notion of public administration is by emphasising its concern with the processes of preparation, promulgation/enactment and enforcement of the law, also in view of the consideration that a distinctive trait since Weber's theorisation lies in conceiving of public administration as operating under conditions of legal domination, whereby the law is the legitimate source of power in the 'modern' world, rather than charisma or tradition (Rosser, 2018); to differentiate from the notion of public administration, Pollitt and Bouckaert observe that the notion of 'public management' has a different emphasis: rather than on the role of law, public management is defined by its focus on the relationship between resources consumed and results produced by public organisations public administration and public management are in this respect different mappings of the same terrain (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Finally, the notion of public governance, which we also include under the label of PA throughout this book, is used to refer to the broader processes of steering of society by public institutions and engaging non-governmental actors into public policy, to distinguish from the stricter focus on governmental authoritative decisions and administrative processes that are captured by the label of public administration (Pierre & Peters, 2000) the notion of governance also refers to the broader formal and informal rules, conventions, practices and beliefs in place in a given political regime.

So far, we have addressed the question of defining PA from the lens of PA as a science, in the sense of field of scholarly inquiry, study and education. PA is also, on an equal footing and in an equally constitutive way, a profession (Frederickson, 1980): PA is being practised by millions of people across the public administrative systems and public services all

over the world; in this perspective the aim of PA would then be optimising public administration in the widest sense, that is, making the state and all public institutions work as legitimately, fairly, effectively and efficiently as possible (Bauer, 2018).

Next, PA can be seen as an 'art' (Lynn, 2006)—and indeed the arts (the fine arts) should not be seen only as metaphor but as a proper source for understanding the nature of PA (Bouckaert, 2025; De Graaf & van Asperen, 2025; Drechsler, 2025; Ongaro, 2025).

Finally, PA has been defined as 'humanism', specifically as a form of practical humanism (Ongaro, 2020, chapter 1). Biancu and Ongaro (2025) specifically interrogate in what sense it is possible to speak of humanism of and for PA, and they revisit defining issues about the notion of humanism: as a historical and historiographic term, as a synthesising cultural category, and as an axiological term. They then reflect on how humanism intended as a mythical and axiological reference can provide a horizon of sense within which PA can be studied and practised, and they notice how the notion of humanism can operate as a synthesising and generative category at the core of a constellation of notions—like human dignity and human rights—which require being continuously renegotiated while remaining universally shared by humankind and in need of being continually upheld. They conclude that such conception substantiates a notion of public administration as practical humanism. We may further notice this conception is very much in line with Waldo's conception of the nature of the discipline of public administration (1948/1984), a conception which has recently been revisited by Overeem (2025) highlighting the inherently philosophical, specifically Socratic, stance of Waldo, thereby proposing a reading of Waldo's approach and stance to PA as inherently philosophical.[2]

In a published work unfolding in the form of a dialogue by the author of this book and a then high-level official of the European Commission (Dewandre & Ongaro, 2022/2024), the case for bringing PA back

[2] Notably drawn from political philosophy and political theory; we may further observe that we could also use the expression 'public affairs' here, noticing however that public affairs (i) is broader than the specific focus on the triad of public administration, public management and public governance which is the focus of this book, and (ii) that public affairs encompasses political philosophy too, so the notion of public affairs encompasses both the fields of knowledge that this book aims to connect: it refers to both 'PA' and 'Philosophy', while at the same time also denoting other areas of scholarly inquiry and practice that fall beyond the scope of this book.

to its humanistic roots has been made in strong terms by recalling the always valid admonitions that Hannah Arendt (1951/1958) issued to the contemporary rulers of her time when she referred to the death of Socrates as the death of wisdom in both public governance and society at large: from this consideration stems her call to rediscover philosophical wisdom alongside and in a sense over technical expertise as the only way forward for a better and more humane society and public governance. Her call resonates as part and parcel of the rationale for both this book and the one that precedes it (Ongaro, 2020), whose overarching thrust is to (re-)introduce philosophical knowledge into the study of PA in a more systematic way, and with it re-bring philosophical wisdom (the wisdom that derives from philosophical knowledge and understanding) into public governance.

Philosophy and PA: A Developing Research Agenda and Scholarly Programme

We conclude this chapter by wrapping up on the framework proposed in this book about how to connect philosophy and PA along four directions of inquiry and revisiting key issues encountered when attempting to more systematically connect Philosophy and PA. In this final section, we at first consider the issue of the responsibility (in the spirit of the Philosopher Paul Ricoeur's ethics of responsibility) of those scholars and whoever is pursuing such endeavour, to then discuss the conditions under which the endeavour of more systematically interconnecting philosophy and PA may be pursued along all four the directions of inquiry outlined throughout the volume, and delineate the contours of a research agenda which may hopefully become a shared and collegially owned scholarly programme of investigation longer-term.

To introduce the issue of responsibility in undertaking the academic enterprise of connecting philosophy and PA, I would like to recall a question that was asked when presenting at a research workshop the initial contours of what later would become this book: 'Why open the gate and flooding PA, a practical discipline with its feet on solid 'technical' ground, with the quagmires of philosophy?' The implication of the question: 'Isn't it dangerous to bring into PA the philosophical never-ending querying, with its entailed risk of entangling PA into the morass of philosophical quizzing and doubting, its inherent risk of 'scholasticism', and ultimately the danger of getting PA to be shackled and bogged down, paralysed

in the quagmire of philosophical questioning and not able anymore to advance through accumulation of (empirical) knowledge and the elaboration of solid, strictly social scientific, verifiable claims?' (I am indebted to Sungmoon Kim for eliciting my reflections on this point and to Alfred T. Ho and City University of Hong Kong for hosting the workshop during which this discussion unfolded.)

The question, and the challenge it entails, is serious. Indeed, any intellectual enterprise mobilising philosophical thinking should never be done light-heartedly—quite the opposite, it is something that should be done responsibly, with the humility, restraint and awareness of one's own limitation, as well as the kindness and gentleness, displayed by the Philosopher Paul Ricoeur and his approach rooted in an ethos of responsibility. Moral judgement can be attributed to the human self, and we can be morally judged and hence held responsible for our own actions—including the intellectual action of scholarly writing and teaching—actions which should be assessed not only on the bases of the conviction with which they are undertaken and whether they are inherently 'appropriate', but also by the consequences they can engender (hence an ethics of responsibility). It would therefore be remiss to be naïve or dismissive about this 'risk area'.

In order to seriously engage with this important concern, three interconnected claims can be put forward for why bringing back the connections of PA with the field of philosophy is a worthy enterprise, also from an ethics of responsibility viewpoint—leaving it to the readers to judge the value of these claims. The first claim is grounded on a (very unphilosophical) matter-of-fact constatation: that contemporary PA has become so a-philosophical, that it has gone so far down the road of overlooking or outright ignoring and disregarding philosophical thinking altogether, that it may well be the moment of compensating for it, of offsetting at least to some extent this drift. Banal as the formulation of this argument may be, the point here is that—like in medicine—it is also a matter of dose: were contemporary PA completely absorbed by philosophical preoccupations, and the scholarly works in the field of PA entirely concerned with philosophical questioning to the detriment of the contribution that other disciplinary perspectives can bring to the field, it would probably not be responsible to issue a call for connecting further philosophy and PA. However, such is not the case: the field of PA is strongly rooted in the social sciences, and rightly so. Indeed, most of the calls in PA over the past decades and since at least the aftermaths of World War

II have been about strengthening the contribution to PA as an interdisciplinary field of one or the other social science that was considered to have been overlooked in the preceding period: so, over time, movements of opinion have emphasised the contribution of management (over the alleged previous dominance of law in the field of PA), the contribution of political science (over the alleged risks of managerialism in PA, notably at the zenith of the New Public Management), of social psychology and the experimental research methods coalescing around the label of behavioural public administration (over the limitations of all the previously emphasised disciplines), and so forth. However, none of these calls has, to our knowledge, ever involved philosophy and philosophical thinking. Put simply, calls for new disciplines have plucked from the social sciences, and more recently from the STEM (Science, Technology, engineering and Mathematics), driven by the impressive advances in computer sciences and digital technologies, but they have forgotten the humanities and the contribution they may provide to contemporary PA. Indeed, interdisciplinarity is constitutive of PA and strengthening interdisciplinarity in and for PA demands to encompass the humanities as well (a case being made in a collective work by over twenty scholars, see Ongaro et al., 2025a), and philosophy is king and pivotal in the realm of the humanities. Therefore, given the humanities at large and philosophy specifically have been overlooked over many decades now, it may be high time for issuing a call to bring back philosophy and the humanities into PA.

This constatation brings us to the second and connected claim for why contemporary PA may benefit of philosophy. The field of PA has over its history oscillated between the two poles that constitute its dual nature as both an applied field, an assemblage of solutions to practical problems, and as an academic field, a scholarly discipline within academia (Wagner & Raadschelders, 2025). As an academic field, and one which is inherently interdisciplinary in nature (as amply discussed throughout this chapter), the status and standing of PA within the academia can only be strengthened by the solidification of its connections with a discipline like philosophy, *the* academic discipline *par excellence*, at least in the West. An argument can therefore be put forward that the flourishing of PA within academia may also depend on the strength of its connections with other established disciplines, chief amongst them being philosophy. This may perhaps be seen as an instrumental argument, concerned about the flourishing of PA as an academic field based on the constatation that connecting with philosophy may be instrumental to this purpose, yet

it is not irrelevant since the flourishing of PA as an academic field may generate the research and educational opportunities—attracting research funding, attracting students—which may in turn engender a virtuous cycle of development of the field which spills over to the 'real world' of public administrative systems functioning and public services being managed better. It is a goal of this book to contribute to strengthen the status of PA as an academic discipline—its standing and recognition. That said, connecting with philosophy provides PA with more than that: it enables PA to expand its boundaries.

This consideration connects to the third claim we put forward for why PA needs philosophy: this is based on the (philosophical) consideration that 'philosophy is always there', including in PA. In fact, PA—like all human enterprises—does have guiding assumptions: we may not notice them, given how deeply embedded they are in our own thinking, but they are there: our philosophical presuppositions determine and shape what we think and how we think; philosophy is already there serving PA scholars and practitioners alike. We said earlier on that PA has become a-philosophical, but this is in a sense impossible, as philosophical assumptions are always there, although they may be implicit and get unrecognised. We may just not be aware of them, and if such is the case, then this means that PA has drifted along the road of basically countenancing and assuming only a few philosophies (philosophical streams) as acceptable, ruling out the others—without any rationale for making such a self-limiting move.

The three philosophical strands that have possibly found their way into PA over the past decades are Positivism (which, as insightfully argued by Whetsell & Shields, 2011, has come to enjoy a status of 'quasi default philosophy' for many scholars in the field of PA, perhaps also driven by a thrust towards explanation and causality inspired by an emulative—of the natural sciences—approach which seems to be quite dominant in PA, as it is or has been in other social sciences or humanities, see Atkinson, 1978, for historiography; and see also Beaton et al., 2024, on the 'burden of objectivity' that this approach may place on the shoulders of scholars of PA), Pragmatism (see, inter alia, Ansell & Boin, 2019; Shields, 1996, 2008; Whetsell & Shields, 2011; Whetsell, 2025), and Relativism-Constructivism (see, amongst others, Box, 2007; Catlaw & Treisman, 2014; Farmer, 2005; Fox & Miller and notably their joint work Miller & Fox, 2007). These three perspectives applied to PA have been recently reviewed in Ongaro and Yang (2024), a work which also makes

the case for introducing Critical Realism more forcefully into PA. Other perspectives surface occasionally: chiefly amongst them the Aristotelian-Thomist Realist philosophical tradition, which is closely connected to Critical Realism, and which is occasionally, albeit most often implicitly, brought up in rigorous yet also super-parsimonious ways by certain leading scholars (at least so I interpret some works of scholars like Geert Bouckaert, Wolfgang Drechsler or Guy Peters—and indeed also some of my own works, e.g. Ongaro, 2009, 2024). And this is all, or almost all, as concerns the explicit and self-conscious application of philosophy to PA. The risk is therefore that PA gets de facto dominated by a few philosophies, and it ends up missing out on the contribution that many other philosophical traditions with deep roots can bring to the field. This is a problem which demands to be addressed, in line with the stated approach of an ethos of responsibility in engaging with this venture of introducing philosophy into PA. We deem it would be remiss to not facilitate the connection between PA and a broader range of philosophical streams, as this precludes the field of PA from benefiting of their contribution; and not encompassing such other philosophies would leave the field of PA 'biased', not towards not-philosophy (which is ultimately impossible as philosophy is already there in every human activity) but rather towards a limited and ultimately narrow range of philosophical strands (however important each of them is in its own terms), which do not get critically appreciated and questioned against the contribution that other philosophies can offer and provide to PA. This is indeed the rationale for this book: providing a framework for connecting the field of philosophy and the field of PA that can facilitate the development of bridges between the widest range of philosophical streams and traditions, on the one hand, and the field of PA in its entirety, on the other. This book attempts to enable these connections to happen, as well as along the way and as most welcome 'by-product' (so to speak) to also enable to revisit critically the contribution of the few philosophies which have already somewhat found their way into PA.

This is why it is worth delineating the steps for developing a research agenda for individual scholars or reflective practitioners who may deem it worth pursuing the establishment of closer connections between philosophy and PA as part of their research work and their commitment to public service. Such research could become a scholarly programme proper, a broader collective and collegiate effort. How to develop this

research agenda and scholarly programme further? There are practical and theoretical steps that can be considered.

The reader may be interested in starting from the practical ones, after having been exposed to theoretical considerations earlier on in this chapter and with many more to come throughout the rest of this book. A first practical point regards how to build networks of teams of scholars (and practitioners) engaged in this inquiry; part of the problems lies in the fact that working on such an interdisciplinary venture like the intellectual effort to strengthen connections between philosophy and PA can in some regards be likened to swimming against the tide: academic incentive structures are likely to run against the bridging of seemingly unrelated fields; across-the-board constraints on obtaining funding may play out (especially for a line of activity that does not appear at face value oriented to developing knowledge which can translate into skills for the job market, more and more a key requirement for receiving funding in contemporary academia); engaging into such efforts may also bring with it reputational issues for scholars as blending findings of these two fields may be very challenging because these academic fields are so distant in their thrust, academic status, career paths, conventions of what is 'highest standard of science', and so forth. However, realism in appraising the challenges ahead is important but should not lead to overlooking the opportunities that lie in undertaking interdisciplinary efforts at bridge-building: building connections between academic fields is deeply enriching, first and foremost for those who engage into this venture. A green field opens up for those who engage into connecting these two fields and embark in such interdisciplinary venture, who may become leaders in a new area of inquiry and develop academic standing in a distinct area, as well as a reputation as academic bridge-builders. Interdisciplinary work also seems to attract a lot of interest from students, practitioners and the public at large: PA scholars who engage with foundational issues are likely to attract much more interest from their audience than just by speaking about more conventional PA topics and themes; and philosophy scholars who, by connecting with PA, become able to also bring to the attention of the audience connections with 'actual' contemporary problems, may reach out to their audience more effectively.

Journal editors may also potentially play a big role in the process of establishing the interdisciplinary connections between philosophy and PA: for example, by demanding of prospective contributors to make

their philosophical assumptions more explicit when submitting a contribution, perhaps ideally as a 'standard section' of their submission, like the methods section or the discussion section which are standard component in every PA publication. Indeed, the readership of a journal article may well wish to know what the underlying assumptions of a given piece of research are, exactly like they demand to know about the methods employed to generate knowledge or the implications of the findings of the research (findings which in their turn can be better interpreted if the underlying philosophical assumption which drove and informed the research in the first instance are made explicit and elaborated upon by the author of the article).

These are some of the practical steps to advance the programme of connecting philosophy and PA. As regards theoretical considerations, we suggest two approaches in developing this research programme. The first one is exploratory: one approach to make this research programme both very attractive (for scholars and practitioners alike) and very fruitful is by interconnecting it with the cutting-edge subfields of inquiry in PA, the ones that are 'the next big thing', and when the limits get reached about what can be studied with empirical methods or logical-mathematical reasoning (i.e. standard science) applied to PA problems, then usher in philosophy to tackle the issues that cannot be addressed with standard scientific methods and deploy the intellectual power of philosophy, thereby highlighting the functions of philosophy for PA: enlightening; critical; gap filling; integrative; and the capacity of philosophy to address issues and questions that are normative in nature. For example, at the time, this book goes to press the 'next big thing' is the impact of artificial intelligence on public administration and public governance and the dramatic changes to state-citizen interactions driven by the disruptive innovations occurring in digital and algorithmic governance. A research programme centred on connecting philosophy and PA may complement and supplement the scholarly literature by enabling to shed light on aspects of digital governance that are philosophical in nature and ethical (hence inherently normative) in thrust. In working out the contours of a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century (Chapter 5), we systematically resort to philosophy of information, a recent and novel branch of philosophy, using it both as a pattern and also for its potential to enable connecting philosophy and PA around issues which are especially salient and relevant for the contemporary debates in PA.

The second approach, in a sense the one most directly flowing from this book, lies in using the framework wrought out in this book as an orientation map and picking and developing each of the four directions of inquiry outlined here further. Each of the next chapters provides elements hopefully useful for how this can be done in relation to the direction of inquiry presented and discussed in the chapter. So, in philosophy for PA (this direction of inquiry is developed in Chapter 2), indications are provided about how to expand the range of philosophies applied and the range of PA problems investigated. In mapping backwards from scholarly works in PA to their underlying philosophical assumptions (this direction of inquiry is delineated in Chapter 3), indications are provided on how to further expand the coverage in the recognition of the philosophical assumptions of extant PA works. In aligning doctrines for the reform of the public sector with their ideational underpinnings (the direction of inquiry analysed in Chapter 4), further clusters of doctrines may be considered, and more detailed analytical connections between administrative doctrines and their ideational bases may be developed. And, finally and crucially, a key pillar of this research programme rests in working out in full a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century, whose features and contours are outlined in Chapter 5.

If, as the English saying goes, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating', then it is now high time to draw to an end this introduction and overview chapter, and let the reader turn to Chapters 2–5, dedicated to outlining the four directions of inquiry in connecting philosophy and PA that substantiate the framework of analysis that this book works out, starting from philosophy for PA, to which Chapter 2 is dedicated, followed by the backwards mapping approach that is detailed in Chapter 3, the aligning of philosophy and PA—aligning doctrines for the reform of the public sector with their inherent philosophical premises and ideational bases—the direction of inquiry to which Chapter 4 is dedicated, and, in the most classical 'last but not least' (to conclude with another English adage), the delineation of the key traits of a philosophy of administration, the final direction of inquiry in connecting philosophy and PA that is proposed in this book, which is the task for the concluding Chapter 5.

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